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## Lesotho: a case of under-participation

### THE MACRO-LEVEL PICTURE

Lesotho is one of the few developing countries where gender disparities have been noticed in favour of girls in schooling participation rates and educational outcomes, though the country is far from reaching universalisation even for the primary stage of education. These disparities exist in literacy rates as well as participation rates at both primary and secondary stages. The participation rates for both boys and girls are low at secondary stage. However, within this situation of low participation, the enrolment rates are still lower for boys (Table 11). In fact, gender gaps are higher at the secondary stage of education indicating a lower survival rate or higher drop-out rate for boys in the post-primary phase of schooling. In this context, it is also important to remember that Lesotho, a small, landlocked country located in Southern Africa, has a total population of 2 million; hence even small change in numbers lead to significant changes in percentage terms. Nevertheless, there is no denying the fact that there is a clear case of boys' under-participation.

TABLE 11: SELECTED EDUCATIONAL INDICATORS, LESOTHO (PERCENTAGES)

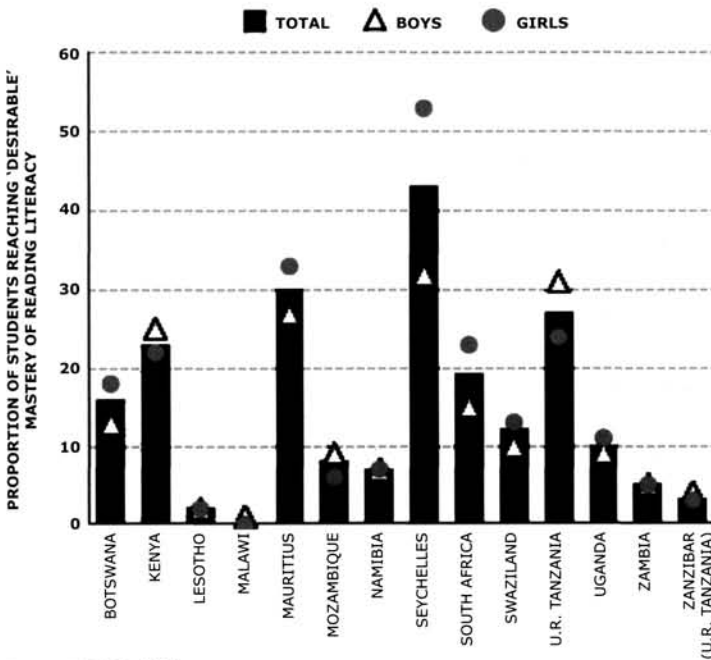
	YEAR	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	GENDER PARITY INDEX (GPI) FEMALES/ MALES
ADULT LITERACY RATE	1990	78.0	65.4	89.5	1.37
	2000-2004	81.4	73.7	90.3	1.22
NET ENROLMENT RATIO (NER) AT PRIMARY STAGE	1998-1999	64.5	60.3	68.7	1.14
	2002-2003	85.8	82.9	88.6	1.07
NET ENROLMENT RATIO (NER) AT SECONDARY STAGE	1998-1999	14.0	9.7	18.3	1.89
	2002-2003	22.5	17.8	27.2	1.53

Source: UNESCO, 2006.

The trends are not as clear in the case of under-performance, the other aspect of boys' underachievement. The results of the Southern and Eastern Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality II (SACMEQ II) 2000-2002 shows that there is hardly any difference between boys and girls in reading literacy in Lesotho (Figure 1). SACMEQ II was the first time Lesotho had participated in the survey (which originated in Zimbabwe in 1991), and the reading and mathematics achievements of Grade 6 were assessed on a sample basis.

Interestingly, the region presents a variety of gender patterns: while girls are clearly performing better than boys in some countries such as Botswana, Mauritius, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland and Uganda, the opposite is true in Kenya, Mozambique and United Republic of Tanzania, and still others – Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia and Zambia – depict insignificant differences. The countries showing insignificant differences are usually the low achievers as well.

FIGURE 1: GENDER DISPARITIES IN READING LITERACY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COUNTRIES



Source: UNESCO, 2005

Boys and girls in Lesotho show similar scores despite the fact that repetition rates are higher for boys in all zones (Table 12). According to a government report (Government of Lesotho, 2000), girls perform better than boys in all the grades at the primary education level, but the scores for both sexes level off in the final examinations. What is obviously more worrisome for Lesotho is the fact that it has one of the lowest levels of proficiency for both boys and girls among all the countries that participated in SAQMEC II.

