



Women and liveability – Best practices of empowerment from Lesotho

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Abstract

How to survive and make ends meet and how to improve the quality of life are daily and persistent livelihood issues and liveability challenges preoccupying disadvantaged communities in underdeveloped and developing countries. In economically restrictive and HIV hazardous Lesotho life struggles could be complex and challenging for womenfolk who more often than not are left on their own to cope with daily liveability problems. Through examining the findings from secondary information sources this paper illustrates three cases of how women helped make the best of empowerment projects geared to make the livelihood and liveability of themselves, their family and community better and more meaningful. It also highlights the institutional and organizational traits that were also the success factors of the empowerment projects.

Keywords: empowerment projects, Lesotho, liveability, livelihood, success factors, womenfolk

Introduction

The Kingdom of Lesotho is made up mostly of highlands where many of the villages can be reached only on horseback, by foot or light aircraft. During the winter shepherds wearing only boots and wrap-around blankets have to contend with snow. While much of the tiny country (Fig. 1) - It is just over 30,000 km² (11,583 sq mi) in size and has a population slightly over two million - with spectacular canyons and thatched huts, remains untouched by modern machines, developers have laid down roads to reach its mineral and water resources. The Lesotho Highlands Water Project was completed in the 1990s to supply South Africa with fresh water.

Resources are scarce - a consequence of the harsh environment of the highland plateau and limited agricultural space in the lowlands. Water and diamonds are Lesotho's significant natural resources.^[21] So, Lesotho has been heavily dependent on the country which completely surrounds it - South Africa. Over the decades thousands of workers have been forced by the lack of job opportunities to find work at South African mines. South Africa has on several occasions intervened in Lesotho's politics, including in 1998 when it sent its troops to help quell unrest.

Lesotho has one of the world's highest rates of HIV-Aids infection. A drive to encourage people to take HIV tests was spurred on by former Prime Minister Mosisili, who was tested in public in 2004. Poverty is deep and widespread, with the UN describing 40% of the population as ultra-poor for living on US \$1.25 a day. Food output has been hit by the deaths from Aids of farmers. Economic woes have been compounded by the scrapping of a global textile quota system which exposed producers to Asian competition. Thousands of jobs in the industry have been lost.

The earliest known inhabitants of the area were Khoisan hunter-gatherers. The Sotho–Tswana peoples colonized the general region of South Africa between the third and 11th centuries. The present Lesotho, then called Basutoland, emerged as a single polity under King Moshoeshoe I in 1822. Subsequent evolution of the state hinged on conflicts between British and Dutch colonists. In 1869, the British signed a treaty at Aliwal North with the Boers that defined the boundaries of Basutoland, and later Lesotho, which by ceding the western territories effectively reduced Moshoeshoe's Kingdom to half its previous size. Moshoeshoe died on 11 March 1870, marking the end of the traditional era and the beginning of the colonial era.

The former British protectorate has had a turbulent, if not particularly bloody, period of independence with several parties, army factions and the royal family competing for power in coups and mutinies. The position of king has been reduced to a symbolic and unifying role. Constitutional government was restored in 1993 after seven years of military rule. In 1998, violent protests and a military mutiny following a contentious election prompted a brief but bloody intervention by South African and Batswana military forces under the aegis of the Southern African Development Community. Subsequent constitutional reforms restored relative political stability. Peaceful parliamentary elections were held in 2002, but the National Assembly elections of February 2007 were hotly contested and aggrieved parties disputed how the electoral law was applied to award proportional seats in the Assembly. In May 2012, competitive elections involving 18 parties saw Prime Minister Motsoahae Thomas Thabane form a coalition government - the first in the country's history - that ousted the 14-year incumbent, Pakalitha Mosisili, who peacefully transferred power the following month.



Fig. 1. Location of study

Economic profile

Small, landlocked, and mountainous, Lesotho is geographically surrounded by South Africa and economically integrated with it as well. The economy of Lesotho is based on agriculture, livestock, manufacturing and mining, and depends heavily on inflows of workers' remittances and receipts from miners employed in South Africa and customs duties from the Southern Africa Customs Union for the majority of government revenue. However, the government has recently strengthened its tax system to

reduce dependency on customs duties. Completion of a major hydropower facility in January 1998 permitted the sale of water to South Africa and generated royalties for Lesotho. Lesotho produces about 90% of its own electrical power needs.

