SCHER: Today is the 17^{th} of July 2009 and I’m here at the Faculty of Business at the University of Botswana with Dr. (Motsomi) Marobela. Thank you very much for taking time out of your schedule to meet with us.

MAROBELA: Thank you.

SCHER: We spoke a little bit before I hit record about what I’m doing here and our project’s aims. Before we get into some of the specific questions I had for you, I was wondering if you would mind just introducing yourself a little bit and telling us a little bit about your own background.

MAROBELA: I am Motsomi Marobela. I work with the Department of Management in the University of Botswana. I have been at the university for ten years and my focus is on Human Resource Management, research methods, labor relations, organizational behavior, and lately I teach Public Sector Management. I have a MBA and also a PhD in behavioral organizations. I’m a senior lecturer now in the Department of Management.

SCHER: Excellent. As we spoke about a little bit, Botswana is held up as a shining light for many other countries in terms of its public sector reform. We were talking about how you agreed that that’s true to some extent, but you have a slightly different take on, or slightly different analysis on what the drive is of this reform and what the function and outputs are in many ways.

MAROBELA: Yes, that is true. I agree entirely that Botswana is different from other countries. Compared to other countries, for example, we hear of cases where there has been absolute corruption and mining from mineral resources used to create towers and walls and situations like that. Indeed if you look around, you’ll see that Botswana, compared to other African countries, has done fairly well in terms of actually managing these resources to effect change for the ordinary people. You can see that infrastructure rose, clinics and a lot of money has gone into social services.

Having said that I’ll say there’s another side also, particularly when you look at the current public sector reforms. I think normally people don’t get the context of that. They just look at mineral wealth, money going to schools, money going to health. Botswana also has poverty. Botswana also has serious problems; social ills like unemployment. If you look at the income differentials you’ll see big problems. There is also a gap between the poor and the rich. So that’s a problem.

But in terms of analysis of the public sector reforms and changes, I would argue that these reforms have to be seen from Botswana macro-economic structure, particularly its overdependence on the diamond sector, the mineral sector.

In terms of what I’ve written, I’ve argued that it’s very important to socialize andhistoricize the nature of the reforms and their linkages and their ties to imperialism and the colonial structure that I think was important in facilitating and modeling the economic structure of Botswana. That is its heavy dependence on the diamond sector. If you look at imperialism and what it has done to African economies, of course, this is not actually just imperial powers. They act in alliance with the national bourgeoisie.

If you look at what has happened, it’s that most South African countries have been appendages and vehicles for supply of raw materials to the developed
countries. And these developed countries have structures and institutions and interests. Those structures and mechanisms like World Bank, IMF (International Monetary Fund), WTO (World Trade Organization) are not neutral – they are very powerful. And they have an economic agenda. It is the agenda people have said is the Washington consensus: the theory that the market is very important to facilitate development and progress.

And in terms of Botswana, if you can’t oppose Botswana’s progress vis-à-vis the reforms that have been introduced and are still actually going on in Botswana’s public sector, like privatization, which generally seeks to pave way for the private sector to, you know, get involved in the management. Not just management, but the profiteering from public sector corporations which are so essential for developing countries. I talk about water, for example, power, electricity--

That is very interesting because you see Botswana has done so well, not withstanding the problems that I’ve said, that many people are poor and in fact statistics confirm that and indeed government has admitted that they’re dealing with very serious challenges so for poverty and unemployment. This is why they have drought relief programs where people are being relieved from drought and they get very little actually. Government does realize. And related to this mass unemployment and poverty is criminality; the crime. I’m not saying there’s an automatic relationship between unemployment and crime, but people without food, without other things, they really are desperate.

But if you look at that then you’ll see. If Botswana has done well, and is doing well, why then would it seek to go through the route that, for example, for many other African countries has brought disaster? Structural adjustment problems, you know. This has happened in Zambia; it has happened in Zimbabwe; it has happened in South Africa. Water privatization has happened in many countries. So why would they do that if they have done well economically they have the resources. They could simply say that the public sector is very crucial in helping government with its agenda of providing quality land for their people.

I mean, as I speak to you, government has a very strong view about privatization and Botswana in fact has said we’re a free market-led economy and we’ll go into privatization. And we say why? Why privatize public corporations like water, like power, like telephones? They are doing well. They make profit and if you look at the annual reports, actually, they are doing well.

