

The Migrant Labour System and Economic Empowerment in Lesotho

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ABSTRACT

The migrant labour system was already entrenched in Lesotho before the middle of the 19th Century. Since then thousands of Basotho men have worked, and still continue to work, especially in the mining sector in South Africa, for varying periods in any given year; and their remittances had contributed significantly to economic empowerment and welfare of a large proportion of the population in Lesotho. Recently, however, opportunities for Basotho to migrate to South Africa for work are dwindling. At the same time the operation of the labour market in Lesotho continues to encourage external migration. And, with the low labour absorptive capacity of the economy, unemployment has been on the increase. The government has been trying without success to empower the tens of thousands who are unemployed through EPZ schemes.

This paper will develop a stylised model of the labour market in Lesotho and use it to show how:

- i. The labour market's operation continues to encourage external migration;
- ii. A redirection of the educational system could open up job opportunities in Lesotho for thousands of Basotho, empowering them.

The paper will also show that many women in Lesotho have attained economic empowerment because of responsibilities entrusted to them in the absence of their migrant-labour husbands and because of improvements in their educational levels.

The paper will conclude with recommendations on policy direction that would contribute to economic empowerment in Lesotho in the absence of external migration.