As the number of mineworkers has declined steadily over the past several years, a small manufacturing base has developed based on farm products that support the milling, canning, leather, and jute industries, as well as a rapidly expanding apparel-assembly sector. The latter has grown significantly mainly due to Lesotho qualifying for the trade benefits contained in the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act.

The economy is still primarily based on subsistence agriculture, especially livestock, although drought has decreased agricultural activity. The western lowlands form the main agricultural zone. Almost 50% of the population earn income through informal crop cultivation or animal husbandry with nearly two-thirds of the country's income coming from the agricultural sector.

The extreme inequality in the distribution of income remains a major drawback. The majority of households subsist on farming. The formal sector employment consist of mainly the female workers in the apparel sector, the male migrant labour, primarily miners in South Africa for 3 to 9 months and employment in the Government of Lesotho (GOL). Food output has been hit by the deaths from Aids of farmers. Economic woes have been compounded by the scrapping of a global textile quota system which exposed producers to Asian competition. Thousands of jobs in the industry have been lost.

Poverty is deep and widespread, with the UN describing 40% of the population as "ultra-poor". The percentage of the population living below USD Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) US\$1.25/day fell from 48 percent to 44 percent between 1995 and 2003 (World Bank, 2003). Lesotho has signed an Interim Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility with the IMF. In July 2007, Lesotho signed a Millennium Challenge Account Compact with the US worth \$362.5 million.

- GDP (purchasing power parity): \$3.301 billion (2008 est.); \$4.265 billion (2013 est.)
- GDP per capita (PPP): \$1,600 (2008 est.); \$2,200 (2013 est.)
- Labor force by occupation: - agriculture: 86%; - industry and services: 14% (2002 est.)
- Population below poverty line: 49% (1999 est.)

Source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lt.html>

Social profile

The population of Lesotho is estimated to be around 90% Christian. Protestants represent 45% of the population (Evangelicals 26%, and Anglican and other Protestant groups an additional 19%), and Catholics represent 45 percent of the population. Members of other religions (Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Bahá'í, and members of traditional indigenous religions) comprise the remaining 10% of the population.

Lesotho's population has increased from 2,130,819 in 2009 to 1,942,008 in 2014 (the 149th. highest in the world) as the growth rate has arisen from 0.116 % to 0.34 % respectively. The national sex ratio is 0.97male(s)/female in 2014 although both sexes have improved life expectancy at birth : male from 41.18 years in 2009 to 52.55 years in 2014 and female from 39.54 years to 52.75 years respectively. The 2014 national life expectancy was only 52.65 years placing Lesotho at 211 in world comparison. The maternal mortality remains high at 620 deaths /100,000 live births (2010), the 12th highest in the world.

The low life expectancy and mortality figures are rather perplexing given that Lesotho spends a significant 12.8 % of GDP (2011)- the 8th highest in the world - for health .There is only 0.05 physicians (2003) and 1.3 beds (2006) for every 1,000 population. Drinking water source has improved for 93.2 of the urban population and only for 76.7% of the rural population (2012). By contrast, improved sanitation facility access only benefits less than 30 per cent of urban and rural population. For 63 % of urban and 73.3% of rural population their sanitation facility remains unimproved (2012).

Undernourishment has seen 13.5 % (2010) of Lesotho children under the age of 5 years underweight, the 56th. highest in the world. What is most worrying about Lesotho current health risk is the adult prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS which stood at 23.1 % (2012) the 2nd highest in the world. A total of 358,700 million (2012) lived with this disease the 20th highest in the world, and 15,500 deaths in the country were due to HIV/AIDS in 2012 also the 20th highest in the world.

Urbanization increases a little from 25% of total population in 2008 to 27.6% in 2011. According to CIA (2014) estimates, 89.6% of those older than 14 are literate. As such, Lesotho holds one of the highest literacy rates in Africa, in part because Lesotho invests over 13% of its GDP – the highest in the world - in education. Unlike in most other countries, in Lesotho female literacy (95.6%) exceeds male’s 83.3 literacy. Females enjoyed a school life expectancy of 12 years as compared to 11 for males (2012). Although education is not compulsory, the Government of Lesotho is incrementally implementing a program for free primary education. Despite their literacy, Lesotho's residents struggle for access to vital services, such as healthcare, travel, and educational resources, for only 3.4% of the population use the Internet (International Telecommunication Union).