But should they make profit and make it its actually ultimate objective? Once you do that, actually, you run the risk now that you are transferring public resources into private resources. It has happened in Eastern Europe, Russia, it is a case in other countries. You are cutting off many people from essential services, because it doesn't just, you know, automatically happen like privatization. It comes with implications, a price, for example. The private sector basically is motivated by profit, competition and other things.

I think we already see those lessons and some of them have been very sad for Botswana. If you see how Botswana has performed and some of the service and reforms, people have lost jobs and Botswana has a problem with unemployment like other African countries. I think unemployment could be around 20%. Government will argue that it’s going down. It’s 18%. But it’s the quality of the jobs, really. People here, majority of them on average are getting 600 Pula which is I think, really very little compared to equivalent of dollar. It will be less then $60.
If you look at labor reforms that come with this thing, we've now moved to casualization; we've moved into out-sourcing, and the qualities of those jobs are very bad, actually. People are now working long, long hours for very little and there's job insecurity.

I just want to reflect with the issue of privatization of water. I think government is moving towards that - we saw the first steps for example with the closure of public stand pipes. There are communities; there are people, who cannot afford to bring in a tap into the household, but government has closed public stand pipes where people got water near and it's free. Now they protect that. Well, you have to get stand pipes and this is good for you. But the effects have been very bad. Children have to actually use wheelbarrows, put water, walk, drive in these wheelbarrows, and sometimes going distances. We've seen children and mothers, young people wasting a lot of time queuing at one public stand pipe because some of the public stand pipes have been closed.

But recently now government has now changed the distribution of the water system to the extent now that one office, which used to be a government department that provided water at really lower rate is now being incorporated into Water Utilities Corporation, a corporation that charges fairly higher fees. You see that closing public stand pipes and also trying to incorporate a government department water supply of rural villages and other communities into public corporations, like water utilities, which government says it's going to privatize in time. It's creating a secured market. It's a captured market.

So going back to original question, why are we doing these things? We are not just doing these things because government wants to punish people. I think it's very important to understand how the capitalist system works, actually. If you look at our economic situation, yes, we have done well, but also, yes, we are very vulnerable. The paper I wrote some three years back has alluded to that vulnerability and crisis. Now we're in a crisis.

My argument is very simple, the way Botswana's economy is structured it puts it in a very vulnerable situation because it depends on diamonds; a commodity for which we don't have a market here in Botswana; a commodity for which we don't have real control over its production system. Remember, Botswana has a company called Debswana which is a joint partnership with a private company called Debswana. Debswana is linked to the Oppenheimer family and also to Anglo-American. So we already see the connection between the state and the multi-nationals on the drive not just to dig this shiny nice stone for the people, but for the multinationals, for making profit actually. But it is in that process where we see that we are in a very complex relationship, because if you cannot control the production system, the marketing, and you depend entirely on the international market and the country where your diamonds are sold in, United States of America, China, and I think Japan. This is where the little crisis exists.

That thing has roller coastered and snowballed to Botswana. For example, recent statistics from government, national account statistics from central statistics office, they clearly show that this quarter, 2009 quarter, Botswana’s GDP has fallen by close to 20%. Last year in the same quarter I think they made 23 billion, the GDP, and this year, the same quarter, this quarter they say it's around 18 billion. The driving thing for that is the diamond sector because, according to central statistics office, the mineral sector has fallen by around 68%. At some point actually, I think 2 or 3 months back, the diamond industry, which is the main pillar of this economy, we saw actually the closure of mines here. Three crucial
Mining shafts were closed here signaling that. And people had to be told to take leave. That was really so serious.

Last year around November, government says they sold no diamonds at all. They didn't sell any diamonds last year November at, I think, the height of this crisis. So this vulnerability and for many years, for many, many years, I think for three decades now, government has been talking about diversification and it's very difficult to diversify away from the diamond sector.

Government has done a lot of what these global financial institutions have requested, you know, liberalized the economy. They have done that. Botswana, compared to other countries, I think, the tax rate for corporate tax is very low. If you look at the investment environment here financial regulations have been actually stripped out. Investors can come here and go and that was part of, I think, conformance to the dictates of international financial capital. They've done a lot in terms of paving the way for what they'll say is the attraction of foreign direct investment. This is where desperate African countries that rely on a mono-production system have to do, you know, do all those reforms.

