EXPERIMENTS IN AN "AID LABORATORY"

THE MAKING OF LESOTHO

by Rafael Suarez, Jr.

The visitor flying into Lesotho—the tiny nation-state wholly surrounded by South Africa—gets to see a bit of the country before landing. It's enough to give him second thoughts. The parched, brown land stretches in all directions; and nowhere is there a hint of the lush mountain kingdom promised in the tourist board's brochures.

The Air Lesotho forty-seater touches down at Chief Leabua Jonathan International Airport, a single building in a vast field. The scrutiny of passport control, then the visitor is whisked down Chief Leabua Jonathan Highway toward Maseru, the capital. The highway is flanked by conical huts with thatched roofs and rows of public housing—cinder-block boxes topped with corrugated iron. The huts and boxes continue into the very heart of the capital, where the visitor's car turns onto Maseru's main road, the Kingsway. The sign reads: "Welcome to Lesotho, Africa's friendly mountain kingdom." Perhaps it should read: Welcome to the poorest place on earth.

AID CITY
A quick stroll along the Kingsway brings the point home. Within a few hundred yards are the offices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), CARE, Save the Children, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, UNICEF, Catholic Relief Services, the World Food Program, and, near the U.S. embassy, just past the Holiday Inn, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Discussion with the minister for rural development, Vincent M. Makhele, reveals that not only are the international aid organizations here, but so are the Norwegians, the Canadians, the Swiss, the Dutch, the British, and the Chinese. Judging from the number of agency and embassy-related Westerners flocking to Maseru's movie theatres, restaurants, and department stores, it is easy to form the image of Lesotho—a country of 1.3 million—as a Third World aid "boom town."

The aid workers—volunteers and paid staff alike—tell you that "the country is unique." And so it is. It is almost as though all the problems facing the underdeveloped world are visited upon one country: few natural resources, drought, illiteracy, too many imports and too few exports, foreign debt, economic exploitation, lack of roads and rails, lack of a communications system and power grid, poor nutrition, and health care, and so on down the sad list. Lesotho is an "aid laboratory."

Women squat by the side of the road selling South African apples and cabbages from cardboard boxes; men idle around the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet; Barclay's offers savings accounts; and the Maseru Hilton, snug and well-lit, towers above it all, beckoning.

At the outer rooms of the Hilton casino, citified natives pour South African coins into slot machines. A big score could mean more than a year's salary, $500. Against the August cold they are wrapped in their traditional blankets, in contrast to the Afrikaners in jacket and tie heading for the blackjack tables and roulette wheels.

Lesotho enjoys three dubious distinctions: Aside from the postage-stamp states of Vatican City and San Marino, Lesotho is the only country completely landlocked by one other country; it is the only nation on earth with every square inch of territory at least three thousand feet above sea level; and it houses the world's shortest railway—a thousand yards crossing the border into South Africa.

The land is nearly dead. Six years of drought have worsened the effect of a century of overgrazing. Everywhere the land is scarred by gullies. Bridges span riverbanks a hundred feet wide, but there is no water below. In the more fortunate areas, where drought has prevailed for only three years, a thin, muddy trickle might still run down the center of the banks.

Even during a good, rainy growing season Lesotho produces barely 30 per cent of its food needs. The shortfall is made up by imports and aid, using almost all the national income derived from remittances paid by the more than 50 per cent of the country's able-bodied men who work in South Africa's mines. This massive export of labor creates the demographic anomaly of a country without men. In some of the relatively prosperous areas of the country four of every ten men will leave home for the mines. Where the drought has hit the hardest and where life is most grim, more than seven in ten respond to the siren call of the mine recruiters.

A NEW TRIBE
More than simply products of their history, the Basotho people are victims of it; and their life today is a culmination of a journey that began in the early nineteenth century.

Steamrolling from the north into what is now South...
Africa, the powerful Zulu armies created an empire and subjugated the pastoral peoples of the area. The Zulu empire-builders Shaka and Dingaan, who were to be formidable opponents even for the better-armed Boers from the Cape, destroyed the constellation of Sotho-speaking tribes that for centuries had lived unmolested in the area.

Under the leadership of the crafty and charismatic leader Moshoeshoe, who was advised by French Jesuits, the scattered tribes were gathered up and led into the mountains. Here the victims of war became a new tribe, the Basotho, and Moshoeshoe their king. The Drakensberg Mountains protected them from the Zulus and their herds spread out to the west.

Territorial pressure soon came from the other frontier—from the Boers “trekking” inland from the Cape province to escape British rule. After fighting off the Boers twice and losing much of his territory to the Orange Free State, Moshoeshoe asked for and got the protection of the British crown. The British put the administration of the Crown Protectorate of Basutoland in the hands of Cape Town civil servants. It was only after a native rebellion in 1880-81 that Moshoeshoe got what he wanted, and his country was then run from London.

