

Botswana in major drive on land issues



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The land issues in Botswana have given rise to infected land disputes among Botswana's 12 Land Boards. The causes include the lack of registries detailing who owns what. Cooperation between the Ministry of Lands and Housing and the Swedish National Land Survey aims to resolve the problem.

As we enter the southern Kalahari, the earth shifts from reflecting a reddish shimmer to an ever lighter brown. Between the stunted acacias, we occasionally glimpse people treading the earth where, above all, the Tswana people have always wandered. Such tribal lands occupy some 70 percent of Botswana and have long been a source of misunderstanding and conflict.

Until the early 1970s, the tribal lands of Botswana were managed and allocated by the village headman but today, no official land register is maintained. As a consequence, this land can neither be mortgaged by its owner nor generate revenue for the government. It also means that it takes time to secure permits to build on such land or to purchase a new holding.

"Once our systems are in order, enquiries from landowners will be responded to within a day, in contrast with the current two years," explains Bareng Malatsi from the Botswana Ministry of Lands and Housing.

He tells how his own land board has dealt with 400 cases in the past year alone. These do not involve major conflicts but rather misunderstandings. Although that is sufficient to generate mistrust and is costly for the country.

"It may be a matter of someone applying for a landholding and being denied. And then that person finds out someone else received a positive ruling on a similar matter. Naturally, that upsets him and he submits his matter to the board," says Bareng Malatsi.

New systems are being developed

The inconsistency in rulings is the result of poor coordination between ministries and land boards, as well as straightforward misunderstandings resulting from inadequate systems. For this reason, the government of Botswana is now undertaking the country's largest land survey effort to date, which will also register state land (25 percent of the country) and freehold land (5 percent of the country). In cooperation with the Swedish National Land Survey a national address system with street names is being developed, as is a data system with unique reference numbers for all properties throughout Botswana. The project has a budget of SEK 50m, of which Sida is providing SEK 10m and Botswana the remainder.

Åke Finnström, project manager for the Swedish National Land Survey and

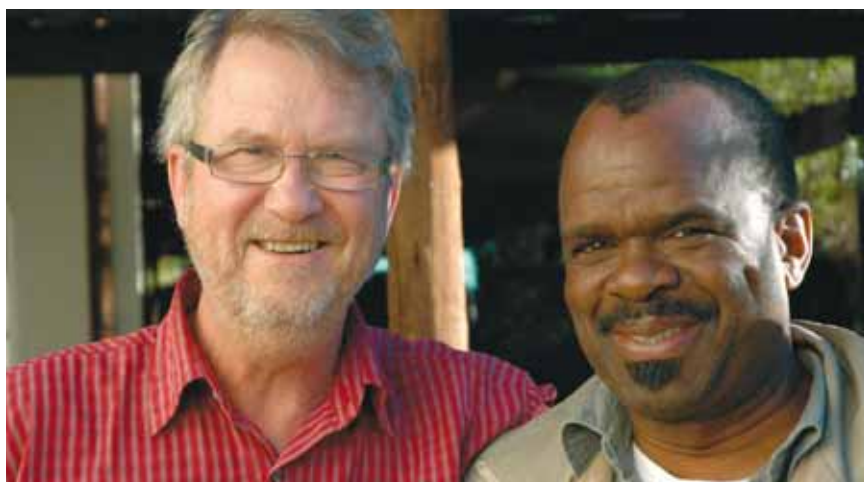
Bareng Malatsi's right-hand man, explains that the team is currently planning a register of who owns what in tribal lands covering an area almost the size of France.

"That will probably be our greatest challenge," he says.

Cooperation on equal terms

Åke Finnström drives his Swedish visitors into the great silence of the grasslands. We are here to gain an insight into the project and after the four-hour drive from Gaborone, we can see Åke Finnström's pride in the cooperation with the Ministry of Lands and Housing. Most of all, he is content with his counterpart, Bareng Malatsi, who is running the project from the Botswanian side and has the best local knowledge.

Åke feels that although the Swedish National Land Survey has been active in Botswana since the late 1980s, through Swedesurvey AB, working mainly on modernising the country's national map organisation, maintaining an equal relationship with a project manager on both sides has been key to this project and has paid off in results.



Åke Finnström and Bareng Malatsi are working close together.



Tsan family in Kalahari.

Bareng Malatsi and Åke Finnström can both see that it takes a little too long for people working on the project to become fully committed. The language barrier is also a test of patience, since most people do not speak English as well as the project managers. In general, however, most people understand that the effort is a positive development for the country. The political will is also strong and there are continuous contacts with the State Secretary and responsible Minister.

Åke Finnström clarifies that “being able to register ownership is extremely important, both for personal development and the economy of the entire country.”

Holistic view and coordination

The assignment, which commenced in the autumn of 2008, includes developing the administration of land issues and making information available to ministries and departments as well as to society in general. Transparency and easy access are key terms.

“We must always maintain a holistic view in our efforts, so that we coordinate our work between the ministry and other authorities and organisations,” says Bareng Malatsi. “From Sweden we get technical solutions and a small amount of financial support. What is crucial however is the transfer of knowledge so that we can later manage the systems ourselves.”

What does Sweden gain from the cooperation? Åke Finnström emphasises the soft values – that employees of the Swedish National Land Survey learn to work in a foreign country.

“Work like this makes us better people,” he says.

But he also emphasises the more tangible benefits; the opportunity to test new Swedish technology and equipment year-round.

Accessible for all

The cooperation on land issues between the Swedish National Land Survey and the Ministry of Lands and Housing means that the information will also be made available to private individuals, banks, other authorities, ministries and departments. Everyone who can benefit from the information will have access to it. The project, which is scheduled to take five years, will also involve others from both Sweden and Botswana. One of the first initiatives for extended cooperation has been taken by the Swedish National Tax Board and its counterpart in Botswana.

“We are also planning to initiate competence concerning the future. Botswana has the ultimate responsibility for the project and in five years’ time, hopefully sooner, everything should work perfectly without us,” says Åke Finnström.

Botswana is one of the countries where Swedish aid has been phased out. Cooperation between various Swedish players – authorities, organisations and businesses – and partners in the country is increasingly taking place on equal terms and through mutual interest. The objective is long-term selfsustaining relations, for the partners in the countries and for the people living in poverty.

Sida is stimulating Partner Driven Cooperation by facilitating contacts, arranging meeting, disseminating knowledge regarding possible partners and markets, as well as providing initial financial support.

Relocation no obstacle

Entering a village a little way into the southern Kalahari, we encounter a mother lighting a fire in the yard of a traditional Tsan dwelling, while three boys in soccer shirts and a small girl play nearby. We have no shared language but are able to greet each other with gestures. This family has had to move to a village following a decision by the Botswana government that most of the Tsan people, who normally wander freely in the Kalahari, should live in a community in order to receive an education, among other things. We ask our guide whether the large-scale land survey effort must pay special consideration to this relocation of people. However, according to Åke Finnström, it does not affect their work but entails other issues instead, such as getting children to attend school.

But the land survey effort as a whole does have a clear vision.

“There must be better opportunities for citizens to own land and property. To achieve that, we must establish a just and uniform system of ownership,” he says.