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The local governance of COVID-19: Insight from Lesotho's response and mitigation

Abstract: Pandemics are deemed accidents of history. Their control and impacts span over economic, social, geopolitical and ideological considerations. This paper attempts to answer how Lesotho responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, which factors hindered local-level implementation of COVID-19 response and mitigation, and how the kingdom's local government disaster preparedness can be improved. A desktop study supported by virtual consultations with relevant players was conducted to gain insight for this study. Content and thematic analysis established a lack of administrative and financial decentralization in Lesotho, which had detrimental implications for COVID-19 response and mitigation.

Key words: Lesotho, COVID-19, colonialization, governance, intervention, mitigation

Introduction

Study context

Pandemics are deemed accidents of history, and their impacts span over economic, social, geopolitical and ideological considerations (Matamanda et al. 2021). This applies to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has overshadowed the world since December 2019, and will likely remain in the near future. Local governments, being at the forefront of where COVID-19 is severely felt, have tirelessly worked to combat the effects through response and mitigation agencies. Their

success has been acutely influenced by national economies, regulatory frameworks, decentralization levels, international relations and in some countries, the colonialism background (OECD 2020). The overall objective is to explore the crucial responsibility faced by Lesotho's local government to manage COVID-19 response and mitigation strategies, and elements that affected its implementation efficacy. The research questions are as follows;

1. How did Lesotho respond to the COVID-19 pandemic from national to local levels?
2. Which factors hindered an efficient local level implementation of COVID-19 response and mitigation?
3. Taking lessons from the COVID-19 experience, how can the kingdom's local government arrangements improve on its disaster preparedness?

The paper begins by highlighting a brief background of Lesotho followed by the methodological considerations of the study. It then examines the implications of colonialism in the structuring of Lesotho's local government systems and proceeds to review common concepts in the management of hazards and the functionality of local governance. These include disaster preparedness, inter-governmental relations, service delivery, resource management and competence. Discussions then shift to findings and analysis of data before making recommendations based on policy implications.

Considering that Lesotho reported positive cases much later than other African countries, the study asserts that the country had an opportunity to experience a more subdued impact of the pandemic. However, findings indicate that inadequate healthcare structures, the centralization of power, a lack of state capacity and high poverty levels in the country are among the reasons for the difficulties faced in combating the spread of the virus. These observations provide a benchmark for research on how local government in Lesotho can improve its disaster preparedness through intergovernmental relations, service delivery, resources management and competence.

Country background

Lesotho, affectionately known as the Mountain Kingdom, is a small landlocked country with an area of 30355km² and an approximate population of 2,168,845 million. With a poverty rate of 49.7% and a GNI per capita of US\$1100 in 2020, the country is listed as one of the world's poorest countries (World Bank 2020, 2021). In terms of health, Lesotho is burdened by increasing disease rates, lack of human resources and facilities and inequality of access. It has an average life expectancy of 50 years, with mortality rates on the rise due to poor access to health services and high poverty rates, especially in the rural areas. It is also rated the country with the third highest HIV/AIDS prevalence in the world (Oxfam 2014, WHO 2017).

Lesotho's 1993 constitution provides for the Local Government Act of 1997 which demarcated governance at municipal, district, urban and community

levels. Due to the rootedness of the country in traditional leadership, local chiefs form part of community councils to fulfil the function of political decentralization. Some of the integral issues facing the kingdom's local governance is lack of administrative and fiscal decentralization ('Nyane 2016, CLGF 2018). Figure 1 highlights the country's government structure with details of the various levels.

