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PDBAR 080April 1982 evaluation  
by Bob Learmonth

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1. INTRODUCTION

The USAID grant to Planning Assistance, Incorporated (PAI) of New York, USA, has provided technical support in the establishment and development of a national food and nutrition planning system within the Government of Lesotho since 1976. Except for periods between grant extension authorizations or brief periods between the terms of resident advisors, that assistance has been relatively unbroken since the 1st Lesotho National Food and Nutrition Planning Conference held at Roma in 1975.

A requirements of the PAI grant has been to conduct regular in-house evaluations of the program. This report presents the findings of such an evaluation done from 22 April to 5 May, 1982 by Robert Learmonth, who was the Planning Assistance resident advisor to the Food and Nutrition Coordinating Office (FNCO) from 1978, when the FNCO first assumed operation, until 1980.

Since the author of this report is a former advisor to the FNCO, and since the purpose of an in-house evaluation is to provide what it is hoped are useful insights to assist the FNCO, no attempt has been made to claim objectivity in the comments contained in this report. This discussion is based on a series of collaborative meetings held during the field visit with all the FNCO staff, supplemented by individual discussion with the staff and the current PAI advisor, Robert Nothstein, and additional subjective comments by the author.

Finally, no attempt has been made in this evaluation to evaluate the activities of the PAI grant, as distinct from the activities of the FNCO. From the beginnings of the FNCO operations, the PAI advisor has been considered as an inseparable part of the total FNCO programme.

The report is separated into five sections, the first being the introduction. The second section discusses the structure of the FNCO and the Lesotho Food and Nutrition Council(LFNC); the third section discusses the planning methodology used by the FNCO; the fourth provides comments on the administration of the FNCO; and a fifth section presents a brief conclusion.

## 2. Structure of the FNCO

An important contribution to the success of the FNCO has been its structural positioning within the Government of Lesotho. As early as the 1st National Food and Nutrition Conference in 1975, it was recognized as important that the FNCO be bureaucratically located within the Prime Minister's Office. Such positioning of the FNCO would, first, demonstrate the importance with which the government views food and nutrition coordination and policy development. But it also was intended to provide the FNCO with executive-level authority conferred by the Prime Minister himself. During the first two years of its operations, the Director of the FNCO reported directly to the Senior Permanent Secretary and had frequent and direct access to the Minister to the Prime Minister and other Cabinet Ministers.

The basis for this bureaucratic configuration was, and is, that the FNCO is the secretariate of the Lesotho Food and Nutrition Council(LFNC), which is a rather loosely defined organization comprised of all the ministries and organizations in Lesotho which work directly or indirectly with food and nutrition activities. The LFNC is guided by a Cabinet Sub-Committee consisting of the ministers of Health, Education, Agriculture, Cooperatives and Rural Development, and Commerce and Industry, which was added later at the request of the Minister of Commerce and Industry. The subcommittee is chaired by the Minister to the Prime Minister. The FNCO, in theory, can serve the interests of all of the organizations which make up the LFNC, while deriving the authority needed to actually

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coordinate food and nutrition activities in Lesotho from the Cabinet Sub-Committee through the Minister to the Prime Minister and the Senior Permanent Secretary.

While this organizational configuration still seems the ideal, there have been changes within the government that have had an adverse effect on the ability of the FNCO to fulfill its responsibilities.

## 2.1 Structural Problems

The most major change in the government effecting the FNCO was the creation, in 1980, of the new post of Permanent Secretary for Cabinet. The creation of the PS position in Cabinet effectively diluted the accessibility of the FNCO to the Senior Permanent Secretary and the Minister to the Prime Minister. The FNCO therefore has begun to assume more of the administrative characteristics of a peer ministry, with its Director reporting to a Permanent Secretary with executive and bureaucratic authority over it.

Another development that must certainly have an effect on the FNCO has been the elevation of the Central Planning and Development Office (CPDO), formerly within the Ministry of Finance, to a position within the Prime Minister's Office. CPDO, however, has its own Permanent Secretary, who presumably has direct access to the Senior Permanent Secretary.

