

Information Sources for Public Policy Making in Botswana

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Abstract

This article identifies and discusses information structures for public policy making in Botswana. It shows that information structures for public policy making can be divided into institutions, documents and people namely items in; registries, libraries, central statistics office, staff's own documents and personal contacts. Registries are used a lot by government officers for their routine tasks and sometimes systemic activities. Other information sources are meetings, seminars, workshops, or conferences; followed by radio and television, and then library items such as books. The paper concludes that information structures such as institutions, documents and people which include information sources like registries, libraries, research units in government departments and indeed other information structures provide hard and soft information within government and where possible out-with government, and add value to public policy formulation. However some deficiencies were identified such as lack of training and lack of relevant materials. It was then recommended that there is need to train staff working in government structures such as registries and libraries as well as an improvement of the materials found within the structures to make it more relevant to policy making.

Introduction

The need for well established structures of synthesized information, accessible across all government sectors for the purposes of evaluating alternative policies as policies are formulated cannot be overstated. If governments are to make meaningful policy decisions it is important that they put in place a well thought out and correctly used information structures. In order for information providers to disseminate quality information to public policy makers, they need resources to prepare policy papers, carry our research for those papers, conduct polls and interviews, conduct focus groups, conduct hearings and employ computer and telecommunications technologies. Information providers do process information, store it, retrieve it, and disseminate it. All these are needed to develop a richer sense of the systemic agenda (governmental agenda containing matters from the lists of larger societal concerns) and indeed routine agenda (items derived from ideas and even standard procedures of government itself) (O'Toole 1990:226). In Botswana information structures are being built into certain government departments. Development of these structures, however, is haphazard and lacks a coherent commitment and coordination. This situation is exacerbated by the widely held lack of appreciation by African bureaucrats of the relevance of information in problem solving. Inadequate structures in terms of physical facilities and personnel available to government ministries in Botswana constitute a major problem for public policy making. It is therefore important to examine the situation in Botswana, and make recommendations which seek to improve existing structures and establish new ones. Botswana lacks an explicit national information policy that can facilitate the development of a good information infrastructure on an integrated basis. The absence of a good information infrastructure inhibits efficient and effective acquisition, analysis and dissemination of information for public policy making.

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Literature Review

This paper takes its lead from a consideration of rational (involving collection of information about a problem, formulation of goals, weighing of alternatives and choosing among basing on merits) and incremental (adapting decision making by reducing the scope and cost of information collection and computation) and mixed scanning theories of policy making (Keynes 1936; Dahl and Lindblom 1953; Simon 1957; Lindblom 1959; Arrow 1964; Easton 1965; Lasswell 1970; and Etzioni 1973). Rather than employing each of these theories, the paper lends its support to mixed scanning theories, which in many ways represent an appraisal of rational and incremental theories of policy formulation. There is literature on the subject of public policy formulation, administrators and politicians (Lindblom 1959; Polsby 1963; Parsons 1995). There has also been a lot written on government information and public policy making in Botswana. For instance 'Vision 2016' is a national development blueprint that defines what measures must be taken in order for the nation to reach the status of an information society (Long-term Vision for Botswana, 1997). Within the region, Botswana subscribes to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) IT protocol which spells out measures that must be undertaken by each member state to reach an information society. At the continental level, Africa's Information Society Initiative (AISII) provides the framework for building Africa's information infrastructure for its member states.

Globally, the Digital Opportunity Task Force of the G8 for bridging the digital divide and the World Summit on Information Society provide guidelines and define specific steps that must be taken by the international community toward bridging digital divide in order to attain an information society (Mutula 2004:145; Sebina 2004:52). However, Sebudubudu et al (2012:29) and Charlton (1991:265) writes that Botswana's transformation was possible in part because of the good leadership and good policy decisions. Since Botswana has embraced democracy from the time of her independence in 1966, its government has continued to facilitate access to information. However, having been independent and democratic since 1966 and having pledged and facilitated access to information since this time, it does not mean that Botswana should be complacent about democratic practice. As 'Vision 2016' has made clear, Botswana's democracy should evolve and adapt to modern times. There are already complaints about the secrecy of government with the formation of the Directorate Intelligence Agency, this has forced the former leader of opposition Dumelang Saleshando to table a private member's Freedom of Information Bill which was rejected by the government leading people to say that Botswana is dragging its feet on the bill (<http://www.saha.org.za/news/2012/April.htm>).

