

Lesotho: sustainable food security practices

1. The context

Persistent food insecurity continues to be a chronic problem in Lesotho and a key obstacle in the country's development agenda. The food crisis has been amplified due to the existence of a number of interlinking issues including periodic droughts which have led to crop failures, excessive soil erosion, declining rangeland conditions, chronic poverty and the effects of HIV on the labour force. An estimated 80 per cent of the country's 2.1 million population¹ is engaged in the agricultural sector, while conversely, the sector accounts for only 16 per cent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product.²

Food production in Lesotho has seen a notable decrease leading the country to import 70 per cent of its food needs, while it has equally been adversely affected by rising global food and fuel prices.³ The country's geography does not lend to its dependence on subsistence farming due to the fact that its mountainous topography covers approximately 65 per cent of the total land area, which leaves only 10 per cent of arable land.⁴ This has led to insufficient arable land per rural family, poor soil fertility and poor water resource distribution. Lowered food production has also been due to climatic variances, including below normal rainfall and droughts in recent years, as well as the impact that HIV has had on weakening subsistence farming communities.

Lesotho's food security crisis also emanates from the disastrous impact of the HIV epidemic which in large part has diminished agricultural output. One of the groups most affected by the HIV epidemic is adults in the age range group of 30-50, constituting the core of the nation's economically active and child-raising populations.⁵ An estimated 70 people die every day from AIDS related causes in the country,⁶ thus further exacerbating the food security situation. Furthermore, for people living with HIV the consequences of inadequate and insufficient nutritional intake can be detrimental. The strain and costs of households caring for HIV-affected family members or orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) can be significant, in particular in securing essential food and nutritional needs.



Keyhole garden in Lesotho

Past food security practices, which have included the support of national and international organizations, have not produced the desired long-term sustainable results. This has been mainly due to lack of participatory strategies for beneficiaries during project design and implementation; consequently, project exit strategies have always been weak or have not been fully integrated.

The following case study provides an example of successful community-based food security initiatives which have the potential for long-term impact and lend to the possibility of replication in order to support communities facing food security crises.

2. Project description

The Lesotho Red Cross Society (LRCS) embarked on the precept that in order for food security initiatives to be sustainable they need to include the active involvement of the community and need to address other interrelated and pressing issues, including HIV and AIDS and disaster risk reduction.

The food security initiatives were carried out in the districts of Mafateng and Quthing. The rationale in targeting the two districts is as follows: Mafateng, with a population of 250,000, is among the most vulnerable districts in terms of its susceptibility to drought, variable meteorological conditions and poverty. It is estimated that 57 per cent of its population is classified as living below the poverty line while seven per cent are said to be living in a state of chronic illness.⁷

The district of Quthing, with a population of 140,000, includes highlands comprised of mountain ranges that are severely affected by heavy snowfall in the winter months.⁸ These conditions can often cut off the mountain settlements from basic essentials, including access to food and health centres. Overall the two districts face formidable challenges in securing sustainable and reliable livelihood resources.

Objective

The aim of the project is two-fold: it seeks to promote community-based food security programming through income-generation initiatives, sustainable farming and training on food preservation techniques. While it also seeks to tackle a number of underlying issues linked to food security by integrating other sectors including HIV and AIDS and disaster risk reduction.

The overall intended outcome is to enhance community resilience and coping strategies to recurrent droughts and the impact of HIV and AIDS.

Project design

The design and implementation of the project was based on the findings of the vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA) that was conducted in the districts of Mafeteng and Quthing in March and April 2006.

The VCA, funded by the Department for International Development (Dfid) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (International Federation), mapped out the hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities within the target areas and provided a basis for the design of appropriate food security projects which promoted livelihood support.

This three-year project, which was initiated in December 2005, was designed to reduce the vulnerability of approximately 10,000 direct and indirect beneficiaries in the targeted districts. The LRCS, with the support of Dfid, the British Red Cross and the International Federation, integrated a sectoral approach to the diverse underlying issues affecting food security in the districts of Mafeteng and Quthing included projects such as:

- household gardening (backyard gardens with drip irrigation system, keyhole and trench gardens)
- fruit tree management
- small-scale pig-raising for the purposes of income generation.

Concurrently disaster risk reduction and home-based care were integrated into the project design.

