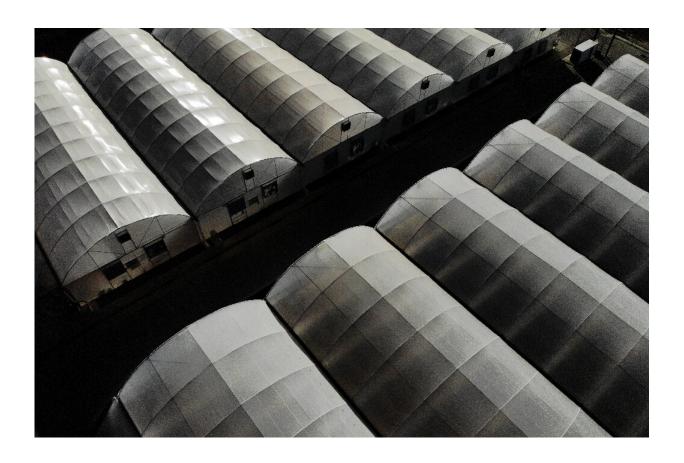# Lesotho, Africa's medical cannabis pioneer

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Lesotho-based company Medigrow cultivates cannabis legally for the medical marijuana industry

Vast white greenhouses sit high up on the slopes of Lesotho's Marakabei town, hidden from view.

It's not fruit or vegetables, however, growing under the 18 plastic covers,

but thousands of cannabis plants.

The cannabis is grown legally by the Lesotho-based company Medigrow and is regulated by the government.

"We have three rows that contain 1,200 plants each. That's 3,600 plants across the whole structure," said Medigrow's head of production Albert Theron, gazing proudly over the crop.

In 2017, the tiny landlocked kingdom of 2.1 million people decided to tap into the booming medical marijuana industry, becoming the first country in Africa to allow the cultivation of cannabis for medicinal purposes.

In order to meet legal standards, most traces of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)—the main psychoactive constituent responsible for marijuana's intoxicating effects—are removed from the seeds.

The remaining medical version is primarily made of the non-psychoactive substance, cannabidiol (CBD), and can only be 0.03 percent THC.

Investing in 'green gold'

Medigrow has invested $19.3 million (17.4 million euros) in cannabis-growing facilities around the country's capital, Maseru.

In 2017, Lesotho become the first country in Africa to allow the cultivation of cannabis for medicinal purposes

A heliport is also being built to ensure the cannabis—commonly referred to as "green gold"—is shipped safely and swiftly, said head of operations Relebohile Liphoto.

The investment is spurred by the industry's positive outlook.

The global market for medical cannabis is currently estimated at $150 billion (135 billion euros) and could reach $272 billion in 2028, according to Barclays Bank.

"At the moment we have almost 2,000 kilos (4,400 pounds) of biomass

and we are going to produce more than 1,000 litres (260 gallons) of CBD oil," said Liphoto.

"Depending on the market, we can sell cannabis oil at between $6,000 and $21,000 per litre."

Mostly foreign companies

Nicknamed "Kingdom in the Sky", Lesotho is the only country in the world whose entire territory sits higher than 1,400 metres (4,620 feet) above sea level.

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Deputy health minister Manthabiseng Phohleli told AFP that the legalisation of cannabis presented "a huge opportunity for the country", which boasts 300 days of sunshine per year.

"It attracts investors," she said. "So far we have around 10 businesses operating on the territory."

Entirely surrounded by South Africa, Lesotho is also one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 159 out of 189 in the latest UN Human Development Index.

Unemployment is high, public services are scant and almost a quarter of the population is infected with HIV.

The government charges 30,000 euros for a one-year renewable licence to grow cannabis.

But the cost is too steep for most locals, and the market is dominated by foreign companies, mainly from Canada and the United States.

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