

The Rise and Fall of Tirelo Setshaba (Botswana's Youth Community Service): A Personal Reflection

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Introduction

Tirelo Setshaba, Botswana's non-military national youth community service, was inaugurated as a pilot project in 1980 following a recommendation by the Presidential Commission on Education (Government of Botswana 1977). Politicians perceived it primarily as a nation building process (Molefe et al 1997) which had the potential to integrate youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds into the national economy. Originally, the scheme was conceived as a study scheme but later changed to a community service scheme. It was intended for senior secondary school leavers who had passed their O Level examinations. Initially, the scheme was voluntary but in 1985 it was made a prerequisite for all citizens for entrance into tertiary and university level institutions as well as employment in the government sector. Technically, it was compulsory for all school leavers whose parents could not afford to pay for tertiary and university education. Also, at a time when government was the largest employer, many school leavers could not imagine securing jobs in the private sector, so almost all O Level school leavers joined the scheme. However, due to budget constraints, it was not possible for the scheme to admit all O Level graduates (Maakwe 1992). Thus, those with lower passes were exempted from the scheme. Most Tirelo Setshaba participants (TSPs) served for twelve months in rural government, parastatal and non-governmental agencies away from their home towns/villages.

The major areas of service included agriculture, education, health, local cooperatives, rural industries, and social and community development. About 40 per cent were placed in primary schools. As the scheme rapidly expanded some TSPs were placed in urban areas, a shift from the original goal. The scheme was designed to provide experiential learning, while simultaneously providing needed practical services especially in rural communities (Molefe et al 1997). Many people believe the scheme was beneficial to rural communities in terms of providing practical assistance where it was needed the most. A major criticism of the scheme was that it benefited a small elite youth while marginalising the majority of youth (about 83 per cent) who did not have access to senior secondary education. Tirelo Setshaba was terminated by the government in 2000, after two decades of existence due to economic reasons. In this article I share my personal experiences as both a former participant in 1985/86, and a field officer in 1990.

Objectives of Tirelo Setshaba

The original objectives of Tirelo Setshaba were fivefold, namely:

- (i) To give an educating, broadening, maturing experience to all O Level school leavers before they begin further education or employment;
- (ii) To expose them to the realities of developmental needs in remote rural areas (and to their problems of meeting them);
- (iii) To increase their self-discipline, initiative, sense of responsibility, ability to identify, analyse, and help solve problems, and their commitment to the development of their country;
- (iv) To provide educated manpower to help carry out development programmes in rural areas, particularly in remote areas; and
- (v) To create greater understanding of each other among people from different parts of the country (Tirelo Setshaba 1987).

Organisational structure

The Department of Tirelo Setshaba was created in the Office of the President headed by a director with field officers in all the districts/towns. These districts/towns were divided into three regions with regional coordinators. Thus, the Department enjoyed full political support from the highest office in the country. It was very well resourced compared to many other comparable agencies. The field officers were drawn mainly from social work and adult education. Their role was to provide career guidance, psychosocial support and a link between the Department and host communities on the one hand, and other stakeholders. The field officers identified communities that needed manpower in different sectors and helped identify host families for the participants through local community institutions.

Tirelo Setshaba started as a voluntary scheme with only 28 participants. By the early 1990s it had increased rapidly to over 1 600 participants, and 6 000 participants by the end of the 1990s, following government's decision to make the scheme compulsory. O Level school leavers were assigned to villages away from their towns/villages of origin as well as places where they did their senior secondary schooling in an effort to

promote their self-development and an appreciation of life in unfamiliar cultural settings. The participants were hosted by families in their respective host communities and were discouraged to share accommodation with public officials. They were encouraged to participate in social life activities outside their regular service work in organisations. For example, a participant could, on weekends, join the family in agricultural chores, a local soccer team or a local community choir. It was hoped that such interactions would close any social and cultural gaps that existed between participants and their host communities and that such a spirit would lead to positive nation building.

Benefits to the participants and their families

There were a number of benefits to both the participants and their families. Participants were given a monthly living allowance which was slightly above the minimum wage to enable them to maintain a modest life. A small proportion of the allowance was put into a compulsory savings account for them and released at the end of the placement. Thus, a culture of saving for the future was instilled in them. The allowance provided an opportunity for them to share their food with the host families, many of whom were poor. For most participants, it was their first time to live away from parents, so they had to learn organisational skills such as conducting community needs surveys, report writing, meeting government planning deadlines, managing their finances and budgeting. Further, they were introduced to the realities of formal work environments, government, parastatal and non-governmental systems, diverse cultures and orientations to careers which helped them to make up their minds on career paths as they began to enter tertiary institutions. They also learnt to manage their personal lives including intimate relationships, friendships, and interpersonal communication skills in general. This instilled a sense of self-discipline among some participants while for others it created personal difficulties. A small proportion served longer than twelve months as punishment for misconduct such as absenteeism from work without permission, alcohol and substance abuse, and conflicts between host agencies and communities, among others.

While there is very little systematic study on the impact of Tirelo Setshaba, my personal view is that it was beneficial not only to the host communities but the participants as well. Tirelo Setshaba provided an opportunity for young people to 'discover themselves' - their talents, potentials, strengths and weaknesses and to apply them in practical situations. It should also be noted that participants' performances, both positive and negative, demonstrated the extent to which they had benefited from the formal school system, and parental rearing in the first 18 years of their lives. The parents or guardians of participants received a family needs allowance, about a quarter of the participant's living allowance. Small as it was, it enabled many families in rural areas to purchase basic commodities.