All the British wanted was territorial leverage against the upstart Boer Republic, which surrounded Basutoland. The country itself was neglected, the domestic economy collapsed, and the once-prosperous Basotho went to the mines to earn their living. Things got worse at home.

In 1966 the Union Jack was pulled down over Masera and Basutoland became the Kingdom of Lesotho, a constitutional monarchy, with King Moshoeshoe II in the palace and Chief Leabua Jonathan the first prime minister. For most of the years since independence the country’s main export has been its labor and its main growth industry at home, vice. The good burghers of the Republic of South Africa have laws against such things as casinos, pornographic films, and interracial sex. Lesotho has none of these laws, and with the capital an easy drive from the major cities of the Afrikaner world, forbidden fruit found fertile soil.

In recent years this has changed radically. With the creation of the “independent black states” of Bophutatswana, Venda, Transkei, and Ciskei, South African investors have rushed in to build casinos and boxing rings. For South Africa, buying legitimacy for the homelands is expensive; but Lesotho is paying an even greater price. The Maseru Holiday Inn, for instance, complete with casinos and in-room TVs carrying interracial porn, stands near-empty.

Thus Lesotho, with an economy distorted by its only neighbor, much of its labor out of the country eleven months a year, and some of the most inhospitable land on earth, presents a unique challenge to international organizations attempting to wean the country from total dependence on South Africa and help its people to a better life. But in doing so, are the donor countries merely turning the Basotho into aid addicts?

**FOOD FOR WORK**

Francesco Strippoli, back in Rome, says absolutely not. The man in charge of World Food Programs projects in Lesotho, this long-time aid officer claims the aid is making great things happen in the country.

Strippoli says the big difference is that WFP aid—the program is funded by UNDP and individual governments and administered by FAO—is not merely a food “gift” with no strings attached. Family allotments of staple foods are given to villagers who work on building Lesotho’s infrastructure—projects managed by government officers and experts from aid organizations. In return for food the people build roads in a country that has almost none, plant forests where the land is most barren, and work to conserve the soil. The work is labor-intensive, can be accomplished with simple tools, and, by its effects on diet and the quality of the land, has an immediate impact on the life of the people.

“We could very easily come into the villages and just give away the food,” Strippoli states, “but this is not the goal of the World Food Program. And besides, the people don’t want handouts. They feel they are earning this food. The attendance at the project sites is almost 100 per cent, because when a family member working on a road can’t make it, the family sends another member to take the missing person’s place.”

The World Food Program also serves a hot midday meal to every primary and secondary school child in the country. Strippoli resists any attempt to portray this as a handout. “I remember very well as a young child in Italy in the years just after the war drinking milk at school that was given as aid. This made a very important impression on us. It’s true Italy didn’t need food aid for very many years, but I think it is obvious that school feeding programs are a basic investment in the future of a country.”

By the end of the 1980s, Lesotho will have 2,500 kilometers of new roads built by Food-for-Work labor. No broad-based development projects are possible without at least a basic road network, and it was over Food-for-Work roads that I drove out to one of the country’s poorest regions, the Thabana Morena valley.

Here the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization is beginning an ambitious project, funded by UNDP and the Netherlands. The intention is to build a self-sustaining local economy where none existed before. At nineteen villages across southern Lesotho, small-scale labor-intensive industries have been started, each producing something that another one of the nineteen needs and in the past has either brought from outside or done without. Local people are being trained to run chicken coops, make school uniforms, raise hogs, and make domestic goods such as mats and baskets. The scale will be kept small, but villages are encouraged to provide enough of these commodities to fill not only their own needs but the needs of the other villages in the project and even those beyond.

Anna Mushiri, a Tanzanian managing the project for FAO, said that many of the mistakes made in previous projects in other countries were not being repeated here. He explained that similar projects had failed because the returns on the villagers’ labor were too long in coming. “Sometimes we had projects that took ten years to implement. It was just too long. The people lost interest and went home.”

The emphasis on small scale is also important. Government ministers, foreign aid workers, and local Basotho all agreed there is a strong streak of individualism here that dooms any “communal-style” projects to failure. The larger the project, the less a villager feels that it is “hers.”
The Thabana Morena project stresses the individual as much as possible. As Mushi said, it is in a sense a test for the people, since without strong individual effort, the project would fail.

Some of the nineteen already have their local “company” running. In August one group of villagers was hard at work building its second fish pond, the first having been a complete success. Mushi noted this as an example of a quick return. “Last year the whole village worked to get this pond finished in time for the season, and the harvest was excellent. They had fish for the village and they were able to sell some of the surplus.” After the crop season was over the villagers decided to build a second pond to accommodate the fingerlings from the first.

