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### Report

## Life history, identity construction and life ambitions of Basotho herders

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### Why this study?

Poverty has been identified as a key factor disabling people's access to education (UNESCO, 2012a), a situation which Lesotho is not immune to. This is evidenced by the continuing decline in Lesotho's international ranking for development indicators, which have shifted from 120 out of 162 countries in 2001, to 162 out of 187 countries in 2014, followed by another drop to 161 out of 188 countries in 2015 (UNDP, 2014; UNDP, 2015). Lesotho is also classified as a low-income country with 54% of the population living below the poverty threshold of \$2 per day (GOL, 2012), with approximately 70% of the rural-based populace reportedly the most poverty-stricken. The economy relies on subsistence farming, manufacturing, and, to a limited extent, migrants' remittances from South African mines.

When a family becomes economically disadvantaged, a boy in the family becomes the first resort to support the family's financial needs, meaning that he will have to withdraw from his educational activities to look for employment. This situation is verified by findings from the unpublished study conducted by Pitikoe (2012) and those of Preece, Lekhetho, Rantekoa, and Makau (2009), which suggest that low herders' literacy rates have resulted from culture and poverty. Culturally, herding in Lesotho takes the first priority and, as such, prohibits Basotho males' access to and retention in education (Gill, 1993; Mohasi, 2006; Morojele, 2009; Ntho & Lesotho Council of NGOs, 2013; Nthunya, 1996; Ratau, 1988; US Department of Labor, 2011). The escalation of HIV and AIDS, coupled with poverty and orphanhood, are further educational barriers that affect access to and continuity in education and force young boys and girls to seek various employment opportunities (UNESCO, 2012b).

Lesotho has been applauded for the positive results brought about by the implementation of its free primary education (FPE) policy in 2000 (MoE, 2001), which saw an increase in learner enrolment. However, there remains an absence of policy that legally binds parents to take their children to school (Morojele, 2009), and parents and livestock owners are not legally bound to prioritise herders' education over livestock herding. As a result, Lesotho unlike other African countries reportedly has higher female than male literacy rates because while girls attend school, the boys look after livestock.

Given that formal education provision does not seem to cater for herding lifestyles, non-formal education (NFE) seems to be a provision that would cater for the needs of the herders. However, Lesotho's NFE provision is only offered by NGOs (Setoi, 2012) and the government-sponsored, Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre (MoET, 2013, 2014). In the absence of ratified policies that support NFE and

adult education, as well as open and distance education, NFE is relegated to a lower standard than that of formal education (MoET, 2005, 2008).

Basotho herders do not want to remain marginalised herders—no land, poorly catered for, low social status, inaccessible social services including education and health, and not part of mainstream society. They aspire to become socioeconomically independent (Pitikoe, 2012; Preece et al., 2009), which highlights the need for at least basic literacy and numeracy skills to enable their global interaction. The paucity of literature on Basotho herders limits the establishment of an in-depth understanding of their educational needs and ambitions that could inform NFE policy and practice on how to match herders' lifestyles with an appropriate and relevant curriculum. This knowledge-gap implies a need for a deeper understanding of who the herders are, how they live, and their life ambitions. Given that, it can be argued that a herder's identity is central to his interaction mode with educational systems and wider society, a more in-depth understanding of herders' lived experiences and the influence thereon on their multiple identities and ambitions can help to inform Lesotho's NFE provision.

Adult education could develop a deeper understanding of who male Basotho herders are, their herding lifestyles, and their educational ambitions in order to inform NFE policy change, agenda, and practice. My research addressed the following questions:

- What are the educational life histories of adult male herders in Lesotho?
- How are their multiple identities (subjectivities) as herders constructed and how do these constructed identities influence their educational needs?
- How have the herders applied indigenous knowledge gained through their life history experiences to advance their livelihoods?
- How could these life history experiences inform Lesotho's non-formal education policy for adult herders in Lesotho?

### **What Theories Did I Use To Explain My Findings?**

The following theories were used to examine Basotho herders' life histories, identities and educational ambitions:

- identity theories (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Wielenga, 2014)
- subjectivity theories (Chandler, 2013; Winter, 2011)
- African perspectives (Kumah-Abiwu & Ochwa-Echel, 2013; Lekoko & Modise, 2011)
- masculinities identities (Bowl, Robert, Leany, Ferguson, & Gage, 2012)
- indigenous knowledge (Lekoko & Modise, 2011; Nyiraruhimbi, 2012; Smit & Masoga, 2012)
- social capital (Bourdieu, 1985; Hawkins & Maurer, 2010).

The identity theories analysed their social inclusion. African perspectives revealed the influence of the collective African nature on herders' behaviour and identity construction. Indigenous knowledge theory explained forms of and the generation of herding knowledge and its relevance to economic empowerment. Social capital theory unravelled the types of herding social networks beneficial to herders.

### **How Was This Study Conducted?**

This qualitative research used the interpretivist paradigm (Chilisa & Preece, 2005) and life history methodology. The unit of analysis was a snowball-sampled 30 Basotho herders aged between 18 and 45 years. The investigation employed semi-structured interviews, photo voice, and transect walks.

### **What Did I Find Out?**

Two distinct identities emerged: public and private. The negative public perception of the herders impacted on their social relations and their ambitions to learn. The private identity was more innate. Regardless of their public resentment, the herders were cohesive, which benefitted them as a shared learning resource. While Lesotho provides FPE, the provision does not fully cater for their economic empowerment ambitions. Therefore, herding provided a quicker way of livestock acquisition for future savings or immediate income generation. In the process, more males dropped out of the formal system to join the herding community.

Herding is a rite of passage into manhood for learning bravery, resilience, and self-protection—hence the higher value attachment to herding than to education. Basic literacy and numeracy skills are of prime importance to livestock monitoring, therefore, some herders devised informal context-specific approaches to learning such as using stones or sheep droppings to learn counting—matching these to the actual numbers or virtually matching them to livestock numbers. Others resorted to the earmarks in order to identify their livestock. Significant others and bonding social capital were beneficial in promoting learning among the herders. These forms of learning can be explained as context-specific social literacy practices which impacted on how literacy and numeracy teaching could be related to their daily herding practice. In spite of their low literacy and their marginalisation status, the herders used traditional herbs for their own medicinal health care as well as for their livestock—and to supplement their daily nutritional requirements.

### **Significance for Social Change**

The potential resourcefulness of herding as a form of learning, and the herding networks, provided support for the herders' learning. The inaccessibility of the social services of education and health care catalysed alternative redress through social literacy skills as well as traditional healing—human and veterinary health care. These implied the need for social change to a consultative NFE curriculum review and design flexible enough to accommodate the herders' educational ambitions and lifestyles. In spite of using a small sample, the responses revealed a need for Lesotho's NFE policy and practice to change to include herding indigenous knowledge into Lesotho's education provision.

### **Conclusion**

This report outlined the sociocultural position of Basotho males and the implications of herding on males' access to education, demonstrating a need to review Lesotho's NFE policy and practice such that Lesotho's herding indigenous knowledge is documented and mainstreamed within the NFE provision.

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