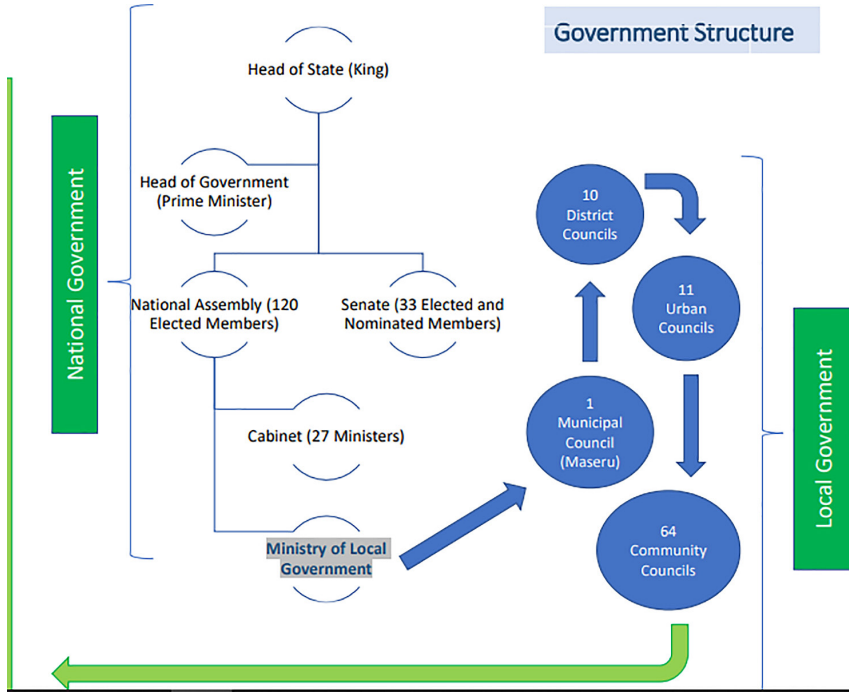


Fig. 1. Lesotho's Government Structure
Source: 'Nyane (2016).

Lesotho was furthest behind to report positive COVID-19 cases in Africa, with the first case identified on 13 May 2020 (Matamanda et al. 2021). However, the challenges faced within the local governance and health systems created interesting manifestations in addressing the pandemic. The rapid and compelling level at which local councils gained significance in tackling COVID-19 exposed the country's low disaster risk preparedness and indicates how it could be guided into utilizing local government as a community liaison tool. These indications acted as the entry point of this study.

Methodology

Most studies on the pandemic are largely quantitative in nature (Talabis et al. 2021, Mulenga, Mulenga 2021, Zhai, Shi 2021); thus, this study followed quali-

tative research inquiry to gain insights on Lesotho's local government response and mitigation to COVID-19. The study was conducted for the period March 2020 until January 2022. Primary data was collected through unstructured interviews conducted via telephone and WhatsApp. The purposively selected key informants included Local Councillors, Town Planners and Chiefs in Qacha's Nek and Maseru, NGO representatives and a journalist. The interview questions were designed to fit virtual interviews and demanding schedules. Due to the informal nature of the interviews, detailed notes were taken, coded and analysed. Verbal consent was obtained from the key informants after the research purpose was communicated before the interviews. It was reiterated that information shared will be treated with confidentiality and anonymity and that no harm will befall them because of participating. It is necessary to uphold ethical requirements and protect the identity of the respondents (Kaiser 2009), thus no names or personal information is used in this study (Allen, Wiles 2016). However, there may be elements partiality leading to inaccurate responses or an inclination to give only positive feedback by key informants (McKenna, Main 2013). Since the sample was relatively small, it restricts comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of local government in response to emergencies. However, based on existing literature on the nature of local government in Lesotho, possible points of consideration were assessed.

A desktop study provided secondary data in the form of scholarly literature, government issued directives such as gazettes, guidelines, regulations and declarations plus media briefings for COVID-19 related legislations such as Disaster Management Act No 2 of 1997. Other sourced online resources included non-governmental organisations websites, United Nations website on Lesotho, reports, World Health Organisation (WHO) reports, National TV, newspapers and social media. The desktop study helped keep track of the different variants of the virus continuously being discovered. Keeping in mind the local COVID-19 regulations that call for social-distancing, this research method was safer, less time consuming and inexpensive (Mbunge 2020).

