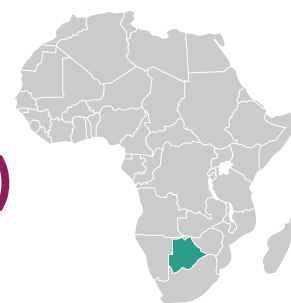


ENTREPRENEURIAL SENIORS: THE ROLE OF OUT OF SCHOOL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (OSET)



I knew I found a home to nurture not only my being but my living.
Ms Rotwane



Rebecca Nthogo Lekoko is a professor of adult education, lifelong learning, and community development. Her work integrates a wide range of critical issues, including life skills development and the empowerment of marginalised groups such as older adults. She has conducted extensive research in non-formal education and has contributed significantly to the Department of Out-of-School Education and Training, serving in various capacities as a keynote speaker, trainer of trainers, advisory committee member, and researcher. Rebecca has published widely. Her flagship publications include *Facilitators' Resource Book for Out of School Education for Children*; *Economic Empowerment for Older Adults*; *Lifelong Learning for Africa's Older Adults: The Role of Open Educational Resources and Indigenous Learning*; and *Critical Humanistic Pedagogy in the Context of Adult Basic Education: Making Sense of Numeracy as Social Empowerment*.



Ontlametse Kebatenne is a dedicated Principal Adult Educator who has a commitment to ensuring quality education and training that is accessible to all learners in non-formal spaces. She has been helpful in assisting her Ministry reach those individuals who are excluded from formal education. As a change agent teaching life skills, she has inspired practical, hands-on, and entrepreneurial activities to assist in the upliftment of individuals and communities. Her greatest passion lies in supporting adults involved in income-generating projects aimed at improving their livelihoods and lives.

Introduction

This article focuses on how adult education played a catalytic role in the lives of two senior entrepreneurs who graduated from the Out of School Education and Training (OSET) programme in Botswana. By sharing their stories, the readers are able to understand how the two women have been able to look after themselves and their families, despite being 'older adults', classified as part of a vulnerable group¹. The article reflects on their experiences, including challenges and resilience characteristics, and demonstrates seniors' capabilities to improve livelihoods and play a significant role in the development of their communities.

Context

Since independence in 1966, the Government of Botswana has prioritised eliminating poverty and inequality. This goal has been integrated into all national plans and vision documents, including Vision 2016, Vision 2036, and eleven national development plans. The aim is to promote inclusive, sustainable economic growth rooted in social justice and economic independence. In March 2018, a conference² was held which led to the development of a National Poverty Eradication Policy (NPEP) and an Implementation Plan, as well as a National Multidimensional Poverty Index. These initiatives, guided by the Office of the President and supported by the United Nations Development Programme, are part of Vision 2036's Human and Social Upliftment Pillar³. The NPEP aims to foster a moral, inclusive society and eliminate extreme income poverty. As a way to deal with poverty eradication, the Ministry of Presidential Affairs, Office of the President, Poverty Eradication Coordinating Unit provides free

start-up equipment and materials for various income-generating projects, such as kiosks, home-based laundry, leather works, jam production, vegetable gardening, bakeries, textiles, food catering, tent hire, landscaping, backyard tree nurseries, and hair salons⁴.

The plight of seniors

Despite these visions, plans and initiatives, according to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Regional Office for Africa, Botswana's socio-economic development has not effectively kept up with the rapid increase in its older adult population, resulting in a mismatch between the specific needs of seniors and available services, like healthcare and social protection. This situation contributes to the vulnerability of older adults. A 2024 study by Lekoko and Tsayang highlighted that, despite the availability of numerous schemes and grants aimed at economically empowering people living in extreme poverty, such as the Poverty Eradication Programme (PEP) mentioned above and Ipelegeng⁵, older adults (65 years and older) remained excluded. A few of them took advantage of the Government of Botswana's backyard gardening initiative (introduced in 2010) as a means of reducing poverty and increasing food security. Deserving individuals were funded for household consumption and potential selling. Today, many of these seniors no longer do backyard gardening. Lekoko and Tsayang argue that without a specific economic empowerment policy for older adults, this group continues to face injustices, such as the stereotype of being considered a burden, negative age-related discrimination, and marginalisation.