In such a dry country, this village was perfect for the pond project because of a nearby natural spring. Local resources play a big role in the choice of which industry was targeted for which village.

A primary consideration in the implementation of the project is the effective use of female labor. The old pattern of women living on the remittances of their husbands while farms went unattended had to be broken. At the fish pond all the wheelbarrows, picks, and shovels were wielded by women, some with babies strapped to their backs. The only males to be seen were a few old men trying to be helpful (not a common sight in a country with a life expectancy of fifty years) and small boys.

The Thabana Morena project will go a long way toward
giving women economic clout commensurate with their growing importance to the country's future. Women have a significantly higher literacy rate than that of men and a much higher rate of secondary school completion. "In this country a woman can compete with a man in anything," said J. A. Mudavadi, a Kenyan in charge of the FAO's work in Lesotho, and as evidence he pointed out that it is becoming common to see them high up on construction sites, planting and sawing.

FOOD AND FUEL
Women also play a major role in plans to make Lesotho green again. The FAO, using funds from UNDP, Sweden, and the Lesotho Government, has started tree plantations and the distribution of seedlings. Robert Potter, an American forester, has been in Lesotho for two-and-a-half years now, trying to build forests from scratch. The obstacles are natural and cultural. Potter says the soil is not the best for trees, but that can be overcome. Even more serious, the land is grazed by three times as many animals as it can support, but in time even that can be overcome.

Perhaps the most difficult problem is that the Basotho have no culturally ingrained love of forests, nor is the care of trees among their cultural values. Historically a grasslands people, driven into the mountains to escape their enemies, the Basotho live in a country where practically every tree was planted by the British.

It is a tall order, but Potter thinks he can lay the groundwork for the establishment of a national forestry system before he retires next year. Young Basotho are being schooled in forestry in the United States, and women are eagerly signing up for seedlings from the plantations to take home for planting.

"After the first tree, you've got to account for its care if you want to take others back to the village," Potter says. "And if the one we gave you last season is dead from neglect, we won't give you another one this year. These trees have to become valuable in the eyes of the people."

WFP Food-for-Work labor is used to maintain the windbreaks and tree plantations. The varieties chosen for propagation need to be termite resistant, fast growing, deeply rooted to hold down the soil, and suited to low rainfall and temperature extremes. Among those chosen are poplar, cypress, honey locust, black locust, weeping willow, and radiating pine.

Another FAO project receiving UNDP help along with bilateral aid is a biogas pilot project that could radically change family life. Dung, long a fuel source in China and India, has been wasted in Lesotho. Using only low-level technology and at low cost, a digester can be dug outside a family's hut to serve as a dung receptacle. A morning's collection in the digester produces enough by-product gas for six hours of cooking and home lighting.

In other societies the changes have been swift and measurable. Women have more time for farm and home maintenance now that half their day is not taken up with the search for fuel; the land is saved the scarring caused by the need for wood; hours are available for study and social interaction.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONNECTION
Many people pointed out that one of the reasons Lesotho is flush with aid and deserves to be is its dependence on South Africa. But as a land area totally surrounded by South Africa, which controls the electric system, the telephone, customs and currency, and provides most of the manufactured goods and the GNP to pay for them, does it make sense for Lesotho to be an independent nation?

"It is not for us to ask. Lesotho is a sovereign nation, a member of the U.N." said Peter Witt, the WFP deputy representative in Lesotho. "If we can be of any help to a country trying to establish its economic independence, we will provide that help. There is no point at which you can say, 'Now we are finished.' If we were in a large country, it would be easier for us to target more options in our development strategy."

So after nearly a hundred years of British rule, the world community is left with the responsibility for building Lesotho. In the meantime the country must continue its heavy aid dependence if people are not to starve.

Basotho men may offer the greatest problem. As South Africa rushes to develop the Homelands, citizens of these bogus nations are given preference over Lesotho's in the mines. With South African industry becoming more mechanized—and Lesotho becoming a more outspoken supporter of the African National Congress—the pace of repatriation will pick up. The crowds of unemployed men who line the streets of Maseru will swell, particularly since men, after five generations as miners, consider agricultural work beneath them. Nor are there enough jobs in Lesotho's infant industries to accommodate them.

With aid organizations attacking so many problems on so many fronts, it is impossible to imagine that the country will not be left better off for it. Lesotho will have many things it did not have before: teachers, veterinarians, foresters, roads, good soil, trees, a literate population, and hope. Just what the long-term cost to the people of Lesotho will be, time alone will tell.