An inductive approach to qualitative content analysis was performed to extract unique themes that enabled interpretation and organisation of findings into useful contextual information. The following main themes emerged from data analysis; COVID-19 regulations, centralisation of power, lack of state capacity and rampant poverty among others formed part of the discussion. Data corroboration was achieved from grey literature, interviews and scholarly literature.

Conceptual Considerations

Colonialism implications for Local governance and intergovernmental relations

Stability is a luxury that the mountain kingdom has seldom enjoyed at length. Amidst the instability of the Lifaqane and Boer wars, the most notable lasting

stability came between 1868 and 1899 under the guise colonialism by the British conquerors (Ambrose 1993). However, this too became a temporal stability until Lesotho's liberation fight. Under the agreement of protectorate and subjugation, Lesotho continued to thrive through the first governor, James Henry Bowker and later in 1871, Colonel Charles Duncan Griffith. Regardless of the adoption of a foreign governance system which deviated from the traditional democracy that Moshoeshoe I already forged with his advisors, others argue that his rule was nonetheless a feudal system that enslaved the commoners under the chieftdom (Thabane 2002). The earliest measures by the British colonial regime from 1871 to 1884 was to subdue native governmental institutions and introduce direct control. The traditional monarchy evolved to parliamentary system of government, founded on popular democracy. This system was made up of King Moshoeshoe I and his brothers' descendants, thus continuing the legacy of chieftaincy. In 1872, it however denied Basotho representation in the so called 'self-governance' that the Cape was given by the British (Mofuoa 2005).

Imperialism was then effected, with every decision presented as a directive not to be questioned but to be ratified into action. The government's mandate at this time was to oversee the implementations of the queen's requests. Centralized decisions have thus since been the norm, wherein chiefs acclimatized to being vital representatives of the government to the Basotho people subject to their rule. The colonial direct rule limited capacity for local administration and district councils formulated in 1943 to maintain law, order and the collection of tax. The reconstituted Councils as per Local Government Proclamation, No. 52 of 1959 and the Basutoland National Council which replaced the Basutoland Council in 1960, could not control foreign inhabitants as they were not vested with powers to freely perform governmental functions. Colonial influence thus facilitated centralized powers and finance; resistance to the autonomy of local government to operate effectively and efficiently in resources mobilization as well heightening unrepresentative parliamentary membership. Resultantly, social conflict reached levels where commoners could no longer tolerate economic and social subjugation. Colonial reign and influence too dissipated, hence the unavoidable independence in 1966. Independence ingrained a thirst for a democratic rule which has persisted to date within Basotho (Mofuoa 2005).

Stemming from the Westminster system, Lesotho now conforms to a democratic multi-party principle where different parties compete for parliamentary seats. Currently there are 43 parties contesting for these seats. The 1993 Constitution of Lesotho determines the distribution of governmental powers among the three arms of government: the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, whilst vesting intergovernmental powers to the monarch. The government is divided into the two main spheres or levels: the central and local. The ministry of Local Government and Chieftainship (MLGCA) is the nexus of the two levels. Whilst the central government has the bulk of the powers and includes district councils as part of the upper tier, community councils are the lower tier mandated with dealing with societal needs and aspirations from the rudimentary level (Nwafor 2013) and (Pule 2002).

Among the many objectives of the local governance mandate most notable for the intent of this paper include decentralised control, just appropriation and dissemination of human, institutional, infrastructural and financial resources, plus inclusive, participatory local development nationally. Currently, though local authorities are expected to oversee inclusive, participatory grassroots service delivery and implementation of governmental plans within communities, the powers that need to be devolved are still at central level. Although there is policy paving way for decentralization, the National Decentralisation Policy 2014, local authorities are fundamentally powerless in terms of decision making and own policy implementation (Shale 2004).