In spite of the adequate span of proper education child labour – the employment of children ages 5-14 – which totaled 103,020 or 23% (2007) is significant and the country is in the process of formulating an Action Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (APEC).

According to the Nation Master (2008) , Lesotho has the highest rape rate of any country (91.6 per 100,000 people rate for reported rape in 2008. All in all, the country is still among the "Low Human Development" countries (rank 160 of 187 on the Human Development Index) as classified by the UNDP.

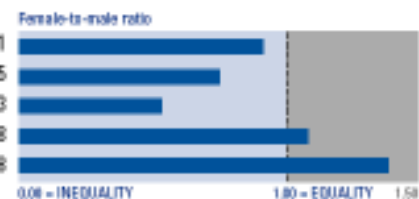
State of socio- economic participation of women in the country

There have been some sliding down of women empowerment in contemporary Lesotho in recent years . The overall score for economic participation and opportunity for women in the labour force decreases from 0.801 in 2009 to 0.745 in 2014 . The women’s estimated earned income has improved from USD 1,016 to USD 1,827, an increase of 80% for the same years . However, men earn almost double - an average of \$3,009 per annum - compared to the average \$1,827 that women are paid in 2014 (Table 1).

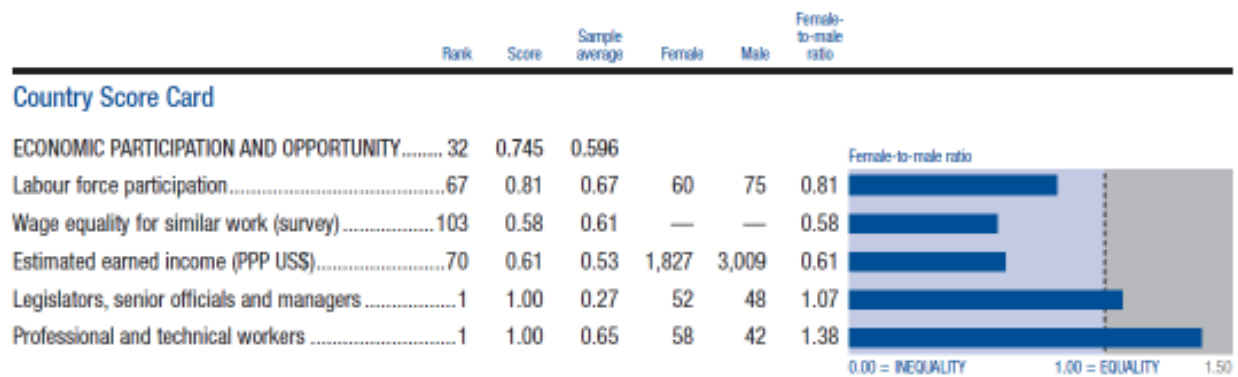
It must also be pointed out that sexual violence in Lesotho is a serious problem. International data from UNODC found the incidence of rapes recorded in 2008 by the police to be the highest in Lesotho. One study in Lesotho found that 61% of women reported having experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives, of which 22% reported being physically forced to have sexual intercourse (APHA, 2005). In another study, researchers have concluded that given the high prevalence of HIV in Lesotho, programmes should address women's right to control their sexuality (Brown, Thurman, Bloem , Kendall , 2006). The *Married Persons Equality Act 2006* gives equal rights to wives in regard to their husbands, abolishing the husband's marital power (Buhle Angelo Dube, 2008) .The World Economic Forum's 2013 Gender Gap Report ranks Lesotho 15th in the world for gender parity, 8 places higher than the USA.

