



BRINGING THE COVID-19 VACCINE TO LESOTHO

On the 3rd March, the Kingdom of Lesotho received 36,000 vaccines as part of an initial tranche of deliveries through the COVAX Facility, which exists to accelerate the development of and access to COVID-19 vaccines.

Lesotho's batch of vaccines were manufactured in India and were flown to South Africa, via the Middle East, before being driven from Johannesburg to Maseru.

First batch is unloaded at the Ministry of Health.
Photo: UNICEF

The UNICEF team tracked the truck from Johannesburg to Maseru. When the driver carrying the vaccines informed the team that he had to focus on driving on the potholed road and couldn't provide regular location updates, UNICEF Driver Ntate Smith Thakeli, quickly jumped in the UNICEF car and drove to meet the truck and update the UNICEF team. At the border, customs officials asked Smith for the permit required to cross. "When the police asked me for my permit, I said, 'I don't have the permit, but I am going to get the vaccine for the Basotho people', Customs let Ntate Smith Thakeli cross.

Meanwhile, at the border, a team of senior government officials and development partners from the EU, UK, UN and US, gathered to ensure a smooth crossing and to celebrate the arrival of the vaccines.

"We are very proud of this moment," remarked the Lesotho Prime Minister, Dr Moeketsi Majoro. "We usually meet with UNICEF to talk about children's issues, but this time UNICEF was at the forefront of getting this life-saving vaccine to us."

After a year of loss, disruption, and hardship we finally had a reason to celebrate. "It was a joyous occasion," said UN RC ai and UNICEF Representative Anurita Bains. "This is what COVAX is about -- a true sign of global solidarity and local leadership. From the drivers to the immunization specialist to supply and communications teams ... everyone on the ground was working hand-in-hand." "I also nearly cried seeing the truck and seeing all the partners here," said the Minister of Health, Semano Sekatle. "There are no words to express our delight in receiving this first consignment."

The deliveries mark the beginning of what will be the largest, most complex global roll-out of vaccines in history. The COVAX Facility plans to deliver at least 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of this year, to ensure that at least 20% of the population in developing economies have access to vaccines in 2021.

The COVAX facility is co-led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the World Health Organization (WHO) working in partnership with UNICEF as well as the World Bank, manufacturers, civil society organizations, and others. In addition to the UN supported COVAX facility, the Government of Lesotho is also negotiating vaccine supplies from the African Union and the private sector.

THE ELDERLY LEARN HOW TO PROTECT THEMSELVES AGAINST COVID-19

Sister Juliet Lithemba (77), a nun at Mt Royal Convent of the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa, Lesotho, describes the past year as nothing short of grace and mercy from above.

For 57 years, since she was 20-years old, Sister Lithemba has dedicated her life to religion. During her sisterhood, Sister Lithemba has experienced the exile of King Moshoeshoe II (twice), a coup d'état, and numerous droughts that have left large swathes of the population severely food insecure. However, according to Sister Lithemba, 2020 was the most distressing year she is yet to experience.



Sister Lithemba tells the WHO team her COVID-19 experience
Photo: WHO

In May 2020, Sister Lithemba was one of the very first Basotho to test positive for COVID-19. At first, she didn't think there was anything unusual about her symptoms as "all my life I have been troubled by common cold".

Sister Lithemba's flu-like symptoms persisted and so, as she showed no signs of improvement, she visited Motebang Hospital, the closest hospital to her convent, for treatment. The nurse assisting her recommended that she test for COVID-19, which she tested positive for. During her stay at Berea Hospital, Sister Lithemba's situation deteriorated and she required oxygen to help her breathe for 18 consecutive days. "I was even taught how to operate the oxygen machine, it sure was going to be a long hospital stay, this I learned as days passed by" she says.

As the world learnt more about COVID-19, it became clear that it was prevalent within Sister Lithemba's covenant and that the transmission of the virus between nuns was out of control. From 20 tests conducted amongst the sisters, 17 were positive for COVID-19. Infected nuns were constantly being brought to hospital for oxygen, unable to breathe. The oldest infected nun was 96 years old. "These were trying times for us, we lost too many warriors in this battle and life will never be the same" Sister Lithemba says.

After the incident, the entire covenant was professionally cleaned and disinfected, and strict covid-19 protocols were adopted. All workers were encouraged to stay at the covenant, or to stay away, and guest rooms were temporarily closed. "Everyone has to stay in their rooms, there are sanitizers in every room and in the main entrance. We adhere to physical distancing in our dining hall and when we go for our daily prayers. We have witnessed the existence of this virus in the harshest way and we are taking our safety very seriously" Sister Lithemba says.

