We all know what technology is supposed to do. Liberate our society. Improve our standards of living. Drive us forward. Make things easier in a world of difficulty and stress.

That is, of course, if you’re one of the privileged few who can afford the luxury of technology.

For the rest of society here in Botswana, the grassroots population living out their lives in villages and remote areas, technology has been, up until recently, an abstract concept with limited relevance. In such severe circumstances, such hardship and scarcity and despair, where the main concern of the day is just to put a meal on the table come dinner time, high-tech solutions seem out of place. Right?

Wrong.

A public-private sector partnership between Ministry of Local Government, Department of Social Services and SmartSwitch Botswana has changed all of that.

THE FOOD COUPON PROJECT

Many people, especially the privileged, have no idea how many households in Botswana survive solely on the Government-funded Food Grant,’ says SmartSwitch Botswana Chief Executive Officer, Kevin Duke.

‘We’re talking about at least 50 000 beneficiaries, receiving a total of P35 million in food aid a month,’ says Duke.

The Food Grant is not a new institution. The Ministry of Local Government and the Department of Social Services have been in charge of feeding Botswana’s most destitute citizens for many years now. But the old system (the ‘Food Basket’ scheme) had many flaws. That’s now ancient history. With the help of new technology, Government can now ensure that the allocation of resources goes directly to those who need it most.

THE FOOD COUPON PROJECT

“We equip people living in destitute conditions, the unemployed, the disabled, home-based care patients, orphans and vulnerable children with their own, personally-identifiable smart cards. It’s a coupon system that helps them to get the most out of the Food Grant,’ Duke explains.

‘We call it the Food Coupon Project.’

So, why is this smart-card technology such a leap forward for these people?

ADVANTAGES

Poverty, as a social condition, is not just about being poor, then. It’s about feeling poor.

The new system – which we’ve pioneered along with our visionary partners at Ministry of Local Government and Department of Social Services – fundamentally changes the way grassroots communities live and see themselves, he says.

Duke continues, ‘In the past, the food basket system helped. But it didn’t work as well as it could have, not by a long way. Beneficiaries didn’t have any choice as to which foods they could enjoy. They could only pick up their baskets at month-end. They had to travel, sometimes long distances, then queue in the sun, then carry heavy baskets back home. They had to eat all the meat and dairy products straight away, before they went rancid’.

Vendors had no incentive to give any decent customer service, and were known to supply over-priced goods that had passed the expiry date. Plus, of course, the tender-based system was wide open to corruption.

Now that all of the Food Grant beneficiaries have their very own smart card – which looks and functions just like an ATM card, onto which their monthly funds are stored safely – all the problems which plagued the old Food Basket system have gone away.

Food Grant beneficiaries now get treated like customers. They can choose where they want to shop (over 1000 countrywide outlets have been equipped with the necessary technology to swipe the card) and they can choose what food what they want to purchase – just like anyone else. And they can choose how: if they want smaller quantities to ensure freshness and quality, they can.

SAVING GOVERNMENT RESOURCES

Do more with less is the public sector battle-cry at the moment. And that’s exactly what the Food Grant achieves.

‘It’s very important that the Food Coupon System saves money for the Government,’ emphasises Duke.

‘The initial investment made on the cards, the card readers and the management of the whole system – all that has been made back many times over. The old Food Basket system was not just inefficient and insensitive. It was also abused. And those abuses cost the Government tens of millions over the years. Thankfully, that’s all in the past now,’ he explains.

REAL SOCIAL WORK

Social workers out in the rural areas have become a lot more effective now that the new Food Coupon Project is up and running. It takes the cumbersome administrative weight off their shoulders as they no longer have to spend the bulk of their time pushing Food Grant paperwork.

Instead, social workers can now focus on their professional duties, such as spending quality time with the destitute, home-based care patients, orphans, vulnerable children – and giving them the psychosocial support they so desperately need.

‘The foundation on which this project is built can be summarised in one word: dignity. We want to help restore dignity to the beneficiaries of the Food Grant. That’s really the driving force of everything we do here,’ he concludes with a smile.

Get more information about the government-funded Food Grant.

Everyone is singing the praises of the new Food Coupon system. Food Basket system (before)

• Had no choice of food at all
• Rotting food was commonplace
• Collection of food was fixed at given locations and dates. No flexibility
• Problems with corruption in tender processes
• ‘Ghost’ beneficiaries all over the country
• Quickly made Food Grant recipients feel inferior.

Food Coupon project (after)

• Beneficiaries can now choose what to buy
• Much more freshness and quality
• Had no choice of food at all
• Can shop at any time of the month
• Transparent process – no more loopholes
• Optimal Allocation of Government resources

Testimonial – Boi (Oodi)

I remember the food trucks. They would come to the main kagota in Oodi once a month. We would all queue up three, with empty wheelbarrows, waiting in the sun. People of all ages, we all gathered patiently. The trucks were not reliable. I remember that quite often we would wait two or three days for food.

I remember other villages, the ones with jobs, would pass by. I could hear them remark sometimes, or see them whispering to each other. They knew we had to depend on the government to feed us. For me, it was a constant reminder that my parents had passed away. There were so many of us receiving food baskets, but I always felt alone in that line.

When the trucks came, I remember carrying all that food back home. We didn’t have a refrigerator, so I had to ask the neighbours to use theirs. In return, they expected a cut from our rations. We also had to be careful of thieves, because they knew we had food in the house.

Often the meat was not good. Too many bones, and slightly sour from the heat. The vegetables would spoil too soon. I very quickly learned how to ration the food and make it last for a month, as best we could. Importantly, it taught me self-discipline. I no longer wasted food. I had to earn it.

And then things changed. We were told to report to the council, and each of us was given a card. The card, we were told, would allow us to visit the local stores and buy the food we wanted, when we wanted.

I immediately let my imagination run free. With my card, I could shop like a normal person. I chose the brands I wanted, and I could buy a bag at a time, without having to worry about the heavy load home, our storage problem – or the thieves. Everything we ate from that point on was fresh. I couldn’t believe how much choice we had.

As an orphan, the food coupon system completely changed my views of the world. Suddenly, I felt like I belonged in the community. I could concentrate better at school. No longer was I self-conscious. Nobody was teasing me.

Having that sense of hope and optimism and faith helped to set me up for the bright future that I now experience and take for granted today. I’m moving forward in my life and career – and I’m not sure if things would have worked out this well if not for the food coupon system.