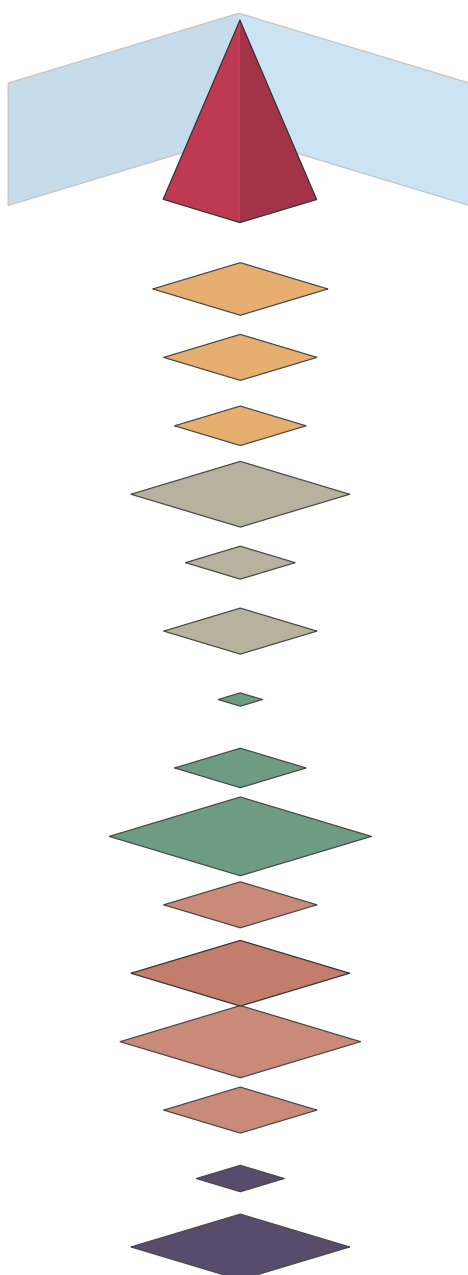




LESOTHO



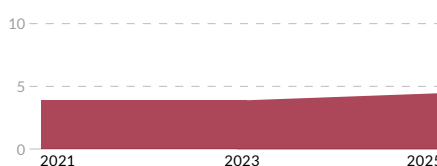
4.52 $\nearrow 0.60$

CRIMINALITY SCORE

128th of 193 countries $\nearrow 26$

41st of 54 African countries $\nearrow 9$

6th of 13 Southern African countries $\nearrow 5$



CRIMINAL MARKETS

3.73 $\nearrow 0.30$

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	4.00	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	3.50	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	3.00	1.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	5.00	1.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	2.50	1.50
ILLCIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	3.50	0.00
FLORA CRIMES	1.00	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	3.00	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	6.00	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	3.50	0.00
COCAINE TRADE	5.00	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	5.50	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	3.50	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	2.00	1.00
FINANCIAL CRIMES	5.00	0.00



CRIMINAL ACTORS

5.30 $\nearrow 0.90$

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	6.00	3.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	5.50	0.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	7.00	1.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	5.50	0.50
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	2.50	0.00



This project was funded in part
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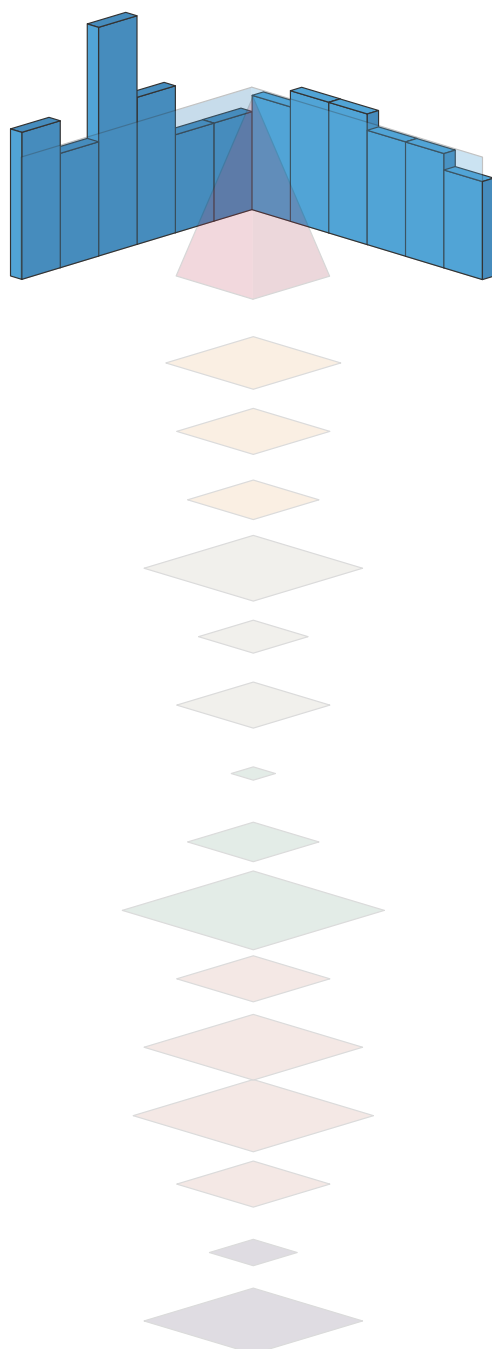


