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Africa's Gift

Assessment of the impact of cook bags on users' everyday life

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1. Summary

The report, conducted by the Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice in collaboration with Africa's Gift Charity, investigates the impact of insulated cook bags on the daily lives of users in Lesotho. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 25 individuals in the Malealea valley, Lesotho, who had experience with Wonderbags, Eco Cook bags, or polystyrene bags. The research aimed to assess the practicality and efficiency of cook bags and their potential to address various difficulties faced by the Basotho community, including health risks associated with traditional cooking methods and poverty.

Lesotho, known as the Mountain Kingdom, faces multiple challenges, including high rates of HIV infections, Gender-Based Violence, and economic vulnerability. For the main part, Basotho women are responsible for cooking and resource collection, exposing them to health risks and, because the tasks associated with food preparation are so time-consuming, hindering their socio-economic prospects.

The report details the evolution of cook bags, including Wonderbags, polystyrene-filled bags, and the Eco Cook Bag. The cook bags have proven to be effective in reducing cooking time while preserving nutrients, resource consumption, and waste. The Eco Cook Bag stands out for its biodegradability and positive social impact, as it is locally produced, creating employment opportunities and utilizing locally-sourced waste materials for insulation.

The report emphasizes that cooking without cook bags is energy- and resource-intensive and time-consuming, and a health hazard due to smoke exposure when relying on open fires or wood stoves. Women are primarily responsible for these tasks, which often involve collecting firewood and water, activities that may increase their vulnerability to gender-based violence.

Interviewees' responses suggest that cooking with a cook bag has a positive impact on users' daily lives. It reduces cooking time, resource consumption, and food waste. Women, in particular, benefit from increased time for other activities, both paid and unpaid. Users reported improved health due to reduced smoke exposure. Because babies are traditionally carried on women's backs as they undertake household tasks, these health benefits also extend to infants.

The report highlights the economic advantages of cook bags, particularly for households using gas as their primary cooking source. Using a cook bag reduces costs and provides families with additional financial flexibility. Participants expressed an interest in learning more about cook bags and expanding their use to various recipes. The use of cook bags also has the potential to alter the way people think about food and cooking, providing a more relaxed and convenient approach to meal preparation.

The report concludes by underlining the need to adapt cook bags to meet the evolving needs and preferences of the Basotho community. The interviewees suggested, among other things, the production of different sizes of cook bags and ensuring that the bags are

washable. The team has committed to developing their collaboration and involving other stakeholders in the production, distribution, and awareness-raising of cook bags.

2. Methodology

Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice in collaboration with Africa's Gift Charity conducted research into the impact of cook bags on the daily life of their users during an academic staff-led trip to Lesotho in June and July 2023. The interview schedule was divided into four themes: cooking before the introduction of cook bags, cooking with cook bags, resources required for cooking, and questions related to lifestyle. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility for both interviewers and participants. Interviews were conducted with 25 people living in the Malealea valley who had used Wonderbags, Eco-Cook bags, or polystyrene bags.

Given the diversity of languages spoken within the Malealea valley and recognizing the potential language barriers that some participants might encounter when trying to comprehend certain questions, the research team enlisted the invaluable assistance in translation of Malealea Development Trust personnel.

3. Lesotho – the Mountain Kingdom

Lesotho is a landlocked country surrounded by South Africa, with over 80% of the country being at an elevation of 1,800 metres above sea level. Despite its natural beauty, Lesotho faces a number of issues, starting with one of the highest rates of HIV infections in Sub-Saharan Africa and an overwhelming prevalence of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) (Riches, C., & Palmowski, J, 2021; Russell, 2023). According to a joint report by the World Bank and the Lesotho Bureau of Statistics, which classifies Lesotho as one of the poorest countries in the world, "economic vulnerability is high, with more than 75 percent of the population either poor or vulnerable to poverty" (The World Bank and Lesotho Bureau of Statistics, 2019, p. 10).

