



PROTECTION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW

Lesotho Red Cross

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Lesotho Red Cross volunteer in delivering messages to child and youth participants.
Photo credit: Lesotho Red Cross

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Background

This case study describes a camp implemented by the Lesotho National Defence Force with, support from Lesotho Red Cross National Society (LRCS). The camp, structured as a “boot camp”, aimed to achieve rehabilitation for young people using or at risk of misusing illegal substances. The first camp was launched in 2021 and takes place twice a year during the winter (June and July) and summer (December) holidays, targeting in- and out-of-school children and youth aged 15 to 22 years. This age group have reported high rates of substance abuse and at risk of being in conflict with the law.

Introduction

In Lesotho, young people using and abusing substances is frowned upon, especially where misuse is accompanied by violence and disrespect towards elders. As undesirable behavior escalated during the COVID-19 lockdowns when young people were out of school and not at universities or workplaces due to lockdown, teachers and parents began to approach different organizations for help. Discouragingly, there was often no, or low action taken to help young people. The Lesotho Defence Force stepped in, developed and launched a child and youth development programme to counter the misuse of substances by young people.

A key aspect of the camp programme is to ensure the consent of the child or youth before they join the camp. In addition, parents sign and agree. The focus of the camps is on the re-direction and rehabilitation of young people, especially those who were part of gangs.

During the camps, LRCS facilitates two-day-long sessions on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPS), identification, prevention, and mitigation of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), and life skills development. In June 2022, 225 young people (186 boys and 39 girls) were reached. The sessions covered decision-making; in particular, defining what a decision is and what the decision-making process entails, focusing on cause and effect. The session also allows participants to discuss strategies and qualities to become better decision-makers, which includes consideration of challenges, choices, and consequences.

The LRCS session also focuses on taking participants through a personality inventory, which covers the assessment of each child’s personality and lifestyle and how they interact with everyone given their different traits. The dominance, influence, steadiness and conscientiousness (DISC) assessment tool was used. The tool lays out different personalities and their subcomponents that helps participants to thoroughly introspect and align their behavior and personalities. The session allows for open discussions within the group. This has been helpful for getting participants to understand that they have different personalities that are not in any way intertwined with those of their peers; this is helpful for minimizing the influence of peer pressure and elevating personal ability to make different, positive decisions.

The final part of the LRCS session is on identification, prevention, and mitigation of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). It covers early signs of SEA in different people and how young people can recognize that they are being lured into SEA by their peers or older people. The session also covers prevention measures that children can take for themselves and others, including communicating with parents, teachers, or another trusted individual about risks and concerns. A final aspect of the session is around mitigation strategies how children and youth can safely report to their local authorities, the Lesotho Child Help Line, the Lesotho Mounted Police Service emergency number, or the LRCS toll-free number 800 40000.

The camp is implemented over six-months. Initially, the camp targeted youth gang members and children known to misuse substances. In time, the approach changed to a more comprehensive substance awareness and prevention programme for all children and youth at risk, both those in and out-of-school.

The running costs for the camp were incurred by the military, with contributions from parents and guardians who paid a small fee for their children’s participation. Other funds were availed by corporate organisations and businesses as part of their corporate social responsibility.

The camp model incorporated an open week for local and international organisations to share knowledge and maximise the information shared with participants.

LRCS rolled out its sessions to support the initiative and contribute to addressing child and youth challenges, speaking up against, and misinformation about sexual abuse and exploitation while supporting the mental health and psychological wellbeing of participating young people.

Young people shared concerns that they only learned about the support available to children and youth and were supported while at the camp, but that on the outside there was a shortage of programmes that address child and youth concerns without judgement.

Most children and youth involved in the camp were engaged in crime, gangsterism, drugs, and cross-generational relationships for survival. Young people also explained that without support, they were stuck in a cycle where they also became perpetrators themselves (among their age mates and below) because of the bullying and toxic environments they grew up in in their homes and communities.

Successes

The key successes of the camp programme include:

- Personnel engaging with children and youth using structured approaches have had a positive effect on the young people. Young people have reported feeling heard and supported with knowledge to tackle the different challenges that they encounter day-to-day, and which contribute to them turning to substances like alcohol, cigarettes and drugs.
- Child and youth participants expressed approval when informed there are platforms where they can express their views, be heard, and be supported to cope with sexual exploitation and abuse. They indicated their eagerness to have more conversations beyond the camp.
- The LRCS toll-free number and safeguarding reporting email, which are managed by the LRCS safeguarding officer, were shared as were the addresses of the LRCS branch offices.



Lesotho Red Cross works from the position that collaboration with other stakeholders is in the best interests of communities. In future, LRCS personnel will work to ensure sustainable relations with the military to keep supporting children and youth development activities, and to also assist where relevant and possible to intensify community engagement and accountability and document the good work.



Lintle Mathosi, Safe and Inclusive Officer

Lessons Learned

The community appreciated the initiative, but the implementing partners did not have the resources to implement it nationally or reach all the young people who could benefit from it.

The camps provided safe and positive environments for young people to reflect on their hopes and aspirations and how their behaviour was impacting their growth.

In some cases, progress made in the camps was undone when children and youth returned to the same environments where peer pressure, difficult home lives, and negative influences prevailed. Young people also reported feeling pressured to demonstrate ongoing positive behaviour by parents and community members after participating in the camp.

The cost of the project does not reflect additional costs that can arise. For instance, the military hospital already serves many people, and in cases of serious illnesses, children need to be transferred to specialist hospitals at the expense of the military.

The trust from parents and the community helped. The initiative was well received by parents, teachers, guardians, and community members, and that contributed to its success. Feedback from graduates of the programme, parents, and the community helped the military to modify and refine the camp.

The observed impact of unity, order, and discipline was clear among matriculants of the programme. The impact of the camps on LRCS programming was transformative. Specifically, the National Society shifted to become more child and youth-sensitive. Lesotho Red Cross teams learned a lot from the laudable efforts of the military and plan to support the camps in the long term through sharing information and helping and coaching parents and guardians to communicate better with young people. The National Society also aims to enhance its support by working with communities to ensure better reintegration of children and youth who may have been in trouble with the law after they return from the camps. This is done from the position that providing children and youth with the good living environments they deserve is dependent on families and communities being more sensitive to the challenges that young people face.

Reference List

The Reporter (2021). School high on drugs. [online] The Reporter Lesotho | Fresh News, Daily. Available at: <https://www.thereporter.co.ls/2021/04/19/school-high-on-drugs/> [Accessed 11 May 2023].