During African Association of Public Administration and Management (AAPAM) Roundtable held in 1980 at the Seychelles under the theme 'Public Policy on Africa' the following approach was endorsed; acceptance of public policy as a deliberate and binding action by responsible authoritative organs of state (not always the government) designed to influence the behaviour of society or substantial section thereof. Bassit (1988:15) defines information 'as a resource, a production factor which has its place in every system of creation, an element to be taken into account in all decision making process [es]...a commodity which, unlike most others is not exhausted with use'. Research has demonstrated that the real decision making processes of organizations takes place on both formal and informal levels. Informal information has been used extensively (Draft and Lengel 1986; and Hastings 1994). Informal information has been valued because it provides more background and explanatory detail, enables fuller evaluation of the consequences of decision alternatives, can be timely, is easier to interrogate for details and better serves personal objectives and interests. At other times government have employed consultants, but Heeks (1999:54) maintains that consultants have disadvantages, which include financial costs, lack of objectivity, failure to understand organizational realities and lack of sustainability.

The Botswana environment has shown a high level of close inter-personal conduct and a distribution of information based on talking that result in a highly complex information system. Proponents argue that participatory policy-making techniques address informational problems, gain

the cooperation of citizens, and empower citizens. Problems with access to local information and the willingness of citizens to cooperate with government officials are both widespread and widely recognized. Frequently no single set of actors has access to all of the information needed to design and evaluate policy proposals (Balule 2003; and Balule and Maripe 2000). Several studies have been conducted on registries in Botswana by Chebani (2005), International Records Management Trust (2003), Keakopa (2006), Kenosi (2010), Mnjama (2007), Tough (2009), Sebina 2004 and 2005, and Hlabangaan (2006) . It has been observed that (Chebani 2005:116):

The introduction of trained and experienced records personnel in the Botswana public service marked the beginning of effective management of records. Prior to this change, arbitrarily nominated administration staff using inconsistent methods and practices managed government records, and that affected the delivery of government business. Botswana integrated the public service records and archives functions in 1992 that brought to being Botswana National Archives and Records Services (BNARS). This was a fusion of what was originally Botswana National Archives with Government Records services in Ministries and Departments.

Institutions, Documents and People

There is no doubt that developing countries like Botswana should take public policy making seriously, particularly as they are still grappling with basic developmental issues. The Botswana government has put economic development and planning in the forefront of its activities. The Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP) has been entrusted with this great responsibility. To ensure that it does its job effectively government has placed planning officers, who are mainly economists, at the ministry and line ministries alike. It has also established structures to make sure that civil servants can function and deliver information needed for policy making. Information structures for public policy making can be divided into institutions, documents and people namely items in registries, libraries, central statistics office, staff's own documents and personal contacts. Items in the registries are mainly used by civil servants, and they define their information sources as items in government registries. The registry is a hub for government information whether it is a unit, division, department or a ministry.

However, it is clear that as government communications and transactions were increasingly conducted electronically, the role of the central registries got diminished. Therefore, new methods of records management are needed to deal with electronic records within the broader context of basic records management principles and standards. Discussions at meetings, seminars, workshops, or conferences constitute another important source of information. In addition there are radio and television as well as library items such as books. Institutions are also important as information sources for instance. ministries, Statistics Botswana, Botswana Institute of Development and Policy Analysis (BIDPA), University of Botswana, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (BNARS), ministerial libraries, donor agencies, Government Computer Bureau, public libraries, pressure and lobby groups, and lastly political parties. While registries house information for government officers they are lacking in areas such as training despite the fact that training is offered at such places as the Institute of Development and Management (IDM) and the University of Botswana's Department of Library and Information Studies. In terms of documents the government officers use consultancy reports, own office documents, private and government newspapers and media, books, commissions of enquiry reports, and the Hansard. Government officers or civil servants have diverse sources of information from both national and international sources. The people they rely upon mostly are registry officers, personal contacts, members of public, and parliamentarians among others. Committees also play a very important factor in how government officers interact.

