

# **Documenting Sustainable Change through Community Empowerment: LIA with SOS Kinderdorf in Lesotho and Ethiopia**

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In the summer of 2025, I had the privilege of travelling to Lesotho and Ethiopia to work alongside the global NGO SOS Children's Villages, the largest non-governmental organisation focused on supporting children without parental care and families at risk.

Our roles involved working as part of the SOS communications teams in various locations across Lesotho and Ethiopia, documenting the various projects and initiatives being supported by SOS and helping to produce various media materials promoting the work that SOS does to the public and donors.

Known internationally as SOS Children's Villages, SOS Kinderdorf is primarily known for their work providing homes to children who have lost their parents. However today SOS Kinderdorf also delivers a wide array of interventions across the globe to keep families together and prevent family breakdown, empower children, and advocate for children's rights, aiming for sustainable community development, through family strengthening programs, education, health centres, and youth skilling.

This experience not only allowed me to witness the life-changing work that SOS Children's Villages does across the world, but also allowed me to learn about how NGOs can operate in often unstable environments, working holistically with communities to construct and deliver groundbreaking initiatives that produce sustainable change, allowing communities to become part of the process of child and family empowerment, and creating change that continues even after the NGO leaves.

## **Youth Empowerment & Entrepreneurship Training: The YEET Programme in Leribe, Lesotho**

Our first week was spent in Leribe, Lesotho, where we documented the progress of the Youth Empowerment and Entrepreneurship Training programme [YEET], which provides free vocational training and education to vulnerable young people, supporting them with the skills, knowledge and eventual funding and materials to start their own sustainable businesses, so that they can support themselves and their families. The YEET programme offered courses in beauty and hairstyling, sewing and textiles, culinary arts, and construction and carpentry. These fields were selected with Lesotho's economic context in mind, since they align with labour demand and provide realistic pathways into work and self employment. Textiles form the backbone of Lesotho's manufacturing sector, accounting for around eleven percent of national exports and providing significant employment through export oriented garment production. Beauty services such as haircare and skincare maintain steady local demand and present relatively low start up barriers for young entrepreneurs. Carpentry and construction skills remain relevant due to ongoing housing needs and small scale building across both urban and rural areas. Culinary training creates opportunities in hospitality, informal food businesses and tourism.

Many of the young people we met on the program faced incredible challenges to accessing education, from experiencing family bereavement to financial barriers, to geographical and infrastructure barriers.

Lesotho's social welfare challenges are shaped by persistent poverty and weak infrastructure, particularly in rural areas where most people live and where access to education, healthcare and

other essential services is limited. Public social protection systems are under-resourced and unevenly delivered, leaving many without reliable support and reinforcing rural deprivation and unequal access to opportunity. Although primary education is free for the first seven years, classrooms often exceed eighty pupils per teacher and, once children turn twelve, schools begin charging tuition fees. These costs, combined with infrastructure shortfalls, make secondary education financially out of reach for many families despite government efforts to increase funding, with the burden falling most heavily on vulnerable children and young people.

Lesotho is one of the most mountainous countries in the world, earning it the nickname "Kingdom in the Sky". A significant lack of developed road infrastructure, especially in its mountainous highland regions, leads to isolation for many communities, restricting access to markets, services and schooling, relying on bridle paths, footbridges and difficult dirt roads. These barriers contribute to low secondary completion rates and high youth unemployment, since poor roads make it difficult to reach schools and training opportunities. Many of the students we met travelled for hours each day just to reach the pick-up points for the bus to the YEET training centre; for some, the commute exceeded five hours daily.

We had the privilege of meeting both current students of the YEET programme and several graduates who had gone on to establish their own livelihoods. One graduate had opened a small tuck shop and offered construction, carpentry and electrical services, skills he had gained through the programme. He explained that his business now supported not only himself, but also his parents and younger sister.

We also met a graduate from the Culinary Arts programme who had secured an internship as a chef in a local hotel. After completing his placement he was hired full-time, and he described how his income was helping him support his younger siblings by paying for their school fees, uniforms and transport, enabling them to access the education and opportunities he had previously been unable to afford.



One of the most striking aspects of the YEET programme was how deliberately it resisted positioning the young people they supported as only passive recipients of charity. Instead, students were encouraged to view themselves as contributors to a broader cycle of sustainable community building. Staff emphasised that the skills gained on the programme carried both personal and social value, and that young people had the capacity to shape the wellbeing of their communities rather than simply benefit from external aid.

During our visit, staff told us about a local family in particularly difficult circumstances: a fourteen-year-old girl and her eleven-year-old brother who had lost their mother two years earlier. Although supported by the limited social services available in the area, they still faced acute poverty and social exclusion. Their home, like many we saw in Lesotho, consisted of a single brick room with a corrugated iron roof, without running water or electricity. The windows and door were broken, providing little protection from the extreme winter cold in the mountain regions, and the interior held only a bed, some cookware and broken furniture.

