

WORKING TO REFORM THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IN BOTSWANA FOR IMPROVED LEARNING OUTCOMES

The vast country of Botswana in Southern Africa with its two million inhabitants has been the success story of Africa in many senses, as it has enjoyed many years of political stability and development with diamond-led growth and sound macroeconomic policies leading the country from being one of the poorest countries in the world at Independence in 1966 to its current status as Upper Middle Income Country.

The country's spending on key social sectors, such as health and education, is at par with high-income countries in Europe (Botswana spends 8% of GDP on education, EU-27 public expenditure on education 5.4% of GDP in 2010) but for the last few years, the reward for the money put into the sectors has not been of the standard anticipated. In education, students' exam results have been declining and the quality of the education system is perceived to be low in international comparisons. The country is grappling with high unemployment among tertiary education and vocational skills graduates and a lot of children do not have access to any further training when they finish basic education.

With the high amount of public funding going into the education sector, one has to ask why is there then still a shortage of textbooks for the students, why are there not enough class rooms and why do you still find science labs with no science equipment in them? To help the Ministry of Education and Skills Development to find the answers to these questions, and to the question of the declining quality, and to support the Government in preparing a fundamental reform of the country's education system the European Union has been providing assistance since 2012.

- "We started the process by looking into each sub-sector in the education sector to see what was not functioning the way it should, asking our various stakeholders and also engaging the civil society in this process as education is something everyone has a part in", says Mma Nkhwa.

Ms Taboka Nkhwa is leading the reforms in the ministry, in a new position as Secretary for Education Reforms that was created in the beginning of this reform exercise to lead the way forward.

She continues: "In Botswana we have a long culture of kgotla meetings, which means basically consultation at local level, so we wanted the process to be very consultative. This means that it might take a bit longer, as touring our large country takes time, but it also ensures more buy-in in the implementation stage."

The ministry then embarked on the process of drawing up a sector plan, the Education and Training Strategic Sector Plan. This plan would set out the priorities of each sub-sector and of the education sector as a whole and would be costed and sequenced.

Mma Nkhwa explains: "When we started we did not have up-to-date information on our education system, the numbers of drop-outs in all the different levels of the system for the last year, the textbook availability in the schools, and also importantly, what the cost of putting one student through the education system was. One can say we made our decisions in the dark without this information. We need to know exactly the numbers and this in a timely manner, in order to take the corrective actions to address the issues at the schools."

Each of the ministry's different departments has been working on their specific part in this sector plan from pre-primary unit to the ICT, to the teacher development and the special support units. Some problems identified had to do with organisational issues and human resources, or budget systems. After two years the ministry is now in the final stages of having a complete plan.



"We still need to prioritize among the programmes to make the plan fully costed from the outset. We now know how much we spend on each student in primary, in secondary and in tertiary education. With this information we are able to take important policy decisions and to prioritize. One question, for example, we have to address is whether we should not spend more on primary education, when this part of a child's education is laying the foundation for the basic competencies of that person in the future", says Mma Nkhwa.

"We have also identified areas where our systems are not providing the services the way they should and are now taking actions to correct it. One particular area has been the introduction of public pre-primary schooling, as that is a key component of the foundation of a child's education. We cannot afford not to provide that to our children, so we are now expanding access to early childhood education across the country."

Unlike many other developing countries, the problem in Botswana is not the amount of money set aside for social sectors, but how that money is used to provide necessary social services of a certain quality. With limited funding, the EU can and does catalyse change to the benefit of all children in Botswana. Implementation of the ambitious reform plan will, of course, take years. But once this is done it will have the potential of adding another success story to the country of African success stories.

FACT SHEET:

The EU is providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Education and Skills Development in Botswana to help them review and reform the education sector in order to get better value for money and improved service delivery and results. During the last four years, 2 MEUR in TA has been provided.

An important part of the assistance is to capacitate officials in the ministry and transfer the necessary skills to them so as to keep the reforms going after the external Technical Assistants have left.