Funded by
the European Union

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LESOTHO



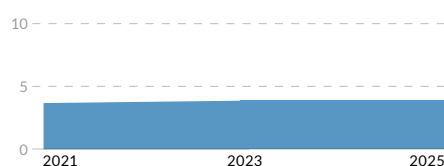
3.92 $\downarrow 0.00$

RESILIENCE SCORE

135th of 193 countries $\nearrow 1$

26th of 54 African countries -

8th of 13 Southern African countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	4.50	$\nearrow 0.50$
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	3.50	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	7.00	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	4.50	$\nearrow 0.50$
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	3.00	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	3.00	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	3.50	$\nearrow 0.50$
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	4.00	0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	4.00	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	3.50	0.00
PREVENTION	3.50	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	3.00	$\nearrow 0.50$



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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Lesotho is a source and a transit point for human trafficking, particularly affecting women and children who are subjected to forced labour and sexual exploitation. Economic hardships, exacerbated by inflation and climate change, have driven vulnerable populations to seek opportunities in urban centres and abroad, where they often fall prey to traffickers. Women and girls, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, are lured to South Africa and countries in western Asia through fraudulent job offers, only to be coerced into sex trafficking or exploitative labour. Male migrants seeking work in agriculture and mining also face exploitative labour conditions, particularly in South Africa. Child labour and domestic servitude are concerns in Lesotho, where they are worsened by gaps in legal protections stemming from inconsistencies between the minimum age of employment and compulsory education requirements. Organized crime syndicates involved in illegal mining operations also recruit young girls from Lesotho for sexual exploitation. The involvement of long-distance truck drivers in facilitating trafficking exacerbates the problem.

Human smuggling in Lesotho, though limited in scale, appears to be facilitated by the country's porous borders with South Africa. Migrants, primarily Basotho nationals, often cross these borders in search of employment opportunities, and most movements do not occur in a criminalized way. In limited instances there is overlap between human smuggling and trafficking, as migrants who rely on the services of smugglers to cross borders find themselves unable to pay, becoming vulnerable to exploitative labour conditions, including debt bondage. Reports also suggest that corrupt officials sometimes enable irregular migration. There have been no recorded convictions for human smuggling in recent years, despite frequent reports of Basotho migrants being apprehended while attempting to enter South Africa.

Extortion and protection racketeering are underdeveloped but increasingly visible criminal markets in Lesotho. Some Basotho individuals involved in illegal mining in South Africa have engaged in extortion schemes, targeting foreign workers and demanding protection payments. In some instances, violence linked to these activities in South Africa has spilled over into Lesotho, undermining local security and influencing gang culture.

TRADE

Arms trafficking has been increasing despite the implementation of stricter firearm regulations. The smuggling of firearms between Lesotho and South Africa is prevalent, and weapons are frequently acquired by criminal groups such as the Famo gangs and zama zama miners. Reports indicate that illicit firearms often originate from corrupt law enforcement and military personnel. The accessibility of these weapons has contributed to high levels of violence and Lesotho has one of the world's highest homicide rates. However, limited official data means the number of illicit arms circulating is unknown.

The trade in counterfeit goods is not a dominant criminal market in Lesotho but is still a concern. Counterfeit cigarettes and alcohol are widely available, and much of the illicit trade is linked to South African and Chinese networks. The imposition of higher levies on tobacco and alcohol has fuelled this market, and illicit products are either smuggled into Lesotho or produced locally in unregulated distilleries. Reports indicate a notable rise in counterfeit alcohol sales in Maseru, harming legitimate businesses and public health.