Institutions, documents and people are therefore identified as information structures/sources central to public policy making in Botswana. There are, however, issues such as the structure's

use, adequacy or relevance. These information structures are not loose entities but intertwined, and therefore form a network or an information infrastructure. The government puts emphasis on the use of planning tools, consultants, trained government officers, meetings, workshop, conferences, Central Statistics Office (now reconstituted as Statistics Botswana) and registries in policy making. Because of this emphasis one can conclude that decision making in Botswana is based on rational approaches. In spite of this being the case some officers have been accused of making decisions without adequate information. This is attributable to the fact that sometimes government research/studies take long to finish and that information sources like libraries lack resources in personnel and funding among others. Coupled with this is the fact that parliament, district and community/village level of decision making do not enjoy vibrant information systems when compared to central government. Thus it is also safe to opine that decision making sometimes takes the form of incremental approaches. Therefore, there is a mix of rational and incremental which Faludi (1973:15) has called mixed scanning approach. This paper, however, indicates a bias towards rational approach which goes by the name semi-mixed scanning approach.

Semi-Mixed Scanning Approach

It has asserted above that the Botswana government has placed much trust on the knowledge of economists to generate information for public policy making. It is noted that the government has done so at the expense of other mainstream information structures such as libraries, research units, and others. Hence, the hypothesis that the absence of a well placed information structures undermined public policy making. The paper also observes that there are many information structures for public policy making in Botswana in the form of institutions, documents, and people. The structures are not isolated entities rather they are related and influence one another in different ways. It is because of the relationship found between the structures that we could conclude that it is an information infrastructure. The local centrality of the relations in other words, policy making contacts, ties, connections, group attachments and meetings can be traced though the ministry of MFDP because of much reliance on planning officers. In almost all policy decisions the MFDP is involved either directly or by extension. It has final influence on decisions. Our analysis points to the flow of information and ideas through different institutions such as line ministries and departments but shows that in the final analysis MFDP considers most decisions before they reach cabinet and parliament. Information structures in the form of libraries, research and information units are considered important but lack resources to be used more by civil servants. They also suffer shortage of qualified personnel and relevant material. Furthermore, they seem to have been created indiscriminately depending on funding and the enthusiasm of top officials. It is also clear that civil servants do not use them much due to inadequacy or lack of relevant materials. This is in part due to the fact that the government of Botswana places trust in the civil servants and in particular planning officers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has sought to present an analysis of the information structures for public policy making in Botswana. It has attempted to provide a critique of the information structures using the network analysis. The paper has revealed that the mainstream information structures like government registries and libraries are considered important. However, despite the key role they play they lack resources such as trained staff and relevant information systems to encourage greater use by civil servants. Civil servants rely on the structures especially registries. We should, however, be quick to point out that they do not pose a major problem to policy making as civil servants store a lot of information in their offices, and also rely on consultants. It is, however, clear that an improvement of these structures will improve policy making. Improvements include better trained staff and better and more relevant collection. It is also important to accelerate automation of registries.

While the paucity of information within libraries and registries appeared to undermine policy making, the planning officers together with other government officers, and consultants follow a pragmatic planning process which can be attributed to a mixture of both rational and incremental theories. It has to be mentioned that an improvement of registries and libraries is critical to any continued pragmatic policy making. Sources used, which appear to function adequately at present, may become less satisfactorily with time as context become more complex and information has accumulated over a longer time since independence in 1966 – hence another argument to strengthen formal information structures like libraries and registries. In a government where transfers of staff are common, it is important that the information they produce over time is maintained in structures that are well equipped. Thus government must move fast and improve resources in its storage and retrieval systems.

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