

Thabang elders assist people living with HIV

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MASERU - What started as a small gesture to support and empower people living with HIV by elders at Thabang in Mokhotlong has turned into a big agricultural project.

The sizeable project now not only feeds the vulnerable, orphans and people living with HIV in the area but also supports food security for the community and beneficiaries of the project.

The elders that are implementers of the project have also witnessed a turn-around in their livelihoods and their families.

In 2001, Thabang elders started a support group which they named 'Bolokanang Liphamola Support Group'. The support group's objective was to take care of people living with HIV by supporting them emotionally, psychologically and physically.

The senior citizens in the community were driven by the discovery that people living with HIV were being discriminated against and stigmatised because of their status.

The group started buying food and other basic needs for the vulnerable families, orphans and people living with HIV from their own pockets, in addition to doing their laundry and cleaning their houses on a daily basis.

When they started out these elderly people had nothing to their names except just the will to lend a helping hand to those in need.

The support group offered counselling services to people who are living with HIV and even taught the community about the virus in an attempt to reduce the stigma that comes with HIV.

In hard times when the support group could not afford to buy food and other basic needs for these vulnerable people, they shared their own, just so no one would go to bed on an empty stomach.

Chairperson of the support group, 80-year-old Mamaketekete Chita, said they have been supporting these vulnerable people with the little they had.

She said they survived together and, above all, they were able to curb HIV stigmatisation and ensure that the needy are well looked after, physically and emotionally.

She said as years passed by their efforts were recognised by, among others, the European Union and LENASO which supported them financially and enabled them to buy basic needs for their beneficiaries without much struggle.

Chita said in 2017, luck visited the supported group and they were awarded a grant of



about M616 000 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) through the Global Environment Facilities Small Grants Programme (GEF SGP).

The GEF Small Grants Programme funding covers the incremental costs related to projects. Incremental costs are additional cost associated with transforming a project with national benefits into one with global environmental benefits.

In an interview with *Public Eye*, National Coordinator GEF SGP, Nthabiseng Majara, said the programme provides up to US\$50,000 (about M850 000) directly to civil society organisations and community entities for environmental protection projects.

Majara said the programme thrives on partnerships so it operates on a 1:1 financing arrangement, further stating that contribution by guarantees can be in cash and or in kind and can be raised through partnerships with donors, government, academic and research institutions, the private sector, business sector and other stakeholders.

She said action at the local level by civil society organisations (CSOs) and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), including among others women groups, indigenous people, farmers' associations, youth and people with disabilities is recognised as essential to form multi-stakeholder alliances to deliver global environmental benefits and contribute to the GEF-7 programming directions, UNDP's strategic plan 2018-2021, and national priorities to achieve UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other international commitments.

The programme's priority strategic initiatives for Lesotho, she said, include community-

based conservation of threatened ecosystems and species, sustainable agriculture, fisheries and food security and local to global coalitions for chemicals and waste management to mention a few.

"The programme aims to promote and support innovative, inclusive and scalable initiatives, and foster multi-stakeholder partnerships at the local level to tackle global environmental issues in priority landscapes and seascapes," she said.

With the grant the support group had been awarded, Chita told *Public Eye* that they started an agricultural project through which they produce all types of vegetables including, green peppers, cabbage, green leaf vegetables, carrots, beetroot and butternut which they then sell to retailers and surrounding communities.

She said the produce is also shared among people living with HIV, vulnerable community members and orphans.

The support group also has an orchard and sells fruits including red apples, peaches and pears whose sales sustain them, their families and their beneficiaries and also ensures sustainability of the project.

The project is owned and run by seven elders of the community including six women and one man all aged between 70 and 85.

What is interesting about the group is that all work that needs to be done at the project is done by the elderly even though it is not by choice.

Chita said after receiving the grant, they recruited youth to join them and be part of the project but all of them were not interested arguing that the project takes time to bring money to meet all their needs.

"Youth around here left us and went to seek jobs in South Africa.

They lack patience and want fast money. The future of our hard earned project is at stake as you can see that we are already old," she said emotionally.

Chita said with the grant money, they were able to buy two big green houses which they use to produce some of their produce. They also built a water tank, bought small machineries that help with some tasks where hard labour is needed and built an electrified storeroom where they keep their equipment safe.

They also have a properly equipped office where they keep all the support group's documents and finance statements.

Chita told this publication that since they got the grant, they have also been able to expand and assist more people by ensuring that they have food and other basic needs.

They are certain that their project is sustainable and will prosper in years to come. She however expressed concern with the long term future of the project, specifically on who will take care of it since youths are disinterested.

She said currently, apart from insects that invade their garden, production has been increasing, noting that the group uses sustainable methods of planting and their produce is able to grow despite extreme weather conditions.

Zero hunger is Goal Two among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at ending hunger, achieving food security and improving nutrition while also promoting sustainable agriculture.

Among Goal Two of the SDGs' targets includes ending hunger and ensuring access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and

sufficient food all year round by 2030.

Another target is to end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under five years of age, and addressing the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons.

"By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.

"By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality," the SDGs targets.

Another target is to maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species, including through soundly managed and diversified seed and plant banks at the national, regional and international levels, and promote access to and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilisation of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, as internationally agreed by 2020.

As another way to end hunger, Target Two of the SDGs is to increase investment through enhanced international cooperation in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development and plant and livestock gene banks in order to enhance agricultural productive capacity in developing countries, in particular least developed countries.

Target Two of the DSGs further aims to correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets through parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and all export measures with equivalent effect.

This is in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round and adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets and their derivatives and facilitate timely access to market information, including on food reserves, in order to help limit extreme food price volatility.