GBV is a serious issue across Lesotho, with more than 86% of Basotho women having experienced violence at some point in their lives (Russell, 2023). Patriarchal social norms make women second-class citizens, which drives an increase in economic inequality, limited access to education, and unemployment. Women and children bear the main burden of cooking, generally over an open fire, which exposes them to the harmful effects of smoke and pollution (WHO, 2022). Moreover, gathering fuel, water, and resources is an activity mainly undertaken by women and children, which not only limits their time for other activities such as paid work and education but also puts them at risk of sexual violence and assault when they need to travel long distances, often alone, to collect resources.

The research team undertook this study to understand the impact of using cook bags on daily life and to identify ways in which cook bags could be improved to better meet the needs of the users. By investigating the practicality and efficiency of cook bags, we aim to provide insights into how this innovative cooking solution can help address some of the challenges Lesotho is confronting, such as Gender-Based Violence and the health risks associated with traditional cooking methods.

4. Retention cook bags – Wonderbags, Eco Cook bags and polystyrene bags

The issue of smoke inhalation in rural Africa was first starkly observed by personnel from Africa's Gift in Lesotho in 2000. This observation prompted the establishment of a north-south connection between South Yorkshire (United Kingdom) and the Malealea community (Lesotho). In 2002, the Malealea Development Trust was formed, culminating in the inaugural partnership visit in 2003 ([Africa's Gift](#), n.d.). During this interaction, educators, accompanied by a doctor and nurse, engaged in extensive dialogue with local community health practitioners, with smoke inhalation emerging as a prominent concern. The community nurse conveyed that smoke inhalation posed a grave threat to the elderly, contributed to underweight and premature births and affected infant health, and led to respiratory problems and impaired eyesight among the local populace. According to WHO 2.4 billion people around the world continue cooking over open fire which causes grave health issues as lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or stroke and impacts premature death of 3.2 million people each year from those illnesses. ([WHO](#), 2022). Interview respondents also reported a high degree of food wastage through burning, because it is difficult to manage the cooking process over an open fire. Food nutrients are lost each time a cook has to open a pot to check cooking progress or add water to the pot.

Addressing the issue of smoke became a focal point of collective learning for Mantopi Lebofa, Director of Technologies for Economic Development, in Maseru and Ken Dunn, Director of Africa's Gift, in Yorkshire, who joined forces to drive change, with a particular emphasis on clean burn technologies. This effort culminated in trials and the subsequent rollout of UN-funded Eco Zoom Rocket Stoves. However, the adoption of these stoves was uneven across communities.

During this journey, a breakthrough emerged in the form of a heat retention cook bag crafted from polystyrene balls by Mme Itumeleng Kosie from Teyateyaneng (TY). The trial use of this innovative bag yielded successful results, despite its initial costliness. In response,



Yorkshire redirected financial resources away from stoves and toward the production of cook bags. In 2007-08, it came to light that bags of similar nature were being produced at scale in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). Subsequently, Sarah Collins, Founder and CEO at Wonderbag, was approached to procure these foam-filled bags, known as Wonderbags, at a reduced price for distribution in Lesotho and other southern African communities. ([Wonderbag](#), n.d.).

To facilitate this collaboration, a UK charity was established, initially named Khokayana – Phiri but later renamed Africa's Gift, with HRH Prince Seeiso as its Patron. Hundreds of Wonderbags were acquired and introduced into communities surrounding Malealea. Valuable feedback was shared on how to enhance these bags, and concerns about microplastic pollution related to polystyrene- and foam-filled bags prompted an evolution and the all-natural, 100% biodegradable Eco Cook Bag was established ([Eternal Flame Worldwide](#), n.d.).