TABLE 12: PERCENTAGE OF PUPILS WHO ARE REPEATERS, LESOTHO

ECOLOGICAL ZONE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
FOOTHILLS	16	22	19
LOWLANDS	14	20	17
MOUNTAIN	18	23	20
SENGU RIVER VALLEY	14	17	18
<b>TOTAL</b>	16	21	18

Source: Government of Lesotho and the World Bank, 2005.

The above analysis establishes that under-performance of both boys and girls is a major issue in Lesotho. However, boys deserve special attention on two counts: (a) the relative under-participation of boys in terms of enrolment in a situation where the participation of all children is low; and (b) boys' relatively higher repetition rate.

An important aspect of Lesotho society is that although slightly more girls attend school and consequently have higher literacy rates, this is neither the result of nor leads to better positioning of women. Despite impressive advances compared to some other sub-Saharan African countries, with significant representation of women in almost all sectors including administrative and managerial positions, unequal gender relations are still a dominant feature in Lesotho (Kimane et al, 1998; Abagi, 2003). The patrilineal and patriarchal system continues to subordinate women to men, and customary law classifies women as minors that need to be perpetually subjected to the guardianship of their male counterparts. Boys' under-participation, therefore, does not emanate from their secondary position, as had been the case with girls in most parts of the world. Rather, it has its roots in the age-old practice of herdboys tending livestock. Livestock are an

important part of Lesotho traditions and boys are engaged in looking after them from a young age. The practice continues in rural areas, especially among the population living in the highlands.

About one third of Lesotho's population lives in the highlands, where villages are small and isolated, separated by steep mountains. The temperatures are cooler and snow falls during the winter months. Most families there raise animals such as sheep, cattle or angora goats. Livestock, apart from being a source of pride, are also one of the important sources of livelihood and nearly every boy spends part of his life as a herdboys. They pass their days in taking the family's herd to a field where they can graze and searching for new places where the animals can feed the next day. During winter this often means taking the herd to the fields a few miles from home. When spring planting begins, these young herdboys need to go further up into the mountains to look for pasturelands. As the demands of schooling clash with those of the livestock, these herdboys are one of the main groups that remain outside the fold of modern education.

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The practice can be associated with the traditional perception that wealth was counted in terms of the number of livestock a family had. Several researchers have pointed out that herding of animals is considered a good practice even in terms of socialising the male child to become a responsible member of family and society (Mokhosi et al, 1999). According to these researchers, the initiation to herding animals tends to begin between three and five years when young boys start accompanying their elder brothers or relatives to look after animals. Most herdboys come from poor family backgrounds. The situation is worse for children who serve other families as herdboys and stay with their employers, as they work for little remuneration and are denied all their basic rights.

Figure 2 lists the barriers that cause under-participation, as seen in a number of studies. It is important to understand that indifference towards education combines with the practice of herding and poverty to act as a constraint to participation in schooling. The fact that the practice of being a herdboys is now mostly found only among the poor shows that it is not only a cultural issue. It is probably the only major livelihood option for many poor families based in rural areas located in the highlands. Therefore, the practice

continues even if it clashes with the demands of schooling and leads to a lack of formal education among boys. Studies also indicate that lack of education means lack of information about health-related issues, leading to a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and drug abuse.

FIGURE 2: OBSTACLES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE FAILURE TO ATTAIN A FORMAL EDUCATION, LESOTHO

FACTOR	SUPPORTING STATEMENT/S
POVERTY/CONSTRAINTS	SCHOOL FEES, BOOK FEES, UNIFORMS, FEEDING SCHEME PLACE TOO HIGH DEMANDS ON THE MAJORITY OF PARENTS
CULTURAL PRACTICES	CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS, NEGATIVE PARENTAL ATTITUDES, PRACTICES SUCH AS INITIATIONS AND EARLY MARRIAGES AS WELL AS MISSING SCHOOL TO ATTEND TO HOUSEHOLD CHORES OR HERDING ANIMALS
SUBSTANCE ABUSE	YOUNG PERSONS ENGAGE IN DRUG ABUSE AND ALCOHOLISM
FACILITIES	LACK OF HEALTHY PHYSICAL AND SANITARY FACILITIES IN SCHOOLS, INCLUDING TOILETS AND DESKS
HEALTH	HIV/AIDS INFECTED AND AFFECTED, THE HIGH HIV/AIDS PREVALENCE AND MANY ORPHANED BOYS AND GIRLS
PREGNANCY	CASES OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS, MORE SO THOSE IN RURAL AREAS
DISTANCE	LONG DISTANCES FROM SCHOOLS
NEGATIVE ATTITUDE	SCHOOL IS CONSIDERED TO BE AN UNNECESSARY ACTIVITY; PEOPLE ARE SOMETIMES SIMPLY TOO LAZY OR SHY TO ATTEND
CLASH IN SCHEDULE	HERDBOYS LEAVE EARLY IN THE MORNING, SPEND THE WHOLE DAY IN THE FIELD AND COME BACK IN THE EVENING
ERRATIC OR NON-ATTENDANCE	HERDBOYS ARE REQUIRED TO WORK ALL YEAR ROUND, A SITUATION THAT AFFECTS REGULAR ATTENDANCE

