# Rural Lesotho villagers embrace smartphone activism amid looming dam displacement



Joel Ralits’a, a 30-year-old farmer and occasional tour guide, lives in Malealea village near the Makhaleng River gorge, about 80 kilometres south of Lesotho's capital, Maseru. In the rural setting where he tends maize and sorghum fields passed down from his grandfather, Ralits’a represents the intersection of traditional livelihoods and modern challenges facing his community. His remote village might soon face significant upheaval due to a long-proposed dam project in the gorge that could flood the area and force residents, including Ralits’a and his elderly parents, to relocate.

The dam project, marked recently by the installation of a concrete anchor block dated 30 September 2023, is still navigating bureaucratic hurdles before construction can begin. Its potential to transform the landscape poses grave questions for the villagers about relocation timing, compensation, and participation in decision-making processes. Ralits’a, relying primarily on his smartphone for information in the absence of frequent consultations with government authorities or the Orange-Senqu River Commission overseeing the dam, exemplifies how connectivity is becoming vital in rural citizen engagement.

Water resources are a cornerstone of Lesotho’s economy, with the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP) generating about 10% of the national GDP by exporting water to neighbouring Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. The LHWP comprises a network of large dams, including the Mohale Dam east of Maseru, which previously necessitated the relocation of local communities. Dr Teboho Mosuoe-Tsietsi, a social scientist who conducted doctoral research on the displaced Mohale Dam families, has highlighted the need for comprehensive accountability measures to protect affected residents from the adverse social and economic consequences that often accompany such large infrastructural developments. This context takes place in a country where approximately 60% of rural households live below the poverty line, lagging behind urban populations in income and employment opportunities.

A recent continent-wide survey by Afrobarometer sheds light on African perspectives about climate change responsibility. The majority of respondents across 39 countries hold their own governments primarily accountable for leading climate action, rather than historic polluters from the global North, who are responsible for much of the climate instability impacting Africa. This finding suggests a lack of climate literacy but also points to an opportunity to deepen public engagement. Dr Nick Simpson, the chief research officer at the Climate Risk Lab within the University of Cape Town’s African Climate and Development Initiative, explains that those with access to information via smartphones, social media, and platforms like WhatsApp are more likely to attribute responsibility to historical emitters. He says, “There is a strong correlation between access to new media types that shifted the dial for attributing responsibility to historical emitters.”

Simpson notes that this shift could pressure African governments to respond more proactively, especially in international negotiations aimed at securing funds to address climate losses and damages. He suggests this heightened awareness among citizens might influence governments to focus more on climate adaptation strategies.

In Malealea village, basic infrastructure challenges persist. Ralits’a describes how transporting his elderly parents to medical facilities involves a complex, time-consuming process of coordinating donkey carts and off-road vehicles over rugged terrain before reaching conventional roads. Yet, information reaches the community almost instantly via mobile technology, illustrating a paradox of remoteness and digital connectedness.

If the Makhaleng River dam proceeds, Ralits’a and fellow villagers face the prospect of losing ancestral lands, livelihoods, and social networks. Relocation will be compulsory, but precisely where and under what conditions remain unanswered questions. Despite these uncertainties, Ralits’a is determined to use his limited resources, including his battered smartphone, to participate in decision-making and hold authorities accountable, reflecting a wider trend of digitally enabled civic engagement in rural African contexts.

This report is based on an account by Leonie Joubert for Daily Maverick and additional analysis of recent studies on African climate perspectives and rural development challenges. It forms part of a collaborative investigative journalism project on southern Africa’s climate tipping points between the Stellenbosch University School for Climate Studies and the Henry Nxumalo Foundation, linked to the global Covering Climate Now initiative.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.waterpowermagazine.com/analysis/lesotho-highlands-water-project-transforms-local-communities/> - This article discusses the Lesotho Highlands Water Project's impact on local communities, including the empowerment of artisans and tourism entrepreneurs through training programs, which aligns with the article's mention of the project's potential to transform the landscape and affect villagers' livelihoods.
* <https://www.lestimes.com/lesotho-highlands-water-project-phase-ii-delivers-beyond-energy-security-fuels-economic-growth-and-empowers-communities/> - This piece highlights the economic benefits and community empowerment resulting from Phase II of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, providing context to the article's mention of the project's potential to transform the landscape and affect villagers' livelihoods.
* <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad717-with-climate-change-making-life-worse-africans-expect-governments-and-other-stakeholders-to-step-up/> - This survey reveals that a significant majority of Africans expect their governments to lead in addressing climate change, which supports the article's point about the need for proactive government responses to climate challenges.
* <https://issafrica.org/topics/environmental-security-and-climate-change/01-sep-2008-environmental-change-and-human-security-in-lesotho-the-role-of-the-lesotho-highlands-water-project-in-environmental-degradation-oscar-g> - This analysis examines the environmental degradation caused by the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, including the loss of arable land and its impact on local communities, corroborating the article's discussion on the project's potential to flood areas and force relocations.
* <https://riverresourcehub.org/resources/lesotho-highlands-water-project-what-went-wrong-4060/> - This resource hub discusses the adverse effects of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, such as loss of livelihoods and inadequate compensation, aligning with the article's mention of the project's potential to flood areas and force relocations.
* <https://www.seinoli.org.ls/can-anyone-hear-the-socioeconomic-and-environmental-alarm-bells-on-lesotho-highlands-water-project/> - This article highlights the socioeconomic and environmental concerns associated with the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, including displacement of communities and loss of arable land, supporting the article's discussion on the project's potential to flood areas and force relocations.
* <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMiuAFBVV95cUxNZ2VDazlEbU9mQTZNdHpUR3FSd2psTTVGRWk5OUNnTEdUYlFvNXh1UllmREFOd0dieEVYdVFldC0wZ1d1LV9YSlg4UEJmZTZPYXRQR2FOcUlNbDl4R2FrRDhadEJHazl2cXl0bE9sRTgtYldzWkllbEpDYnNfMnNOUjBpSlBsbVI5LUNKbEdoZkFERGttOGRNVlRQQWtrOFJjYnpaNVlMUk9rS1dHalEwM3l2T3BtRld3?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data