Although the administrative changes that will result from the shift of CPDO to Cabinet are still unfolding, it is clear that the government intends to increase the stature of CPDO, and consolidate the planning functions of government within the Prime Minister's Office. To the extent that this has the effect of making the FNCO and CPDO (competitors in) the efforts to coordinate food and nutrition planning, this apparently minor change could have substantial effects on the influence of the FNCC within both Cabinet and the Ministries.

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The staff of the FNCO also indicate other recurring problems (which may relate to problems in the structure of the FNCO) which in term may be causing a diminution of influence of the FNCO within the ministries. Among the most basic of these problems, and the ones that seem to have the most effect on FNCO effectiveness and staff are:

1. not enough staff.
2. low grade ratings for current staff positions.
3. inability to get sufficient training posts, and
4. lack of staff qualified in technical areas such as research methodology, statistics and agricultural economics.

These complaints may in fact be the symptoms of a larger and more serious problem: the decline in influence of the FNCO with a commensurate reduction in government willingness to support the organization with higher level posts and more opportunities for participation in overseas training programs. This tends to reduce the attractiveness of FNCO as a career post among recent graduates with more specialized training. Graduates understandably want to acquire a post which has a reasonable entry grade, potential for additional training and career development.

If true, this suggests that the FNCO is not seen as sufficiently important by those whose support is essential for its continued vitality and growth. Although this may also present a considerably more pessimistic picture than is actually warranted.

In the years of its operation, the FNCO has relied upon the support and encouragement of a few high officials in the Cabinet and the Ministries. These officials generally understood the mission of the FNCO and were instrumental in planning its creation and development. One of the problems that the FNCO currently seems to face, however, is that many of the government officials who had been strong supporters of the programme have either

retired, changed jobs or left the government. The relevant officials with whom the FNCO now works do not seem to understand the mission of the FNCO very well, nor appreciate its need within Lesotho.

There are many possible reasons why decision-makers commonly do not understand the phenomenon of malnutrition and the need for developing a food and nutrition planning programme. Although these are by no means unique to Lesotho, it is likely that some or all of these issues are operative here, and are contributions to an insufficient level of support for the programme.

- (a) Malnutrition is an "invisible" disease. Generally, unless the level of malnutrition is so severe that people, particularly children, show the signs of kwashiorkor, undernutrition is difficult to recognize. Even trained medical people often apply deductive indicators of the disease (for example, if there has been drought, there must be malnutrition).
- (b) People who are malnourished generally have little access to the political process. They are the poorest in society, the least educated and informed. They represent no combined constituency or advocacy group such as the miners, farmers, or students do. Hence, they usually cannot or do not petition their representatives for services.
- (c) Politicians frequently do not want to recognize that conditions could be bad enough to result in malnutrition.
- (d) Because many people are relatively uninformed about nutrition, they are inclined to equate nutrition activities with home economics or dietetics. They often dismiss the subject as order the concern of women, while overall development policy decisions are taken by men.

The apparent lack of understanding and support on the part of key decision makers can also be seen among the programme managers in the ministries, Ministry officials do not seem to understand the LFNC. The Permanent Secretaries do not appoint senior representatives to the FNCO Advisory Group, so attendance at Advisory group meetings is spotty, signifying a lack of commitment on the part of both the ministries as well as the Advisory Group members whose job it is to represent their ministries.

## 2.2 Suggestions

There are some areas where substantial benefits can be realized in acquiring support for the nutrition program and for the FNCO. The most obvious of these is that the decision makers must be trained to become better informed about the issues of malnutrition, nutrition planning and the relationship between nutrition objectives and other development priorities. Although it is probably true that everyone in government could benefit from a better understanding of what a national nutrition program should be, it is especially important to "educate" the Permanent Secretaries, the SPS and DSPS, and the ministers. It is at this level that decisions are taken which must effect the functioning of the FNCO.

The FNCO should also try to reestablish the same kind of support among key decisionmakers that it lost due to retirements, transfers and the like. Since high government posts are frequently changed, this activity should probably be a continuous part of the FNCO's <sup>AN</sup> plan of work. It is particularly important to acquire access to the Cabinet, either through the Permanent Secretary for Cabinet, or preferably by reestablishing access directly to the Senior Permanent Secretary.

