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Communities Affected by World Bank's Largest Dam Project in Africa Protest its Impoverishing Effects as Next Dam Moves Forward

As the world's financial leaders gather in Washington for the annual meetings of the World Bank (Sept. 24-25), help for Africa will be high on the agenda. But the Bank's biggest dam project in Africa, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP)¹ – sold as a way of pulling Lesotho out of poverty while supplying water to South Africa – is, according to the Bank itself, failing those who sacrificed everything for the project. Poverty is increasing in communities directly affected by the scheme's dams, and project-affected people are resorting to marching in the streets of Lesotho's capital to call attention to their plight.

The World Bank stated in a project report in March: "It appears increasingly likely that LHWP risks not meeting the Treaty requirements with respect to resettlement and development, or the legal requirement with the Bank that 'the standard of living of all people affected by the implementation of Phase 1B should not be compromised and where possible improved'."²

Today, 500 people from dam-affected communities marched in Maseru, to broadcast their lingering grievances, which include delayed and inadequate compensation, lack of training to replace their former livelihoods; large numbers of affected people left out of programs to restore lives, and lack of water and sanitation in resettler communities. The Survivors of the Lesotho Dams (SOLD) are calling for a halt to plans for more dams in the 5-dam scheme until their grievances are resolved. (*See background at end for SOLD's demands.*) South African media reported this week that Lesotho and South Africa will on Thursday sign an agreement for a feasibility study of the next dam in the scheme, the 155-meter-high Mashai Dam.³

Said Monaheng Mahlakeng, chairperson of SOLD:

"The communities' impoverished state make a mockery of the initial boom generated by the project's construction and highlight the worsening poverty in Lesotho."

In the past 10 years, the project has forced out thousands of people from their homes; submerged farmlands, forests and sacred places; destroyed fisheries, and caused social, cultural and economic impoverishment of the affected communities. Tens of thousands of people have been affected by the project in some way, according to resettlement experts on the project.

Said Jacob Lenka of the Lesotho NGO Transformation Resource Centre:

¹ World Bank financial support enabled construction of the project's first phase, at a cost of \$3.5 billion, which includes Africa's highest dam, the 185-meter Katse; Mohale, which, at 145 meters, flooded some of the country's most fertile lands; and the Muela hydropower project to supply energy to Lesotho. Future phases remain under consideration by the governments of Lesotho and South Africa. The project's treaty requires that directly affected people are not made poorer as a result of the project.

² from *Lesotho Highlands Water Project, World Bank Supervision Mission, March 22-30, 2004*

³ http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?area=/breaking_news/breaking_news__business/&articleid=251392

"We urge the World Bank, the South African and Lesotho governments to intervene to make sure that the dam-affected people's lives are restored to the acceptable living standards as required by the Treaty."

Said Lori Pottinger of International Rivers Network:

"The World Bank should move away from huge schemes such as the LHWP and toward quality projects that place effectiveness, social justice and environmental sustainability at the center. The Bank should give the poor the option of setting their own priorities, including choosing smaller, decentralized projects to meet basic needs. Such reforms are critical for Africa's future."

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BACKGROUND/ DEMANDS FROM SOLD:

While its water is exported, Lesotho suffers from drought and severe food shortages, with almost one million people (nearly half the population) now dependent on food aid. Affected people have tried to resolve these issues with meetings, ombudsman hearings, court actions and other interventions.

*"As a result of a delayed compensation, many of our children have not gone to school this winter.

Delayed compensation has adversely affected our share-cropping system, and host communities refuse to get into partnership with us, saying we do not have money. We have been unable to buy seeds and fertilizers this season. We demand our annual and lump sum compensation immediately with interest, as required by law."

*"We demand development and training from [project authorities] LHDA, to ensure that the lives of all communities affected by the LHWP activities directly or indirectly are restored by sustainable livelihoods.

*"We demand water and sanitation for the communities affected by Katse Dam.

*"We demand that *all* communities affected by LHWP related activities be sufficiently compensated."⁴

⁴ Some 152,000 people have been affected by reduced downstream flows because of the project's dams. The project authorities continue to have disagreement over compensation for these people, and to date there are no programs to help them, nor monitoring of how ecological changes from reduced water flows will impact their lives. See: <http://www.irn.org/programs/lesotho/index.php?id=000618.ifr.html>