

Public Policy and Land Reform in the North East District of Botswana

Keshav Lall MAHARJAN (広島大学)
Boga Thura MANATSHA (広島大学大学院)

Botswana is a landlocked country located in southern Africa, with a population of roughly 1.8 million. It is one of the most economically and politically progressive countries in Africa, and beyond. Although, it was a British Protectorate from 1885–1966, the North East District (NED) was fully colonized by an imperial and capitalist Company, the Tati Company (TC). Land alienation and massive displacement of the indigenous people, forced taxation and labouring, went on, unabated from around 1890–1966. The NED was administered by TC, using the crudest laws which were also in operation in “full-blown colonies”. This paper explicates the land reform process in this district. There has been public policy ‘controversy’ with regard to the Market-Based Land Reform (MBLR) which was instituted by the Botswana government to solve the land crisis in the NED. This MBLR is based on the principle known as the ‘Willing-Buyer, Willing-Seller’ (WBWS).

This district was primarily chosen because it is the only district in Botswana which was fully colonized. When the post-independence government led by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) took office in 1966, it was confronted by the need to institute land reform in the NED. The pressure was inevitable because the district was reported to be in serious land crisis since the 1940s. The paper adopts qualitative analysis based on the interviews (with peasants, politicians, and government officials), consultation of archival sources, official correspondences, news paper reports, secondary sources, and websites of various Think Tanks and institutions dealing with land issues in southern Africa. The interviews/data collection was done between August and September 2007.

A MBLR operating on the principle of WBWS is characterized by political controversies, bureaucratic and institutional rigidity, and the unwillingness by the landlords to release the much-needed land. Land restitution as opposed to land redistribution is preferred by the communities which were dispossessed of land by the TC. However, this policy is not favoured by the pro-market and liberal democratic government of Botswana. Poor consultation of the affected communities by the respective authorities exacerbates the situation. This makes the land reform process complex and elitist. This paper argues that Botswana’s reputation as a ‘shining liberal democracy’ in Africa might be tarnished by the ‘carelessness’ at which the land reform process in the NED is being handled. Land reform, particularly in southern Africa is sensitive, emotive, and too political. The NED shares the border with Zimbabwe, a country where land reform politics has led to economic crisis. The paper reveals that the earth-shattering situation (land invasions by the landless) which occurred in Zimbabwe in 2000 aroused the land reform debates in the NED. Thus, the NED is slightly drifting towards a land reform crisis.

The paper concludes that public policy rigidity, politics, and land reform in the NED are inseparable. The ensuing result has been mistrust between the locals and the government. The paper proposes a land reform policy which takes into cognizance, the socio-economic, political, historical, and cultural aspects on board. Due to the nature of a complex and complicated colonial history in this district, the issue is both politically and morally difficult to resolve.