Disaster preparedness, response and mitigation

The Disaster Management Act of 1997 established the Disaster Management Authority (DMA) as a public platform for lessening disaster risks. Although Lesotho has set up two contingency funds, one at the Ministry of Finance and one at the DMA, these are not sufficient for a budget cycle, hence the country is exposed when disasters strike. The current COVID-19 pandemic has engraved a deep scar on the meagre disaster fund (World Bank, 2019). To date, the local government's capacity for development and managing hazards is still limited since it lacks autonomy. Irrespective of the environment forged through varying statutes such as the Urban Government Act of 1983; Lesotho Government Order Nos. 3, 4 and 9 of 1986; Order No. 11 of 1990 which amended the 1983 Act; Development Councils Order 1991; 1992; Local Government Act 1997 and the 2004 amendment; The Public Finance Management and Accountability Act 2011, together with procurement regulations of 2007, true devolution of power has failed to reach the local level. This has detrimentally influenced local governments to put into action lasting interventions. The predicament of local governance in Lesotho is essentially rooted in, but not limited to the following challenges (Kellam III, Muwanga 2014):

- The political affiliations of local authorities derail development at the local level.
- Unwarranted political interference in local affairs denies local authorities any opportunity to do things their way.
- The lack of capacity among councilors on their roles and responsibilities. They are unable to control expenditure and to limit the accumulation of payment arrears in all councils.
- Lack of competence and expertise for officials and councilors.
- Dearth of financial resources and their management at local level has led to disinterest among local authorities to generate municipal revenue. They need full powers over local revenues to retain them and use them towards local services.

Among the many ministerial recommendations, the finance ministry has emphasized the priority of a national disaster risk finance strategy, highlighting the need to increase the contingency fund, fast-tracking disaster resource mobilization and bolstering implementation of financial support to affected households (UN Habitat 2004).

Service delivery and Resources management

Good governance strives to boost socio-economic welfare of citizens through improvements in public participation and service delivery. In Lesotho, this is undermined by the lack of decentralization which concentrates administration, finance and development capacity to central level and neglects to devolve it to the local authorities (Shale 2004). Another impediment is the clashes of roles due to overlapping functions between levels of government. Though the 1997 Act delineated roles and responsibilities of local authorities through community, urban and district councils, local service delivery is markedly assumed by the central government. Moreover, the local service delivery in Lesotho has substantially been restrained by the nature of correspondence between local authorities and central government departments ('Nyane 2016).

The state is faced with an eroded economy and diminishing resources under its control, aggravated by the competition for political office by 43 parties (Pule 2002). Despite assistance from Non-Governmental Organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Program – WFP, Lesotho struggles to respond effectively to the resource control. This is augmented by the current plight of environmental change, implicated problems of food security and intense land degradation including excessive soil erosion caused by water run-off, inappropriate agronomic practices and overgrazing; and resource mismanagement (FAO 2022). To improve efficiency, reliance on existing systems or structures is crucial for leverage on the identification and delivery of resources where and when needed. The failure to do so was evidenced when, despite the creation of COVID-19 Private Sector Relief Fund, there were still challenges in identifying and registering vulnerable small and medium enterprises – SMMEs and therefore delaying execution of the grant (Lekomola-Danziger et al. 2021).

Competence

Competency embodies performance of the government's units, organizational structure, procedures, and culture within the local government. Additionally, the personnel entrusted with governance must also be knowledgeable and capable. This was established by Lesotho's neighbour, South Africa, through its Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA), in their 2021 empirical study exploring the support required by local government authorities to improve competency in their service.

In Lesotho, the guiding legislature limits the operational capacity of the local government to only the making of by-laws which are contingent to the minister's endorsement. Thus, the general assumption is the capacity to function within their territory. However, it becomes problematic when local authority functions are assigned vaguely or generally, as this results in misinterpretation and misappropriation, thus a regression in the decentralization process. Furthermore, intergovernmental relations are strained as the central government undermines the

capacity of local authorities, who in turn can only act based on their obligation to the central government ('Nyane 2017).

