

# Visible Barriers to Economic Empowerment: Lessons from San Wood Carvers of Botswana

**Rebecca Nthogo Lekoko**  
*University of Botswana, Botswana*

**Maitseo Bolaane**  
*University of Botswana, Botswana*

**Andy Chebanne**  
*University of Botswana, Botswana*

**Tumelo Matlhongwane**  
*University of Botswana, Botswana*

## ABSTRACT

*This chapter presents some barriers to grassroots empowerment; namely, when government prescriptive approaches take precedence over the felt needs of those to be empowered; empowerment projects are likely to fail. This chapter demonstrates that poverty reduction strategies left to the decisions of the government promote the use of one-size-fit-all approaches that cannot work for all. Empowerment is possible only to the extent that strategies and priorities are tailored to clients' needs. These needs can be effectively addressed when the grassroots work in close partnership with development partners in defining suitable projects and support systems. The model of empowerment presented in this chapter recognizes that welfare approach becomes more distasteful when people who can rely on their natural talents like the Serowe Wood Carvers are denied support to use these talents and hence forced to depend on the welfare schemes.*

## INTRODUCTION

Part of the community of wood carvers discussed in this chapter belongs to the Khoisan ethno-linguistic group of Botswana, namely the San, commonly known as Basarwa in Botswana. Their current situation is characterized by institutionalized assimilation, relocation, language and culture loss (Chebanne, 2008). The Basarwa are marginalized, ethnically and socially. This situation has put these groups under the socio-economic and socio-cultural control by other groups (Batibo, 2008). One important point that resulted in this marginalization is that the Basarwa are put in the lowest social class of the Botswana society. A publication on the Khoe and San by some academics at the University of Botswana (Selolwane & Saugestad, 2002) revealed that these communities experience powerlessness, marginalization, disintegration, exploitation, pauperization and deprivation with the net effect of social and economic exclusion from the main development programme of the State. It has been observed that

*... the quality of life for the Basarwa declined during the colonial period. Their status further worsened during the first decade after (Botswana's) attainment of independence as a result of interaction with modern economy which resulted in exploitation, land dispossession and environmental destruction (Mogwe & Tavera, 2000, p. 78).*

A more systematic account of the San/Basarwa in Botswana and their social and historical condition is provided by Saugestad (2001). Generally, their social and economic situation has not matched that of the rest of the population. Most Khoe and San people face socio-economic hardship and abject poverty (Cassidy et al., 2001). Unlike other ethnic and linguistic groups, they do not have customary rights to land where they could freely engage in the affairs of their culture and language, or just freely practice it for their own purposes.

For many African nations, Botswana included, the process of moving rural communities from a stage of welfare-dependency to a transformative empowerment is not an easy one. Transformative empowerment is a stage of self-awareness (being aware of own needy situation); self-initiative (taking action to address own survival needs) and having self-confidence to take responsibilities with minimal intervention from outside worlds like the government (Strandberg, 2002). Empowerment itself denotes ability to get involved in solving own problems, a way of “learning from each other and taking action together” (Chamberlain, 1993, p.31). Empowerment, as noted by authors is facilitated when those to be empowered are actively involved in the empowerment projects. It is for this

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