Table 1. Gender inequality in economic activity

Gender Gap Subindexes	Rank	Score	Sample average	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
Economic Participation and Opportunity	4	0.801	0.594			
Labour force participation	17	0.91	0.69	69	76	0.91
Wage equality for similar work (survey)	20	0.75	0.66	—	—	0.75
Estimated earned income (PPP US\$).....	80	0.53	0.52	1,016	1,915	0.53
Legislators, senior officials, and managers.....	1	1.00	0.30	52	48	1.08
Professional and technical workers	1	1.00	0.84	58	42	1.38



Source: <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap2009/Lesotho.pdf>



Source: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR14/GGGR_CountryProfiles.pdf (p.240)

In the past, Lesotho women were de facto heads of households due to excessive male labour migration to South Africa. As a result, they were responsible for agricultural production, which was the backbone of Lesotho’s economy. Women now contribute significantly to the economy of the country, and dominate the SMMEs and the garment sectors (<http://www.undp.org.ls/millennium/default.php#MDG%20Goal%20Four>).

Nevertheless, women remain the more hard-pressed when it comes to coping with livelihood and liveability challenges. For instance, burdened with the task of being a single bread-winner Lesotho women often face the difficulty of accessing adequate capital, effective marketing and competent management. In rural areas in particular marginalized female household heads often find themselves confronted with the challenge of reviving and rehabilitating their spirit and will to survive and to carry on caring for their family.

Best practice project 1: Lesotho village savings and loans for economic strengthening

Project initiators, location and background

CARE International and CARE South Africa-Lesotho. CARE International is one of the world’s top three aid agencies, fighting poverty and injustice in over 70 countries around the world and helping 65 million people each year to find routes out of poverty. CARE in Lesotho seeks to promote the formation of 1800 groups with an average membership of 10 members per group in the districts of Mokhotlong, Qacha Nek and Quthing, three of the most underserved and vulnerable districts in Lesotho, with potential expansion into the district of Molepolole.

The project recognises the vulnerability of rural livelihoods in both South Africa and Lesotho. Nearly 80% of Lesotho's 2,2 million population live in rural areas. Remote from services, rural households are three times more likely to be poor than their urban counterparts and female-headed households are more likely to be food insecure than male-headed ones.

Poverty in South Africa is similarly geographic and gendered, with 74% of poor people living in rural areas and women more likely to be poor than men. To many rural people, the environment and natural resources are key to their livelihood, and land, agriculture and livestock are often seen as the backbone of development. But rural households face a number of challenges, including: macro-economic policies that result in higher food and transport prices; retrenchment; chronic illness which means increased expenditure on medical bills and funerals; poor agricultural practices and environmental degradation; and isolation from support services for advice, inputs or markets. In both countries, rural households rely on a number of coping strategies, often emphasizing off-farm income for household survival and development.

Project design

The current food crisis in southern Africa highlights the vulnerability of rural households, and the importance of promoting food security based on long-term goals, such as improved institutional capacity (at household levels and above) and sustainable management of natural resources. CARE's focus is on homestead food production, with low reliance on external inputs and promotion of sound environmental practices that promote productivity.

A homestead garden is the land or premises occupied and (usually) owned by a family, adjacent to the family home and over which the family has complete control. Its area is small — but it is often used for growing vegetables, some staples and fruit trees. Because it is within or near the home, gardening and home nursing are compatible and the labour demands can be lower than working in fields. Homestead vegetables and other crops are important in providing a nutritious diet that can promote positive living with chronic illness, and can provide a surplus for sale and income generation.

The goal of the project is to improve the livelihood and economic security for 18,000 poor and marginalized households in Lesotho, by improving their access to sustainable and appropriate financial services, with at least 70% of the clients women. This will be achieved by implementing or scaling up VS (voluntary savings) and L (lending) activities to improve access to financial services, stabilization and wealth creation through income generating projects.

Project impact

As VS and L clients, the rural poor have become more financially literate and have better access to appropriate and sustainable financial services. Increased household livelihood (or economic) security as households increase income levels and assets. The rural and urban VS and L clients have better access to higher-level services through micro-finance institutions (MFIs).

Best practice project 2: Cellphones in service of agricultural development in Lesotho

Project initiators, location and background

The Thulare-Eyking Agricultural Development Project (was initiated by the IDRC is a Canadian Crown corporation that works in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search for the means to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies.

Project design

The benefits of cell phone use by women in 25 rural families is unfolding as part of a larger design to stimulate a resurgence in the local agricultural economy.

The women in Lesotho's Eyking area, who are isolated and lack access to traditional village communications methods, are cut off from crucial information that could help them farm more productively. This is the reason why Econet-Ezitel is providing them with cell phones. Now the women in the pilot project can check markets for the best prices for their products and keep in touch with local farming co-operatives.

