

Governance Case Study:
Institute on Governance Youth Against HIV/AIDS Initiative in Lesotho

**The development of a young Basotho woman
in addressing HIV/AIDS through good governance**

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This case study details the personal growth of Lerato Molapo, one young Basotho Youth Committee Member in the *Youth Against HIV/AIDS* (YAH) program. Her story illustrates the potential of effective training and support to transform the lives of young villagers in a world dominated by HIV/AIDS.

Background:

Landlocked within the Republic of South Africa, Lesotho has the world's third highest incidence of HIV/AIDS, with prevalence estimates of 25% to 55% and very few resources with which to address the epidemic. The severity of HIV/AIDS in this country is exacerbated by the underlying factors of gender discrimination and violence; widespread denial of the reality of the epidemic; stigma and the resulting absence of people willing to reveal their HIV-positive status; the scarceness of treatment availability; cultural myths and damaging beliefs; a quickly diminishing cohort of parents and leaders; staggering unemployment; food insecurity; inadequate government initiatives; poverty; and a lack of resources at all levels.

The need to address issues of good governance is paramount for the Basotho (people of Lesotho) to address HIV infection rates and their impact on the country. Building capacity for greater participatory, democratic processes and practices is the goal of the initiative discussed in this case study. The *Building Governance Capacity and Community Engagement in Lesotho: Youth Against HIV/AIDS* (YAH) project is a 2.5 year project of the Canadian Institute On Governance (IOG) funded through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). It fosters strong governance and involves youth-led Youth Committees in four regions in Lesotho: Hlotse, Seboche/Bokoro, Pitseng, and Thaba Tseka/Paray, selected by virtue of their remoteness, lack of resources, and the severity of need. The project builds leadership capacity among the youth and governance capacity at various levels of government and within civil society organizations to identify and address HIV/AIDS related issues in a sustainable, accountable, transparent and efficient manner. The IOG partnered with the Canadian NGO Help Lesotho (www.helplesotho.ca) to benefit from its extensive community networks and connections.

In the first stage of this project, eighteen Basotho youth were selected for training on governance, leadership, communication, HIV/AIDS, and gender equity. They were trained in capacity mapping of the strengths and needs of their respective communities and strategies to develop capacity and address HIV/AIDS. Youth Committees learned about HIV/AIDS and its relationship to gender equity. They received training to assess and promote concrete steps to foster greater governance capacity and community engagement of civil society organizations within their own regions to more effectively fight this HIV/AIDS pandemic. Canadian governance and HIV/AIDS experts work with Basotho specialists to build up both the Youth Committees and the local governmental and civil society organizations.

Analyzing the development of one individual, Lerato Molapo (name changed for case study), through this program allows us to examine the effects of participation in this program on the five foci of governance, communication, gender equity, leadership and HIV/AIDS.

As a CIDA-funded Canadian Youth Volunteer with the project, I lived for two and a half months with the youth throughout the training and five week community capacity mapping in the mountain village of Pitseng. Research for this case study involved ‘participant observation’ and informal and formal interviews with the case study subject, Lerato, as well as other youth and members of the community. Informed consent was granted.

Lerato of Pitseng

Lerato Molapo is one of seven siblings in the village of Pitseng, one of three areas chosen for the first stage of the YAH project. Like the majority of Basotho, traditional cultural norms and practices related to such issues as governance, HIV/AIDS and gender equity are prescriptive and most often compete with international standards of health, safety and distribution of power. Lerato’s father was a very negative figure. Typical of many Basotho men, his migrant work in the mines in South Africa, allowed him to return home infrequently throughout the year. Lerato’s mother feared him. A request for something like money to buy shoes for the children would often result in a beating. The children were not exempt from his abuse and feared his visits home. The “culture of abuse” in Lesotho is such that communities often overlook all but the most severe violence, rendering the perpetrators exempt from intervention by family or neighbors and from punishment of law. Lerato’s family was one of many who lived continuously in an abusive situation with no recourse.

While the father refused money for school fees or food for his children, believing children need not go to school, he was generous outside the house, sharing drinks with other men and buying treats for children other than his own. Within the home, the brothers received slightly better treatment, openly preferred by the father to his daughters. This determined the communications patterns in the family: the boys spoke only to their father when he was home, while the girls communicated only with their mother. Not surprisingly, HIV and AIDS were not discussed in the home when Lerato was a child. The children received no information at all about sex from their parents. Communication about these issues remains quite low within Basotho families, despite the pandemic.