In addition to counterfeiting, the illicit trade in excisable goods, particularly tobacco and alcohol, remains common. Lesotho plays a key role in the roundtripping of cigarettes, where tax-exempt products are exported from South Africa then smuggled back across the border to avoid taxes. Weak customs enforcement allows smuggling networks to profit from these schemes, which have adversely affected local businesses and government revenue.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes in Lesotho are virtually absent. While there are reports suggesting that illicit logging occurs on a small scale, there is no clear evidence linking it to organized crime networks.

Fauna crimes are similarly constrained, but incidents of wildlife poaching along the Lesotho-South Africa border persist. Villagers from Lesotho have been reported to poach game from South African reserves, taking advantage of the lack of border security. Abalone poached in South Africa is sometimes transported through Lesotho before being smuggled to Asian markets. Livestock theft is a significant issue, criminal networks and corrupt border officials facilitating cross-border cattle rustling. Reports indicate that this criminal activity frequently results in violence, affecting South African farmers and Lesotho villagers.

Non-renewable resource crimes primarily involve illegal mining. Lesotho has legalized small-scale diamond mining but reports suggest continued illicit extraction and trafficking of diamonds. The impact of legalization on curbing illegal mining and trafficking has so far been minimal, and the market remains a significant concern. Moreover, Basotho criminal groups are deeply involved in illegal gold mining in South Africa, often engaging in violent conflicts on both sides of the border. Illicit proceeds from illegal gold mining reportedly pass through the country. While there are claims that gold is laundered through Lesotho, evidence of gold physically transiting the country remains uncertain.

DRUGS

The heroin market in Lesotho is underdeveloped and consumption is limited due to high prices relative to neighbouring countries. Most heroin entering Lesotho originates from Bloemfontein, South Africa, and is trafficked by informal networks.

The criminal market has moderate influence over cocaine consumption. Powdered cocaine is widely available, while crack cocaine use is mainly concentrated in Maseru. Nigerian criminal groups reportedly control supply and distribution, relying on networks in South Africa. Smuggling routes frequently involve bribery of border officials, allowing drugs to cross the border with minimal inspection.

Cannabis production is entrenched in Lesotho's economy and many rural communities depend on the drug's cultivation. The legalization of cannabis for medical and scientific purposes has led to increased production but illegal cultivation persists. Most cannabis produced in Lesotho is trafficked to South Africa and reports indicate that the majority of South Africa's cannabis supply originates from Lesotho.

The synthetic drug market in Lesotho is small and methamphetamine is the most reported substance. Crystal meth, in particular, has become one of the most prevalent drugs in urban areas, especially among young people. Other synthetic drugs, including ecstasy and methcathinone, are available in limited quantities and not used widely. The market is primarily supplied through illicit flows from Bloemfontein but demand is low due to economic constraints and limited purchasing power.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crimes are on the rise in Lesotho and financial and government institutions are frequently targeted, occasionally leading to service disruptions. The prevalence of ransomware attacks and hacking attempts is increasing, and limited public awareness and gaps in cybersecurity infrastructure leave the country vulnerable to further threats.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes in Lesotho encompass cyber-enabled fraud, public procurement fraud and misappropriation of government funds. Criminal networks have engaged in large-scale financial fraud, often diverting funds from financial institutions to accounts abroad. The interconnected nature of financial crime between Lesotho and South Africa is evident, particularly in cases involving shell companies and fraudulent banking transactions. Weak financial oversight has enabled the diversion of public funds and some reports have linked these activities to officials. Mobile money fraud is a concern and mule accounts are frequently used to exploit unsuspecting users.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Lesotho's most prominent mafia-style groups are the Famo gangs, a network of rival factions engaged in organized criminal activities. These groups have been involved in violent confrontations, significantly affecting security. They are deeply entrenched in illegal mining operations in South Africa, particularly in the Free State province, where they engage in violent disputes over control of abandoned mines. Their involvement in arms trafficking sustains their dominance. They have established connections in law enforcement and the military and there are reports of officers being used as hitmen in gang conflicts. The Famo gangs are reported to have connections with political figures, which complicates law enforcement efforts. Despite efforts to curb their activities, these groups are highly organized and capable of succession, and new factions continually emerge.

