

Lesotho

GEOGRAPHY

The Kingdom of Lesotho – once known as Basutoland – is about half the size of Tasmania and is surrounded entirely by South Africa. Almost two-thirds of the country is mountainous, with the highest peaks rising to more than 3,400 metres. In summer, it is very warm during the day with cool nights, but in winter, temperatures may fall below 0°C and there are heavy frosts, with snowfall in the mountain regions.

PEOPLE

Lesotho's population is around 2 million. The capital, Maseru, is a small city of 220,000 that lies near the border of South Africa in Lesotho's western lowlands, where most of the country's population lives.

The official languages are English and Sesotho, although some migrant labourers who have worked in South Africa also speak Afrikaans. About 80 percent of the Basotho (people of Lesotho) are Christians, belonging to various churches. The remainder practise indigenous religions.

HISTORY

In the early 19th century, the legendary Zulu King Shaka attempted to gain absolute power over the inhabitants of this region. He was overthrown by the unified army of a leader called Moshoeshoe, who by the 1850s had established a single language and a central government.

In 1884, after a series of wars, the British took control of Basutoland. Their administration paid little attention to the wishes of the local people. Thousands of Basotho had to leave and found work in South Africa.

The Lesotho National Party, led by Chief Leabua Jonathan,



Map courtesy of The General Libraries
The University of Texas at Austin

won elections in the late 1960s. Basutoland was renamed Lesotho and became an independent monarchy under King Moshoeshoe II. In 1970, Jonathan staged a coup and arrested all opposition party members, sending King Moshoeshoe II into exile.

Civilian rule recommenced in 1993, but the army and politicians continued to struggle for power. In 1998, a dispute over election results led to the controversial intervention of South African troops, 80 deaths and widespread property damage in Maseru. Peaceful parliamentary elections have been held since then, with Prime Minister Bethuel Mosisili currently serving a third term in office.

ECONOMY

At least 85 percent of the workforce is engaged in agriculture, the main crops being maize, sorghum and wheat. Cattle, sheep and goats are also bred, and wool and mohair account for up to one-quarter of the country's exports. However, agricultural land is limited and up to one-quarter of the rural population do not own their land. The soils are quite poor and the rainfall erratic. Most small farmers barely grow enough crops or raise enough cattle to support their own families, so they have to look for casual jobs or depend on the earnings of relatives working in towns or in South Africa.

As a small landlocked country, Lesotho's economy is closely linked to that of neighbouring South Africa. A significant proportion of young men work in South Africa's goldmines and in Lesotho, the unemployment rate is about 45 percent. Apart from small diamond deposits, there are no known mineral resources in Lesotho.



World Vision is working to ensure that children like Lisema have access to education.

The Lesotho Highlands Water Scheme, now in the second of three development phases, generates income for Lesotho through the sale of water to South Africa. But the scheme has not been without controversy. Scarce farmland has been taken over for roads and reservoirs and there are fears of increased soil erosion and reduced water flow within Lesotho.

LIVING CONDITIONS

With so many men working away from home, many women in Lesotho are left to take care of the family and tend their fields alone. When the men do not send enough money home, women have to find alternative ways to make ends meet, such as selling handcrafts, brewing beer or working on neighbours' farms. Households headed by women are among the country's poorest families.

Most rural families live in villages of between 20 and 1,000 people. Their houses are often circular thatched buildings. Food is often cooked outside using precious wood or animal dung for fuel. A wide range of cereals, vegetables and fruits are grown but most of these are exported, while Lesotho also imports food for those who can afford it. Maize or wheat is used to make a stiff porridge that is eaten with the fingers, and sorghum is used for local beer brewing.

Droughts cause severe food shortages. Some families live solely on maize, leading to vitamin deficiencies.

Around one-quarter of children aged below three have stunted growth. Since many people in rural areas do not have access to clean water (or have to walk more than 30 minutes to obtain it), gastroenteritis and other waterborne diseases are common. The construction of community health posts in remote areas has improved the health situation, but poor families often cannot afford the fees for treatment. Immunisation against diseases such as tuberculosis, polio and measles has increased, but HIV and AIDS now poses a serious health threat.



Helping families to improve their ability to grow food for household consumption and income generation is an important aspect of our work in Lesotho.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	LESOTHO	AUSTRALIA
Population	2.1 million	21.5 million
Urban population (as % of total)	26.9%	89.1 %
GDP per capita (PPP US\$)	\$2,021	\$38,692
Population living on less than \$2 a day US\$)	43.4 %	0%
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	85%	100%
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	89.5%	99%
Life expectancy at birth	45.9 years	81.9 years
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	79	6

Source: United Nations Development Programme
Human Development Report 2010

Lesotho's adult HIV prevalence rate of 23.2 percent (2007 est.) is amongst the highest rates in the world. The spread of HIV and AIDS in Lesotho has had a major impact on people's livelihoods and is leading to an increasing incidence of child-headed households.

EDUCATION

Officially, almost all children enrol at school but only half complete their final primary year. There are no government secondary schools; so many families cannot afford secondary education, even for successful students.

In contrast to some other countries, some girls in Lesotho are able to continue their education further than boys because they are not forced to leave home early to find employment. Other parents prefer to see their daughters married young. Estimates of adult literacy vary widely, but there are significant numbers of adults who cannot read and write.

The challenge for Lesotho is to discover new ways for people to earn an income, while protecting local resources such as land, soil and water for future generations.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN LESOTHO

- assists sponsored children, their families and communities with needs such as education, nutrition, healthcare and improved access to clean water and sanitation
- raises awareness about HIV and AIDS care and prevention, establishes community-led coalitions to care for people living with HIV and child-headed households, and works to reduce stigma associated with the disease
- works with communities to find new ways to increase incomes, from raising poultry to machine-knitting and sewing
- partners with farmers to plant vegetable gardens and orchards, providing much needed food and fuel

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