“Women in the villages have traditionally networked...by meeting at the village well when they get water,” explains David Dolly, of Lesotho's Thulare-Eyking Agricultural Development Project. “Giving them cell phones and air time means we now have an electronic well head.”

If it turns out that the phone contact can help women improve their families' productivity and earnings and raise their own status, the example would become an important one in Lesotho, which is mired in economic difficulties. Lesotho's per capita income ranks 192th in the world (CIA, 2014), with some seven

out of 10 Basotho (as the people of Lesotho are called) eking out a livelihood on declining subsistence farms.

The hope is that if this pilot project is successful other agricultural co-operatives will emulate it, giving Lesotho's farm productivity the boost it badly needs. While this impact is important in itself, project organizers hope for even more exciting ripple effects. If other rural groups in the health and local government sectors, for example, follow this project's example and build their organizations around their own networks of connected women, the concept could revitalize Lesotho as a whole.

Project impact

In 2006 ten cellphones were distributed amongst three women's farming groups in different agro-ecological zones in Lesotho: one went to a chicken farming group in Maliele (St Michael's) (the lowlands); four went to a pig farming group in Nyakosoba (in the foothills); and five went to a seed potato and vegetable farming group in Semonkong (the highlands). The cellphones were Siemens handsets and training was provided by the Maseru-based provider (Vodacom Lesotho).

Recognising the lack of exposure to mobile telephony amongst the target users, joint monitoring committees were established, comprising a teacher in the community and a young student, together with the members of each farming group. As it is beyond the scope of RHVP to provide a regular cash transfer, each handset was pre-loaded with ZAR500 (approx \$40) of airtime, and the intention was that the recipients would use ZAR100 of this for group communication, and then sell the remaining ZAR400 (as airtime or SMS) to other community members, such that the enterprise becomes self-sustaining. A follow-up evaluation was conducted in May 2007, nine months into the project, in order to look at the opportunities and challenges.

The evaluation highlighted several opportunities offered by the provision of cellphones in Lesotho. The most overwhelming advantage relates to how an increase in communication led to a drop in travel times experienced by the women in the farming groups. Lesotho is a mountainous country and outside of the capital, Maseru, transport infrastructure can be poor, meaning that disproportionately long times are often spent travelling short distances.

In the highland location of Semonkong, for example, women would typically make a four hour round trip to the Bishop Allard Vocational School where impromptu meetings are held concerning the marketing of produce. After cellphones had been distributed, it was possible for the women to call ahead to the market and obtain pricing information, and then to communicate with each other, removing the need for physical travel.

A number of women also provided stories of how access to communications had eased their lives in other ways, for example in the case of a medical emergency it was possible to call a doctor and obtain advice rather than getting a sick patient to a clinic. Some women in Semonkong had also started selling airtime, as had been intended at the start of the project (Vincent and Freeland 2009; <http://ict4dblog.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/m4d-vincent-and-freeland-final.doc>).

Best practice project 3: Lesotho textiles and apparel project

Project initiators, location and background

The ComMark Trust is a non-profit Southern African pro-poor regional development organisation. Its core business is to alleviate poverty by increasing the participation and returns of economically poor communities through agribusiness, manufacturing and services sector activities. ComMark addresses regulatory, policy, productivity, institutional and business service constraints to make markets work for poor people – whether as workers, entrepreneurs or consumers. Its programmes respond to Millennium Development Goals 1, 3 and 8: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger, Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women, and Develop a Global Partnership for Development.

The Apparel Lesotho Alliance to Fight AIDS (ALAFA) was launched in May 2006. As its names implies, it is an alliance. The project is hosted by the Lesotho Textile Exporters' Association, with government, industrialists, labour, brands and retailers, funders, donors and multinational organisations working together to combat the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Gap Inc., American specialty retailer, provided the seed money to pilot the programme at one of its approved vendors, and has continued to support the roll-out to the entire industry.

Other international brands and retailers supporting ALAFA are the Levi Strauss Foundation, the Wal-Mart Foundation and US retail chain Nordstrom. Other international donors are Irish Aid and the European Union. ALAFA is also receiving funds from the ONE campaign, a partnership between clothing company Edun and ONE: The Campaign to Make Poverty History (www.alafa.info).

