ECONOMICS OF AGRICULTURE IN LESOTHO

"A pick and a spade are my friends and a wheelbarrow is my sister." So says Mr Black Jesus, a fruit and vegetable farmer in the Berea district of Lesotho, a tiny mountainous country surrounded by South Africa.

When Mr Jesus began to farm here in 1981, he became a member of the Berea Fruit and Vegetable Cooperative, subsequently being elected as its leader. The Co-op grew from seven to its currently 60 members.

With funding from a Canadian NGO, the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada, the Cooperative built a $115,000 cold storage facility to store and market their produce. The facility opened in late 1988, only to close less than 3 months later.

The answers to why it closed are part and parcel of the agricultural marketing system of Lesotho. According to Mr Jesus, Lesotho's government granted a foreign businessman a license to import cheap produce from South Africa to sell in direct competition with local producers. The Co-op members just could not compete.

"Our goods rotted in the cold storage while the Boers sold their cheaper, subsidized produce here," adds Mr Jesus. "As producers our main problem is this country's lack of effective agricultural marketing systems."

Occurrences such as these have prompted researchers at the National University of Lesotho to formulate a research proposal studying agricultural marketing problems in this southern African country. This proposal, submitted to IDRC for funding, led to a cooperative agreement between the Institute of Southern African Studies (ISAS) of the National University of Lesotho and the Agricultural Economics Department of the University of Saskatchewan.

There have been two phases to the project. Phase one, which started in 1984, was codirected by Dr Michael Sefali of ISAS and Dr Gary Storey of the University of Saskatchewan. Mr Brent Swallow served as project leader for this initial phase, with research assistants Malijeng Ngqaleni and Limpho Sopeng. The project's second phase was under the direction of Dr Gwendoline Malahleha, the director of ISAS.

The overall aims of the project were to highlight problems and weaknesses in current marketing systems, conduct research, and recommend improved policies to the government's Ministry of Agriculture. Marketing policies for initial research in the first phase focused on developing marketing policies for vegetables, grains, and livestock and livestock products and byproducts (milk, wool and mohair, and skins and hides).

In this phase, four Basotho researchers received research training and completed Master's degrees in Saskatchewan. All four student theses focused on agricultural problems in Lesotho. Dr Storey at the University of Saskatchewan says that "Student education and professional training are more meaningful when the student can work on a research problem that he or she has a feeling for and understands." Unfortunately, he adds, not all international project funding allows for this.

Of these four students, None Mokitimi and Motsamai Mochebele have taken over as the project's principal researchers in the second phase, which expands on previous research while incorporating an analysis of household economics and marketing institutions.

Dr Malahleha stresses the significance of local administration of the project. "The researchers can communicate with farmers and producers in their own language, with the same cultural understandings," she says. "At the same time, the researchers are improving their own analytical skills."

Research methodology is straightforward. Project researchers conduct meetings and interviews with staff members of the Ministry of Agriculture to determine specific marketing problems. A steering committee composed of the project team and government officials from the agriculture ministry and the central planning and development office chart the research agenda.

The project researchers formulate problem statements and conduct research. Seminars and workshops are scheduled to discuss research findings. Later, the findings and recommendations are published for government examination and dissemination through the Institute of Southern African Studies documentation centre.
Says Dr Malahleha, "It has been a project in which our academic institute is able to work closely with the government. This has enabled the project to address relevant marketing problems and make more of an impact and, importantly, it has been one where researchers can say the truth even if it is not as the government perceives it."

The project's research findings generate statistics that are now used by aid organizations and Lesotho's government.

The research team has identified major problems that result in poor agricultural marketing in Lesotho. These include the absence of set standards in grading and packaging, the lack of effective marketing boards and institutions, and overwhelming competition from South African farmers that has resulted in the country's dependence on imported goods.

Another significant drawback is the researchers' inability to work with ministries other than agriculture — such as trade and industry — which influence marketing systems.

A successful dairy farmer by Lesotho standards, Mr Motlomelo owns six dairy cows that, collectively, produce 90 litres of milk per day. Although he and other dairy farmers have benefited from the joint dairy project, there are still areas where he would like to see government improvement.

"Farmers don't have any control over what price milk is sold to retailers," Mr Motlomelo says. "I sell my milk to the dairy plant at 70 lisente (US 35 cents). The dairy plant then sells my milk at M1 20 (US 60 cents) to grocery stores like OK and Frasers, which charge the customer as much as they want. I feel like Mr Fraser owns me. There should be price controls at all levels, from the farmer to the consumer."

He would also like to see the creation of credit and loan schemes that would "serve the interests of the rural poor and ordinary farmers." He suggests that the government should closely monitor hygienic standards where milk is produced and force farmers to milk in shelters instead of in the open.

Most importantly, Mr Motlomelo feels the current land tenure system should be reformed to allow farmers to rent land and expand. "We can't all be small-scale dairy farmers. We can't all live hand to mouth."
To reduce overstocking and overgrazing, the marketing project has recommended that the Ministry of Agriculture introduce grazing fees, levies imposed on livestock per head, to encourage farmers to dispose of nonproductive livestock that put pressure on Lesotho's limited land and resources. This would address concerns raised by farmers like Motlomelo who want to expand their dairy operations.

Although the Ministry of Agriculture is introducing these, it has already implemented project recommendations dealing with livestock. Frequent livestock auctions are held in each district, publicized through the distribution of auction sales calendars and radio announcements. Auctions are open to private traders and individuals.

All cattle, sheep, and goats are graded and all sold cattle must have ownership and identification certificates, known as Babeik, to prevent the sale of stolen animals. The Ministry of Agriculture also offers education and training for farmers, including courses for herdboys.

The research work of this marketing project is slated to continue in a projected third phase. According to Dr Malahleha, developing new marketing policies will become more complicated "in light of the many political changes taking place in the region."

The disintegration of apartheid, Lesotho's anticipated return to democracy in 1992, and the return of large numbers of Basotho from South African mines over the next 15 years, make improved agricultural marketing not only a priority but a necessity.

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FINGERING A SOLUTION TO CHINA'S DWINDLING FORESTS

A new wood-processing technique making use of small, crooked and thinned-out lumber may help to save China's forests and meet its growing demand for timber. The technique, called finger-jointing, was introduced to China under an IDRC-sponsored project called "Wood Utilization." When widely adopted in this country, the innovation could save millions of cubic metres of timber annually.

The finger-jointing technique involves profiling wood ends into finger shapes and then joining pieces of small-sized lumber with adhesives to produce straight and long wood commodities. The first step in the process involves air-drying pieces of wood until there is a low moisture content. Then, a glue-like substance is applied to the ends, the "finger-profiles," and they are pressed together at great pressure. The interlocked pieces of wood are held firmly by the adhesive and can be used for various construction and building purposes.

The most obvious examples of this technique being put into practice are the huge beams installed in the water park of the Beijing Recreation Centre for the XI Asian Games. In this unique building, finger-jointed pieces of lumber were used as massive support beams: beams that are currently the largest wooden structures in China.