

Interview with

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IICBA: Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?

I am Malephoto Niko Ruth Lephoto from Lesotho. I hold a PhD in Psychology of Education. My Doctoral thesis is underpinned by Ubuntu/Botho philosophy and Relational Leadership theory as frameworks that focus on the enhancement of Guidance and Counselling as a critical educational component for attaining safe, peaceful, and supportive learning environments. I work as a lecturer, teacher educator, and researcher in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, National University of Lesotho. I teach undergraduate courses in the wide scope of Educational Psychology, Counselling for Educators, and Inclusive Education. I also supervise postgraduate students in the areas of Educational Psychology, Counselling, Inclusive Education, Psychosocial Care, and Support for learners with special needs. My research addresses teachers' and learners' well-being and the creation of safe, peaceful, and supportive teaching and learning environments. I am an advocate and promoter of Education for Peacebuilding and I coordinate education for peacebuilding activities in my institution. For the entire period of my teaching profession, I have always been passionate about the support and empowerment of learners particularly vulnerable ones. My philosophy is that teaching and learning processes should go beyond the development of an intellect, to prioritize more the development and shaping of character and personalities. I am passionate and committed to fostering a growth mindset and responsibility in my students so that they can contribute to human and planetary flourishing. I am genuinely devoted to

Background: This series of interviews was prepared for the International Day of Education on January 24 whose theme for 2024 is "learning for lasting peace". As noted on UNESCO's International Day of Education webpage, "the world is seeing a surge of violent conflicts paralleled by an alarming rise of discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and hate speech. [...] An active commitment to peace is more urgent today than ever: Education is central to this endeavor, as underlined by the UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development. Learning for peace must be transformative, and help empower learners with the necessary knowledge, values, attitudes and skills and behaviors to become agents of peace in their communities." This series of interviews builds on projects implemented by UNESCO IICBA on education for peace and the prevention of violent extremism with support from the Government of Japan.



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making a positive impact on the lives of children and young people in my country. It is out of this passion that I founded a youth-led organization Young Educators for Peacebuilding and Empowerment Organization (YEPEO) based at the National University of Lesotho. Its purpose is to reach out to young teacher trainees and empower and transform their lives so that they can also transform other young people in schools and communities.

IICBA: What are the most frequent types of conflicts or violence in your country, including risks of violent extremism?

Lesotho being part of the global village is indirectly experiencing acts of violence that have put the public in a state of fear and bewilderment. Although there is no war in the country, the culture of peace that the nation was founded on is now just but a dream. Various reports by security agencies and local and international organisations concerned with the promotion of peace and non-violence show that violence in the country is imminent. We also have the sixth-highest murder rate in the world. Acts of violence add to existing complex social challenges ranging from social, economic, and political instability, climate change, poverty, unemployment, diseases, and moral decay. The Center for Global Nonkilling (2019) shows that considering the high rates of homicides, suicides, and other forms of violence, it is hard for the country to attain sustainable development. As a result, Lesotho must ensure promotion and respect for human rights to attain SDG 16, target 16.1. The report also shows that suicidal cases are rising, placing Lesotho as the second country with the highest suicidal rate in the world and the first in Africa.

A UNDP Lesotho (2021) report shows that violent conflict resolution and instability have hampered service delivery and led to disillusionment and uncertainty among citizens. Young people become victims, increasingly

hit harder by unemployment and social frustration, thus becoming more vulnerable to extremist messages and influences (UN, 2020). Generally, the nation's social cohesion is under strain and has left many Basotho particularly victims of violence in a state of bewilderment and uncertainty (UNDP, 2021). Political intolerance, early child marriages, suicides, and human trafficking are some of the most prominent violent acts that the country is currently experiencing. Youth are on the frontline to pursue these rampant acts of violence even if efforts have been attempted by government agencies, NGOs, and international agencies to curb the problem and prevent it from escalating.

IICBA: What are the main causes or drivers leading to conflict and violence, including violent extremism?

According to a report by the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (2019), conflict in Lesotho can be fully understood only with sufficient historical context. Lesotho has a long history of political instability and has experienced high levels of factionalism, political tension, and violent conflict especially during and after elections since its independence in October 1966. Reports show that one of the key drivers of conflict is the country's socio-economic fabric and the attraction to the state by political elites who value it as a source of survival and wealth accumulation due to the country's relatively high level of poverty, unemployment, inequality, and lack of a robust private sector. The UNDP (2021) assessment of the triggers of conflict in Lesotho shows that a political party system built on strong personalities rather than institutions and a weak economy are at the center of conflict and political instability. This, together with many other challenges faced by the country, has prevented it from achieving political stability and sustained economic growth, contributing to high levels of inequality, poverty, and unemployment among young people.