And my argument is that Botswana has no choice in terms of, you know, ascending to new liberal reforms because they are desperate. They want to attract foreign direct investment, and one of those ways is to open up the public sector to the private sector, privatization. This is one of the things that they can’t do away with. The critical question is how do you diversify the economy away from diamonds? And institutions like the World Bank, IMF, World Trade Organization, these credit investment institutions like Standard and Pula and others will say we need to see this opening up. So I think Botswana has tried to do that.

Now, for me I think what they’re trying to do with the public sector, it’s not helpful at all. Instead of actually helping to make the public sector efficient they should not be demolishing it. I’ve said it shows. The public sector in Botswana, from telephone to power to all those, they are making profit, so you use that profit to facilitate better public service delivery. The notion that actually you have to change ownership is misplaced, because efficiency is not a function of ownership. I mean, it’s a function of management instead. So what we see in Botswana’s public sector shows that they can be run fairly well. We can improve on that, but you don’t necessarily have to change ownership from government to the private sector. In fact, the current global economy crisis has reasserted what we have always argued that this thing about the private sector and the market is synonymous with efficiencies is wrong. Actually what we see now in the private sector has created problems because of inefficiency.

If we go back to the root of this crisis, it’s accumulation. It’s the notion that we can make more money so lend more money to people who are not in a position to pay. Actually speculate the sub-prime lending that has happened in America. It’s not government. To the contrary, now we see government actually bailing out the private sector, giving money to the private sector. Who has to pay? It is us, the ordinary people who pay the tax. You know, some of the people really are losing jobs now and this is because of the inefficiency that has come with the new liberal theory that really has seen the market sine qua non to efficiency. This is wrong.

And my argument is that, for developing countries the public sector is very important. We need education. What has happened in this country is very shameful, if you see how government has introduced a school fee after many,
many years of Botswana being a model of free education. Going with this agenda of liberalism we’ve seen a government being very harsh on the education sector. Children were returned home from primary to secondary because government has started school fees that parents could not afford. You know, we have seen a very negative effect from that thing. We’ve had dropouts. Thousands of students could not go back to school because the parents could not afford to pay and government said well, parents pay. How much are you going to afford if you are getting 600 Pula or $60 a month? We’re talking about a very serious case. This has come into education; these reforms have come into education and hit people so hard.

We’ve seen it here in the University of Botswana. They privatized the bookshop. The company is making a lot of money charging the students so much that students cannot afford to buy books, you know. There are negative effects. They privatized the catering companies here. We’ve seen workers losing jobs. They privatized the cleaning here. We’ve seen people working like slaves, I tell you. They work seven days a week here because they’re in a company. They have no entitlements that other people who are employed by the University as full time cleaners. Like pension gratuity and very decent salaries. They don’t have that for the company that got this outsourcing job. They just work them through and through and you see these people. I’m sure if you look outside there you might see some of them. When you talk about a holiday I talk about that as for them, that’s not the case. The company says, “Come tomorrow.” “But what am I doing? I just clean.” “You’re employed by me.”

So all these things have consequences for the welfare of the people, so I would go again to the case of analysis and say some people don’t want really to go to what Marx will call the “realm of the deep”. The analysis is from the surface. By that they fail to see the linkages between what we see from the surface and the events that are driving what we see at the surface level. Those are events, for me, is the edge for accumulation, and accumulation comes with profitability. With that is a crisis, with that is social economic problems that affect the welfare of the people.

We have a hospital here, a private hospital that which government has facilitated and is partly a shareholder. If you are sick at that hospital, if you don’t have money, you’re going to die. They say give us 10,000 Pula, 1000 or so upfront. People have been returned there because they can’t afford. But very fortunately, we have a public hospital called Princess Marina here. I can get sick and knock at Princess Marina without looking at my status, and I’ll get a bed and I’ll get very good medication and the doctor will attend to me. If you see how much money has gone into the creation of that private hospital for people who are well off, you just see that it is wrong for a developing country like Botswana.

Botswana has done well, but I think in moving forward, the demolishing of a very good welfare system that government has created here it’s a very sad thing for me, actually.

SCHER:

I have a question for you about the involvement of the unions. One of the things that I’ve been quite interested to see is that there seems to be quite a lot of high level cooperation between the unions and government and that you don’t have this adversarial relationship that is characteristic of the relationship between unions and government, say in South Africa, where the unions are really at the forefront of opposing the types of moves that government makes, precisely for the reasons that you have laid out. I was wondering if that’s something that you could maybe comment about or account for what seems to me to be a very
strong working relationship between two groups that may not have the same interests.

