Philosophical Foundations of Botswana’s Social Protection System: Charity or Social Justice?

Prof R Mupedziswa, PhD
Presented at SASPEN Conference on Social Protection
Johannesburg 20-21 October 2015
The government of Botswana has been hailed for making available a fairly comprehensive and efficient social protection system for its citizens.

In an article titled, “Social Protection in Botswana – A Model for Africa?” the respected Regional Hunger & Vulnerability Programme (RHVP, 2011) stated that Botswana had in place an impressive track record in terms of long-standing commitment to state-led social protection....
Indeed, Botswana’s social protection system is known to be quite robust and efficacious to the extent that it has been hailed by some as a model for Africa.

RHVP (2011:1) stated that Botswana boasts of one of the most comprehensive social protection regimes in the southern African region.

“Programming for poor, vulnerable and excluded groups is comprehensive by African standards....” (RHVP, 2011:1).
Philosophical Foundations of the Social Protection System

Perhaps a question that has received limited attention is: What are the philosophical foundations of Botswana’s social protection system?

Preliminary and very tentative results of desk research suggest 5 philosophical (or historical) phases in the development of the country’s social protection system.
Botswana’s 5 phases in development of social protection system

1. **Traditional** (predicated on *botho*). (up till 1895).
2. **Paternalism** (Minimalist) (colonial period) 1895 – 1965) “We know what is good for the people”.
5. **Social justice?** (1997 – to present) (Vision 2016) Striving towards a social rights approach.
Prior to colonial period, up to around 1885, Botswana relied on informal social protection measures.

The philosophy during that era was driven by the notion of *botho* which emphasized solidarity and reciprocity (*quid pro quo*).

This social protection system was embedded in people’s cultural beliefs, norms and values.

Ntseane (2007) notes that the extended family network was seen as the main social security system as it played a key role particularly in times of life crises.
2. Paternalism phase (1895 – 1965)

- Guided by minimalism, the colonial period ushered in new ways of doing things, with limited formal social protection programmes being introduced.

- Social welfare services for the black majority in particular, were rather piece-meal as the new administration was interested more in the welfare of the small group of white settlers than the black majority (Ntseane, 2007).

- Decisions were taken in a rather paternalistic manner, with blacks not involved in any meaningful decision-making.

- The colonial administration introduced Hut Tax in 1899 and Native Tax in an effort to raise funds to finance social services such as education, health care and the eradication of cattle diseases.

- Where social protection is viewed as charity, welfare provision is at the discretion of the state (Plagerson, 2014); and the idea of a statutory framework is often remote.

- Benefits are made available to only a minimal number of people in very extreme exceptions (Bitso, 2012).

- The Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme, launched at independence in 1966, provided meals and nutritional supplements to vulnerable, poor or low income households.

- Services were availed at the discretion of the state to e.g. to lactating mothers, pregnant women, TB patients, malnourished pre-school children, primary school children, and children aged 6-10 (Ntseane & Solo, 2007).
Chiepe (1973:321) quotes the then President of Botswana, Sir Quett Masire as grappling with a number of issues of national importance, which included the following:

“Because Botswana is such a poor country, we can undertake only a few (development) projects and the task of choosing is much harder. Do we provide more schools or more hospitals?............Do we improve roads or water facilities.”
A caring state is defined as one which offers various services, including for children, elderly, and other socioeconomic groups as a matter of cause (Szebehely & Vabo, 2009). (e.g. Nordic countries).

Thanks to the diamonds boom, the government apparently shifted to a caring state philosophy. The launching, in 1980 of the National Destitute Policy, among other initiatives, can probably be seen as the surest sign that the government had enthusiastically embraced the caring state philosophy.

Vision 2016 adopted by the government in 1997 emphasised the need to provide “an adequate and dignified safety net for those who are in poverty in a way that does not encourage dependency and provides a means of escape from the poverty trap and a return to productive society.” (GoB, 1997).
Where social protection is an act of social justice, it is rolled out as a right, meaning the state guarantees redistribution of benefits to all (Plagerson, 2014).

In such cases, social protection is clearly articulated and embedded in the country’s constitution, backed up by a legal framework.

Services disbursed on the basis of the notion of social justice would be ‘needs’-tested rather than ‘means’-tested.
In Botswana, the government still decides to whom and for how long a social protection benefit will be granted, a practice not quite consistent with a fully-fledged social justice system.

Social protection is provided by the state through policy guidelines and legislation, but the provisions are not (yet) explicitly embedded in the country’s constitution (Ntseane & Solo 2007; RHVP:11).

There is thus still lack of clear legislative framework to drive the social protection process in the country (Ntseane & Solo, 2007).
Apparently, out of the 10 social protection programmes, only 3 are supported by formal policy statements; all others operate on the basis of guidelines (RHVP, 2011: 20).

RHVP (2011:3) has observed, “While most Batswana have benefited from these achievements, the new wealth is very unevenly distributed and many individuals and groups are marginalized economically, socially and/or geographically”.

It has also been noted that Botswana’s social protection schemes have tended to suffer from lack of coordination, poor implementation, ineffective utilization of resources and lack of accountability (Ntseane & Solo, 2007).
Charity or social justice?

- Balise 2014:2 cites a study by BIDPA and World Bank as observing that, “While Botswana has many social protection programmes, some of them are rather small relative to the target group they intend to (cover) or to the number of poor people, which limits their effectiveness”.

- The BIDPA/WB report further noted that, “Targeted programmes for the poor such as the Destitute Persons cover less than three per cent of the population. Furthermore, safety net programmes are fragmented (Balise, 2014:2).

- This suggests that clearly, enormous challenges remain in the area of social protection provision, meaning by and large the social justice goal (for now) remains elusive.
Thus it can be surmised that while Botswana has made great strides in terms of social protection provision, which some may argue qualifies it as a model for Africa, much more still needs to be done if the social justice goal is to be realised.

Most importantly, efforts have to be made to ensure the social protection theme is embedded in the country’s constitution, if the country is to usher in a rights-based approach to social protection.

As things stand, social protection in Botswana is neither predicated on the philosophy of charity nor on social justice, but rather on the ‘caring state’ philosophy. Much more work still needs to be done before it can realise the social justice goal. (i.e. more than charity, but less than social justice).

Be that as it may, the efforts made to-date by the government ought to be commended as Botswana has made enormous strides, and is far ahead of most other countries in the region. By some accounts, Botswana can justifiably claim to be model for Africa, given the country’s comprehensive provision of social protection.
Does Botswana’s social protection system exhibit any signs of linear progression?

If yes, have the phases necessarily followed a progression from one phase to the next, clearly depended on fulfilment of certain conditions at each stage?

Does Botswana’s experience offer any lessons for countries in the region: For the countries to succeed, do they all have to follow the philosophical (historical) phases?
Comparison of Rostow’s stages with Botswana’s philosophical phases? Any pointers or lessons?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROSTOW’S 5 DEV STAGES</th>
<th>BOTSWANA’S 5 PHASES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Traditional</td>
<td>1. Traditional (botho)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Preconditions for take off</td>
<td>2. Paternalism/minimalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Take off</td>
<td>3. Charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Drive to maturity</td>
<td>4. Caring (or social service state)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mass consumption</td>
<td>5. Social justice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>