All three types of bags - the Wonderbag, the polystyrene-filled bag, and the Eco Cook Bag - have demonstrated outstanding performance and have been instrumental in transforming lives. However, the distinguishing feature of the Eco Cook Bag lies in its ability to be composted at the end of its life cycle, eliminating the need for disposal. Moreover, based on anecdotal input from the interviewees using more than one type of bag, it seems that the Eco Cook Bag's insulation allows for the temperature inside the bag to be maintained for a longer period compared to foam- and polystyrene-filled bags.

Another noteworthy facet of the Eco Cook Bag is the social enterprise behind it, which operates on a circular economy model that embraces the principles of shared wealth. Those involved in its production stand to benefit from its sales, thereby fostering economic empowerment. Furthermore, the bag is manufactured locally, contributing to employment opportunities, and employs locally-sourced waste materials for insulation.

Surveys conducted as part of this initiative may refer to Wonderbags, polystyrene bags or Eco Cook Bags.



5. Cook bags and their impact

5.1. Cooking without a cook bag

Answers to questions about life before cook bags were introduced into the daily routines of the interviewees provide a valuable insight into culturally and traditionally rooted cooking practices of the Basotho people as well as resource consumption, health concerns and economic implications. The team asked about the typical day of cooking without a cook bag and participants noted the substantial consumption of resources such as wood, gas, water and mainly, time.

Participant 11

I have to collect the wood far away from home, that takes me 2 hours, to go and return back to the house. Then when I reach home, I have to go to the tap and cook. You see, you understand? I'm now using three hours fully before the food is ready [...] after that I have to make a fire, that leaves my eyes sometimes crying without being hurt because of that smoke.

Participant 15

It was difficult, because I had to go collect some water so, we used a lot of water when we were cooking the beans you know because, it would cost more fuel, more time, cost more water.

For instance if I go to fetch the water to cook the beans [...] I would use the bucket of 20 litres [...] I would use up to 10 litres if I'm cooking like 10kg, no, 2 kg of beans. [...] Yeah so, it says I would spend some hours cooking, I would spend some water, I would spend more wood. You can imagine if you're cooking for 4 hours how much wood...

In most households, the responsibility for cooking and resource collection primarily falls on a single person who may occasionally receive assistance from children or grandchildren, as indicated by the interview responses. The majority of this labour falls to women, especially in households headed by women.

Participant 11

No, I'm doing this on my own because I am a single mum. So sometimes I find that I left my kids with my neighbours so that I can walk far away to collect the wood.

One of the commonest methods of cooking involves using an open fire fuelled by wood, although for those with greater financial resources there are other options, such as cooking



on a gas stove. Cooking entails more than just spending extended periods over the fire or stove; it also necessitates resource gathering, particularly when preparing meals over an open fire, which involves collecting wood and water beforehand.

Participant 7

She said it [collecting wood] takes 30 minutes to go there and come back and start chopping wood from there. Then she said, no it takes actually more (longer) than that.

Participant 25

I think before we had the cook bag, everything takes a long time because I want to cook pap [maize porridge]. Yeah, I have to get the wood, I boil some water and I have to stand there and make sure that the wood under the fire keeps burning till I'm done with the pap even for everything like I want to cook everything takes a long time, takes a long time.

In addition, the interviewees expressed concerns about their health as a result of prolonged exposure to smoke emanating from open fires. These health issues encompass a range of symptoms, including but not limited to eye irritation, coughing, and headaches. It is noteworthy that during the winter months, many Basotho resort to cooking indoors over open fires, which greatly increases their smoke exposure.

Participant 7

She says that the smoke from the fire that she made, caused her many problems because she inhaled the smoke and then it caused her to cough a lot. And then, the smoke will also irritate her eyes when she was going to sleep then she will hardly close her eyes because they will be full of smoke, they will be itchy.

Her concern was mainly about the child [...] because she would be making fire and the smoke would be irritating the baby's eyes. So, the baby's eyes were getting sore or irritated and that was her biggest concern.

Participant 24

She says that she, there is different kinds of materials to cook with, this could be dried cow dung, the other one could be wood but then the smoke from those things that she would be burning would sometimes, as she inhaled the smoke they cause her headache or even make her cough.