OSET training

One main function of the Out of School Education and Training (OSET) unit⁶ of the Ministry of Basic Education is provision of functional literacy and entrepreneurial skills to deserving adults. This programme aims to assist participants to live their lives in the most productive way possible by addressing two dimensions of vulnerability: lack of or low income and

Figure One shows the range of businesses/activities.

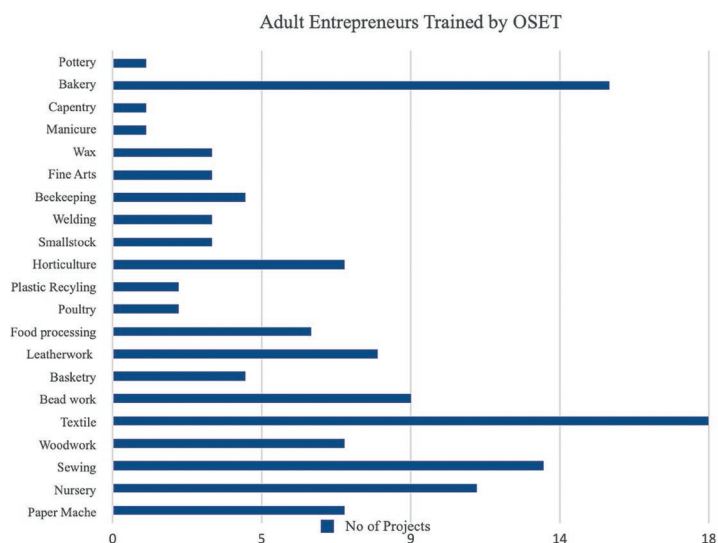
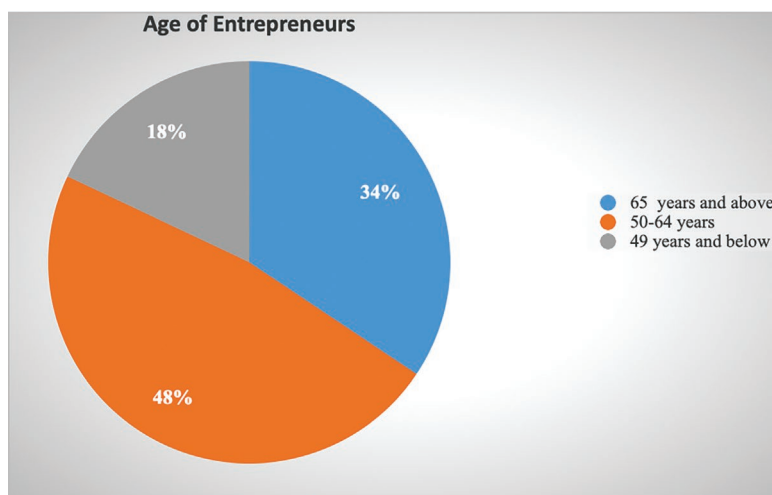


Figure Two shows the entrepreneurs who attended the OSET programme as per the 2024 OSET Report.



Generally, senior entrepreneurs are defined as older adults who commence ownership of a small business when aged 50 or above (Stirzaker et al., 2019; Soto-Simeone & Kautonen, 2021).

participation poverty. Participation poverty refers to the situation where materially poor individuals lack meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their lives, such as a lack of access to resources, information, or decision-making processes. This hinders their ability to be industrious.

From an adult education perspective, learners are primarily interested in acquiring knowledge and skills⁷ that are directly relevant to their lives - the functional literacy and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills offered by OSET equip learners with the necessary skills to engage in various economic

activities. Functional literacy goes beyond basic literacy. It gives learners the ability to use reading, writing, and numeracy skills to function effectively in everyday life and participate fully in one's community, such as by improving one's livelihoods. As per the 2024 OSET Report⁸, the South Region had 128 OSET income-generating projects (107 female learners and 21 males). Projects are diverse and include agriculture; home economics; tourism and hospitality; arts; design and technology; construction; performing arts; automotive engineering; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; and health and beauty therapy.