Informal criminal networks operate across Lesotho, engaging in a range of illicit activities, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, livestock theft and diamond smuggling. These groups are heavily involved in trafficking Basotho nationals to South Africa by tempting them with employment opportunities that often turn out to involve forced labour and exploitation. Criminal networks also facilitate transnational financial crimes, including large-scale embezzlement schemes that extend between Lesotho and South Africa. Illegal mining operations contribute to organized crime and participants become involved in violent conflicts over control of resources.

Corruption is widespread in Lesotho and state-embedded actors are frequently linked to organized crime. Many government officials maintain close ties with criminal groups, particularly the Famo gangs, using these relationships for political leverage and protection from prosecution. Corruption extends into law enforcement, where some officials have been implicated in selling seized firearms to criminal groups and facilitating human trafficking. Reports suggest that obtaining official documentation may sometimes involve bribery. Immigration officers have also been implicated in

corruption, enabling smuggling operations by accepting bribes or facilitating irregular migration.

Foreign criminal groups play a significant role in Lesotho's illicit markets. South African networks dominate vehicle theft and smuggling operations, using Lesotho as a hub for re-registering stolen vehicles. These groups are also heavily involved in cross-border livestock theft, farm attacks and cannabis smuggling. Nigerian criminal organizations control a large portion of drug markets, using established distribution networks. Pakistani and Chinese groups are active in human trafficking, particularly in the textile sector, where workers face exploitative conditions in factories owned by foreign operators. Foreign criminal actors have a widespread presence but their direct interactions

with local networks are moderate. Some foreign players operate independently while others collaborate with Basotho intermediaries.

The involvement of private sector actors in organized crime is not extensive but there is evidence that they facilitate illicit activities. Some telecommunications companies providing financial services have been linked to money laundering operations, enabling fraudulent transactions and the movement of illicit funds. Several cases have emerged involving state actors colluding with private sector individuals to divert funds. Private sector corruption is not as entrenched as in other sectors but financial institutions are vulnerable to exploitation by organized crime.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Lesotho's political landscape has been marked by instability, corruption and governance challenges that have weakened its ability to counter organized crime effectively. Over the years, political crises, including contested elections and coalition collapses, have led to a weakening of the rule of law and a lack of public trust in government institutions. However, efforts have been made to stabilize the political environment. The general elections in October 2022 were largely free and fair, leading to the emergence of the Revolution for Prosperity party, which formed a coalition government. This change signalled progress but concerns persist about corruption in public procurement, border security and the potential infiltration of criminal networks into state structures. The government's rhetoric on fighting organized crime has yet to translate into substantive action, and proposals such as using the military for policing duties have raised concerns.

Lesotho has established oversight mechanisms to combat corruption, including the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Offences, which is responsible for investigating and prosecuting corruption cases. However, these measures are undermined by resource limitations, political interference and capacity constraints. Non-state actors, including civil society organizations and media outlets, play an important role in holding the government accountable, although they face challenges such as censorship and harassment. The government has introduced digital platforms for procurement processes to enhance transparency, but gaps remain in ensuring full and timely disclosure of relevant documents. Corruption perceptions remain high and international organizations have urged the government to strengthen oversight mechanisms and combat impunity.

Lesotho has ratified several international conventions related to organized crime, including agreements on human trafficking, corruption and narcotics control. The country participates in regional initiatives and joint investigations with South Africa, particularly on cross-border crime. INTERPOL's National Central Bureau in Maseru facilitates international law enforcement cooperation. Extradition agreements with other countries have been used to prosecute organized crime actors and asset recovery initiatives have seen some success. However, enforcement of international obligations is hindered by institutional inefficiencies and resource constraints.

Lesotho has enacted various laws addressing organized crime, including legislation on human trafficking, arms trafficking and financial crimes. However, there are gaps in the specificity and enforcement of these laws, limiting their effectiveness. The government has taken steps to strengthen cybercrime legislation but recent proposals have drawn criticism for their potential impact on press freedom and privacy. Despite legal provisions, victim rehabilitation services and crime prevention measures remain underdeveloped.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Lesotho's judiciary includes specialized units for corruption and economic crime, such as the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Offences. However, its effectiveness is undermined by resource constraints, delays in legal proceedings and lenient sentencing. Corruption in the judiciary has led to concerns over transparency and accountability, particularly in high-profile cases. The prison system faces significant challenges, including corruption, inadequate healthcare and poor living conditions. These