Some of the interviewees mentioned that they had not associated their poor health with smoke exposure until they introduced cook bags into their routines.



Participant 1

So, she said she didn't know that when using smoke, the smoke was harmful. But after using this (the cook bag), the headache, the breathlessness that she suffered from whilst in the smoke, is less. She said that she didn't know that the smoke was harmful but now she has learned.

Primarily, it is the responsibility of women to ensure the preparation of food, a task that consumes a considerable portion of their day, particularly when overseeing the cooking process over an open fire for extended hours. The interviewees frequently mentioned the extensive preparation and cooking times required for popular and affordable foods such as beans, samp (made from maize groats), or pap (a type of maize meal porridge).

In the latter part of the interviews, it becomes apparent that the introduction of cooking bags not only streamlines daily routines but also has broader implications for gender roles and socio-economic dynamics within the Basotho community.

5.2. Cooking with a cook bag

The interview participants use their bags either daily or occasionally, but everyone unanimously agrees that Wonderbags and eco-cook bags have a positive impact on their daily lives. This includes reduced time spent on cooking, decreased resource consumption, minimized food waste, and the convenience of keeping hot water in the cook bag overnight, eliminating the need to boil it again early in the morning.

The team asked participants to describe what the bag does for them, and they received a variety of answers:

Participant 7

She's no longer working very hard now that she has the cook bag, she is now using the cook bag to cook pap and even whatever it is she wants to eat pap with. And that saves her time and then makes her feel kind of relieved from other duties.

Participant 11

Now I'm using a cook bag and I can say that my life is very simple because I have to collect less wood and it lasts me a few days. Yeah, you will find that I cook little and with the wood, then I took my hot whatever I'm making and put it inside the cook bag. I'm not using any wood, I would rather take my cook bag, then put my pot in, then do other jobs like I have a keyhole [garden] at home. You will find that for the 30 minutes or 45 minutes that I'm putting my pap inside the cook bag, I'm



still on the keyhole to sow, to water my garden. Yeah, it took less. If I say, if it took, it takes me an hour to kind of prepare the food I'm cooking with the cook bag. So, you see, before it was 4 hours, now I take only 1 hour, or less, 45 minutes.

Participant 25

Everything is easy. Because like now if I know that maybe tomorrow, I want to do some beans I just put them in the wonder bag. When you go to bed in the morning they're done. Just to mix and add some salt and mix some spices, well done.

Participant 17

Since she has got the bag, it has brought a lot of difference because she's able to do some other stuff while she's cooking the cook bag and she doesn't experience any problems like smoke.

A day of cooking differs significantly with and without a cook bag. The main difference lies in the amount of time spent supervising a pot over the fire, adding wood and water, and reducing the quantity of resources required for cooking.

Although the positive impact of the cook bags on the community members is undeniable, some people who have owned these bags for an extended period do not fully utilize their potential. One of the primary reasons is adherence to traditional cooking methods and limited access to information sources that could help them better understand how to use cook bags.

Participant 2

Because they grew knowing that firewood is the right thing. But education, education, education, they will end up understanding.

Participant 5

She's saying the reason being [why she doesn't use the cook bag too often], now that all the time she's there, at home doing nothing, she feels she should cook food. She feels like she doesn't need the cook bag because she's always there.

As the team spoke to participants about health-related concerns, the participants note that cooking with a use of cook bags has positive impact on their health, particularly when they are made to cook over an open fire inside their houses.



Participant 4

Yeah, there is a change in that if I had to cook inside and it is cold, not cold. As such, it's raining, that means in the past I had to be in that house with the smoke for longer period of time. While now I can just boil it and then put aside.

Participant 16

So since she's cooking with wood on the floor, she said she had trouble with eyes. Now that she has a cook bag, she normally cooks and then she's fine. She doesn't... she does no longer have trouble with her eyes.