In order to ensure that the project was owned at the local-level and was geared at long-term sustainability, vulnerable households were identified and selected in consultation with the local communities, including local chiefs, local councilors and care facilitators. Given the scope and activities of the project, the criteria for selecting beneficiaries included the following:

- individuals who were chronically ill (this includes HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis), thus directly correlating to decreased productivity

- eighteen year old orphans with either one or both parents being deceased.

Moreover, the communities selected lead gardeners based on their literacy levels, communication skills and interest in gardening.

The criteria for the lead farmers differed somewhat from other beneficiaries in that they had to be prominent farmers, as well as having adequate and relevant indigenous farming knowledge, and preferably with the ability to read and write. The targeted households each had an established productive keyhole garden, trench and a drip irrigation plot.

The criteria to select beneficiaries receiving the pigs was based on the condition that they be in good health, have previous knowledge of pig management, as well as the ability to construct a pigsty and to attend to the pigs on a daily basis. Equally important was the beneficiaries' ability to provide for supplementary food stuff and medication beyond the starter packs provided by the LRCS.

A minimum of five beneficiaries from different households grouped themselves to manage a pair of piglets. A total of 100 piglets were procured and distributed in Quthing and Mafeteng. Thus, a total number of 650 households benefited as direct beneficiaries. In the Lesotho context, a household is comprised at average of five members.

Therefore, this implies that out of 650 households 2,600 indirect beneficiaries benefited. Each group received a pair of piglets to breed in order to later sell the piglets and pork for purposes of income generation and to also improve nutrition levels among the targeted households. Most beneficiaries that had planted and harvested some vegetables during the year also were able to improve the nutritional status and health of OVCs and home-based care in targeted households.

Approximately 48 households are reported to have sold some vegetables to neighbouring villages and were able to purchase supplementary high protein food items such as eggs, meat and milk to meet their dietary needs from cash sales of surplus vegetables.

Volunteers were able to monitor the project's performance and to provide technical assistance to lead gardeners and beneficiaries. Lead farmers were selected by the community members in the presence of local authorities, relevant stakeholders and LRCS representatives. Their mandate was to work with other beneficiaries on the weekly basis to disseminate

information on different farming practices, such as soil preparation, plot construction, seeding methods, compost, mulching and irrigation tips.

The lead gardeners also conducted group and household visits, identified individual beneficiary problems and facilitated discussions to find viable solutions. Monthly meetings held with lead gardeners helped share knowledge on daily challenges and to come up with solutions for participatory project monitoring. The meetings also served in providing progress on the intended objectives of the project as well as providing an assessment for the longer-term sustainability of the project at the community-level. At the community-level, public gatherings were held with the chiefs and local councilors of the target villages to brief communities about the project.

3. Project impact

Main findings

After two years, the following findings have been reported:

- Beneficiary households are able to produce 75 per cent of their consumable needs of fresh vegetables throughout the year.
- All the beneficiaries are producing different vegetables varieties in their homestead gardens, and this has had a spill over effect on non-beneficiaries. Therefore, vegetable prices in neighbouring shops have dropped benefiting the general population and availing those living below the poverty line with the possibility of eating vegetables on a daily basis with their meals.
- The impact on access to health care and living conditions of HIV-affected persons has steadily improved.
- Beneficiary household incomes have increased by five percent from sales of surplus vegetables, through improved gardening techniques.
- Higher levels of production reflect the improved farming skills that households acquired as a result of training received from lead gardeners and volunteers.
- Success of the project is in large part due to the active participation and ownership of the community in its design and implementation.

A closer look at the project's impact

The LRCS's integrated food security project has made reasonable progress in most of its short-term objectives such as home vegetable gardens, while long-term objectives such as fruit tree management will require more time to yield results. In the short-term the project has helped targeted beneficiaries in enhancing their food security, nutrition levels and garnering additional sources of income.

Crop diversification has been adopted by the communities with the introduction of vegetable garden techniques and fruit trees. The introduction of the pig-raising project as an income generation activity provides more options for communities towards meeting their diverse needs. In turn these activities have spurred and motivated other households, outside of the target group, to adopt the promoted technologies that have increased production, and therefore helped enhance resilience against drought.

