

Educational Free-For-All

Botswana. Phil Sandick * for CAPafrique, September 2009

On 28 March, HE President Lt. Gen. S.K.I. Khama made the following remarks in his speech to his party, the Botswana Democratic Party (the “BDP”):

“Whilst talking about discipline, let me take this opportunity to express my concern over another matter that has bothered me recently; the conduct of some of our students at the University of Botswana. One of the BDP policies is to ensure equitable distribution of this nation's wealth to its citizens. We have chosen to provide this through educating as many hardworking Batswana as possible so that they may provide for themselves and their families and the nation in the future. Our elaborate welfare programme for mothers and children, a highly subsidized health welfare programme and the very high proportion of our national budget allocated to the Ministry of Education and Skills Development further prove this commitment.

“This is why I have taken the firm stand to take action against all those students who deliberately go out of their way to disrupt these efforts. The recent disturbances caused by some of our students at the University of Botswana do nothing more than deny other Batswana an opportunity to learn. The money spent on repairs and payment of salaries to teachers who are not teaching is enough to have paid for several other students who did not get the opportunity to be admitted at the university. It is extremely selfish for those students who act in this manner and clearly irresponsible for those adults who encourage them to strike for issues as lame as the right to be allowed to receive a second sponsorship for courses they failed. I cannot allow a handful of people to destabilize a national programme intended to benefit all Batswana. As such, culprits who engage in such acts will be expelled from any institution and may be denied employment opportunities in the public sector in the future.”

Well, that seems a little extreme.

The immediate back-story is that on 4 February, students at the University of Botswana [rioted](#) because they hadn't been paid their allowances. The Botswana Police paramilitary unit was called in, and the action was suppressed. But there is a much deeper narrative that sheds light on national tertiary education legislation. This particular treatment will show how policy from the last quarter of the 20th Century has caused certain conditions to arise in the first quarter of the 21st.

In 1975, in order to build a local campus (facilitating the secession of the University of Botswana from the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland), the Botswana University Campus Appeal encouraged each male citizen of Botswana to donate a beast, framing the enterprise as an illustration of Botswana's self-reliance. The government added the catchy slogan, *motho le motho kgomo* – literally, “one man one beast” – which was doubtless a cause of the campaign's phenomenal success. Brian Mokopagosi, in the *Journal of Southern African History*, writes that “every adult Mtswana is proud to have made a contribution to [UB's] early development.”

At least, they were until February.

Citizens of Botswana (“Batswana”) who matriculate at UB do not pay for their education. Instead, they are given a stipend for all expenses. If they live off campus, they are given more. Everyone – especially those in the fashion clothing industry – knows when UB students receive their stipends. The local club counts on increased business that weekend, scheduling guest DJs accordingly, and Chuck Taylor All-Stars are sold *en masse*.

Students, seizing the opportunity, have been failing classes in order to remain on the government payroll. Recently, many insisted on moving off campus (for the higher stipend), leaving significant dormitory accommodation vacant. As a result, the Ministry of Education (the “MoE”) refused to pay February allowances to those who failed. The Student Representative Council (the “SRC”) approached the University administration, which pointed them to the MoE. The MoE refused to budge from the position it took last August, and neither the MoE nor the UB administration warned the students of this particular impending financial crisis.

When the students found out they weren't being paid their allowances, they boycotted class. The University administration, which really should have warned the students, responded by suspending the SRC. The students countered by staging a march, and the government countered the march with paramilitary force. The students responded to what they saw as gratuitous use of force by *actually* rioting, smashing windows and generally wreaking havoc on UB campus. The Vice Chancellor of the University, who had been in hiding for the entire week leading up to the riot, resurfaced just long enough to send a one-sentence email to UB staff: the University was officially closed.

Then comes HE President Khama's address to the BDP.

One important ingredient in this mess is the entitlement of the students, but a second is the failure to communicate that comes out of a centralized, top-down educational policy structure. The entitlement starts early, with socialized medicine, but not all countries with socialized medicine have entitled youth. That entitlement, I believe, is spurred on at university: to repay their government stipend, Botswana are expected to pay 5% of their salary to the government for the first few years that they are out of school and working. As a result of this regressive approach, there is no real consequence for eight or ten years of matriculation; the government receives the same portion of employment taxation. A suggestion was made to turn what is *superficially* a grant and loan combination into an *actual* grant and loan combination—eliminating regression in the process—but it was stifled.

Still, the students are not the only ones to be blamed for the problems. Some of the issues are purely structural, the channels of communication and responsibility so concealed and/or loose that a lot of finger-pointing and avoidance of guilt are systemically facilitated. There is one Ministry for all types of education, and the boundaries of who decided what is not always clear.

If deployed properly, [recent tertiary education policy developments](#) may run in the right direction. Instead of creating a separate ministry for tertiary education, as many Anglophone African countries did post-independence, the Government has created a Department of Tertiary Education under the newly named Ministry of Education and Skills Development. Ideally, this move would have a two-fold effect. On the one hand, the Department would organize, orchestrate, and consolidate tertiary education institutions where appropriate (following [South Africa's example](#) from 2003). On the other, they would heed the Tertiary Education Council 2005 Consultation Paper's warning that "the growing complexity of tertiary education...has caused governments to appreciate that their near monopolistic hold of tertiary education through Ministries of Education at both system and institutional level could not be maintained." As a new, integrated unit, the Department could act as a specialized bridge to the rest of the education system, yet allow tertiary institutions to maintain control of their activities that the Ministry might not feel safe granting to all levels of institutions within its purview.

It is welcome news that the Tertiary Education Council, an external body, will remain outside the Department of Tertiary Education, and that Botswana's tertiary enrolment continues to increase. With the new policy, "Towards a Knowledge Society", Botswana makes room for private institutions to increase the differentiation of higher education opportunities around the country by opening different types of tertiary schools. At the same time, the new Department ensures the quality and relevance of the institutions' programming, as well as the standardization and translatability of students' qualifications. Everyone wins.

Students who can afford to do so should begin to pay for their tertiary education (as they do in South Africa, Mozambique, and most other countries worldwide) or at least for their textbooks and personal needs (as in Senegal). Students who cannot afford to pay should be eligible for a true grant and loan system, affording them the possibility of attendance without the incentive to failing. When students are paying their own way, they would place greater value on their education. Further, the people with the power to change dysfunctional leadership would pay more attention to students who would now be partially funding the institution. Accountability on all sides would increase.

Botswana's educational system has done the country well, and some of the initiatives are good models for struggling countries. With all of her resources and potential, though, there is no reason to stop at anything less than a model for all. ■

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