Source: Respondents, Odumbe, 1990; Gill, 1994; Mokhosi et al, 1999; Abagi, 2003; Makhetha and Motlomelo, 2004; Government of Lesotho and UNICEF, 1994.

Even when herdboys and other children from poor families enrol in schools, the incidence of absenteeism remains high, affecting their continuation and performance. Although absenteeism is high among girls too, it is reportedly higher for boys. Fetching water is the main activity that leads to girls' absenteeism, but that appears to be less demanding in terms of conflicting with the school day as compared to being a herdboys. The isolated nature of villages, separated by mountains, also poses physical barriers in terms of attending

schools. The lack of facilities makes schools in rural areas an unattractive option, and these areas face a paucity of teachers, especially qualified ones. The school census records school location in four general categories and, although this is not normally used for analysis, it was used by a study undertaken by the Government of Lesotho and the World Bank (2005). This reveals that 51 per cent of teachers in mountain areas are unqualified, compared with only 24 per cent in lowland areas (Table 13). Even these figures may mask greater teacher shortages in the most isolated schools, as many schools might not have any or only one qualified teacher. The study opines, “It is hard to attract people to rural areas, as the conditions are difficult... Young people, even those from rural areas, want to come down from the highlands as soon as they can”. The high incidence of teacher absenteeism in rural areas for a variety of reasons compounds the problem.

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TABLE 13: PERCENTAGE OF TEACHERS WHO ARE UNQUALIFIED BY LOCATION, LESOTHO

ECOLOGICAL ZONE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
FOOTHILLS	35	58	39
LOWLANDS	21	39	24
MOUNTAIN	47	60	51
SENQU RIVER VALLEY	26	59	35

Source: Government of Lesotho and the World Bank, 2005.

Considering the mountainous nature of the terrain and the dispersed nature of the population, open and distance learning (ODL) assumes a special significance. This case study looks at the experience of Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre in this context. It examines the Learning Post programme, which aims to take basic education to students living in remote areas.

## THE LESOTHO DISTANCE TEACHING CENTRE

The Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre (LDTC) was established in 1972 as a department of the Ministry of Education and Training. Initially, the Centre was set up to address the needs of secondary education using ODL methods. The focus was on students who had not passed the final secondary education examinations. The literacy and numeracy section of the Centre, which is now the Centre for Basic Education, was established in 1977 to provide literacy and skills training. The basic premise for starting this section was that it was not possible for some sections of the society to attend school due to a variety of reasons. Despite the introduction of free primary schooling, this is not universal due to the practice of cattle rearing as well as the lack of faith in the relevance of education mentioned above. The Learning Post (LP) programme was intended to cater for illiterate and semi-literate learners, most of whom are herdboys. This case study is based on a desk review of existing evaluation reports of the programme as well as consultation with all kinds of stakeholders including learners, volunteers, parents and administrators associated with the programme.

### Learning Post programme: A flexible option for the underprivileged

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LP programme offers learners the opportunity to complete the course at their own pace and in their own time. The hope of better employment opportunities and developing the capacity to deal with the exploitation that they often face were major motivations for learners joining the programme. Those who had dropped out of the formal system shared their experiences of not feeling comfortable there because of their age being higher than other students and lack of attention from teachers. This reflected that the formal system is not geared to deal with the specific needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A perusal of the family backgrounds of learners consulted reveals that they largely came from uneducated and poor households. The majority of parents

had never been to school and remained illiterate. Almost all mothers were housewives and fathers were farmers, reflecting the fact that this programme was not a choice of those whose families were educated or in any kind of employment. The flexibility obviously helped poor children cope with the requirements of supporting their families and engaging in practices such as cattle grazing. There have been more male learners in the programme than female. Although not equivalent to primary education, the programme covers basic literacy and numeracy skills in addition to some vocational skills. All the respondents who were consulted stated that the LP programme has had a positive impact on the learners and their communities. Programme graduates have been actively participating in community-based development projects, and this was perceived as a good use of the skills acquired through the programme.