The economic situation for the family has since improved. Despite the refusal of the father of money for school fees, their mother’s perseverance educated them all. She earned money as a cook at a local school. The father was disabled in the mines and now lives permanently at home. The mother is the sole wage earner, relegating him to a separate building next to the house. He has lost his source of power and has become less of a threat to the family. Lerato and a sibling are fortunate to have graduated from high school with above-average marks in a country where most are unable to attend school due to fees. The rest of her siblings continue to study. The brothers do not treat their sisters very well, having learned to distrust and disrespect women. Although their mother does treat all her children equally, the girls feel unable to express themselves at home.

After completing high school in November 2005 in her village, Lerato did what most Basotho after school; she ‘sat.’ Of those qualified, most are forced to wait a year before going to university while applying for government loans. The scarce employment opportunities in most villages leaves them

‘sitting’ to wait for loan approval. When the YAH program was introduced in Pitseng in early 2006, eighteen year old Lerato saw an opportunity to use her time productively. She was motivated by a desire to work with other youth, to share ideas and to learn more about HIV and AIDS. She later understood the program focused not only on HIV/AIDS but also on governance, gender equity, communication and leadership, concepts she initially knew very little about.

Training

Local interest in this program was exceptionally high. Such opportunities are limited and many youth applied. Lerato applied, was interviewed and selected to participate in the YAH program as part of the eighteen Basotho youth and two Canadian volunteers, Melanie Theriault and me. The three Lesotho villages represented were Hlotse, Seboche and Pitseng, with equal representation by gender.

An initial three weeks of training (March 13 – March 31) on leadership, communication, gender equity, governance, and HIV/AIDS explored notions of leadership, alternatives to violence as a method of conflict resolution, sexual violence and gender dynamics and power sharing within relationships. A safe environment was provided in which to question prevailing social norms, traditional practices and individual perspectives which lead to the spread of HIV/AIDS or diminish citizen participation. Participants were encouraged to think of leading by example and, despite complete initial resistance, all took advantage of the opportunity to test for HIV.

At the onset, Lerato was shy and reserved, as were the majority of the committee members. Most were strangers to each other. It is important to note that the school system in Lesotho actively discourages students from asking questions or in other ways standing out in class, often with physical punishment. This produces a painful attitude of compliance and an almost desperate desire to blend into the group in structured settings. With great effort participants gradually accepted that this training was an open, supportive environment and the comfort level steadily increased. Throughout the three weeks marked shifts in participation were observable in sharing of ideas, confidence and risks to communicate. This was true of Lerato. She entered the training believing herself entirely unable to speak in front of a group of any size and slowly came to trust in her own opinions and the value of her contribution. While she continued to struggle with self confidence, distinct improvements were evident.

Lerato felt the most valuable part of the training to be the HIV testing. She had been terrified of the results and never imagined she could actually have a test. Following testing she was so proud of herself and has since shared her experience and thoughts about the process with many others, encouraging them to face their fear and take responsibility for their health. Lerato also greatly appreciated her new understanding of leadership concepts and said she came to understand the importance of leaders not to base decisions on emotions but to be impartial and fair.

The most challenging aspects of the training for Lerato and many others were the ideas surrounding governance. A relatively alien concept in Lesotho, Lerato initially thought ‘governance’ was a misspelling of “government.” These concepts continue to be a challenging aspect of this project to date, whether with youth, adults or government officials.

Capacity Mapping

Following the initial training, youth returned to their villages for five weeks of capacity mapping, from April 2 to May 4. The committees used their new skills to determine the leadership and governance strengths and challenges of their respective villages through formal and informal interviews with individuals, community leaders and organizations. This was followed by a final strategic planning week in which concrete community-based projects were developed based on the identified strengths and needs of their community. The committees continue to work on these projects.

During this period, Lerato developed in multiple ways. Observation, critical thinking and question-asking abilities fostered during the initial training were diligently practiced by Lerato and the Pitseng Committee as a whole. The committee members repeatedly expressed their new-found awareness of the challenges and potential of their community. They demonstrated group strengths and personal development, including their effectiveness to work together with an equitable distribution of power and to address emerging team challenges. Lerato and the other young woman developed an increased sense of leadership and ability to share ideas and opinions.

