

Book Reviews

One Hundred Thousand Miles in the Kalahari: a history of co-operative development in Botswana, 1970-75

By Basil Loveridge

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Reviewed by John Collins, who served for 20 years in various UN and EU aid projects and was Project Manager of the EU Trade and Investment Promotion Project in Botswana 1981/1986

Basil Loveridge, a member of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, deserves praise for producing such an interesting and informative study of the International Labour Organisation's Project to develop the Co-operative Movement in Botswana between 1970 and 1975.

When the Project started Botswana was one of the world's 25 poorest countries. There was only six miles of tarred road in a country of 700,000 people, sparsely scattered over an area of 230,000 square miles.

The only national resource was the cattle, sheep and goat farming sector, which was very subject to the vagaries of climate. Its importance is well illustrated by estimated figures of that time that there were over two million cattle and more than one million sheep and goats. The livestock was – and still is! – raised in the north of the country and had to be transported to the abattoir in the south. In 1970 this business was largely in the control of whites, mainly from the then apartheid South Africa.

The Botswana Co-operative Movement had received assistance from British sources in the early 1960s and after independence in 1966. Some well-known UK co-operators such as Bert Youngjohns and Trevor Bottomley, were involved in the early stages and later Edgar Parnell helped to establish the Botswana Union (Wholesale) Society.

However, by 1970, weaknesses were appearing and a detailed review of what existed and what was needed was undertaken. Such a review required that the societies must be visited and individually assessed and other possibilities such as a fishing co-operative, be examined. Basil Loveridge's book includes an excellent series of photographs which illustrate some of the logistical problems that he and his team faced.

A single tour of groups of co-operatives could involve travelling several hundred miles, often on paths with more pot-holes than flat surface.

Basil's account is well rounded, with lots of human interest stories relating to the Project team of international consultants and local counterpart staff. The author gives several detailed descriptions of the problems and opportunities they identified and tackled. For example, in connection with the cattle industry, he explains that:

"The large scale white farmers took their cattle to Lobatse (where the abattoir was based) in large trucks or through the rail-head. These methods were generally beyond the villager, who was dependent on the passing truck, whose owner would pay a much reduced price for his beast. The villagers had to learn that what they could not do alone could be done in association. They formed a marketing co-operative, and together they ran a co-operative marketing agency to get the cattle to the abattoir in groups of twenty or more, either by trekking them through the bush or hiring railway wagons for the journey. These two types of co-operative were absolutely right for Botswana's needs."

By 1972 the Project was well established and problems and possibilities like the above were being identified and acted upon. This also required the understanding and support of government officers and the local community. Basil puts this very well and his following remarks can be applied to co-operatives everywhere, not only to those in Botswana.

"Co-operatives cannot be imposed on people. They have to be persuaded of their value and accept the role they have to play in managing and owning the enterprise. There is much

discussion, education and training, and when, as in Botswana, it is a matter of starting from scratch, it is impossible to hurry things.”

Basil also pays tribute to the helpful and co-operative attitudes of the Botswana Government and the general population. Having lived and worked there for five years myself, I think it is necessary to put on record that Botswana is a genuine democracy, without any tribal tensions and, very important for a developing country, is devoid of corruption. Despite the discovery of high quality diamonds in the 1970s and, some years later Botswana becoming the “world’s second largest producer of diamonds”, those characteristics of democracy, probity and tolerance remain! The benefits of a growing mining sector have been used for the public good.

I would make a special appeal to the academics reading this review to purchase copies of Basil Loveridge’s history of co-operative development in Botswana between 1970 and 1975 and to use it as a case study for students. Appendix 1 records the impressive achievements made during the

Project. ie number of societies up; number of members up; share capital up; total net surplus up! The team must have been doing something right!

Appendix 2 summarises how the above results were obtained. It deals with centralisation of staff; specialisation of societies; continuing management counselling, previously called “inspections” in the field; training courses; setting up a Co-operative Cattle Agency; providing a new structure for the Botswana Co-operative Union, which had been formed at about the time of Independence in 1966; and the importance and scope of annual reports to make sure that they provided accurate and relevant information for society members.

Let us end this review with a story from Basil’s regular visits around Botswana. It took place in the village of Ukuntsi. The local group were discussing the need for regular visits from central headquarters to individual societies. An old man in the group put the need in clear local terms. He said, “You know, Mr. Loveridge, we have boys out at our cattle posts near the borehole, and if we don’t go to check on them we lose cattle, and if you don’t check on your co-operatives, you will lose them.” Later, Basil tells how he was reminded of this basic rule when regular visits to one seemingly strong society had been ignored and it suddenly developed problems.