However, despite these positives, the LP programme has been questioned on several grounds. First of all, the learners do not complete a full cycle of primary or basic education and hence the programme cannot be considered as equivalent to the primary stage of schooling. This does not appear to be in conformity with the rights approach and can be viewed as a poor substitute for poor children, a criticism often made of alternatives that do not have the same or equivalent curricula. The present curriculum has also been questioned on the basis of relevance, and the need to include additional topics such as conflict resolution, HIV/AIDS, career guidance, basic criminology, etc has been highlighted. A number of respondents in the process of consultation suggested that the nature and quality of vocational skills needed to change if the learners were expected to use these to find employment. However, the recent decision to introduce the English language in the programme was viewed as a positive development by most of those consulted.

***Low paid but highly motivated teachers working in an un-enabling environment***

The majority of the LP programme administrators/ teachers are middle-aged women. They serve as volunteers and receive monthly honoraria of about M150/ US\$19. This low level of honoraria explains the disproportionate presence of women as men in general, and young men in particular, do not find it attractive enough. It also leads to a high incidence of turnover. However, the level of motivation among these administrators/ teachers is observed to generally be high, one of the major reasons that the quality of delivery has been acceptable despite adverse conditions. A number of these teachers had been associated

with LDTC themselves and felt a sense of responsibility towards contributing to a programme that promotes literacy and education among the deprived. For instance, one of the teachers shared her experience of being able to complete her secondary schooling through an LDTC correspondence course, and noted that she finds this experience satisfying even if it is not rewarding in monetary terms. This sentiment was echoed by many other teachers as well. Nonetheless, it was also obvious in the process of consultation that motivation alone cannot sustain the programme, and a number of interventions are required to improve it further.

Lack of a conducive environment and of adequate facilities for schooling has been identified by a number of evaluations as a major obstacle in raising the quality of the LP programme. An enabling environment helps in attracting and retaining learners. The respondents, in particular the LP administrators, indicated that the schools' proprietors do not allow the programme administrators to use their facilities. This confirms the findings of almost all evaluations undertaken for LDTC, which have recommended the active involvement of stakeholders such as school proprietors, field-based education officers and parents or guardians in significant ways to improve the environment.

The LP programme relies heavily on the print and face-to-face mode of delivery. Evaluations suggest that reception of Radio Lesotho – which, among others, presents the language arts radio lesson programme – is on the whole good and have proposed that this facility might be one that can reach most learners and in particular herdboys. However, this would only be possible if the poor communities could be provided with radios. There appeared to be universal agreement that the use of modern technology would make the programme more accessible and cost-effective. This is especially relevant given the mountainous and remote nature of the terrain. It appeared that the LDTC does not use for training the radio slot provided by the Ministry of Education and Training, which has been in place for more than 20 years. Radio can be used creatively to teach a new language and thus has special relevance for the recent decision to teach English.

### *Retention in the Learning Post programme*

The retention rates are apparently not very high in the LP programme. Several reasons have been put forward for this. Primarily, it has to do with the herdboys' lifestyle. The boys who are employed tend to move from one employer to the other, and the new employer may not be in the same district or locality as the one in which the herdboy was able to participate in the programme. Even when

they are not employed and herd their family's livestock, the sheer pressure of having worked through the day makes it difficult for them to come for these classes in the evening. Seasonality also affects attendance as boys tend to spend longer periods at the cattle post during winter while girls are retained at home for help during harvesting periods. In some cases, herdboys join circumcision school, after which they discontinue other forms of education. Early marriages are common and girls are often not permitted after marriage or pregnancy to go back to these classes. Makhetha and Motlomelo (2004) and UNICEF (2003) have also cited ill health, excessive drug abuse, attending to family chores such as working in the fields and lack of motivation as major causes of drop out from the programme. It is obvious that the whole issue of child labour needs to be addressed as these practices clash with any form of schooling. Language also acts as a barrier in some cases. Lesotho is largely homogenous and Sesotho is the main language and the medium of instruction. However, Xhosa and Zulu are also spoken in some parts.

## CONCLUSIONS

The case study shows that although ODL has potential as a solution in circumstances where the locations are remote and the population dispersed, it needs to be planned and implemented carefully if the objective is to provide basic or higher levels of education. A complete cycle of basic education cannot be treated as the same as literacy and requires the participation of children for longer hours on a sustained basis. ODL models can be successful only if they implement well-designed curricula using a variety of technological tools in combination with face-to-face interactions, which does not seem to be happening in this case. While the programme has provided literacy skills to a large number of herdboys who had either dropped out or never been to school, there remains the need for developing other solutions to the whole issue of boys' under-participation, which appears to be result of a combination of economic, social and physical factors in Lesotho.

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