IICBA: What are some of the effects on individuals, communities, and society at large? Does violence affect women and girls differently?

The state of conflict and escalating acts of violence negatively affect individuals, communities, and society at large. This has contributed to a state of confusion, uncertainty, and bewilderment among citizens, particularly women, children, and the elderly. Lesotho is identified as having the highest incidences of sexual and gender-based violence that tear apart the lives of women and girls, hindering development, and stifling progress. According to the World Population Review 2022 report, 86% of Basotho women have experienced gender-based violence in their lifetime. The Police Child and Gender Protection Unit reports that from January through July 2022, there were 184 reported sexual offenses and 45 assault cases perpetrated against women. In addition, UNDP (2021) indicates that intractable conflicts and instability have hampered the delivery of services and led to disillusionment among citizens. Also, under the circumstances of poverty exacerbated by COVID-19, some people have resorted to violence and crime, and social cohesion is under strain.

Let me again mention the UNDP (2021) assessment report on conflict in Lesotho. It provided the following as examples of how women, girls, and other vulnerable groups are affected by violence: (i) Abuse of women, people with disability (PWD), and girls through sexual exploitation in exchange for jobs; (ii) Lack of access to medical care and criminal justice system for women, PWD, and youth who are victims of sexual offenses and domestic violence; (iii) Violation of the rights of women, PWD and children to access justice through delays; and (iv) Some cases involving minors and PWD who are victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse have been scrapped off the roll for lack of evidence due to the fact that children have a short memory, and therefore by the time the cases get set, they have forgotten what happened to them a long time ago.

IICBA: Does violence and conflicts affect schooling and learning in basic or higher education?

The situation of conflicts and violence in Lesotho schools reflects the nature of the communities and society we are currently living in. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are traditionally regarded as sanctuaries for young people to discover great ideas, develop competencies for living together, and build lifelong acquaintances, but this is threatened when educational institutions are characterized by violence. The ever-increasing incidents of violent student protests in HEIs and elementary schools are shocking, raising questions about whether they remain safe places. The literature shows that there are many types of campus violence, including frequent violent rioting, bullying in its various forms, dating violence, sexual harassment, unfair treatment of students, gender-based violence, fighting, hate speech, stalking, disorderly conduct, property crime, violent gangs, substance and drug abuse, and self-harm and suicide.

Currently, HEIs management resorts to deploying policemen to stop students' violent riots which have become a culture. Usually, such confrontation between students and armed policemen ends with shootings where students get injured, and on several occasions, some students have lost their lives. Public elementary schools also had to close for a lengthy period because of conflicts between teachers and the teaching service department on the ground that teachers' grievances are not responded to. Another example is when students from the National University embark on violent protests, they severely disturb nearby elementary schools to the extent that the nearby schools often have to close at least for a day or two to ensure that the situation in the university is under control. When this happens, not only learners and teachers in the schools get affected, but even fellow students and lecturers in the same university are often affected in many ways. Students who are at the frontline of the riots literally intimidate lecturers and fellow students who appear not to be supportive of the riots by expelling





them from lecture halls. These riots usually end with universities' closure for a period of two weeks or more.

IICBA: What do you think could be the role of education in promoting peace and preventing violence and conflicts?

The role of education is to contribute to the building of peaceful societies. Without a culture of peace, societies cannot attain human flourishing and sustainable development. Education should aim at building all the pillars of sustainable development, including environmental, economic, and social pillars beyond the technology progression and the improvement of economic values. It is crucial that schools and communities work collaboratively to teach human recognition, harmony, humbleness, respect for human rights, empathy, self-awareness, tolerance, equality, and interdependence as social pillars for sustainable development. Moreover, education should focus on social integration, inclusion, the prevention of discrimination, and addressing differences and conflicts without a culture of violence. Education should be directed towards breaking of the cycle of violence by capacitating young people to become leaders in peaceful conflict transformation. I support Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) that *“Education shall be directed towards the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”* I also support the international organizations working on the promotion of peace and non-violence such as UNESCO and UNICEF for education systems to implement peace education and education for peacebuilding as approaches for promoting peace, building resilience, and preventing violent extremism.