While the user narratives detailed above already suggest that the use of cook bags can make the lives of their users easier, the next section will focus further on resource reduction and positive economic implications.

5.3. Use of resources

Although previous sections may have already addressed the reduction of resources needed for cooking, in the third part of the interview, participants were asked to discuss several issues, including time spent cooking (whether it's more or less with a cook bag), food waste, and economic implications. Starting with the aspect of time, users noted a significant reduction in the time spent on cooking, especially when preparing foods like beans, samp, or pap:

Participant 9

I used it when I was working. Sometimes I would leave the pot in the cook bag while I go to work and when I come back the food is ready [...] that saved me a lot of time [...] I'm tired after work sometimes, so food was ready [...] Instead of coming home and having to cook everything [...] Yes, so much easier for me now.

Participant 11

All I'm saying is that I don't enjoy to focus on one thing but, before I used wonder bag, I had to focus on making fire for 4 hours. So, now because of wonder bag I'm putting my food inside the wonder bag then doing other things, or even take my phone and watch Facebook or whatever.

Participant 18

A lot of time because for instance, cooking beans and pap you have to spend like 2-3 hours. With the bag, its less than that because it take only 30 minutes to boil the pot then after you put it in the bag and go away and do some other stuff



Especially for women, this change is significant. They are no longer confined to the house and can engage in paid or unpaid work, complete other tasks, or simply rest, all while still taking care of their families.

Interviewees were also questioned about food waste and whether there were any changes in the quantity of food they prepared with and without a cook bag. It's worth noting that food wastage is not common among community members, as the amount prepared is typically consumed by the family. However, a noteworthy point was raised by a couple of participants: the use of a cook bag eliminates the risk of burning food, resulting in zero waste.

Participant 22

She says it has...it has reduced the food waste because when you cook with this thing, it fit even if the water in the pot burns, there's no harm that the food is going to burn. But when cook with the wood sometimes you forget that you have cooked and then the food burn.

Participant 18

When I use... I don't use the bag; I have to throw away the hot stuff. Some of the food is burnt and you have to take it away.

Finally, one of the most prevalent themes emerging from conversations with users of cook bags is the fact that this alternative way of cooking saves them money. However, the greatest savings are noticed in households using gas as the main source of heat, as participants who mainly use wood and open fire tend to collect the wood for free, making it difficult to determine the actual financial implications other than to note the great savings made in time-use.

Participant 4

I think it does, even though it is indirect now that we are collecting the free wood. [...] but with the gas it saves a lot.

Participant 7

She says that it has actually contributed to reducing the cost because before she could have the wonder bag, she was using, her gas would, 9kg of gas would last 3 weeks, but now she has the wonder bag it lasts a month and 2 weeks.



Participant 13

You must understand that it was costly to buy some of the gas before but now that we are using the bag even our finances are not badly affected. Because you are one able to do some other things with it.

Maybe we came buy some other house needs that were still there and you couldn't even buy them because we would use the money on fuel, but now we have the extra money to buy other things.

5.4. Lifestyle and thinking about food

The research team aimed to determine whether the use of cook bags influences the way people think about food and cooking. While traditional cooking methods remain deeply ingrained in Basotho culture, cook bags are gradually being accepted as an alternative approach that can positively impact time management, resource utilization, and finances. Simultaneously, they allow users to enjoy their favourite foods in a more convenient and less time-consuming manner, without compromising on taste – or even improving the flavour of favourite foods.

Participant 3

You're not worried, you're relaxed other than when you use the gas because you only have to go check if the water is still there.

Participant 15

Yeah, I enjoy the food, it was, it has also got all the nutrients.

Participant 11

It was unbelievable [at first]. Saying how can this bag warm my food and all this stuff. So, I need to express, this thing can change lives.

In terms of recipe diversity, it seems that participants primarily prepare what is most affordable and available: beans, samp, and pap. While some have experimented with other recipes, it appears that despite their positive attitude toward cook bags and this alternative method of cooking, they still show some hesitation when it comes to trying different foods prepared using cook bags.

