

Purposeful Play in Lesotho: Empowering Girls and Youth Through Table Tennis and Education

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Areas of work

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Organisation

Heal Our Land Organisation (HOLO) is a non-governmental organisation based in Matsieng, Lesotho, dedicated to empowering children, adolescents, and young adults through education, sport, psychosocial support, and community development. HOLO provides a safe space where youth can learn, grow, and build resilience, with a strong focus on girls' empowerment, gender equality, and inclusive participation. HOLO has been operating in the community since 2019. Table tennis, as a tool for promoting the importance of physical activity and empowering girls and women was embraced by the organisation in October 2023.

Summary

HOLO-MEC (Motivational and Educational Club) is a holistic youth development programme serving at least 219 learners in rural Matsieng, Lesotho. The programme integrates education, sport, health, and life skills to address interlinked challenges affecting children and adolescents, especially girls.

The project began in October 2023 with the assistance of the Lesotho Table Tennis Association, Table Tennis Wales and other key partners focusing on developing table tennis in the community combined with capacity building workshops on leadership, menstrual health and safe sport. Building trust and successful communication with several international partners, HOLO has obtained invaluable support from the Swaythling Club International (mentor and international liaison Ms Lilamani de Soysa), Table Tennis Wales (Michael Board) and the June Canavan Foundation in Australia.

The overall aim is to improve well-being, empower girls, increase participation in sport, and build a peaceful, resilient community.

Problem Statement

Children and adolescents in rural Matsieng face multiple, deeply rooted challenges that hinder their educational, social, and personal development:

Education Challenges

Quality education is always a challenge, and there is limited access to extra learning support and literacy development. Corporal punishment in schools is fairly common, which affects confidence and performance. Existing learning gaps were worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and High school dropout rates increased (49 in 2022; 32 in 2023; 46 in 2024).

Sporting Challenges

Lack of sports infrastructure and structured grassroots sport programmes are an ongoing barrier, with no clear pathway for development, with limited opportunities for sport leadership and competition. Girls are particularly vulnerable as they are excluded due to inadequate facilities (only one pit toilet available), menstrual constraints, and gender stereotypes.

Health & Safety Challenges

Menstrual health barriers leading to absenteeism and reduced participation, hinder girls' participation in sport and physical activity. Other psychosocial challenges include trauma, violence, and low resilience. Community insecurity with rising crime rates, substance abuse, and gang influence are particularly pernicious problems.

Community Challenges

The community faces significant challenges, including poverty, food insecurity, and limited recreational options for young people. The lack of structured programmes places youth at risk of engaging in harmful activities, while environmental neglect and low participation in climate action further affect community wellbeing. Without targeted interventions, these combined factors threaten the potential and future opportunities of young people, particularly girls.

About the program

The HOLO-MEC Programme provides an integrated model to respond to these challenges through:

Table Tennis & Girls' Empowerment

Table tennis is used as a powerful tool to empower girls and young women while promoting the importance of physical activity, equality, and inclusion. Regular coaching sessions help participants develop skills, confidence, and discipline, supported by leadership and safe sport workshops led by Lilamani de Soysa and Sasha Martell from Safesport International. Practical barriers to participation are addressed through the provision of menstrual hygiene support and the construction of two gender-separate toilets, ensuring safety and dignity for girls. Participants are given opportunities to compete in local, national, and international tournaments, broadening their exposure and ambitions. Boys are intentionally included in the programme to promote allyship, gender equality, and mutual respect.

Gender Equality & Safeguarding

Workshops are conducted on gender-based violence prevention, safe sport, menstrual health, and gender equality. Dedicated communication channels are also created to ensure girls have safe, supportive spaces where they can openly discuss sensitive issues, share experiences, and seek guidance without fear or stigma.

Community Development

Community development activities focus on strengthening local engagement and youth leadership. World Clean-Up Day events are organised in collaboration with local schools, promoting environmental responsibility and collective action. Anti-doping education is combined with environmental awareness to encourage healthy, ethical lifestyles. HOLO actively engages community stakeholders, including schools and local authorities, to build strong partnerships. Through these initiatives, young people are given opportunities to develop leaders and peace advocates within their communities.

Outcomes

Education Outcomes

There is clear progress seen with learning gaps narrowed for 219 learners receiving support. The programme has contributed to at least a 5% reduction in school dropout rates at the

neighbouring high school. Alongside academic improvement, learners have developed greater resilience through strengthened life skills.

Sport Outcomes

At least 10 girls will participate annually in national and international table tennis tournaments by the end of 2028. The programme also focuses on developing women coaches in table tennis, creating role models and pathways for leadership. Attitudes toward gender equality among boys and the wider community have also improved.

Health & Hygiene Outcomes

Improved menstrual hygiene management for girls and increased access to safe, clean toilets that support dignity and wellbeing. These improvements contribute to healthier, more confident female athletes who are better able to participate fully in sport, education, and community life.

Community Outcomes

The youth are more equipped to advocate for peace, gender equality, and safe sport within their communities. Collaboration between local schools and organisations has increased, strengthening collective action and shared responsibility. There is also greater awareness of environmental protection and climate action.

Successes

HOLO has already established a strong foundation that this project builds on:

Education & Learning

Consistent tutoring has led to a significant reduction in learning gaps and strengthened overall academic performance. At least 219 learners are actively participating in the HOLO-MEC programme, benefiting from structured educational support. As a result, learners show improved confidence, greater motivation, and stronger engagement in their studies.

Sport & Girls' Empowerment

A growing table tennis club has attracted strong and active youth participation. The programme has significantly increased the visibility and acceptance of girls in sport within the Matsieng community. This progress has been strengthened through a successful partnership with international sport leaders, bringing expertise, mentorship, and global connection to the local initiative.

Community Impact

HOLO is recognised as a safe and vibrant hub, filled with activity, laughter, and positive engagement. Community relationships have been strengthened through regular events and close collaboration with local schools, fostering trust, connection, and shared responsibility for youth development.

Partnership Development

Strong partnerships have been built with Dolen Cymru Lesotho and the British High Commission, providing valuable support. In addition, international connections with organisations such as SCI, the IWG, and Safesport International bring global expertise, mentorship, and opportunities to the rural youth.

Challenges

Despite the progress made, several challenges remain. Persistent poverty, food insecurity, and unstable home environments continue to affect many young people, while limited resources restrict the development of adequate sports infrastructure. Funding shortages pose a serious risk, with support from current partners coming to an end soon. There is also resistance to behaviour change, particularly around deeply rooted gender norms. In addition, the presence of only one existing pit toilet makes participation especially difficult for girls, highlighting the ongoing need for improved facilities.

Lessons & Recommendations

- Holistic programming is essential — education, sport, psychosocial support, and health interventions together create stronger, sustained impact.
- Girls thrive when their basic needs are met, especially menstrual support and safe sanitation.
- Partnerships strengthen capacity — international collaboration brings powerful role models and expertise.
- Continuous engagement retains learners — consistent activities reduce dropout and harmful behaviour.
- Safe spaces change lives — youth are more confident, expressive, and motivated when they feel protected and valued.
- Boys must be included to effectively shift gender norms and build community support for girls' leadership.
- Sport is a powerful tool for education, peaceful communication, and behaviour change in rural settings.
- Community trust-building is crucial, especially in contexts of violence or insecurity.

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