The Central Planning and Development Office should have stronger ties to the FNCO. Particularly now that CPDO is a Cabinet Office, there is a danger that CPDO will manage the major food and nutrition programmes, particularly on the food production side, and leave the smaller programmes with less potential impact to FNCO.

Related to this last point, FNCO should begin to coordinate some of the more major food and nutrition programs, such as BASP and Food Aid. With the recent encouragement of USAID, FNCO now has a good opportunity to assist in rationalising the food aid programme, which is by anyone's definition a problem. The assistance provided with respect to these programme could considerably enhance the prestige of the FNCO among the ministry officials whose support is necessary for developing a good national programme.

The coordination work done by the FNCO since its formation has been a successful but time-consuming effort. Because this work has been in demand from the ministries and NGOs, there has been a tendency for the FNCO to work with every one or two individuals in each organization. That is not surprising, since it would require additional staff, time to train others in the ministries in the FNCO planning methodology, and staff time has always been a precious commodity.

The problem in only working with a few knowledgeable people in each ministry is that when they leave their jobs or are transferred, the ongoing work with that ministry suffers. An increased use of collaborative planning by the FNCO in their coordinative meetings, and additional training sessions in the ministries can help broaden the base of planning expertise in the ministries, and might make the FNCO's work easier in the long term.

One would hope that the desired effect of FNCO's development of a well informed constituency among other government units and ministries will be a greater appreciation for what the FNCO has and is doing, with a resultant increase in posts, more training opportunities and an enhanced ability to attract new graduates in technical skill areas. In the interim, however, the FNCO can acquire additional needed technical skills, such as in research, through the Advisory Group, by requesting a volunteer through the Peace Corps or UN, or by trying to recruit a volunteer from among the community.

The FNCO may want to initiate an alternative organization to the LFNC, which seems to be commonly misunderstood. The structure of the LFNC, since it has been formally instituted by the Cabinet and the Prime Minister, cannot be changed without a considerable amount of red tape. But it is perhaps feasible to establish task forces on food and nutrition issues that are made up of representatives of the ministries, and possibly chaired by FNCO Advisory Group members. Such an arrangement might be more readily managed by the FNCO, and be less prone to misunderstanding by the ministries

Finally, a potential way to rekindle support for the development of a national nutrition programme, and also help establish the renewed importance of the FNCO is to hold the Third National Food and Nutrition Planning Conference. If the conference is well prepared and carried out, it will provide a good opportunity to bring forward the importance of nutrition within the overall development agenda, and will help to create the constituency that the FNCO needs among government programme planners and managers. The conference should not be rushed into, but should be held as soon as is feasible.

3. Methodology of the FNCO

The planning methodology of the FNCO is based upon three central, fairly well known techniques: collaborative planning, management by objectives (MBO) and the multi-sectoral approach to nutrition planning. Collaborative planning is simply planning a project by consensus. Within the context of the FNCO's coordinative work, collaborative planning is done in a <sup>series of</sup> meeting<sup>s</sup> where all of the people whose involvement is necessary to the success of the effort are participants using a simplified MBO format, projects are collaboratively planned with measurable objectives, specific tasks that must be accomplished relating to the objectives, a work<sup>plan</sup> showing when the tasks will be completed and by whom, and a plan for monitoring and evaluation. Because these projects are often an ongoing part of a ministries recurrent budget plan, a budget is sometimes not required, but is usually written as well.

The third central methodological technique employs the multi-sectoral approach to nutrition planning. The most basic feature of the multi-sectoral approach is a recognition that the causes of malnutrition are the <sup>on</sup>interventions of a network of social and economic factors that cause deprivation, the principal symptom of which is malnutrition. Adopting such a perspective on the problem of malnutrition implies that the malnutrition will not decline unless something is done to connect the social and economic inequities that are presumed to have caused it. One is therefore committed to not only treat the malnutrition in a curative program once it has been identified, but one is also committed to bringing all of the sectors together to plan efforts designed to eliminate the interlocking source of the deprivation.