To protect the senior population, the Government of Lesotho has launched the Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) campaign, supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). Under the RCCE, targeted messages have been designed for specific population groups, including the elderly.

"Aging populations are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and they have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic as they are at the highest risk of contracting the virus infection due to weakened immune systems and pre-existing health conditions," says Richard Banda, Representative of WHO Lesotho. "As we celebrate this year's World Health Day, we must intensify our work to achieve Universal Health Coverage, and to invest in addressing the social and economic determinants of health, to tackle inequities and build a fairer, healthier world," Mr Banda added.



CELEBRATING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

On 8th March 2021, the UN Lesotho celebrated International Women's Day, under the theme "Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world."

However, women have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which threatens to undermine recent progress in achieving gender equality.



Globally, women have experienced higher job losses and many have had to manage increasing demands from household work and childcare alongside their normal responsibilities. Women work more in service and caring roles and thus are exposed to a greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Gender-based violence has increased during the pandemic, which affects women and girls to a greater degree.

During the celebration of International Women's Day, Dr. Marc Derveeuw noted women's selfless contribution to others during the pandemic: "We recognize the achievements of women in Lesotho especially women in the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis such as health care workers, caregivers, community organizers and many other women in different facets of life in Lesotho as the most exemplary and effective national leaders in combating the pandemic."

For UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, these women include, a family planning outreach worker ensuring that women's access to contraception is uninterrupted despite COVID-19, a Midwife putting her health at risk to support a safe birth for mother and child, a counsellor aiding a gender-based violence survivor and a life skills trainer educating girls against child marriage, impressing upon them their right to bodily autonomy.

Dr. Marc noted that more needs to be done to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment, including protecting women's rights and access to health services, and greater research into gender equality. "For us at UNFPA, expanding possibilities for women and girls to lead healthy and productive lives is at the heart of our mandate. Our work involves promoting women's health care and advocating for gender equality. This is why in we are committed to ensuring policy, legal and accountability frameworks are strengthened to advance gender equality and empower women and young people, especially adolescent girls, to exercise their reproductive rights and to be protected from violence and harmful practices.

"We will continue working towards prevention of unintended pregnancies, providing lifesaving reproductive health services to women and young people as well as vital services needed by survivors of gender-based violence. We will continue with our efforts to ensure that high-quality data and evidence is obtained to ensure that no one is left behind."

In addition, he called for implementation of commitments made at the Nairobi Summit on the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD25) in 2019 to eliminate of all forms of discrimination against all women and girls, in order to realise all individuals' full socio-economic potential. "It is incumbent upon all of us to eliminate obstacles that stand in the way of women's voices, choices, consent and equality," he emphasised.

The United Nations began observing International Women's Day in 1975.



FIGHTING FOR FOOD AVAILABILITY

The Government & UN visit farming households



Government & FAO Officials visit farmers
Photo: FAO

For many years, the Kingdom of Lesotho has faced increasing food insecurity, caused by climate change induced drought and poverty. COVID-19 has exacerbated food insecurity for many households, as income losses and rising food prices due to supply constraints has made food, and seeds, unaffordable.

Working alongside the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security and the World Bank, the UN has implemented a project to improve food security in Lesotho during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project provides farming households with agricultural inputs worth US\$ 55 (Maloti 830) so that they may feed their families. In March, officials from FAO and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security conducted a field mission to visit project beneficiaries and hear how the project had impacted their families. Ntate Poulo Mohlomi of Morija in Maseru received 10kg of bean seeds. "I was able to plant close to one acre of land with the seeds I received" he explains.

Ntate Mohlomi hopes that from the produce, he will be able to feed his family and other at-risk members of the village. Even though most of the beans have not yet been harvested, he was able to harvest enough to feed his family. He gratefully exclaimed that had it not been for the UN intervention, he would not have been able to plant any beans this planting year because he could not afford the seeds.

The project supplied beans, potatoes, and maize seeds to vulnerable farming households negatively affected by COVID19. So far 200 metric tons of beans seeds, 66 metric tons of maize seeds and 399 metric tons of potato seeds have been distributed to 26,832 beneficiaries. The project has also provided 31,000 vulnerable households with home gardening kits, livestock vaccinations against anthrax, black quarter, rabies and sheep scabies, and has trained farmers in Climate Smart Agriculture technologies.