Lerato observed that this experience allowed her to develop both personally and professionally in significant ways, learning more about her community and herself. She developed professional skills and nurtured a growing belief in herself. She feels more able to speak in public and has a new sense of confidence and self-worth. She described the most rewarding part of this process as learning about her own community and being able to identify its challenges and strengths. These changes in Lerato and her fellow Pitseng committee members are visible and a tangible indicator of the very positive effects of the YAH project on individual Basotho youth.

Community Engagement

Help Lesotho also prepared the YAH committees for their community engagement responsibilities, to begin in July through the Help Lesotho initiative, “Ntja-Peli.” Ntja Peli was successfully administered in the communities of Hlotse, Pitseng, Seboche, Bokoro, Mahlekefane and ‘Mamohau. Five partner organizations presented their unique approaches to addressing HIV/AIDS in Lesotho to over 8,300 students and community members (see www.helplesotho.ca Project Page).

YAH committee members conducted extensive community engagement activities for Ntja-Peli events by meeting with community leaders, individuals and organizations and giving talks on these local partners and their approaches to HIV/AIDS. They helped organize and attended all events. Lerato shone in her ability to speak to community gatherings about the importance of addressing HIV/AIDS in her community. The group commitment was inspiring.

A Young Woman’s Development

Leadership

Significant increases in leadership skills and self determination are clearly observable in Lerato. She admitted that before this project she “thought a leader could only be a man” as she grew up witnessing men ignore opinions of women and make all decisions. She feels differently now and believes that gender equity is an achievable goal in Lesotho. She stated “all should be equal. It is coming to happen.

Now women are empowered. For example, many of the census people were women (in the 2006 Lesotho census).” She determinedly and unequivocally stated: “(Equality) will happen in Lesotho.”

Not only does she believe in the notion of leadership, but this previously passive and hesitant girl is able to practice what she has learned. She now takes increased initiative in group settings and expresses her opinions, while remaining willing to bend to the group’s will. Although the entire Pitseng committee demonstrated increased leadership, Lerato was the most active in attending meetings, taking on responsibility and conducting interviews. Lerato herself agrees with these evaluations and states she feels much more confident. She previously thought herself incapable of being part of a group and speaking in front of them or of interviewing prominent figures in her community. She has a new-found recognition of her personal skills and abilities and sees she can do many things, is gaining new skills and learning much.

Communication

An increase in communication ability is also evident in Lerato. She now comfortably expresses the opinion that the training strongly affected her. As well as now being confident to speak in front of groups, she also has become much articulate in expressing her feelings and sharing her experiences. Her body language and behavior are truly different than when she entered the program. There is now much more eye contact, she stands up straight and speaks clearly. She is an exemplar of the overall improvement in effective communication skills among her group.

HIV/AIDS

Lerato models the increase in knowledge among YAH youth participants. She was initially similar to most Basotho in her misconceptions surrounding HIV/AIDS, believing for example that one can become infected through talking with an HIV-positive individual. She is now very knowledgeable concerning HIV/AIDS, feels much more comfortable with HIV-related information and issues and shares her knowledge with others. All committee members tested during the training. The night prior to testing Lerato was paralyzed with fear and lay awake wondering what she would do if she was positive; what her mother and friends would think of her. Like the majority of Basotho youth, Lerato assumed herself to be positive. When discovered her negative status there was an overwhelming relief. Another young man in the group who similarly had assumed himself positive was so overcome with relief he shook for an hour after. Lerato is incredibly proud and enthusiastic to discuss the testing process and dealing with the fear of results: “I tell them, I have tested. They say Ah! No, I am too afraid. I say yes, I was also afraid but you must just do it.” She discusses the importance of understanding HIV and of knowing one’s status with many in her community, including her family. All her family, apart from the father, now discusses HIV/AIDS in Lesotho. While at times still uncomfortable, her mother often listens to the discussions and says “you are the children of democracy,” meaning they have access to much more information than in the past and are able to discuss such issues. The acquisition of accurate knowledge of HIV/AIDS, prevention and testing, and changes in attitudes about the disease and toward those living positively were direct outcomes of the first stage of this program.