A note on mentorship



From left to right: Ms Kentsenao Rotwane, a senior entrepreneur who owns a pottery and basketry small business; OSET Principal Adult Educators (PAE) and mentors: Ms Neo Tlhako, Ms Ontlametse Kebatenne and Ms Keolebogile Ditedu; Ms Rebecca Lekoko, a professor in adult education and community development.

The two senior entrepreneurs and their mentors recognised the value of monthly home visits by mentors particularly as a vital form of ongoing support. The visits created space for discussions about progress, challenges, and the development of suitable strategies to sustain each business. The consistency of the visits was especially appreciated, given the limited resources available. Many benefits associated with these visits were cited, for example, lessening the risks of giving up on their businesses; mentors were described as ‘shoulders to lean on’, ‘motivators’, and ‘supporters with admirable networking skills’. Mentors were praised for their gentle yet firm guidance, their dedication, and their high but supportive expectations. Seniors commented as such: ‘In them lies a clear message: There is a winner in you’ and ‘It pushes you to be up to your next best, the next visit’.

Additional support mechanisms were noted. These include participation in radio interviews⁹; product showcases at small markets and at government events, such as those organised by the Department of Social and Community Development; involvement in cultural activities; assistance in acquiring trademarks; job shadowing; and connections with potential buyers. These experiences helped entrepreneurs recognise the importance of collaboration and partnerships.

The entrepreneurial journey of two seniors

As mentioned earlier, this article focuses on two senior entrepreneurs, Ms Rotwane and Ms Onneng.



Ms Kentsenao Rotwane is 67 years old and describes herself as a hard worker, innovative thinker, multi-tasker (she does both basketry and pottery), and passionate about her business. Her choice to pursue basketry and pottery comes from years of experience gained by ‘sitting next to Nellie’¹⁰ - observing, learning and doing hands-on ‘work’ under the guidance of her mother. Her initial learning was done by real-world practice rather than by formal education. Ms Rotwane’s business started in 2013. She explained that her choice was also ‘demand-driven’ because her baskets and pots are used during traditional activities and events like weddings and Dikgafela (a festival that celebrates the ‘first fruits’ of the year).



Ms Gadifele Onneng is 65 years old and describes herself as a hustler, a hard worker, committed, and passionate

about her project. Ms Onneng does sewing and plastic recycling. She did not think she would adopt her mother’s trade but she did. Her business started in 2013. Her decision to start a business was influenced by both the demand for products and lessons learned from OSET about the environmental benefits of plastic recycling. She also hoped the business would generate enough income to support her and her family, which it does. She has been able to do home improvements, like painting, flooring, and some fixtures. Ms Onneng said that she is the only person in the area actively and enthusiastically producing recycled plastic items such as shoes, bags, and hats.

In both cases, social learning theory¹¹ played a part in how the women (who were girls at the time) learned. They observed, imitated, and modelled what others (their mothers) did. The experiences of Ms Rotwane and Ms Onneng align with findings in the literature that it is usual for senior entrepreneurs to contribute a wealth of life experience to whatever it is they do (Rehak et al., 2014).

One major and common reason for both women starting their own businesses was the need to survive as mothers, grandmothers, siblings, and community members. Following in their parents’ footsteps (who also struggled with issues of poverty), they looked for opportunities to improve their livelihoods and identified OSET as a pathway. Both seniors felt that OSET with its focus on functional literacy and entrepreneurial skills would be beneficial for this purpose, and both agree that it has been. These senior entrepreneurs are able to look after themselves and their families as explained by the following: ‘My children don’t go to school with empty stomachs, bare footed and dirty’ (Ms Rotwane). ‘Hunger is a not a perpetual visitor to my home’ (Ms. Onneng).

