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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LESOTHO COUNTRY DIAGNOSTIC CASE STUDY

Lesotho, a small landlocked nation in Southern Africa, is surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. With only 10% of its 30,355 km² landmass arable, the nation's economy remains highly dependent on South Africa for trade, food imports, and remittances. Agriculture contributes just 4% to GDP yet employs nearly 40% of the workforce, predominantly women, highlighting a deep mismatch between economic output and livelihoods.

The Climate Resilient Food System (CRFS) Alliance launched country diagnostics in 2022, with the first batch of countries comprising Ethiopia, Fiji, Belize, and The Gambia. These reports aim to facilitate resource mobilization and the exchange of best practices amongst countries. These case studies consider the country's Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans, Food System Pathways, and other relevant national strategies relating to food and climate change.

The Lesotho Country Diagnostic Report 2023 scrutinizes the country's food systems by

tracing each step from production, through distribution, to consumption. It sheds light on the country's national circumstances, food systems, climate risks, and agricultural policies in Lesotho as of October 2023. Food systems in Lesotho are marked by low productivity, heavy reliance on rainfed agriculture, and strong dependence on imports, with only 30% of food consumed being produced locally. Cereal yields are consistently below regional averages, and 91% of crop fields are cultivated by smallholders who often struggle to meet subsistence needs. Livestock plays a dominant role in agricultural GDP, but diseases, land degradation, and limited veterinary services constrain its potential.

Food and nutrition security remain critical concerns. Over half of the population cannot afford a nutritious diet, while one in ten households cannot even meet energy needs. Malnutrition costs the economy an estimated USD 200 million annually, equivalent to 7% of GDP. The country faces a double burden of high child stunting (33%) alongside rising obesity and non-communicable diseases.

Poor dietary diversity limited local food availability, and weak awareness of healthy diets further exacerbates nutrition challenges. Despite these opportunities, significant gaps remain. Lesotho's food systems are constrained by weak technical capacity, underdeveloped seed and input supply chains, poor infrastructure, and inadequate data for monitoring food security and climate risks.

Lesotho is one of the most vulnerable countries globally, which is attributed to its geographic and socio-economic conditions. The nation's high dependence on rain-fed agriculture and reliance on regional energy imports further heighten its vulnerability. Lesotho's topography and location contribute to its temperate climate, characterized by alpine features, which, in turn, increase its susceptibility to climate variability. The country is facing a risk of rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, droughts, and floods. These changes accelerate soil erosion, desertification, and biodiversity loss, undermining agriculture and water resources. Projections point to hotter and drier conditions in the future, with significant risks to planting cycles, crop yields, and livestock systems.

The policy landscape shaping food systems resilience in Lesotho is anchored in a mix of national, regional, and international frameworks. At the national level, the National Vision 2020, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, and the National Strategic Development Plan II (2018/19–2022/23) set broad development priorities, emphasizing food security, nutrition, and climate resilience. Sector-specific frameworks include the Agriculture Sector Strategy (2003), the National Agricultural Investment Programme (2015) under CAADP, and the National Action Plan

for Food Security (2007–2017), supported by localized District Economic Strategies. Climate and disaster risk management is guided by the National Climate Change Strategy (2017), the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA), and the Nationally Determined Contribution (2025), which collectively frame Lesotho's commitments to climate adaptation and resilience. Regionally, the SADC Regional Agricultural Policy (2013) and the AU Maputo Declaration reinforce commitments to sustainable agriculture and food security.

Building a climate-resilient food system in Lesotho requires a combination of targeted actions aimed at enhancing productivity, sustainability, and equity. Key priorities include the adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices, such as conservation agriculture, enhancing agricultural productivity through better seed systems, improved access to inputs, irrigation, and mechanization, alongside diversifying crops and diets to reduce dependency on imports and improve nutrition. Livestock management and veterinary services must also be strengthened, while expanded financial inclusion, agricultural extension, and market access will empower smallholders to adopt resilient practices. At the same time, mainstreaming climate-smart agriculture, integrating water resource management, and scaling up social protection, insurance, and disaster risk reduction mechanisms are essential to buffer communities against climate shocks and safeguard livelihoods.

To advance the food system in the country, entry points for the Climate Resilient Food Systems (CRFS) Alliance include the promotion of multi-stakeholder coordination, mobilizing finance for smallholder resilience, and strengthening evidence-based policymaking.

Ultimately, achieving resilience in Lesotho's food systems demands a holistic approach that integrates climate adaptation, food and nutrition security, and inclusive economic growth, while addressing systemic vulnerabilities that affect agriculture and rural livelihoods.