As a planning methodology, the employment of these three techniques offers the FNCO with a fairly wide spectrum of possible interventions in projects. Ideally, the FNCO staff attempts to be involved at the beginning stages of project design, where decisions regarding project targets and priorities can be influenced by considering where the project is most needed in terms of the nutritional status of the population. It is most desirable to place projects first in areas where the malnutrition is the worst. At the minimum, the FNCO tries to establish nutritional objectives for projects, so that the project planners and operators are aware of the nutritional consequences of activities that they may already be doing. At some later time, then, additional modifications can be made to a project, or new interventions may be developed to help maximize the projects' impact on nutritional status.

The FNCO also encourages ministries and NGO's to develop projects in areas where an analysis by the FNCO shows an unusually high proportion of "at risk" people in the population.

As a part of this planning, or replanning process, the FNCO attempts to coordinate all of the nutrition related work so that duplicative efforts are minimized and neglected areas considered. This coordinative effort is culminated in a national planning conference, intended to examine the national nutrition programme as a whole, identifying where additional work is necessary, coordinating existing resources against need, and planning how shortfalls will be met and projected gaps filled.

### 3.1 Methodological Problems

As a basic activity enabling the FNCO to have an impact on the development of a national nutrition programme, the FNCO staff members chair coordinative meetings with ministries and organizations for the

purpose of reducing duplication, keeping the project "on track" in terms of its objectives, and monitoring project performance. The problem that has developed in this regard is that the FNCO is now actively coordinating nearly 90 separate projects. Its staff has little time to even consider other elements of developing a national plan, such as policy formulation and developing relevant research to assist in planning new efforts. In many ways, the FNCO has become a victim of its own success - the FNCO staff energetically seeks out promising projects that can contribute to the national nutrition programme, while committing the FNCO to still more coordinative meetings. At the same time, the ministries are only too happy to allow the FNCO to assume an increasing share of the workload for running the projects. The ministries then begin to use the FNCO as an extension of their own staff.

The problem here seems to be in determining when the FNCO should pull back and assume only an advisory role in the operation of a project. The intent behind the coordinative part of the FNCO plan has always been to provide assistance in planning and managing projects without getting pulled into actual project operations. The difficulty, however, lies in determining the right balance between providing technical assistance and providing additional free staff to help run the project. With a coordination list of about 90 projects, the FNCO can ill afford to take on any new responsibilities. It should be noted here that in the use of many, perhaps even most, of the projects being coordinated by the FNCO, the ministry or NGO came to the FNCO seeking help. Although the tremendous workload that had developed through this coordinative function has become a problem, it is nonetheless also a testimony to the hard work and competence of the staff that their assistance is so often requested.

In spite of the heavy workload of coordinative meetings, the FNCO staff finds it difficult to follow up on projects that the FNCO has helped to plan. This has caused an increasing sense of frustration among the staff, who see the apparent contradiction of a planning organization which has little time available to monitor and evaluate the projects that they plan.

A problem that relates to both the structure of the FNCO and the methodology used by FNCO is the fact that there are institutional barriers which seem to prevent the FNCO from working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The development of these barriers goes back to the establishment of the FNCO and its advisory group. It was thought then that the FNCO should work principally through the ministries, where the available staff resources and planning capability were weak, while the NGOs would participate only through their ministry, where there was a formed arrangement spelled out in their terms of reference. In all other regards, the NGO community would be unrepresented by CPDO.

In retrospect, the exclusion of the NGOs in a more direct way seems to have not been a wise choice. The NGOs, it is now recognized, represent a unique resource for both the FNCO and the ministries involved in food and nutrition work. An appropriate role for FNCO can be the establishment of more effective linkages between the NGOs and the operational programmes of the ministries. This role has in fact been accomplished on at least several informal occasions (e.g. the reconciliation between Catholic Relief Services and the Ministry of Health on the nutritional surveillance system, and the linkage between Lesotho Planned Parenthood Association and the Programme for Better Family Living).

### 3.2 Suggestions

The problems associated with both the overcommitment of staff to technical assistance and the concomitant inability to monitor project performance could be greatly

reduced through the design and installation of an information system. If the FNCO has an active project list of 90 separate projects, each with an average of 10 tasks which must be monitored (which would represent a rather small project many have over 20 tasks which should be monitored), there would then be 900 tasks that the FNCO should keep track of. If monitoring is only done quarterly, that means that, over the year, the FNCO staff must monitor 3,600 project milestones. If these are converted into staff person-hours, the time requirement becomes a virtual impossibility given efficient staff levels.