MAROBELA: Yes, I think to some extent that’s really true, particularly in the public sector. Our unions here, I’m a trade unionist myself, have been tamed, and this is not by accident. Even tough we say that Botswana is a democratic country, we’ve had elections for five years, no fighting, very peaceful country, but we’ve had very draconian labor statutes that have sought to control labor relations, you know. That has been the record. Only a few years back did government actually go ahead and ratify ILO (International Labour Organization) conventions.

In the past, government workers for example, they were not allowed to form unions. It was just associations and associations have no bargaining power. That has happened in Botswana and only in the last five years, as I speak to you, unions, public sector unions are in the process of transforming toward that. Even when they’ve done that, there are problems, actually, particularly in the terms of the right to strike. Botswana is not really explicit on the right to strike. But even if we are to have that, the legalism, the mechanism that has been put for trade unions to go through a process at which they would ballot and say that we have decided to strike. It’s so cumbersome and long and frustrating in the end and this works for government.

We’ve seen that here with the case of the parking where the University of Botswana introduced a disastrous parking policy. To come to the university to park your car, I’m sure you’ve seen the barricaded fence, you have to pay. Some of us are very, very angry with this. Why should I pay to come to work? (Laughter) It’s my right, you see.

Some of those things, when you move in as the union and fight, the leadership push you back. It has been the tendency in major trade unions. It’s a very sad thing. We, as you rightly say, we are witnessing a situation where it looks like you have this causal relationship between the trade unions and government. One of the things that have come about lately is the way by government, especially the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions, the mother body, with the debt they had to pay, that they’re misguided investment building. They invested in property and they have to pay, actually, the debt with interest and with going in, it was actually strangling them. And they’re facing a threat by the National Development Bank that they’ll lose that building. I think government went in and gave them money, so if you are funded by government, how can you now come and say, “I fight you”. That’s one effect.

I don’t think it’s the overriding effect. The vulnerability that I talked about the diamonds it’s also a key factor. We had a major strike here of the miners in 2004. Three thousand workers, actually, went on strike on bonus and unfair payment. The bosses have paid themselves a lot of money and ordinary workers were
offered none. They said “No, no, no, we need more money also. We both buy bread and bananas with the same price at the supermarket.” The Debswana management didn’t accede to that demand and therefore they went on strike. That strike was a very powerful strike. It went in second week, the third week, I think, was very crucial. The union leadership called off the strike.

This was a very terrible mistake. That helped, actually, government and Debswana to regroup and come back and actually paralyze the union totally. Four hundred and sixty one workers, as I speak to you, lost their jobs. Trade union leaders of Botswana Mine Workers Association were fired for being trade union leaders, for doing trade union work.

At some point this company, which is in partnership with government, actually, went to court seeking that trade union leaders incited the strike and they should be imprisoned. I mean, you can see that from that and the defeat following the blunder of the Botswana Mine Workers leadership, the hopes of these workers were shattered. Instead of actually fighting through they shifted the fight to the courts. In the courts, of course Debswana management has a lot of money. They used all these tactics, technicalities, and the case went, and went, and dragged. I don't know, maybe still going on. The last time the court said “No, you sat on your rights, you waited too much to launch your case and therefore, you know, you’ve lost.” They sought condemnation that was ejected outright by the court.

So, we’ve got to understand how they feel as a worker in the mine. If you say let’s go and do trade union work, you know that you’ll be fired, you know that you’ll be given warnings, as they did give them warnings, those that were striking.

This mining company is not just a mining company. It’s a joint 50/50 ownership between the De Beers Mining Corporation and the Government of Botswana. Here were workers actually having, in my opinion, a justified case for remuneration, for bonus and salary increment following what the bosses said, “We did well this year, so we have this bonus,” and they gave themselves a lot of money.

So if government is in partnership with that, and we have a situation like this, you’d understand this vulnerability. Because if you have a very serious labor dispute in the mines where the bread and the pillar of the country depends, then that will shatter everything. Botswana depends on diamond mining, and it contributes around, I think, 70-80% of government revenue, 40-50% of GDP, over 50% of, I think, foreign income of government.

Those are the underlining issues that, you can understand why Botswana workers seem to be a bit disillusioned. Yes. They are like trade union workers consent and wanting to change their status, but sometimes you have these mechanisms and structures that work against them. One of them is the trade union bureaucracy. The other one is that economic structure. If you allow that to go on, then it means you are in a very difficult situation as a country.

