LAPIS Aids Small Farmers in Lesotho

A brighter future for Lesotho depends on improving agricultural production

BY SUSAN M. KNIGHT

A five-year, agricultural development project emphasizing research education and training, could lead to more independence and prosperity for Africa's tiny nation of Lesotho, the only country in the world completely surrounded by another country.

Based in The University of Arizona department of plant sciences, the Lesotho Agricultural Production and Institutional Support Project (LAPIS) has coordinated training for 75 Lesotho citizens in graduate and undergraduate programs in all fields of agriculture. The students come from Lesotho's Ministry of Agriculture and the Lesotho College of Agriculture, in hopes that their newly gained expertise will foster more self-sufficiency in food production, increased income and decreased unemployment at home, says Amir Ajami, LAPIS project coordinator. In addition to the training program, LAPIS has served as a framework for tying together improvements in Lesotho's agriculture production, research and management.

All of Lesotho, no larger than Maryland, lies 5,000 feet or more above sea level, and only 13 percent of the land is fit for cultivation. Past agricultural practices have left much of the land overgrazed and the soil barren. The agricultural problems have been compounded by drought during most of the 1980s.

A majority of men in Lesotho have abandoned farming to work in the mines in bordering South Africa, leaving the nation's women to tend the farms. In fact, about 70 percent of the country's male population works in South Africa most of the year. Economic well-being for Lesotho's 1.5 million citizens has been largely dependent on the mining jobs; miners' remittances constitute nearly half of the country's gross national product.

But South Africa's economic growth has slowed. A tendency to give jobs to South Africans and increasing automation in the mining industry mean fewer employment opportunities for the Lesotho men. The government and the people of Lesotho are looking to the modernization of agriculture as a means for resolving some of their economic problems.

A brighter future for Lesotho depends on improving agricultural production, Ajami says. The LAPIS Project has focused on improving agricultural production at the small farm level, involving women as farm managers and workers. The project also has included work to expand employment opportunities for the men expected to return as jobs in South Africa diminish.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AMIR AJAMI

Extension programs offer small farmers support ranging from demonstration gardens to training in pump repair.

The $22 million project, funded by U.S. Agency for International Development, has been a joint effort between the UA department of plant sciences, the Consortium for International Development and American Ag International, a company whose headquarters is in Tucson. The UA is one of 11 universities in the western United States and Hawaii that are members of CID. CID also is based in Tucson.

The LAPIS Project, through an active partnership between AAI and the UA, has initiated training for agriculture professionals; research projects in soils, agronomy, range sciences, animal sciences and horticulture; and assistance for small farmers in vegetable production.

Since 1986, the five-year UA project has created individualized training programs for the Lesotho professionals. So far, 60 students have completed their studies and returned to Lesotho to positions in teaching and research at the college or in management in the agriculture ministry. The remaining students will finish their programs and head home by June 1991.

"These are not young students. These are people with years of working experience in agriculture in Lesotho," Ajami says. "The students were selected for a specific task or a special job. They know what they are here for. They are expected to go through specific job training and return to specific jobs in Lesotho."

In Lesotho, the project has focused largely on small farmers and farming associations. Assistance has been provided not only in cultivation, irrigation and food storage, but with marketing, record keeping and learning how to maintain equipment.

Improved extension programs are offering farmers varied support—from demonstration gardens to training in pump repair.

A home garden program—a joint effort of the Ministry of Agriculture, the U.S. Peace Corps and the LAPIS Project—is thriving. Nearly 1,500 gardens at individuals' homes and at schools, clinics and hospitals have been improved or installed.

While 70 percent of the vegetables consumed in Lesotho were at one time imported, the home gardens, small farmers and farm associations are beginning to provide more of the cabbage, carrots, beets, greens, onions, tomatoes, and potatoes for Lesotho. Fruit production also has been promoted. About 175 individuals and 45 associations have planted more than 16,000 fruit trees—apples, pears, peaches, and nectarines.

As the end of the project nears, and direct support to the small farmers and small farmer associations diminishes, 80 percent to 85 percent of the farmers are continuing production. Some of the more experienced farmers are arranging private transport for marketing in villages or regional markets, purchasing new equipment and making necessary repairs on old equipment.

The Lesotho agriculture professionals have excelled in their studies in the United States. Most of the Lesotho students complete their bachelor of science degrees in three years, while it usually takes students four to five years. The master's students finish in two years. Also, more than half have earned grade-point averages better than 3.0.

To provide more diversity in their training and the expertise they will need in Lesotho, Ajami says, students' strengths, weaknesses and needs were assessed before they were matched with an agriculture program on more than a dozen campuses around the country. Although the students have been spread out among 17 American universities, the LAPIS Project office at the UA has handled student placement, monitoring and follow-up, as well as all of the administrative details. A newsletter allows the students to keep in touch with each other. And over winter break, students attend workshops in Tucson on project management and resource development and planning.

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