The answer is to either reduce the level of monitoring that is done, or computerize the information system so that only updates are entered into the system.

The use of a computer offers several advantages which make it more attractive than a manual system. The most obvious is that a computerized system can be expanded almost infinitely and is less demanding in staff time than a manual version would be. In addition a computerized information system can be programmed to produce periodic reports in several copies: one to be sent back to the project managers and one to be kept for monitoring purposes by the FNCO. The ministries would thus be provided with a useful management tool while fulfilling the monitoring requirements of the FNCO.

Whatever the information system does, however, it should be designed so that it can enable the FNCO to more selectively establish intervention points in the project operations.

The FNCO staff has already recognized the importance of establishing linkages to the NGOs, both the Lesotho organisations such as LPPA and NUL, and the international organizations. It can be assured that these relationships will continue to develop over time.

4. Administration of the FNCO

Administratively, the FNCO does a good job of practising what it preaches. There is a well planned yearly work schedule which directly reflects the goals and objectives of the organization. Regular staff meetings are held to assign tasks directly from the work plan as well as those arising from ad hoc coordinative meetings. Staff training is a regular and ongoing part of the office routine. The result of using collaborative planning and management by objectives, the staff members all know their own responsibilities very well, and are well informed about what their colleagues are involved in. Responsibility is well distributed, and is accepted by individual staff members without reluctance.

The staff is also in <sup>remarkably</sup> ~~reversibly~~ closed agreement on both the central mission of the FNCO, and its strengths and weaknesses. Five of the six staff members questioned identified the same goal as being the highest priority for the FNCO.

The Planning Assistance Project Advisor seems to fit well into the administrative operation of the FNCO, and is seen by the staff and the people with whom the FNCO works as a valuable resource.

4.1 Administrative Problems

An evaluator might be hard pressed to identify administrative problems that are not the result of other issues discussed in previous sections. There is, for example, a problem in attracting new graduates with specialized training. The probable reason for this is the low entry grade allocated to the FNCO on the Establishment List and the limited opportunities for advancement and further training. Not surprisingly, there is a morale problem that arises occasionally, usually coinciding with the growing frustration of junior staff as they see better opportunities elsewhere.

The other staff members, who have been at their posts longer, express continuing frustration at being unable to acquire new posts and upgrade the current ones.

In the clerical positions, there is frustration caused by the unevenness of the clerical workload. Typically, the typing and filing requirements arrive on the desks of the clerical staff in large heaps, with very slack periods in between.

#### 4.2 Suggestions

Apart from the comments made in other sections of this report, there is little that can be done to encourage the government to provide for additional posts, more training and to upgrade the existing posts. As a better informed nutrition constituency is developed within the government, the current situation may be remedied.

There are, however, a few measures which might be instituted that can help even out the workload of the junior professional and the clerical staff. These include the development of career ladders and the institution of in-house training to encourage the development of additional staff skills.

The areas that might be considered in developing a career ladders scheme are the information system operation and the resource centre. Both of these components of the FNCO functions can be adapted to provide entry-level and upgraded skills for junior and clerical staff.

#### 5. Conclusion

There is little argument from all the people who regularly work with the FNCO that it is an effective, competent organization. The problems that are identified in this report are ones that for the while, it is easy in

an evaluation to focus on the problems that the organization has, one should not lose sight of the substantial achievements of the organization. Many ministry units and NGOs come to the FNCO with coordination problems and when they cannot seem to organize their projects. They know that the FNCO staff will fulfill their commitment to assist, and will follow through to the satisfactory conclusion of the effort.

< The FNCO has also provided useful information to a number of organizations that have requested it, as well as to those who may not have requested information to the government regarding the 1981 drought and helped get decision taken on relief efforts much sooner than would have been the case if they had not intervened. FNCO staff went into the field on a stating survey to assess the severity of the drought. Although the ministers were aware that there was a problem, the magnitude was not known, nor was there a relief plan until the FNCO intervened.

✓ It has been noted in this report that the FNCO has occasional problems acquiring monitoring information from the ministries on the operations of their projects. The situation now, however, is much better than it was several years ago, ministries do seem to see the importance of reporting progress, even though the system could be substantially improved.