Findings, Discussion and Recommendations

Manifestation of COVID-19, Strides and Milestones towards Intervention

Following directives from the World Health Organization, the state enforced a 21-day national lockdown prior to any reported positive cases in March 2020. This was done to curb any risk of the circulation of COVID-19 through movement and interaction restrictions while setting up systems to manage the pandemic (Kali 2021). Though such a possibility was already widely spread on media platforms and those in decision making power had swiftly deliberated on it beforehand, it still instilled distress within the nation as non-essential public spaces and facilities shut down. The reality of the pandemic really sank in among the locals with the first positive case recorded mid-May, from a native student studying in Saudi Arabia (Kali 2021, Matamanda et al. 2021). The capital city, Maseru, remains the hub of infection with a 50% infection rate during the 2020–2021 period. The national statistics indicated a higher prevalence in females and within the 30–35 age group, while the national death rate was 3.1% over the same period (LENA 2020(b)).

Though the Disaster Management Authority (DMA) legitimately exists to respond to urgent hazards such as COVID-19, the National Emergency Command Centre (NECC) was established for COVID-19 specific response and mitigation. The NECC was later restructured and renamed the National COVID-19 Secretariat (NACOSEC) due to asserted corruption and wasteful use of expenditure, thus failing to adequately address the pandemic. This, however, led to complaints concerning its validity as it was not guided by any legislation and had some contradictions with the requirements of the DMA Act. It also excluded several key stakeholders, such as security services and DMA. The greatest grievance of NECC and later NACOSEC remains the misappropriation of funds which is suspected to be the reason for the non-publicising of the auditor general's report, therefore raising issues of transparency and accountability (Kabi 2021).

District Emergency Operation Centres (DEOCs) were formed to ensure legal border crossings and to facilitate testing of all travellers and those identified as potential risk (LENA 2020). These District command centres received COVID-19 mitigation funding but ostensibly failed to allocate support to local councils. Local chiefs, community councillors and district authorities were entrusted with the responsibility to identify vulnerable community members in need of food support, then report to central government for possible support. However, there has been a general lack of communication between central and local government, thus in most part community councils were 'flying blind' in managing COVID-19. Community councillors are responsible for facilitation of sanitation

Table 1. 2020–2022 COVID-19 Relief in Lesotho

Type of relief	Associated cost / individual benefit (M=Maluti)	Type or number of beneficiaries	Funding institution	Support period
Vulnerable households affected by heavy rains during the pandemic	Corn and beans (Purchased from local farmers)	338 households	Disaster Management Authority (DMA)	January 2022
COVID-19 Vaccine	72 000 doses	Estimated 798 000 people	Republic of France through the COVAX facility	May, June 2021 for ongoing national inoculation
United Nations World Food Programme (UN-WFP) support of those facing food insecurity	1.5 million Euros for food aid	312 000 rural and 15 000 urban dwellers	Germany, UN-WFP	2021–2023
Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)	70 000 face masks and 2 500 litres of hand sanitizer	Distributed to health centres and villages within 10 districts	The Queen presenting to NACOSEC	May 2021
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) – Child Grant for basic needs and national identity documents during COVID-19	M1 500 per child household M2 068 per household M870 per household	50 000 vulnerable children 6 000 vulnerable households 12 741 vulnerable households	European Union and UNICEF	A period of 3 months from February 2021
60+ year olds relief	M831.00p/m and Seeds for gardening	35 000 households	Ministry of Social Development	A period of 3 months from December 2020
Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)	1 845 sterilized gloves 2 610 aprons 1 056 face shields 741 plastic gloves 708 safety boxes 222 plastic boots	Distributed in health centres nationally (10 districts)	Egypt	September 2020
National Association of the Deaf Lesotho (NADL)	Food parcels	100 beneficiaries	United Arab Emirates	June 2020
Factory Workers Relief fund	M120 609 200 comprehensive fund split into M800 per worker	Factory workers earning below M5 000	Government of Lesotho through LNDC	April–June 2020