IICBA: If you participated in a project of UNESCO IICBA, was this project helpful, and if so, how?

I participated in UNESCO IICBA's Peace Education Project including a series of webinars, a training in July-August 2021, and a visit to Japan in May-June 2022. This helped me rethink my teaching. I acquired essential knowledge and developed attitudes, values, and skills that reshaped my teaching philosophy. The project helped me to make a deeper sense of the courses I teach and helped me to figure out how I can use them to educate for peace, build resilience, and promote the prevention of violence. After my participation in the project, I reviewed my courses to include basic peace education content. I also revised my instructional approaches to become learner-centered and transformative. Beyond classroom teaching and learning processes, as I mentioned earlier, I founded a youth-led organization made up of students pursuing educational courses. The organization empowers young educators and other interested students from other schools as agents of peace. We work with students to address challenges facing young people in schools and communities. We are committed to promoting peace, healthy lifestyles, and mental health and preventing all forms of violence including Gender-based violence. We use workshops, dialogue sessions, debates, school visits, and community service to drive our agenda. We also identify and mark relevant important days by engaging in activities that promote peace.

IICBA: What does your organization or institution do today to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence? What more could be done?

Due to the problem of frequent violent students' protests, various schools started to form student clubs that bring young people together to unpack issues of violence. Moshoeshoe 1 Institute for Peace and Leadership runs workshops for the management teams, staff, and student representatives on topics such as ethical and

transformational leadership for the building of peace. The Institute works in collaboration with staff members from various schools. The institution is also working in partnership with the police to come up with better strategies for preserving peace between the institution and the community where it is situated.

IICBA: What is your government doing today to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence? What more could be done?

I am not aware of any specific initiatives implemented by the government except for the development of policies and acts that in most cases the public, particularly young people, are not aware of. Little is done to raise awareness about such policies and their implications in the promotion of peace and prevention of conflicts. However, the Ministry of Education and Training through the development of policies such as child-friendly schools and the Education Act 2010 that prohibits corporal punishment contributes to the promotion of peace in schools. Apart from that, subjects such as Religious Studies and Life Skills Education integrate aspects related to peace and conflict prevention, but schools are not sufficiently conscious of the role of these subjects in promoting peace and preventing violence.

IICBA: Have you seen innovative initiatives to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence? How did they work?

Many of the innovative initiatives intended to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence are developed and implemented mostly by non-governmental organizations and churches. On many occasions, reports are provided on how a certain organization managed to settle disputes between groups of people. However, these may be one-off activities, while acts of violence are escalating in the country.

IICBA: What are the main challenges today to implement initiatives to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence?

Violent ideologies have spread. Some groups are not ready to let go of their belief in violence as an approach to life. Such people are not ready to listen to anyone who speaks a different language. The unfortunate part is that they indoctrinate their children with the same mentality. The government has not shown enough interest in initiatives to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence. Without the government's buy-in, initiatives to promote peace and prevent conflicts and violence do not receive enough support, and therefore often fail to be sustained. Schools usually find peace education and other related initiatives as additional work that compromises time for teaching, learning, and examination. Initiatives and programs are

usually implemented at a small scale that cannot bring sustainable positive change. Implementation requires the participation of relevant individuals and groups of people, who normally lose interest when there is no funding.

IICBA: Finally, could you share with us an anecdote about yourself or your work?

The teaching of psychology-based courses has afforded me a better understanding of how human nature relates to the agenda of the promotion of peace and prevention of violence. In my teaching, I include issues of peace and non-violence and how they relate to human thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. I adopt methodologies that allow students to apply their critical thinking and develop attitudes and values that are in harmony with peaceful co-existence. I take my course as an opportunity to transform the minds of young people and contribute to the development of both intellect and character. Beyond the classroom environment, I make sure that I create opportunities to interact with young people to understand the way they view life, why they behave the way they do, and provide guidance if needed. This is why I finally founded a youth-led organization that brings young people together in safer spaces for sharing of ideas about life in general and capacitate one another on how to tackle challenges in a realistic manner while adopting life-oriented philosophies and approaches. Apart from that I organize workshops for them so that they can be empowered and get the opportunity to reflect and think about who they really are, the meaning of their existence, what they really want in life, and how they can contribute positively to their communities in a sustainable manner.



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