

**CUSO BOTSWANA PROGRAM – Beginnings**  
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The Botswana CUSO Program started in 1970. I was appointed the first resident Field Staff Officer for the program in the spring of 1971. I arrived in Botswana in June that year with Marilyn and our two daughters, Lesley and Lisa.

A few things that I recall from my “orientation” in Ottawa are these:

- The program had a special interest to CUSO because of Botswana’s location in southern Africa, surrounded by the racist apartheid regimes of South Africa, South-West Africa (Namibia) and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and because CUSO had a long-standing commitment to the liberation movements in southern Africa.
- Botswana was commonly regarded as one of the poorest countries in Africa. It had achieved Independence in 1966 but had a big shortage of trained personnel to carry out the responsibilities of government. Since the Botswana Government’s operations were still heavily subsidized by Britain, CUSO would provide volunteers with a living allowance in lieu of their being waged employees of the Government.
- Some in CUSO thought the program could give important support to the mildly controversial (in Botswana) “Brigade Movement” founded by Patrick van Rensburg. The Brigades began as a non-governmental initiative in an alternative kind of education that linked academic education with training in agriculture, construction trades, typing, sewing, mechanics, etc. Students were encouraged to consider employment in the traditional villages and to apply their knowledge and skills to socially useful, productive work.

The first CUSO volunteers (11 I think) arrived in Botswana in 1970, a year before me, ushered in by Don McMaster, then FSO in Malawi. That first group included a retired couple, Nap and Lily Himbeault (of Saskatchewan and Newfoundland respectively), assigned to a newly established and still under construction Brigade school in Tutume; the others were assigned to teaching in government secondary schools except for one assigned to the Lobatse Teacher Training College. Assignments for the second group of arrivals (10 or 12), who arrived a couple of months after me, included one to the also newly established and still under construction Shashe River Brigades school, two to the Ministry of Finance as economic planners, and two to the Serowe Teachers’ College. I think the rest were assigned to government secondary schools. The point of reviewing these first two CUSO contingents is that an interest in the Botswana Brigades movement was present from the start, before I arrived.

As I began to explore how the CUSO program might develop, I came to know Patrick van Rensburg, founder of the Botswana Brigades movement, and key figures in the other Brigades centres in the country, all of them still in very early stages of development. It was widely acknowledged that opportunities for most of Botswana’s youth were very limited: existing secondary schools could not accommodate the large numbers graduating from primary school. The government’s education department seemed to lack both the resources and ideas for how to address the problem. The resources it did have focussed mostly on academic education to prepare youth for university and white collar urban employment. Meanwhile, there was a lack of trained workers for every other area of the economy. Another very large concern was the drift of people from the rural traditional villages (large and small) to the more modern cities (Gaborone, Francistown and Lobatse).

I felt some pressure from the Ministry of Education to make recruitment for its secondary schools and teachers’ colleges our priority, but I found government support for my interest in supporting rural

development in the Ministry of Local Government and Lands. It was looking for people to fill District Officer of Development (DOD) positions. We had our first DOD placement in 1972 in the person of Harry Finnigan. Brian Egner in the Ministry was impressed with Harry's work and Harry was very satisfied with the job so that finding volunteers for those positions also became a priority.

Overall then, during the first three years, I think about half of the CUSOBOT program supported the Ministry of Education's desire for teachers for its secondary schools and teachers' colleges. The other postings were mostly initiatives in rural development, in the Brigades movement, in small rural employment-creating enterprises, and in District Officer of Development assignments. We also placed some volunteers with other professions: a medical doctor, hospital administrator, a mechanic and journalist are some that I recall. I should point out that a number of those who were assigned to Brigades were also secondary school teachers, their main role being to teach the academic side of the Brigade school curriculum.

With respect to CUSO's support for the Anti-Apartheid Movement, in Botswana we kept a low profile, sensitive to the Botswana Government's policy of not openly supporting Anti-Apartheid activities and possibly "looking the other way" when related activities were covertly happening in the country. We assumed some part of the South African Government knew CUSO was present in Botswana and CUSO supported the liberation movements. We also assumed the Botswana Government was aware of CUSO's politics and general activities with the liberation movements. However, they never raised it with us, nor we with them. The overt thing that happened in our office was that on a few occasions we had refugees come into our office and I recall trying to be friendly and empathetic and on one occasion visiting a Zimbabwean in jail and maybe picking him up when he was released. I also recall that, probably in 1973, we "recruited" a South African refugee as a CUSO volunteer (I think that was a first for CUSO), but we understood that overt support for the liberation struggle would at the least be frowned upon by the Botswana Government and quite possibly have us thrown out, notwithstanding Botswana's own sympathies for the liberation struggle. We also tried to discourage volunteers from travelling to South Africa but with modest success; those who went usually did so to try to get some first-hand experience of Apartheid in action.

Finally, I can't leave this brief overview of the first three years of the CUSOBOT program without writing about the CUSOBOT Project Fund. The CUSOBOT program started out in 1970 with CUSO covering all costs including volunteer "salaries," which were, in fact "allowances"; I think the allowance was \$200/month with some addition for children. This cost-covering was no longer the practice in most other CUSO programs. I think it was early in 1972 that CUSO announced that we would have to cut the number of volunteers being recruited for Botswana or the Botswana Government would have to begin paying the volunteer "salaries". A large cut in the Canadian Government's grant to CUSO was given as the chief rationale for this, but I expect awareness that Botswana was no longer "the poorest country in Africa" (development of copper mining and discovery of diamond resources) also influenced the decision. For the volunteers in the country and for the Government of Botswana there was easy agreement that there should not be a reduction in volunteer recruitment.

The Botswana Government then agreed to pay the salaries of all the volunteers working in official government posts (government secondary schools, colleges, DOD's, hospitals, etc.) If memory serves me correctly, CUSO continued to pay the \$200/month for volunteers working in Brigades or other non-governmental situations. The government salaries were considerably higher than the CUSO allowance, in some instances more than twice as high. At an early meeting of the volunteers we had a vigorous discussion about whether a two-tier wage system for the volunteers was acceptable and whether the

\$200/month was adequate. The conclusion of the discussion, based on a vote of the volunteers, was that everyone should stay on the \$200/month and those employed by the Botswana Government should monthly send in to CUSOBOT any amounts in excess of the allowance. The monies were deposited in the CUSOBOT Projects Fund and the fund was managed by the volunteers in some sort of democratic fashion. I think by the time I left Botswana in 1974, the fund had made grants to a number of projects (a self-help blind school/farm and a vegetable market-garden are two that I seem to recall) and had a balance around \$40,000 (equivalent to C\$238,214 in 2019).

By all the reports I have heard, in the years following, questions about what projects to fund and what would be most effective for development, etc., were vigorously discussed at CUSOBOT volunteer meetings. I understand that after some years some changes were made to the CUSOBOT policy governing remunerations and the fund, a story others have to tell.