INNOVATION THROUGH THE SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMME

In an effort to raise resources to support the Government of Lesotho in implementing the national school feeding programme, the WFP Country Office in Lesotho was selected to participate in the Innovation Accelerator Bootcamp from the 15th - 19th March 2021 and Virtual Pitch Event on the 25th March.

Both the bootcamp and pitch event were organized by the WFP Innovation Accelerator based in Munich - Germany. A total of eight teams participated in this event and during this time, teams were connected to mentors and facilitators that supported the different teams to fine tune their innovative ideas in preparation for the virtual pitch night. Following this pitch, the CO will be submitting a written sprint application by 6 April 2021.



Beneficiaries of the school feeding programme
Photo: WFP



CAPACITATING MEDIA PRACTITIONERS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

In 2019, the World Food Programme successfully bid for a US\$ 10 million project from the Adaptation Fund to improve the capacity of food insecure individuals in Lesotho.

The project, "Improving Adaptive Capacity of vulnerable and food insecure Populations in Lesotho (IACOV)", is a four-year project executed by the Lesotho Meteorological Services and Ministry of Forestry, Range and Soil Conservation and implemented by WFP.



Journalists are briefed at the project site in Mohale's Hoek District
Photo: WFP

The project aims to (i) strengthen government capacities to generate climate information and early warning systems, (ii) raise awareness amongst communities, women, youth, people living with HIV, and other vulnerable groups on the impacts of climate change and the use of climate information for seasonal planning, and (iii) design and implement, through a community-based planning process, local resilience and adaptation plans.

As part of the IACOV project, WFP hosted two workshops for media editors and journalists in Mohale's Hoek from the 22nd March 2021. 26 media editors attended the first workshop and 26 journalists attended the second workshop, where they were taught the importance of greater climate change reporting in Lesotho. Greater climate change reporting will better inform many Basotho on what climate change is and the impact of climate change on agriculture, food security, WASH, health and livelihoods. Greater climate change reporting will also inform Basotho on how to adapt to climate change, increase their resilience against the negative impacts and how to embrace Climate Smart practices and technologies. Ultimately, greater climate change reporting will empower farming households.

The journalists' training featured local and international climate change experts, including the former BBC Climate Change Correspondent, James Stewart, COP26 Ambassador for Africa, Nicholas Kay and representative of SEPA/GEF Network in Africa, Miles Zulu.

The two workshops were also graced by the presence of government officials including the Minister of Energy and Meteorology, Honourable Mohapi Mohapinyane, the Principal Secretary to the Ministry of Forestry, Range and Soil Conservation, Mr Lefu Manyokole and the Director of Lesotho Meteorological Service, Mr Mokoena France. The WFP Country Director, Ms Aurore Rusiga was among dignitaries who delivered keynote addresses for the workshops.



MIGRATION DATA LITERACY TRAINING

The Kingdom of Lesotho experiences extremely high levels of net emigration.

In 2020, Lesotho's net emigration rate (the proportion of the population leaving the country with no immediate prospects of returning in any given year) was 6.1% of the population, compared to just 0.02% in South Africa.

The high emigration experienced in Lesotho demands evidence-based and informed policies to support and protect migrants.



However, there is a lack of disaggregated, reliable, timely and comparable migration data and the data that is available is often under-utilised. The lack of and under-utilization of data prevents migration policies from being backed by evidence, and this is an area that the IOM Development Fund (IDF) seeks to address.

To enhance evidence-based policy making and to promote demand of data by technocrats who influence policy, IOM organized a three-day training on data literacy from the 24th to 26th February 2021 for the National Consultative Committee on Migration (NCC) and the Migration Data Working Group (MDWG). The training was intended to build capacity of data producing ministries and institutions on the supply side of data and the NCC on the demand side for utilization of data in policy formulation.

IOM AND UNDP ASSESS INFORMAL CROSS BORDER TRADE

While essential goods and services continued to be brought into Lesotho during the border closures, non-essential cross-border trade and commerce was severely disrupted, particularly for informal traders. Restrictions on border crossings for non-essential goods and workers have negatively impacted the livelihoods of many cross-border traders.

48% of informal cross border traders in Lesotho are women, and 62% of informal cross border traders trade goods valued at less than US\$ 50. Border restrictions have increased the cost of doing business and reduced livelihoods for many cross-border traders, in particular informal cross-border traders and women. Women already faced unequal obstacles to trade, and COVID-19 risks further increasing gender inequality amongst traders.

To better understand how COVID-19 has affected cross border traders, UNDP and IOM undertook an assessment on Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT) in Lesotho during the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular emphasis on the impact of trade on socio-economic development and poverty alleviation.

[For more information](#)

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