Project design

Lesotho leads the way in terms of exports of apparel to the US under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). ComMark has been providing technical assistance to all stakeholders involved in the Lesotho industry since 2004.

Competitiveness has been enhanced through ComMark's training cofinance scheme, while the team has assisted government agencies to diversify the industry both in terms of markets and products. Over 45,000 workers are employed by the industry, earning in excess of US\$70-million per year.

ComMark is working with all stakeholders to build the ethical reputation of the industry where international brands can source product free of reputational risk. ComMark is also working with industrialists to take advantage of the recently signed Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).

ComMark is committed to addressing food security in worker communities in and around Maseru, Lesotho. Through the Food Gardens Project, initiated by ComMark and co-funded with Catholic Relief Services in Lesotho, we leverage and add value to the labour-intensive clothing and textile training programmes that we have sponsored in Maseru over the past five years. With ComMark partner, ALAFA, the project is targeting 5,000 poor households in urban and peri-urban areas. Thus far, 3639 households are included in the project.

Eightythree percent of the participants are women and over 50% of these women work in the local textile and clothing industry. As global food prices rise and regional prices are further impacted by food cartels, this project mitigates the impact of high food prices on families by increasing household access to fresh vegetables produced in home gardens. The project is closely monitored and particular research is being conducted on issues related to household demographics; household vulnerability; vegetable production practices; food consumption patterns; coping strategies; and social assets. Participants are also linked to ALAFA's Nurse Case Managers, HIV/AIDS Coordinators and established peer support groups in order to actively involve textile and garment workers in and around Maseru. The ALAFA team works closely with Local Chiefs and Community Councilors to increase participation and impact (Maseru Food Gardens Shield 3639 Households from Rising Food Prices, 06/22/2009. [HTTP://WWW.COMMARK.ORG/NEWS/2009/MASERU-FOOD-GARDENS-SHIELD-3639-HOUSEHOLDS-RISING-FOOD-PRICES](http://WWW.COMMARK.ORG/NEWS/2009/MASERU-FOOD-GARDENS-SHIELD-3639-HOUSEHOLDS-RISING-FOOD-PRICES)).

Project impact

The Apparel Lesotho Alliance to Fight AIDS (ALAFA) wins Drivers of Change Business Award (Mitzi du Plessis 12/05/2008, Publication: Mail & Guardian). The Southern African Trust and Mail & Guardian's Drivers of Change Award recognises individuals or organisations in the southern Africa region that are making a real impact, especially in developing effective public policies and strategies to overcome poverty. It is awarded in three categories: civil society, government, and business.



Southern Africa Trust Trustee Riah Phiyega hands over the award to the ALAFA team ... Bart Vander Plaetse, Jennifer Chen, Dagmar Hanisch, Letsie Mabereng, Limakatso Phatsoane and Janet Wilhelm

Fig. 2. ALAFA received the Drivers of Change Award for 2008

ALAFA received the Drivers of Change Award for 2008 (Fig. 2) in the business category for its innovative, sector-wide, public-private-community partnership that has shown how it is possible to protect key productive economic sectors in poor countries from the ravages of HIV and AIDS. In addition, the EU trade negotiators have shown the flexibility in allowing ‘Made in Lesotho’ garments to enter the EU market.

Conclusion

Socio-economic empowerment projects have enabled disadvantaged Lesotho people to cope better with their livelihood and liveability challenges. Physical and mental health is pre-requisite of economic empowerment and health education enhances personal, family and community wellbeing.

Women are particularly instrumental in the empowerment projects not only because they are the inheritors of the issues and challenges but also because they have proven to be capable of making the projects doable. The Lesotho cases point to the fact that respect for the women’s existential right makes the difference, and that faith in women as effective leaders for change in their families and communities secures success of projects. A special emphasis on illiterate women, on remotely located women, on chronically neglected and physically disabled women adds value to the projects.

The Lesotho experience also underlines the vital role of prudent management and organization of liveability empowerment initiatives. Here, when a collectively felt need justifies the efforts ready funds pave the way for their implementation, sometimes with the help of a global-local network. Then an efficient on the ground mechanism guarantees implementation by inventing and utilizing creative techniques to ensure women’s accessibility to the empowerment projects, and by training them to make the projects work.

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