Benefits to host agencies and communities

The benefits to the host agencies and families were varied. As a former participant, I can attest that my host community perceived the scheme very positively because it provided the much-needed manpower in their village. Initially, participants were expected to rotate through three placement agencies through their year of placement. Fifty percent of the placement was devoted to primary education while the other fifty percent was shared between other government sectors. For example, as a participant, I served two weeks at a local primary school, followed by a week each at the tribal administration (the kgotla) and social and community development offices. As the scheme grew, participants began to specialise and the number of placements in towns increased rapidly. As shown in my experience, many participants did work for which they did not have any skills. Host agencies were expected to provide induction and ongoing on-the-job training for their participants.

Participants had no work skills apart from their academic education and received two weeks orientation by the Department of Tirelo Setshaba and a further two weeks of orientation by host agencies. Despite this, participants provided practical assistance that the government system was unable to due to shortage of resources. I recall that one of the participants in my placement started a boy scouts group in the community while two others helped revive the local soccer team in 1985/86. My small contribution in community development enabled the local farmers to access the Arable Rainfed Accelerated Programme (ARAP) which had been introduced that year. I was the key link between the host community and the Department of Social and Community Development at the head office, some 250 kilometres away. This exposure motivated me to become a social worker as I discovered my passion for helping people.

I am sure many other former participants have contributed immensely to the development of rural communities throughout the country, and that the scheme influenced their career choices both positively and negatively. Molefe (2001) states that one of the participants in their study indicated that Tirelo Setshaba was "a year of forgetting, rather than learning".

Benefits to the nation

It is my view that Tirelo Setshaba achieved its objective of providing manpower, though unskilled, to many rural areas that needed them the most. In their study of the impact of Tirelo Setshaba in educational settings, Molefe et al (1997) found that TSPs who had chosen that sector were innovative and greatly assisted, especially primary school teachers, in the subjects of mathematics and science in the upper classes which the teachers gave the impression were difficult to teach.

In my experience TSPs provided extra human resources which effectively delivered needed extension services where there was proper supervision by the host agencies. Also, exposure to the realities of development and diverse cultures through Tirelo Setshaba has created an appreciation for national unity among former TSPs. This was very evident when TSPs exchanged their experiences at tertiary level institutions, of which I was a part.

Recently, a member of parliament, Honourable Botsalo Ntuane of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party, moved a motion for government to reconsider reintroducing Tirelo Setshaba. Debates in the local media have since remained sharply divided. The motion was withdrawn by the MP but is expected to be retabled in due course.

Lessons

Tirelo Setshaba was originally intended to be a study scheme but later changed to community service and this is one of the factors that are cited by its critics (Molefe et al 1997). However, I am not aware of any research that has documented the positive impact of the scheme in its community service focus. I believe such research could help balance out the above criticism. Molefe (2001) states that while Tirelo Setshaba failed to implement the educational objectives for which it was formed, the majority of the participants (80 per cent) reported that they valued their experience highly and believed it was a successful thirteenth year of education. A minority reported that it was a waste of time, and that it delayed their tertiary education.

An important factor to note is that TSPs were delayed to proceed with their tertiary education by between 18 and 26 months (Molefe et al 1997). However, my experience is that those TSPs who were placed in sectors in their preferred career choices valued the service highly. Also, as a field officer, I recall that many communities spoke highly about the positive contribution of TSPs. They helped local community institutions to plan and execute village projects, improve their leadership and management skills, and financial accountability for government grants. I believe that many TSPs must have discovered their talents (positive or negative) in Tirelo Setshaba which must be celebrated. I am an example of such a TSP. Lastly, a study by Fako et al (1986) found that the principle of Tirelo Setshaba was acceptable to many Botswana, but that some had reservations about the way it was run.

In spite of the above successes, the scheme was terminated in 2000 because government believed it was not cost-effective, and as such unsustainable. The programme costs increased rapidly after the scheme was made compulsory, and rose from a few thousand dollars to over 10 million in 1997. Furthermore, the scheme benefited only a small fraction of elite youth (about 17 per cent who had completed secondary education (Molefe 2001). Thus the scheme, as it was managed then, would not appeal to a government in this era of declining national economies. Other factors that probably led to the termination of Tirelo Setshaba had to do with common perceptions by participants' parents that the participants were sexually abused, and that many of the participants were immature and that Tirelo Setshaba put them at risk of self-harm. These were some of the grievances I encountered as a field officer. Further, Tirelo Setshaba has never enjoyed the full support of senior government officials (see Fako et al 1986). Therefore, it is no coincidence that its termination came at a time when many of the decision makers' children were due to join the scheme.

Lessons that emerged from the Tirelo Setshaba experience for other countries in the region which may want to establish a similar programme would be to decide whether or not to use youth who have technical skills in some fields. Professions such as in agriculture, education, health and social work, who require their students to do internships, could benefit from some kind of Tirelo Setshaba that promotes study service. In some countries, national service programmes have been designed for university graduates resulting in provision of professional services in a wide range of fields. Also, in this era of high HIV and AIDS incidence in Botswana, the scheme could play an active role in helping combat the spread of the disease. Since its termination, there has been no other innovative national programme on volunteering. Some organisations, such as Total Community Mobilisation or Masedi, have been formed recently to promote civic service but cannot replace the national youth service in scope and intensity.

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