SCHER: I see, I see.

MAROBELA: I don’t know if I answered your question.

SCHER: No, no, very much so. That has helped to account for some of the questions I had. I am very conscious of the time. I’m not sure if you have time for maybe one more question or if we need to wrap up.
MAROBE LA: Yes, Yes, just the last wrap up.

SCHER: Okay, one last question I have. I understand your cautionary notes about the government’s drive towards privatization and it seems that there are a lot of concerns around this and a lot of things that need to be taken into consideration. I was wondering though, if you had any thoughts on what seems to me to be a very strong discourse of productivity. Starting from the early ‘90’s you have within the public sector itself, a whole talk around productivity and productivity and productivity and it doesn’t seemed to be linked entirely to privatization. It seems to be, to some extent, self-contained within the civil service itself, that there are constant innovations and performance management and constantly new things are being constantly introduced to try and raise the level of productivity of workers within the government. I was wondering if that’s something you’ve come across in your work or if you had any particular thoughts about.

MAROBE LA: I think, yes, we’ve been seeing this drive towards productivity to the extent that government built a whole structure called Botswana National Productivity Center. The notion that people here don’t work, are lazy, they don’t want back-breaking jobs, you know I think it’s superficial. Because we have to ask the question why, why are people not productive? Is it simply that they don’t want? I think you have to understand the cost for productivity or lack there of. Normally, people are just going to say people are not working, we are not productive.

But the question to ask is that how come Botswana has actually been singled out as a model of good governments? It could not have come without the all united workers productivity. How come Botswana is much talked about by the world economic forum, as an example of good economic management? This does not come from people at the top; only people have worked on, and I refer to those people working in the diamond mines, the pillar of this thing.

They work very hard. It’s a very simple example. Yes, we have made profits, we are happy, but now give us what is due, what is appropriate in tandem with the amount of labor that are put. Then we have, “No.” So if you’re saying that, I think you’re saying that, you can work but you don’t deserve decent, better pay. That is not a question of ordinary people not being productive. How come Botswana has been singled out by a lot of institutions? Transparency International writes the least corrupt country. It means people are not really just seeking money. There are structures; people are working very hard in government. You have to understand what they get in return.

There is actually poor pay, if I’m to be quite frank with you. The work ethic also is very bad because of the attitude of how people are managed, of how people should be seen as productive. Does it mean that you should work all day long? I just gave you example of people who are cleaning this building. They are working so long but does that mean, by overworking people, does that induce productivity? I don’t think so.

We have to measure and also respect people and say, “Well, we have, if we can measure productivity, you have worked this, this is the yard stick, we are happy about what you’ve done, or we are not happy compared to this.” But a lot of employees say, “Listen, I have worked for these hours and I have produced this, but you are giving me this. I can barely pay my house, I can’t buy food, and I can’t pay for transport.” I know of workers who go every morning footing to work. In the case of people working, they foot and walk sometimes kilometers or two
coming to work. It’s not like me; maybe I’ll come to work because I want to improve my health meters, but that they have no alternative.

What they are being paid has actually evaporated by mid-month. If you pay a person P600, you just have to go to the shops and say, with this P600 how much money do you put in grocery in Botswana? Gaborone is not so cheap. If you take into account that person has family, two or three children, it’s P600. Those kids go to school; they have to pay school fees.

So in the end, it’s also a question of understanding that you can’t force people to be productive if you don’t reciprocate and help them also in terms of also understanding that you respect that they have meaningful work also.

So the question about productivity, people have said that labor productivity is slow, but it’s also linked to the gender of international institutions. I can tell you that here; this productivity has also brought what in public sector reforms is called Performance Management Systems. This is not something that is just particular to Botswana. It’s actually roller coasting many African countries.

Where does this theory come from? If you look and do see the study, you cannot help but understand that this is something that comes with global institutions. It’s a World Bank project, you know? It’s not just productivity for its sake, I would differ with you. It’s productivity to induce ways of bringing about privatization and helping the private sector.

This is how I see the notion of productivity, but I’m pained to see that people are saying that people are not productive, but the very same workers don’t have enough to buy enough food. I can tell you that many workers working in the city here, they stay in one room. In that room they cook in that room, they sleep with children, there’s no ablution, toilets, nothing, and they sleep in that. It’s really the working poor.