More than 70 per cent of the project's beneficiaries report consuming vegetables in their three daily meals, as a result 75 per cent of the project's respondents confirmed that they had observed improvements in their health status and have gained more energy to enable them work better and longer in their home gardens.

Many of the beneficiaries are now able to purchase supplementary high protein food items from income procured from vegetable sales thus ensuring a balanced diet on a regular basis. Income earned from vegetable sales has also enabled people living with HIV and AIDS to pay for their clinical consultations, transport costs, basic school expenses and daily family needs such as paraffin, candles, soap, matches, sugar, tea, etc.

The burden for women and people living with HIV and AIDS of collecting water from remote and distant sources is alleviated through the provision of water-saving roof collection tanks as water is a scarce resource in the southern districts of Lesotho.

Challenges

The continued need for material support on the part of project's beneficiaries remains an issue to be addressed. Furthermore, incentives for retaining the services of lead gardeners after the project phases out needs to be explored. The participatory approach adopted by the LRCS in this project and its collaboration with other stakeholders should be encouraged by all national partners for better results and long-term impact.

4. Lessons learned

The LRCS's community-based approach facilitates the potential for future replication of food security interventions for vulnerable populations. Such strategic approaches are being reinforced by regular exchange and knowledge sharing with relevant government institutions and other stakeholders. Maximum use of local resources and appropriate technologies allow other communities to easily replicate the activities.

The technology used for the production of income generation is simple and is based on knowledge and resources that are readily accessible for rural households and can be replicated without external support. The dissemination and transfer of knowledge is ensured as lead gardeners and trained beneficiaries will continue to carry out demonstrations in their communities in order to facilitate replication to surrounding areas.

The timing and effective sequencing of project activities from planning to implementation is essential to the achievement of sustainable long-term impact. Taking into account local coping mechanisms and building on them when designing mitigation initiatives ensures the sustainability of the project. The involvement of local leaders (i.e., chiefs, local councillors) and the community prior and during the project's implementation ensures that local technical expertise is taken into account and provides an impetus for ownership at the community-level.

5. The way forward

The project has illustrated that the planting of vegetables can reap benefits within a short time span (i.e., one to two months). This has availed households with the possibility of forecasting their immediate needs for consumption, enhancing dietary diversity and providing for a sufficient surplus to be sold in the market, thus ensuring an additional source of income.

The sustainability of the project depends largely on the support that beneficiaries will continue to receive from community structures such as volunteers, lead gardeners and government extension services in monitoring the implementation of ongoing activities. The training that beneficiaries receive is given with the foresight that the skills acquired will be sufficient in the long-term to manage the activities after the project has phased out.

Furthermore, the provision of intensive and regular training to community members during the project

period strengthens the management capacity of the beneficiaries. It is essential that the project design and implementation take into account the specific needs of households affected by HIV and AIDS as well as OVCs. Given the participatory nature of the project and the involvement of the beneficiaries from planning to implementation, it is necessary to ensure that people living with HIV and OVCs are appropriately integrated in order to mitigate stigmatization and discrimination in the project activities.

It is important to develop a strategy on how interventions can be made available to new households throughout the project life cycle by developing clear entry and exit strategies. Vulnerability should be the key criterion used to determine eligibility; households without employment, land or livestock are usually considered by communities as the most vulnerable. The selection criteria should also take into consideration the levels of difficulties that the people living with HIV often face due to increased expenditures and food requirements particularly when starting anti-retroviral treatment.

The impact of the project on beneficiaries has prompted non-project households to inquire about and initiate the construction of keyhole gardens. The expressed voluntary adoption of the techniques by non-members is an indication that benefits have achieved a spill over effect which needs to be supported through appropriate knowledge sharing and technical guidance on the part of trained households and volunteers. beneficiaries in the two districts.

- 1 www.unohrlls.org/en/orphan/98/
- 2 www.issafrica.org/index.php?link_id=14&cslink_id=3434&link_type=12&cslink_type=12&tmpl_id=3
- 3 www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=82227
- 4 <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/nationalreports/africa/lesotho/lesothoNHD R2006.pdf>
- 5 www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/HIVData/GlobalReport/2008/2008_Global_report.asp
- 6 www.unicef.org/media/media_19595.html
- 7 www.proventionconsortium.org/themes/default/pdfs/CRA/Lesotho2.pdf
- 8 Ibid.

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