**Youth empowerment critical**

By Legolo Tshogo

**MOLEPOLE** - Barclays Bank of Botswana and UNICEF have been commended for supporting government in reaching out to children.

That is made possible through the use of a comprehensive, technically sound skills development and empowerment programme dubbed ‘Banking On Brighter Futures’, Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture Mr Shwe Kgathu said during the launch of Barclays/UNICEF partnership programme at Bana ba Keleto Centre in Molepolole.

The programme is aimed at providing entrepreneurial skills training to children and young who are marginalised and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, abuse and exploitation. Apart from giving them a shot at earning a livelihood, the programme is also expected to protect the children from falling prey to risky behaviour and give them a chance to enjoy their rights to meaningfully participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Mr Kgathu also said government remains steadfastly committed to the course of ensuring that all children and youth of Botswana are protected, nurtured and given a platform to grow and develop to their full potential.

He said the investment by Barclays and UNICEF in this programme is a bold step that is not primarily driven by short term gains, but by the reality that the young people are potential future investors.

The minister also acknowledged the cordial partnership that the government has with UNICEF and the unwavering support that the fund continues to give on different levels which include, children’s rights, children’s welfare and protection.

He said this kind of support gives the government confidence that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) could be realised.

The managing director of Barclays Botswana, Mr Thuli John, said investing in young people in this way reduced their vulnerability and helps them achieve a sustainable livelihood for themselves, their families and the community.

He said his bank is proud that it is making a direct contribution to the future of this country by investing in youth.

He added that young people are dreamers and have passion in what they do, adding that if their energy is propelled in the right direction, it can benefit the economy.

Mr Johnson said Barclays has a responsibility to ensure that it always works with the communities in which it operates to ensure their long-term development and sustainability.

Dr Doreen Mulengi, UNICEF representative, said their partnership with Barclays demonstrates how developmental sectors could partner with private business sector organisation and their focus building on the only investment, which will guarantee the possibility of infinite returns, which are children and young people.

Dr Mulengi said the implementation of the project began with a pilot phase in 2009 where approximately 600 children and young adolescents were trained and acquired entrepreneurial skills and HIV/AIDS prevention strategies and the programme will train 1,400 youths.

She said that their implementing partner is Junior Achievement Botswana (JAB) which is to provide the actual training of the selected young people, adding that those young people will also receive monitoring from Barclays employees in their respective districts.

The also called on private business enterprises to emulate Barclays Bank to help Botswana realise her Vision 2016 goals and the MDGs.

One of the young people who had a chance to benefit from this programme last year, Ms. Lebogang Lesego, said attending this programme has helped her to grow her curtain making business and dresses as well as gardening.

She said she was able to conduct market research and she is happy that she is her own boss.

However, she said there are challenges in becoming an entrepreneur while one is still young being that the youth are not supportive and there is lack of finance to boost the business.

She however encouraged the youth to be focused so that they could achieve their desired goals.