Sources: (Government of Lesotho, 2020; LENA, 2020(a); LENA, 2020(c); LENA, 2021; Likotsi, 2022; LNDC, 2021; NECC, 2020; Velaphe, 2021(a); Velaphe, 2021(b)).

stations installation in public spaces as well as community sensitization through public meetings. Communities generally lacked compliance as they continued to attend social gatherings in large numbers, move beyond curfew times and ran their daily affairs throughout all lockdown levels as if COVID-19 did not exist.

This fostered the central government to constantly urge the district authorities, community councils and chiefs to warrant conformity and to appeal to the communities themselves as infection rates increased drastically. Moreover, this also instilled seemingly high levels of stress and worry among council officials, with many fearing that there is high infection risk connected to council work. However, there were also undertones of individual partiality, with others showing inclination to paint an optimistic picture. Thus, the politics of power became clear in that deep-rooted fear exists within local level officials and leaders to share information pertaining to national government. In this instance, many were not willing to be directly quoted in case of revealing sensitive information connected to COVID-19 management and poor coordination between central and local governments, lack of council funding and personal protective equipment (PPE).

According to the feedback, community councils are in constant lack of PPE and other resources though they are expected to closely interact with people. Moreover, there was an exclusion of majority of communities especially the remote villages in the dissemination of food aid, PPE distribution, covid-19 testing and other support. The grievance here was that instead of giving precedence ensuring widespread mitigation, the central government prioritizes political issues and corruption over the epidemic. Which was made clear with the unlawful formation of NECC and NACOSEC and these institutions' embezzlement of COVID-19 funds.

As a direct means of lowering the risk of contracting and spreading the disease, Lesotho launched the first and second batches COVID-19 vaccine containing 36 000 doses each in March 2021 and June 2021 respectively (GOL, 2021). These were distributed in a phased manner, first prioritizing the high rank leaders followed by frontline workers. Later followed the elderly, and the rest of the age groups. These were received with a combination of anticipation and skepticism due to conflicting beliefs and misinformation within communities. Currently, infection levels have dropped as the country continues to implement the vaccine rollout. COVID-19 vaccine dissemination, reception and management present another area of research in Lesotho.

Implications on local governance and implementation efficacy

The application of effective responses for a pandemic remains challenging for local governments in developing countries (Hyland-Wood et al. 2021). Despite Lesotho's 2014 national decentralization policy, adapted with the intend of devolution of powers to increase competency, division of powers is superficial and disregards the possibility of coexistence ('Nyane 2017). This inherent rigidity in decision making means innovative ideas are not easily adapted, thus the struggle to tackle pandemics. The response units formulated in Lesotho upon the arrival

of COVID-19 met the same fate. They lacked accountability, compliance with existing legislation, strategic leadership to steer the right personnel for the task units, and self-evaluation.

Therefore, Lesotho's spheres of government could do with sound and equitable recommendations for COVID-19 response and mitigation based on findings of this study. The study highlights recommendations within disaster preparedness, intergovernmental relations, service delivery, resource management and competence. The lockdown in Lesotho resulted in disruption of lives across the country, putting pressure on local governments to put measures in place that will halt the spread of the virus. It is essential to note that local governance through the application of the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and responsibility navigate effective means to mitigate COVID-19 and the appropriate response by the local government.