issues contribute to the persistence of organized criminal activity in prisons, hampering rehabilitation efforts. The Lesotho Mounted Police Service has dedicated units focused on organized crime, particularly in areas such as human trafficking and child protection. However, these units face significant operational limitations due to insufficient personnel and financial constraints. The National Security Service is responsible for gathering intelligence but its capacity to counter organized crime is a subject of debate. Lesotho has also emphasised community policing as a strategy to enhance cooperation between law enforcement agencies and local communities in addressing crime. However, proposals to involve the military in policing duties have sparked criticism from opposition parties and civil society groups, which are concerned about potential human rights violations and the risk of excessive militarization of law enforcement functions. Lesotho's borders, particularly with South Africa, are vulnerable to illicit activities, including drug trafficking, human smuggling and arms trafficking. Efforts have been made to strengthen border security, including deploying additional soldiers and improving surveillance infrastructure, but challenges persist due to difficult terrain and limited resources. Cybersecurity capacity has improved but recent cyberattacks highlight ongoing vulnerabilities.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Lesotho has implemented national strategies and established a Financial Intelligence Unit to combat money laundering. However, the unit has faced allegations of corruption, affecting public confidence. Resource limitations and outdated forensic tools hinder financial investigations. High-profile money laundering cases have exposed gaps in the country's ability to investigate complex financial transactions. Online gambling is a potential channel for money laundering and regulatory oversight is inadequate. Despite ambitions to transition Lesotho into a competitive, export-driven economy with a robust private sector, the implementation of necessary reforms has been inconsistent and ineffective. Institutional weaknesses have hindered economic development, leaving Lesotho trailing other developing nations. The rule of law lacks the strength to support sustained economic progress, and inefficiencies in the regulatory system are a challenge. Labour market rigidity pushes a significant portion of the workforce into informal employment. Inflation has stabilized but the government exerts influence over prices through state-owned enterprises. To enhance regulatory compliance and address financial misconduct, the government has established bodies such as Revenue Services Lesotho and the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Offences, which are tasked with enforcing tax regulations and investigating economic crimes.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Lesotho has certain mechanisms in place, including a victim support unit in the Lesotho Mounted Police Service and the Witness Protection Act, to support victims and witnesses of organized crime. However, persistent funding shortages and inadequate infrastructure limit the effectiveness of these initiatives. The government relies heavily on NGOs, which play a crucial role in assisting victims, particularly in remote and underserved areas, by providing counselling, housing support and other essential services. In addition to direct service provision, NGOs are engaged in policy advocacy to enhance victim support mechanisms, particularly for those affected by crime and drug abuse. Training gaps among frontline officials have led to inconsistencies in victim identification and protection efforts, while witness intimidation is a serious issue and several high-profile cases have concluded under suspicious circumstances. Public initiatives, including awareness campaigns and community outreach programmes, aim to challenge negative perceptions of drug users and promote inclusivity. However, deep-seated societal attitudes are barriers to a more supportive environment for victims and marginalized groups. Additionally, financial constraints frequently hamper the operations of rehabilitation centres, limiting their capacity to provide effective assistance.

Community policing and crime prevention initiatives exist in Lesotho, including neighbourhood watches and awareness campaigns. The government has increased funding for anti-trafficking efforts and established specialized units to investigate cybercrimes linked to organized crime. Reporting mechanisms, such as the Crime Stop helpline, provide avenues for reporting organized crime, but public trust in law enforcement is low. NGOs and international organizations play a critical role in raising awareness and supporting crime prevention efforts.

Civil society organizations and other non-state actors play a crucial role in combating organized crime in Lesotho, often bridging gaps in state institutions' resources, expertise and ability to raise public awareness. Their efforts span advocacy, awareness campaigns, service provision, promoting transparency and international cooperation, and empowering communities to mitigate the effects of organized crime. The media is also a key player in this fight, providing a platform for state and non-state actors to voice concerns and report on crime-related issues, investigative findings and political developments. Through in-depth reporting and public discourse, journalists help raise awareness, hold authorities accountable and amplify the voices of victims, civil society and other stakeholders. However, media professionals, civil society activists and journalists have faced attacks. These acts of intimidation, often perpetrated by organized criminal networks or state actors, undermine press freedom and efforts to ensure accountability. Recently proposed cyber security legislation has drawn criticism from journalists, who

argue that some of its clauses threaten media freedom and suppress advocacy and whistleblowing.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.