

The Lesotho highlands water project: Supporters, critics, and mountain voices

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"Key negative factors in the debate [surrounding mountain infrastructure development] include brain drain, overexploitation of resources, disruption of local livelihoods and labour migration; while employment, better access to health and education, and exposure to the wider world are positive aspects for mountain development".

Kohler et al., Thematic Paper D1:

"Mountain Infrastructure: Access, Communications, and Energy"

The Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP) is a bi-national, multi-purpose undertaking between the Kingdom of Lesotho (KoL) and the Republic of South Africa (RSA). It is one of the world's largest infrastructure projects under construction today. The project comprises five proposed dams, 200 kilometers of tunnels blasted through the Maluti Mountains, and a 72-megawatt hydropower plant that will supply power to Lesotho. Construction began in 1984 with the first dam, Katse, delivering water in 1998. Mphahlele, the second dam, is currently in the final phases of construction. The entire project is expected to cost U.S. \$8 billion by the time of its completion in 2020. Current donors and lenders include the World Bank, Development Bank of South Africa, African Development Bank, the European Development Fund, various export credit agencies, and European commercial banks.

The Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA) is the semi-governmental organization responsible for resettlement and compensation issues, environmental protection, and overall construction management. According to the LHDA, the extremely rugged terrain of the region is ideal for the development of large water storage reservoirs. A driving rationale behind the project has been to utilize the mountains advantageously to capture, store, and release water (referred to as "white gold" by project authorities) into the Vaal River system to supply the industrial heartland of the Republic of South Africa in the Gauteng Province.

Critics of the controversial project, including the International Rivers Network, point to a number of problems that include the dramatic changes of the formerly remote mountain communities of the Lesotho Highlands; the moving of 20,000 people into the project region; the introduction of AIDS by the work force; and significant increases in prostitution and alcoholism. Environmental concerns include the prospective loss of thousands of hectares of arable or grazing land, downstream reductions in wetlands habitat, less water available downstream for people and wildlife, reductions in fisheries, and cessation of flooding.

A third component, which seems to be frequently lost in the international debates surrounding large-scale projects, are the voices of the local people themselves, the ones who are or will be most affected by both the positive and negative development factors involved. The Panos Oral Testimony Program, Mountain Voices: Lesotho, the Maluti Mountains, however, has succeeded in adding this human dimension to the LHWP through testimonies gathered from villages in the Molika-liko area in November 1997 and February 1998. A summary of their key findings are reproduced below, in illustration of both the anticipated and unanticipated changes, and the positive and the negative consequences, brought on by large mountain infrastructure development:

"All the narrators have now been relocated, but in their interviews they describe mountain life as they experienced it [before the project]. Agriculture and livestock formed the mainstay of their existence, but until recently most of the men spent significant periods of time as migrant labour in the South African mines. This was virtually the only option available to anyone wanting to earn cash. Several months after the last interview was gathered, the villagers were moved away from their mountain valley. The area is to disappear under the waters of the huge Mohale reservoir, together with their houses, fields, graveyards, grazing land and other private and communal resources.

The narrators describe a way of life that for generations has altered relatively little. The most significant forces for change in recent times have been increasing exposure to the monetary economy, and the advent of the road, precursor to relocation and built as part of the massive Lesotho Highlands Water Project. Agriculture, which allowed a reasonable degree of self-sufficiency, is a dominant theme, as are social institutions and the networks of mutual help and support that the community has relied on and takes pride in. In the face of imminent resettlement - some to lowlands and semi-urban areas; some to other highland communities - people talk of their feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability, their distrust of the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (LHDA) - the body responsible for implementing resettlement - and their fears for the future. The knowledge that their way of life was to change for ever may have led some narrators to romanticise their

current existence, but others acknowledge tensions and dissension within and between communities. Some narrators, too, talk of how social relations and attitudes were already undergoing change, and not always just along generational lines.

Not surprisingly, however, the most common cause of anxiety in these accounts is loss of self-sufficiency. Many express foreboding as to how losing their land will affect them not just in terms of livelihood, but also self-esteem. Most of the men's experience of working in the South African mines has made them wary of the dependence generated by being a wage labourers, and of the finite nature of money. Mountain life might be frugal but with land, they felt, they always had a productive resource - and a crucial degree of self-reliance. They speak with pride of their environmental knowledge and how it has enabled them to adapt and survive in a harsh landscape. But they also know that it is precisely the specialist nature of their knowledge - living in an area where each valley is distinguished by variations of climate, soil and vegetation - which may render them at a loss when they move elsewhere in the highlands. And for those moving to urban areas, such skills are all but redundant."

Sources:

1. The Lesotho Highlands Water Project webpage at:
<http://www.irn.org/programs/lesotho/index.asp?id=background.html>
2. International Rivers Network Lesotho Campaign webpage at:
<http://www.lhwp.org.ls/projecthistory/project-description/project-description.htm>
3. Panos Oral Testimony Program: Mountain Voices: Lesotho, the Maluti Mountains at: <http://www.mountainvoices.org/lesotho.asp>

Notes to readers

This paper is a case study on Mountain Infrastructure: Access, Communication, and Energy. A Mountain Forum e-consultation for the UNEP/ Bishkek Global Mountain Summit. 23-28 April 2002.