On a Saturday, we documented a group of students from the construction and carpentry class volunteering their time and skills to repair the family's door and windows, and to build a bed, table and chairs. Meanwhile, culinary arts students prepared meals and raised money through cake sales at school, using the proceeds to purchase non-perishable food and hygiene items for the children. Despite having limited resources themselves, they used what they had learned to support other vulnerable young people in the community. In doing so, they demonstrated that the programme's impact extended well beyond individual livelihoods: it fostered participation, solidarity and a sense of shared responsibility that strengthened the social fabric around them.



## **Supporting Children and Families: SOS Children's Villages**

In both Lesotho and Ethiopia, we met children, families and young people supported through various SOS child-care programmes, including the organisation's "children's villages": specially built, small village-like communities that provide family-like homes for children who have lost parental care or are at risk of doing so, which offer stability, siblings and integration into local community life as an alternative to large institutional orphanages. Alongside this, SOS supports kinship care arrangements, enabling children to remain within extended family networks and grow up in familiar cultural and social environments.

In our second week we travelled to Quthing, a district less populous and far more rural than Leribe. With fewer education and health services and one of the highest poverty rates in Lesotho, basic needs such as water, sanitation and schooling are even more strained for children. Our time there was spent learning about and documenting some of the programmes supported by SOS, from helping vulnerable children access primary education to providing family-based care in the children's village.

Visiting the children's village in Quthing, we met several SOS Mothers and Aunts who shared how SOS supported them and the children in their care. Care is provided within a family structure, often led by an "SOS Mother" and "SOS Aunt" who often raise around ten children of varying ages in a single house. They spoke about the training they had received, the emotional and educational support available to them, and how these equipped them to offer the best possible care. They also spoke candidly about their motivations for becoming caregivers, and the hopes they carried for their children's futures. Many of the children we met told us proudly that they wanted to become police officers, doctors or nurses, and the mothers showed us photos on the walls of the young adults who had once been in their care, some now at university, some living and working in the closest town, and some now parents themselves, considering their SOS Mothers as grandmothers to their children.



## **Sustainable Training for Employment Promotion: The STEP Initiative in Addis Ababa**

When we arrived in Ethiopia for our third week, we spent our first days in Addis Ababa, where we were introduced to one of SOS's largest and most comprehensive projects, the STEP initiative. The focus of STEP is empowering unemployed youth with marketable skills for better jobs and the ability to start and sustain their own businesses through vocational training, entrepreneurship development and direct job placement. As part of a broader multi-year, country-wide strategy to reach thousands of vulnerable children and young people, STEP has already supported over 2,100 young people in Ethiopia. Its long-term objective is not only to create sustainable livelihoods for those directly supported, but also to establish viable businesses that generate local employment and contribute to economic growth.

One young man who was supported in this scheme, was an ambitious Addis University graduate with a degree in computer science, who had shifted his focus to sustainable agriculture and established a honey production enterprise. Partnering with farmers across multiple regions to produce local honey products, he is strengthening Ethiopia's role in the global honey supply chain while supporting his local community through employing dozens of other local young people in Addis Ababa.

## **Family Strengthening: A Sustainable Approach**

As well as providing care for children unable to be cared for by their birth families, SOS's family strengthening model is an approach which goes beyond the provision of essential services, recognising the potential of children, their families and communities moving towards self-sufficiency.

The goal of the Family Strengthening Programs is to provide robust social support services to prevent family child separation and ensure those families where children have been reintegrated are equipped with the skills, child-care strategies to overcome any future hardships, and successfully stay together. This includes programmes to support children's education, health and safety, as well as supporting the financial stability of the family through education and income-generating support schemes for parents and caregivers.

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, financial and social support provided by SOS allowed an aunt who lost her sister and her husband to support her nephew in the ways she has always wanted. She told us that with uniform costs, school fees and materials funded by SOS, she is able to put the money she makes from her home-front store towards buying her child new clothes.



## **Reintegration and Community Based Care**

In both Lesotho and Ethiopia, SOS has been relocating family households from the previously enclosed village compounds into ordinary neighbourhoods, where children live in regular housing among wider communities. This has helped them form friendships more naturally, attend local schools and take part in everyday life without the stigma that can occur when children are set apart in residential villages.

In Hawassa, Ethiopia, we had the privilege of meeting a family who had been caring for children with SOS for more than a decade and had recently moved back into a community-based setting. The SOS mother had been caring for children for twelve years, and her husband had always supported her from a distance, since the old compounds did not permit men to live on site. After the relocation two years earlier, he moved in and became one of the first recognised “SOS Fathers”. He spoke with clear affection about each child, and explained how his background as a sports coach helped him connect with the young people and support their involvement in local sports.

This family consisting of both an SOS mother and father is thriving in the community. The presence of both an SOS mother and father has created a warm and lively household, and the children call the father Abha. During our visit, which took place during the summer holidays, older young people who had previously lived with them were returning to spend time in the home. Three were currently studying at university and had moved into nearby houses, but still chose to visit frequently, joining in games, cooking and helping with the younger children. The house felt full of laughter and movement, and what stood out most was the sense of long-lasting bonds. There was a genuine atmosphere of family, not only within the household itself, but across different ages and stages of life.