Participant 1

She is just really practicing [cooking] pap, warming water, beans, not other things



Participant 12

Oh, some of the things, she doesn't trust with this guy like meat, like bread.

Participant 24

Ok she says that well she's more educated about this but there are more people who are still using it but who don't know much about it so such people they still have doubts about the use of this [bag]

There are, however, some who have tried different recipes and were very positively surprised.

Participant 2

Other people don't believe that you can cook bread. Do you believe that you can cook bread? [...] I've done it, I've experienced it. [...] Bread. Bread dough. Beans, even the fries also I have practiced it.

Participant 18

I'm stating that with the cook bag we can cook everything, it only depends on time.

Members of the community have suggested that the reason people do not try cooking other dishes using cook bags is simply a lack of guidance regarding alternative recipes. Participants have expressed interest in attending workshops to learn more.

Participant 13

I would like to actually do more efforts to find how it works and how it can be used.

Participant 2

My encouragement now is to go and sit down [...] so that we can assist this small group to teach these people about the importance of the cook bag. The main focus is education, that's all.

While food waste does not appear to be a prominent concern among the interviewees in terms of need for food to be discarded, a common issue raised by the participants pertains to the occurrence of burnt food resulting from cooking over open flames. The use of cook bags offers a potential solution to mitigate this issue by significantly reducing the likelihood of food charring and subsequently going to waste.



Participant 18

When I use... I don't use the bag. I have to throw away the hot stuff. Some of the food is burned and you have to take it away.

Participant 19

No, just a little waste food? Yeah. Just there are a very few little, just little, little, little, little, little as you can. That's why they called it wonder bag. It's doing wonderful.

While the majority of cook bag users expressed satisfaction with their current functionality, it was imperative to gather feedback from participants to ascertain the bags' suitability for their intended purposes. Participants were asked for their advice and ideas about potential improvements that could align more closely with user requirements. A recurring suggestion revolved around diversifying the range of bag sizes. While many participants advocated for larger bags capable of accommodating sizable pots to cater to larger families, there were also innovative ideas proposing the introduction of smaller bags tailored to specific needs, such as those designed for baby bottles or miniature pots suited for individuals living alone. This multifaceted feedback underscores the importance of adapting cook bag offerings to cater to a broader spectrum of user preferences and requirements.

Another recurrent and valuable suggestion pertained to the feasibility of making cook bags washable. Presently, these bags lack the capacity for cleaning, as any attempt to do so would compromise their internal structure and functional capabilities. Given the aspiration for prolonged usability, users expressed a keen interest in ensuring the cleanliness and hygiene of their cook bags over time.

Participant 2

So, the problem, it's not too bad but it's very serious that we don't have the bigger wonder bags [...] To allow us to cook for more than 10 people or more than 5 people. That's where the problem is.

While the primary objective of cooking bags is to ensure that the cooking process is quicker, more convenient, and safer, users have uncovered additional, innovative applications for the bags. As the bags possess the unique capability of temperature retention this feature allows them to serve as "fridges" Cold or even frozen items placed within these bags can maintain their desired temperature for an extended duration, thereby preserving their freshness and quality for an extended period.



Participant 16

Yeah, you buy a drink in the store then. With the same temperature put it inside and lock it in there. When I take it out, still cold.

6. Further Actions

- Engage in partnerships with stakeholders to extend the distribution of cook bags not only throughout Lesotho but also to other regions and countries.
- Increase the production and range of cook bags to meet the growing demand, ensure accessibility to a wider audience, and broaden the range of its uses.
- Continue conducting research to assess the ongoing impact of cook bags on users.
- While initial mapping efforts have been undertaken, there is a need for further refinement and expansion, therefore the team needs to develop a comprehensive mapping system to track the distribution of cook bags, both historically and going forward.
- Prioritize outreach to communities where cook bags are in high demand and can make a substantial difference.



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