Community support and respect

Ms Rotwane explained that the slow growth of her business was due to a lack of support, such as government grants or loans, especially when compared to assistance often available

to younger entrepreneurs. The two senior entrepreneurs indicated that, because they did not have access to formal markets, they have built relationships and networks with peers and community members, and that these have helped sustain their businesses. They explained that the trust and loyalty that exists between them and community members has earned them 'prestigious social status'. They provide quality products with *botho*¹². Botho is a Tswana word emphasising relational aspects like care, respect, and kindness. 'When at shops, walking the street, I am known for what I do. I feel valued because I work nicely with everyone' (Ms Onneng).

Wisdom to pass on

In addition to the respect, trust, loyalty and high social status these senior entrepreneurs have earned from other community members, they are also recognised for their years of experience and wisdom. Even though they pass on this knowledge and wisdom informally and non-formally, the two seniors expressed a desire to pass on their knowledge and skills as trainers, trainers of trainers, mentors or advisers in a formal capacity to others wanting to know more about entrepreneurship. Unfortunately, the seniors' lack of formal certification is a major barrier to fulfilling this aspiration.

'Ke godile mo tirong e, ke ka abela ba bangwe' (I have reached advanced competence and others can benefit from it) (Ms Rotwane).

Ms Onneng echoed the sentiment with: 'Kitso e a abelwana' (Knowledge is meant to be shared/ Knowledge is passed on).

Conclusion

The stories of these two senior female entrepreneurs illustrate that older adults are capable of taking charge of their own lives and supporting their families by improving their livelihoods. While poverty was a key driver in their decision to pursue entrepreneurship later in life, both women show a

profound commitment and dedication to their work. It is evident that their businesses are not merely a means of survival, but an integral part of who they are. The seniors credit OSET with the role it played in their learning which assisted them in being able to achieve what they have. This confirms that education has an important role to play in the lives of adults, no matter their age. More recognition by government, including having a specific economic empowerment policy for older adults, would help ease the challenges faced by senior entrepreneurs.

References

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Endnotes

- Between 2002/03 and 2009/10, the poverty rate among the elderly population (age 65+) witnessed a larger decline compared to the national average. While overall poverty decreased from 31 to 19 percent, the elderly population had a larger decline - from 38 to 17.7 percent. An estimated 11.9 percent of the elderly population is considered to be extremely poor. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank (2022).
- Leave no one behind: The fight against poverty, exclusion and inequality* (with support from the United Nations Development Programme).

- Pillar 2 - Human Social Development By 2036 Botswana will be a moral, tolerant and inclusive society that provides opportunities for all. For easy execution the pillar will be looking into different sectors which includes spiritual wellbeing, culture, strong family institution, health and wellness, social inclusion and equality, education and skills development, gender equality, the youth and children's wellbeing. The other pillars are Sustainable Economic Development, Sustainable Environment and an Governance, Peace and Security. <https://www.statsbots.org.bw/sites/default/files/documents/Vision%202036.pdf>
- <https://www.scribd.com/document/424070164/Poverty-Eradication-Guidelines>
- A public works programme designed to provide short-term employment opportunities to relieve Botswana affected by economic shocks.
- There are 10 OSET regions across Botswana. This article focuses on the South Region, which comprises five main villages: Kanye, Moshupa, Goodhope, Lobatse, Jwaneng and surrounding small villages.
- In addition to relevant content, appropriate teaching strategies and methods are used, such as experiential learning, demonstrations, teamwork, storytelling, and the REFLECT approach (REFLECT is a combination of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's theory and the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal).
- Ministry of Basic Education, Botswana OSET Centres Year Report 2024, unpublished.
- 'A o itse gore!' (Do you know that!) is occasionally aired on a national radio station. Sometimes senior entrepreneurs are featured to share success stories - this programme is seen as raising awareness about senior entrepreneurs and moulding a positive image about them to others.
- 'Sitting next to Nellie' (or 'by' or 'with') means learning a job by observing how an experienced worker does it.
- Albert Bandura is best known for developing social learning theory.
- Similar to 'ubuntu' that emphasises interconnectedness, humanity, and the importance of community.