Clearly, the country is far advanced in terms of political decentralisation with national, district and local structures in place, what is however, lacking is the recognition of community liaison. This would ultimately require the improvement of administrative decentralisation. The response and mitigation experience of Lesotho for COVID-19 revealed the absence of avenues where a two-way communication is possible. Thus, there is a need for platforms to be created where the community can communicate their needs specifically during a pandemic. The nature and extent of decentralisation was pronounced during COVID-19 through the level of distribution assistance and support, practice of inclusivity, and prioritisation of the vulnerable. Therefore, the government is urged to refocus in terms of the implementation of its decentralisation policy. This can aid towards administrative and financial decentralisation that will ensure better management of resources leading to fair distribution of pandemic related resources and services. Effective resource management and fair distribution requires competent capacity within their structure.

There should be clear policy recommendations across the country with timely deployment of essential capacity at the local government level in order to reduce disparities in activities and responses undertaken. More autonomy should be granted to local governments to bolster the formulation and implementation of COVID-19 related response. This will maximise the government's efforts towards administrative and financial decentralisation, bringing them on par with the existing political decentralisation, to fast track the delivery of service. The implementation of mitigation measures and responses during a crisis should be accompanied by penalties that are strictly enforced to all citizens. It will be meaningless if some adhere to the measures and others do not. For the purpose of maintained control of the spread of COVID-19 despite set regulations and measures close collaboration with the police force is necessary for guaranteed adherence by the citizens.

Similar to many countries especially in the Global South, Lesotho did not consider the positive contribution that will come in mitigating COVID-19 by maintaining a registry of migrants between cities, towns and rural areas. Thus, for the purpose of better response to COVID-19 and other similar pandemics, it is recommended that each local authority must keep a migration registry to trail and

control the spread. Fundamentally, local government should conduct surveys in their area of jurisdiction to identify persons in need of support during the pandemic considering the closure of all economic activities. The closure of most if not all economic activities because of the COVID-19 pandemic left many businessowners and workers paralysed and without any form of income. Those affected could benefit from relief measures put in place through effective financial decentralisation.

For Lesotho's local governments to reach a healthy, sustainable, and adequate level of disease and/or pandemic preparedness, the national government should increase government support towards all aspects of decentralisation. Local government policies based on social security and control should inform national government protocols, directives, and regulations during COVID-19 to exacerbate the response rate. This will reduce the waiting period for the transfer of implementation measures from national to local government. These set of governance recommendations show how important governance is in response to and mitigation of COVID-19 from the side of local government.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how traditions and power have influenced Lesotho's response to COVID-19. Although de jure decentralised local government exists, in practice much control is still exercised by the national government. The concentration of authority and resources at the centre – far removed from the lives and needs of citizens in remote villages – meant that the prevention and mitigation of COVID-19 was impaired. Local governance structures who could directly interface with communities were not capacitated to provide the information, support and aid that was needed. Several recommendations have been made to improve this situation and assist local governments become more effective. More research is required on the development of democratic local government under Lesotho's unique combination of traditional and representative government.

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Lokalne zarządzanie pandemią COVID-19: wnioski z reakcji i łagodzenia skutków w Lesotho

Zarys treści: Pandemie są uważane za nieprzewidywalne wydarzenia w historii. Zagadnienia ich kontroli i oddziaływania mają wymiar gospodarczy, społeczny, geopolityczny i ideologiczny. W niniejszym artykule podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, w jaki sposób Lesotho zareagowało na pandemię COVID-19, jakie czynniki utrudniały wdrożenie reakcji na pandemię i łagodzenie jej skutków na poziomie lokalnym oraz w jaki sposób można poprawić przygotowanie władz lokalnych na wypadek naturalnych katastrof. W celu analizy tych zagadnień przeprowadzono badanie typu desk research wsparte wirtualnymi konsultacjami z zainteresowanymi podmiotami. Analiza wykazała brak decentralizacji administracyjnej i finansowej w Lesotho, co miało szkodliwe konsekwencje dla reakcji na COVID-19 i łagodzenia skutków pandemii.

Słowa kluczowe: Lesotho, COVID-19, kolonializm, samorząd lokalny, reakcja, łagodzenie