# Lesotho dam project threatens to uproot generations yet offers rare digital lifeline



Joel Ralits’a’s life in the highlands near Malealea village in Lesotho straddles the divide between traditional livelihoods and modern challenges. At 30 years old, Ralits’a, whose family has farmed maize and sorghum on inherited land for generations, balances his daily work with occasional gigs as a tour guide, showing visitors to a nearby lodge the region’s rock paintings and waterfalls. His fields, hand-tilled and rooted in customary practice, lie near the Makhaleng River gorge, a site soon to face dramatic change.

A freshly poured concrete block dated September 30, 2023, rests at the edge of a steep drop into the gorge, marking the future site of a dam wall the local community has long anticipated. If plans by the Lesotho government and the Orange-Senqu River Commission proceed, the dam will flood the gorge, forcing Ralits’a, his ageing parents, and the entire village to relocate. Details about the timing, compensation, and relocation sites remain unclear, and villagers have had little direct consultation with authorities. Ralits’a uses his smartphone—a vital link to information and democratic engagement despite the area's remoteness—to try to understand and influence the unfolding situation.

The dam project is part of a broader national strategy, as Lesotho exports water through the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), which generates about 10% of the country’s gross domestic product by selling water to Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. These countries face growing water scarcity exacerbated by climate change, including severe drought episodes like that from 2015 to 2021. However, questions remain about how much benefit reaches local communities, particularly those displaced by such developments. Social scientist Dr Teboho Mosuoe-Tsietsi, who studied communities moved for the LHWP's Mohale Dam expansion, underlines the need for "exhaustive measures of accountability" to protect affected families from the negative impacts of forced relocations.

In this climate and economic context, a continent-wide survey by Afrobarometer reveals that Africans widely expect their governments to lead climate action, rather than placing primary responsibility on historically high-emitting countries or industries outside Africa. Dr Nick Simpson of the University of Cape Town notes a gap in climate literacy but also an opportunity to increase public engagement. His research finds that access to modern media—smartphones, social media platforms, and internet connectivity—correlates with greater awareness of the roles of global polluters and industries in climate responsibility. This growing awareness may encourage African governments to better respond to citizens’ expectations, particularly in international climate negotiations focused on securing financial support for adaptation and loss and damage.

Despite infrastructure challenges—such as poor roads requiring a donkey cart to reach medical facilities—technology provides a vital channel of information. For Ralits’a and his community, the smartphone offers a measure of agency, allowing them to stay informed and potentially advocate for themselves amid uncertainty.

The Lesotho dam project, part of ongoing efforts to address water scarcity and generate income, thus represents a crossroads for local communities and national development. The prospective flooding of the Makhaleng River gorge will displace families rooted in their land for generations, disrupting social networks and traditional ways of life. While consultation processes and compensation details remain opaque, affected villagers rely on connectivity and information to navigate an uncertain future. The situation highlights complex intersections between climate change, development, governance, and social equity in Lesotho and the broader southern African region.

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

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