## **Action for Bushulo Child Development and Family Empowerment (ABCD) & Shashemene Holistic Action for Sustainable Household Empowerment (SHASHE)**

Our fourth and final week was spent in Hawassa, Ethiopia, where we observed the extensive work being carried out to support children and families.

In the nearby rural villages of Bushulo and Shashemene, SOS had implemented the Action for Bushulo Child Development and Family Empowerment (ABCD) and the Shashemene Holistic Action for Sustainable Household Empowerment (SHASHE) projects. Both programmes aimed to ensure that children are safe and protected from abuse, that families have stable livelihoods, that children and young people are educated and skilled, and that children and families are healthy.

To achieve these outcomes, SOS introduced a wide range of activities. Families received education and training on keeping children safe, preventing abuse and developing positive parenting skills. Caregivers of children with disabilities received additional specialist training to better support their needs. SOS also built a community centre with a psychosocial counselling office where children and young people can seek support.

### **Income Generating Activities**

We learnt about the innovative work being done to support families to build sustainable livelihoods. Utilising local networks and community relationships, SOS helped vulnerable households develop their own income through business and financial training, while also ensuring access to education and healthcare. Working closely with small financial institutions and community based organisations, SOS provided training on business skills and facilitated links with savings and credit groups so that families could access small loans for income generating activities. Many parents now raise livestock or grow crops as a secondary source of income, using the profits to repay loans, support their children's education and healthcare, and reduce vulnerability to economic shocks.

This not only supports their own families, but also strengthens their local communities' economies, contributing to the development of the local economy, creating positive long-term effects for the wider community over time. It therefore improves life not only for the original beneficiary families but for the broader population through a gradual rise in economic stability and community wellbeing.

## **Supporting Children's Education**

SOS had been supporting children's education in the Bushulo and Shashemene area in a range of ways, from funding the construction of new school buildings to better meet the needs of the local population, to providing funding for scholastic materials both in schools and in the home, providing training for teachers to make education more accessible for marginalised children, and through positive parenting training and adult literacy initiatives, supporting parents to support their children's learning.

SOS identified that menstruation, a normal part of any girl's life, in Ethiopia, can be a massive barrier to accessing education, so started the initiative of producing 'dignity packs' for vulnerable female students. Girls' Club members spending their summer break sewing reusable menstrual pads to make up the dignity packs provided to female students to prevent absenteeism during their periods.



In addition, SOS has worked to ensure that education was accessible to children with disabilities, collaborating with local schools to provide training and materials for teachers that were accessible, as well as incorporating disability training into their positive parenting training, changing attitudes and beliefs about the abilities and potential of disabled children.

Through providing training, materials and positive parenting training, SOS increased the enrolment of children with disabilities from 0 to 39 in one small rural community in just 2 years, as well as drastically improving literacy rates amongst both children and caregivers.



## **Conclusion**

Across Lesotho and Ethiopia, the impact of SOS's work is evident in increased access to education and healthcare, strengthened household livelihoods, and safer environments for children. Their integrated approach links direct support for children with assistance for caregivers and wider community systems, helping to disrupt the intergenerational drivers of poverty and vulnerability. The benefits extend beyond immediate participants, contributing to lasting improvements in skills, economic capacity and social wellbeing that continue after SOS has left.

In Hawassa, Shashemene and Bushulo, families have seen substantial improvements through community-designed initiatives. School enrolment and literacy rates have risen for both children and caregivers, while awareness of child protection has increased and hygiene practices have improved. Access to healthcare, sanitation and essential services has expanded, contributing to lower rates of infectious disease and better living conditions. At the same time, households have gained greater financial stability through opportunities for sustainable income generation. These developments have supported meaningful cultural and behavioural shifts, fostering safer communities, stronger protective environments and greater self-reliance. Taken together, they demonstrate healthier, more resilient communities that are better equipped for the future.

In Leribe, Lesotho, vocational education has given hundreds of young people pathways into employment and self-employment, enabling them to support their families and contribute to local economic activity. In Quthing, hundreds of children have been cared for by SOS mothers and aunts, reintegrated into society and supported to pursue their education and aspirations. These outcomes highlight how support offered at different stages of childhood and youth can reinforce one another.

What stood out to me across these projects was how educational support for children, business mentoring for adolescents, and financial and parenting support for caregivers collectively strengthen the foundations of family and community life. They do not only improve individual circumstances, but also spread skills, confidence and income through households and neighbourhoods. Over time, these cumulative changes give rise to communities that are healthier, more stable and better positioned to meet their own needs, reducing barriers to opportunity and improving prospects for the next generation.

This experience allowed me to witness the transformative work of SOS Children's Villages first-hand, and to learn how non-governmental organisations can operate holistically in challenging environments. By working with communities rather than for them, SOS helps to create sustainable change that continues long after the organisation itself steps back, enabling families and young people to become active participants in their own futures.