Governance and Gender Equity

An observable shift in gender power dynamics took place within the group. While participation by all was initially a struggle, the group and its discussions were clearly dominated by the men. They openly monopolized all discussions and decisions. While this never completely equalized, a discernible shift occurred through the training period. The women greatly increased their participation and influence over

group decisions in relation to the men. Decision-making became more equitable. A number of the young women began to assert themselves, including, noticeable, the formerly shy and silent Lerato. However, the group remained on the whole dominated by men, particularly in meetings with all members throughout the capacity mapping period. While clear shifts were noted in the gender-related vocabulary of the men and in their stated value of gender equity, their actions often failed to comply. Men continued to eat first and to expect the women to clean as their natural duty. Such difficulty in affecting gender inequality is not surprising given the entrenchment of gender-based cultural norms, but there was a distinct improvement in both power sharing and the recognition of a need for gender equity.

Like many other young women in this culture Lerato has started to realize that her life can be very different than it was for previous generations of Basotho women. She sees so much potential for herself that had appeared impossible in a culture dominated by men and one in which she assumed she would succumb to AIDS. This new understanding is liberating and exciting for Lerato, however she will also have to content with incredibly rigid socio-cultural norms about gender and leadership and with a culture largely resistant to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic in her country. While she starts to question a lack of good governance principles in her community and country, she will no doubt meet with resistance and challenges.

Summary

This project has to date achieved its objectives in building governance and leadership capacity among the youth as Lerato Molapo's story illuminates. Distinctive shifts in leadership, communication, HIV/AIDS, governance and gender equity occurred. As well as developing significantly in these areas, Lerato recognizes and deeply appreciates the benefits of her involvement with YAH. Her friends and family are pleased for her as they see that she is learning, happy and more self confident. She also is able to contribute somewhat to the household through buying food with her weekly stipend which adds greatly to her self-confidence and her value in the eyes of her family. This program rescues her from sitting at home, or more dangerously, from falling prey to pregnancy and offers from older men of money or gifts in return for sex. Such transactional sex is a significant problem across southern Africa and a threat Lerato herself recognizes and works to avoid.

Her dedication to the project and to her personal development is demonstrated in her recent decision to break up with her boyfriend. He is a 'herd boy', someone who is paid to take care of animals while they graze. He began to resent the time she worked with YAH and felt she should discontinue with the project. Lerato decided she did not want to be with a boy who did not recognize something important to her. She did not want to hurt him by ignoring him and so made the decision it would be best if they split. This was a wise move in the Lesotho context of HIV/AIDS, where herd boys have among the highest rates of infection. The decision also demonstrated her improved sense of self confidence, her new-found ability to make her own decisions and her belief in the work of YAH.

Lerato hopes to continue developing her learning and leadership skills, feeling that one can always learn from others, through sharing ideas and discussing mistakes. She wants to learn to be patient and to forgive others. Lerato hopes to train as a nurse eventually and remains very active in and committed to YAH ten months into the project, often speaking at public gatherings and continuing to develop her self-confidence.

A strong factor in the success of this project in significantly affecting knowledge, attitudes and behavioral change lies in the cumulative effects of the on-going training and support received both initially and throughout the project. Over and above the planned YAH five weeks of training, the youth have trained in health related matters, additional leadership perspectives, governance factors, project management and public speaking. All the YAH women were invited to a recent Help Lesotho three day Young Women's Gender Conference (October 27-29, 2006) with girls from all over the mountains. They will all undergo two four day training session by the Ministry of Gender, Youth, Sports and Recreation in 'String Games', paid for by Help Lesotho, and will use these games to conduct peer training in their villages on HIV/AIDS. In all YAH/Help Lesotho training, participants are encouraged to explore their assumptions in a supportive yet challenging environment. Good governance principals are modeled, practiced, referenced and integrated into all facets of their work.

For future similar projects such intensive training and support is highly recommended, allowing ample time for participants to fully process these difficult and often counter cultural concepts. The three weeks allowed in this project was not excessive for these purposes. A focus on culturally appropriate concrete skill sets to identify and understand community governance issues increased youth capacity and commitment to produce locally-developed strategies which are realistic and sustainable.

The story of Lerato Molapo illuminates the challenges and possible successes through this type of innovative approach to building capacity in governance, leadership and HIV/AIDS strategies. The results are valuable, socially recognized and accepted in communities where change is difficult. Challenges will continue to exist in addressing culturally-entrenched gender inequities, lack of good governance principles and resistance to addressing HIV/AIDS issues in Lesotho. However by building local capacity in these areas, empirical shifts in knowledge, attitude and behavior are both possible and a priori to fundamental social change. Lesotho is dying. Over sixty percent of the population of the country is under 24 years of age. Youth need solid, appropriately paced support to face these challenges to facilitate the success of all other initiatives.