

Building Governance Capacity and Community Engagement in Lesotho: Youth Against HIV/AIDS (YAH)

Youth Case Study

by Melanie Theriault, YAH Volunteer 2006

YAH is a partnership initiative
between Help Lesotho and the Institute On Governance and Funded by CIDA

In the midst of the widespread HIV/AIDS pandemic, the tiny Kingdom of Lesotho, southern Africa, must race against time to mitigate and reverse the significant development challenges that are threatening the social and economic fabric of the country. Lesotho has the world's third highest incidence of HIV/AIDS. Close to 30 percent of its children are orphaned and more than half of the country's 1.2-million population are under twenty-five and trapped below the poverty line. The ability of government, civil society and citizens to demonstrate good governance practices in their own organizations and communities will strengthen the response to both HIV/AIDS and poverty for both current and future generations.

The Building Governance Capacity and Community Engagement in Lesotho: Youth Against HIV/AIDS (YAH) project was designed in part to engage potential community youth leaders in the fight against HIV/AIDS. YAH began in December 2005, as a two- and- a- half year project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through the Institute On Governance (IOG), in partnership with Help Lesotho (HL). The YAH committee members are empowered through intensive training and support in areas of good governance practices, leadership, communication, HIV/AIDS and gender equity.

Selected through a series of equitable interview processes, 18 Basotho youth (9 men and 9 women) between the ages of 18 and 25 were selected as YAH Committee members in three regions of northern Lesotho. These focus regions were selected by virtue of remoteness, lack of resources and need. The YAH committee members were trained to map capacity, needs and resources in their communities and to develop strategies based on available resources to promote good governance practices and a greater capacity to address issues surrounding HIV and AIDS.

This case study chronicles the personal growth of a 21-year-old young man, Mpho Malakea (pronounced Em-po) (the name has been changed for the purposes of this case study) as an active participant in the YAH program. Mpho's story illustrates the benefits of the program in fostering civic responsibility and leadership in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Lesotho.

Two Canadian youth volunteers had the unique opportunity to assist with the 2006 YAH training and live in rural Lesotho among the team members' communities. Donna Bawden and I lived in Lesotho for two and a half months throughout the training, including five weeks of community capacity mapping. I was posted in Seboche, Mpho's beautiful mountain village, where I conducted research for this case study through formal and informal interviews and participant observation. Informed consent was granted.

Seboche is located in Butha Buthe, Lesotho's most northern district and like many other tiny and remote rural villages throughout the country, it is riddled with increasing development challenges. A season of devastating rains following years of drought only fueled the complex cycle of erosion, poverty, unemployment, and malnutrition, compounded by the indiscriminant ravages of HIV/AIDS as it kills citizens, children, mothers, health care professionals and teachers. During a conversation Mpho anxiously comments, "The youth are getting sick and dying. Due to ignorance leaders are dying. Educated people who are counted on to bring something to the community are also dying." This ever-increasing void of healthy leadership figures leaves behind orphans to head households with no hope of guidance, support or opportunity for education.

Mpho's family have resided in Seboche all of his life. The eldest of three siblings and only son, he carries much responsibility in this patriarchal society. Considerable pressure is placed upon young Basotho men from their families and communities to 'become a man' by finding gainful employment to support family members.

Without running water or electricity, living conditions for Mpho's family, like many others in these remote areas, are poor. Mpho and his family are considered prosperous because one parent is working. Thirteen years ago, Mpho's father, like countless other unemployed Basotho men, left the family to work in the Republic of South Africa leaving Mpho's mother with the responsibility of tending to the house and fields and their three children. With only periodic visits from their father, the children grew up without a father figure and with the harshness of a mother frustrated from the worries of never having enough money, of being without the companionship of her husband and aggravated by the uncertainties of her husband's life away from home. Many women's fears that their husbands will bring AIDS home remain unaddressed as a culturally taboo subject. In spite of their increasing vulnerability, Basotho women must learn to make ends meet without assistance from their absent husbands. Growing up, Mpho strongly felt the impact.

Mpho graduated from high school in Seboche in 2003 and has since done piece work in construction and repairs where he can find them. He waits hoping against all hope for a government scholarship, the only means for many to continue their education. Unfortunately, like most youth his age he 'sits and waits.' The majority of youth cannot continue their schooling and, with little in the way of programming or extracurricular activities, many fall subject to listless boredom and the resultant destructive behaviours of petty crimes, violence, and sexual, drug and alcohol abuse.

Mpho greatly wishes a decent future for his village and desires to see his country flourish. He feels a civic responsibility to Lesotho but cannot find ways to help when so many are in need. Mpho shares his dismay at the 'brain drain' phenomenon affecting his country, "so many educated Basotho leave the country for an easier life. But we need our doctors and we need our teachers also." And so, Mpho was highly motivated to join the YAH committee when it was introduced to the Butha-Buthe district in early 2006. Mpho was interested in learning how to assist youth with HIV/AIDS awareness and become an active player in creating a future for his county.

Training

A three-week training session extending from March 13 to March 31, 2006 brought together the YAH committee members from the three participating districts. The training focused on the themes of governance, gender equity, leadership, and communication in their relation to HIV/AIDS.

