

SOME TERMITES AT WORK: INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVES IN LESOTHO¹

Lesotho has very little fertile arable land. Only nine percent is considered suitable for intense cultivation and less than twenty percent can support low intensity cultivation. It is faced with a serious erosion problem arising from its mountainous terrain, soil instability, erratic and intense rainfall and high population growth. Numerous attempts to reclaim eroded lands through regional and national programmes have met with varying success but most have not been sustainable.

Highly motivated and determined individuals have successfully and sustainably reclaimed eroded ravines (dongas) and turned them into productive farms. Like farmers' efforts in parts of Asia, all used labour intensive approaches which focused on soil retention with little or no machinery.

In each of the successful initiatives, the farmers' have been granted secure rights to the land reclaimed. This contributed to their willingness to invest their time and ingenuity in reclaiming the land. Lesotho has certificates of allocation to specific pieces of land which can be granted by traditional leaders.

Mr. Ntate Lebaka returned from working in South Africa in 1985 and was advised by his chief that there was no more land for allocation in his village. He requested that he be allocated two parallel dongas that originated in the village. The chief thought *"that I was a 'crazy fool' but I said I wanted to stay in my home area. I built a hut between the dongas and with a spade, a pick and a wheelbarrow I built small dams across the gullies. At first the dams filled with water but then later there was only soil left. Now I have more than 10 hectares of good land. At first everyone scorned me when I kept making more dams below whenever one dam was full. Now the people are jealous."* Mr Lebaka at 70 owns the largest piece of land in the village, has two hectares under maize, many fruit trees, sells vegetables to the village and his dam walls are planted to kikuyu for grazing and useful reeds and herbs.

Mr. Mikia Mapetla, born in 1935, was retrenched from the South African mines in 1973. He was granted secure rights to an eroded ravine by the local chief and subsequently transformed it: there are now eleven other farmers in his area who have followed his initiative. *"I could feed and educate all my children. We have made a home with many fruits and trees. We sell grasses for cattle to eat and asparagus to go to a factory. We also have fish in the donga ponds that I built to stop the water taking away the soil. The stone walls also catch the soil that is running away and that is what lets me grow good crops."*

Nthebe Bulara is a traditional healer who was imprisoned on Robben Island under apartheid but was acquitted in 1973. He was given access to badly eroded land with many rocks. His quarry experience helped with the rockwork. With the help of a relative, rocks from the roadside were used to build dams and silt traps. Initially he used soil from culverts to make some fields but later he used the soil he had trapped. *"I planted trees to stop the dongas widening. I can grow anything with care and I am now trying to see about tropical fruits. My big interest is to help people and to*

¹ These examples are taken from presentations at the Scandinavian Seminar College Workshop on "Policies and Practices Supporting Sustainable Development in Sub-Saharan Africa" Harare September 1998 and based on a paper by R.L. Ntokoane on "Local Initiatives in Soil and Water Conservation in Lesotho".

grow plants we use for healing and to save plants that you don't find anymore. I think it is bad to use all these poisons and I am using special plants to protect my vegetables." He relates that even the chiefs are now jealous of his success. He has returned his father's fields to be re-allocated in return for a badly eroded hillside where he is again building dams and silt traps and has planted fuelwood trees.

These farmers are now involved in assisting the National Environment Youth Corps in Lesotho to pass on their expertise to unemployed youths.