

THE DISPARITY BETWEEN NATIONAL AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT ACHIEVEMENTS IN RURAL BOTSWANA

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Botswana has earned praise in the development and conservation world for its forward trajectory that stands in stark contrast with much of the rest of Africa. The country has managed to popularize the Okavango as a tourism destination through a rebranding of a seasonal swamp into the enigmatic Delta. Diamond mining, beef export, and tourism have fueled its economic growth, allowing Botswana to emerge as a middle-income country with a highly transparent government and a landscape spotted with exceptional wildlife populations. For visitors accustomed to development challenges prevalent throughout much of Africa, Botswana is an oasis.

Evidence of Botswana's development successes in the well planned, rapidly growing

metropolis of Maun seemed to end as quickly as the paved road a few hours north of the city. To get to my field site in the Eastern Panhandle of the Okavango, a ferry transports you across the head of the Delta to a dusty road leading to quiet villages with few shops. Although the rural economy is seemingly at a standstill, the amenities of a pro-development, government-driven discourse have, in many ways, reached the most rural of settlements: water standpipes are scattered around the villages, public latrines are available for use during chief's *kgotla* village meetings, and health clinics are entirely free of cost. However, the Eastern Panhandle is stuck in a development contradiction where large-scale, national development indicators are mismatched at the rural scale.



credit: Lauren Redmore



In my field site many families depend on subsistence agriculture, though the deep infertile sands of the Kalahari hardly provide a sustaining livelihood. In order to bolster agricultural effort, end-of-harvest subsidies are provided to farmers who plow their fields. Potable water is trucked in at no cost when standpipes go dry. Increasing numbers of claimants of wildlife property damage compensation leads to finger pointing at recipients who are largely blamed for not doing enough to protect cattle or farm. Tourism generates significant revenue in secluded tourist camps, but evidently creates few local jobs, and temporary government jobs called *ipelegeng* provide much of the income locally, driving seasonal rural-rural migration into permanent villages.

During my preliminary fieldwork, I have learned that the funneling of money from the multitude of government subsidy programs into Eastern Panhandle settlements is life's blood for many of the rural poor. However, these subsidies remove the possibility for engagement in the workforce as active, creative, self-realizing members of society. Life in the Kalahari is not easy, but direct subsidies are effective at providing temporary relief, not meaningful, long-lasting achievements of human development. Support for small and local economic growth is necessary to move towards more equitable development achievements across the nation and will vastly improve the quality of life for people living in even the most rural of settlements.



credit: Amanda Stronza



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