The training explored problem-solving tools, the importance of setting goals, communication and conflict resolution, leadership accountability and participation. Sessions focused on sexual violence and gender dynamics, power sharing and milestones for good governance practices. A range of speakers selected from civil society organizations, government representatives and local leaders conducted sessions on the importance of being engaging role models in their communities and active agents for change through successful, accountable leadership and professionalism. Canadian governance and HIV/AIDS specialists were also present to share in their expertise. The training was diverse and intensive.

Much of the training subject matter was novel to the Basotho youth and required them to process significant amounts of information and new concepts in a short amount of time. Their growth was apparent. A safe, appropriately paced and supportive learning environment allowed the participants to apply newly learned critical reasoning, voice their personal ideas and practice what they learned. Daily reflection time enhanced their ability to process the challenging material covered throughout the training session.

The training concluded with HIV testing of the participants and although there was some resistance from the group at the inception of the training period, on the day of the testing all were present. All faced the intense fear that is crippling the Kingdom of Lesotho. Each YAH committee member felt prepared after three weeks of intensive learning and challenging themselves and cultural norms to take the test. Mpho feels that the training inspired a “great change in his life” and has since encouraged others in his community to test for HIV. He is convinced “people would take care of each other if everyone knew their status, but in the dark, the stigma grows.” Mpho is extremely proud of himself for facing what he deems the most challenging part of the training and consequently his greatest success. The test is a simple finger prick and results are known in 5 minutes. His relief at knowing his status was palpable.

At the onset of the training Mpho was as reserved as the other youth and too insecure to participate. The unusual homogeneity (linguistic, religious and ethnic) of the Basotho culture creates rigid social norms and sanctions making it risky to stand out or take a position. In overcoming this reticence, Mpho gained composure and fluency throughout the training. Nurtured by this welcoming, safe and accepting atmosphere, most of the YAH committee members took progressive risks to allow their thoughts to develop, be heard and even challenged.

Capacity Mapping

The tiny remote village of Seboche, with its panoramic vistas of velvet mountains, hosts a pre-school, an elementary school, the only regional high school, a small mission hospital, a Catholic mission and a church. Seboche is plagued with a complex combination of challenges exacerbated

by a severe lack of transportation and communication, and like most mountain villages in Lesotho, it struggles to survive amid this overwhelming web of socioeconomic and environmental setbacks.

Youth were trained to interview local leaders to understand their use of power, decision-making processes, community engagement practices and the challenges facing their villages. This process, called capacity mapping, was instrumental in the growth of these young people as they faced their own fears of authority and learned how their communities are governed – for good or ill. They learned of a severe lack of communication, good governance practices and accountability from some of the community leaders. This eye-opening experience encouraged Mpho to apply further diligence in networking within his community to create links between the structures that are already in place in Seboche in the hopes of assisting in generating stronger associations between services and community members. The youth committees have become passionate, cultivating a new understanding of the inadequacies, fragility and fears in their communities but also an understanding of the local heroes, resilience and compassion found in their communities

Mpho naturally gravitated toward leadership viewing himself as a valued contributor and agent for change in his community. “I am learning to become a better leader. I am striving to lead by example and urge the team to work hard in any difficulties we may approach.” The training provided the needed structure and skill development for Mpho’s civic pride, in an atmosphere of support and inspiration.

Community Engagement

In July 2006 the YAH committee prepared for a community engagement initiative working in partnership with HL and its Basotho counterpart Thusa Lesotho. ‘Ntja-Peli’ (a Sesotho idiom indicating that a bull can go after a dog but many dogs can go after a bull) was a stepwise health and HIV/AIDS initiative that was well received in participating communities. The initiative reached approximately 8,300 community members and students in HL twinned schools. Five partner organizations raised awareness through interactive, educational and age-appropriate activities encompassing drug and alcohol abuse, HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma, care for the sick and prevention. The program concluded with voluntary HIV testing for all community members. The YAH committee members played active roles in their communities in appropriately raising awareness and preparing for each event in addition to attending and assisting the guest organizations (see www.helplesotho.ca Project Page).

Mpho and the YAH committee members’ efforts to build community engagement, peer participation and HIV/AIDS awareness continue. As the YAH committees grow in number and confidence, the outreach fosters support structures, gender equity and good governance practices.

Despite resistance to change in this homogenous culture, the Basotho people are conscious of the need to alter cultural behaviours in order to secure a future for Lesotho. The project’s culturally sensitive programming and goals are accepted and respected in Lesotho’s communities as a step forward in overcoming the HIV/AIDS pandemic that is demobilizing the nation. Lesotho is quickly becoming a nation of children. It is imperative that the Basotho youth are empowered to take ownership and responsibility to step up and fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The project has succeeded in engaging youth through providing a focused understanding of the key elements of communication, gender, governance and leadership in relation to HIV/AIDS in Lesotho. The project has made positive strides to break the complex challenges affecting Lesotho down into manageable pieces. The YAH programming provided tools and awareness through which to initiate steps to overcoming these challenges.

YAH's model of reiterative training, support and educational opportunities throughout all stages of the project is recommended. Activities which work with the communities to build capacity with local groups and youth leaders is proving to be a sound model. This project has reached its objective, as Mpho's story emphasizes, of building healthy governance practices, leadership capacity and civic responsibility among Basotho youth.