

Katse Dam's deep flood of suffering

By [Alexander Matthews](#)

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A Basotho pony is struggling up a cliff, burdened by jerry cans that have been filled up at a spring. Behind the animal, far below and out of reach, lies the fat gleam of Katse Dam. This is the memory that sears through me when I recall my visit to Lesotho in July 2016.



Image source: www.commonswiki.org

I travelled there with photographer Dave Southwood, who has been visiting the mountainous kingdom frequently over the past two years.

Initially, he came to make portraits of the balaclava-clad shepherds who mind their flocks on the steep slopes above the dam. It was a way of exploring how, in portraiture, a blank mask complicates "the act of seeing and being seen", he says, triggering "questions about the viewer's projections and the subjects' power".

But, as he worked, the backdrop intruded. Ever-present and preternaturally still, the dam's "ridiculous, unnatural vertices" and "dense and depthless magnetism" captivated him.

Southwood wanted to dive deeper into the socioeconomic and cultural ramifications of Katse's construction. It, Mohale Dam

and various reservoirs and tunnels form the first phase of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. By June 2017, the project had earned the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority, which manages the scheme, almost R8bn from 19 years of supplying water to Gauteng.

Some have described this as a win-win - with impoverished Lesotho getting much-needed revenue for its "white gold", while helping to quench its big, industrialised neighbour's relentless thirst.

But what of those whose lives have been inexorably altered by the dam's presence?

We headed to Sephareng, one of the many tiny villages dotted around Katse, to find out. Among those we spoke to was Tsenyeho Sehole, who trained as a teacher in Maseru, but has since been unable to find work.

Sitting across from us in her immaculately tidy hut, she explained that the dam initially created jobs for her parents' generation: the men helped build and the women cooked and washed clothes.

"The work is finished now," she says. Most people are jobless - the fish farm and Katse Lodge (the only hotel for miles) employ only a fraction of the adults in the area.

She says communities around the dam are not allowed to use Katse's water (which is intended for SA only) and rely on springs that weaken to a trickle in times of drought. "We are running short of water."

Although taxis and buses ply the tarred roads that were built as part of the project, "they are too expensive" if you don't have an income. It costs Tsenyeho R12 to get to Katse village, where a clinic was constructed and there are now two bank branches. And so she walks there if she is well enough; she takes the taxi only if she is too sick.

Tsenyeho's grandfather Ramatseliso Sehole is also grateful the road has made access to services much easier, but he mourns the way the dam has made travel to once close-by villages so much harder for those without a vehicle.

He says the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority promised the villagers boats to allow them to cross the dam easily - but these have not been provided. "We are unable to reach our friends and bury our beloved ones who have passed away. We are not happy with this dam."

Before the water filled the valley floor "all the animals were grazing very nicely and there was a lot of pastoral land", Sehole says. "Even when the snow had fallen, there was still pasture for the animals."

While the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority has provided compensation for the loss of arable land (in the form of money or food), this has not made farming on the cramped, infertile slopes any easier.

Before the dam, villagers would fish in the river. Although he is a fan of the trout introduced into the dam (which is exported to Japan), Sehole said "we are not allowed to fish anymore".

He says people are arrested if they are caught doing so.

The dam "has affected us a lot when it comes to spiritual things", he says.

Sangomas in the area require flowing water for their rituals; the dam has denied them access to this.

"It's clear that phase one, like most massive damming projects, has fomented socioeconomic problems that haven't been fully addressed by those responsible," Southwood says.

"If these problems are not addressed in law, countless thousands of Basotho will continue to have their lives negatively affected as successive phases of the scheme unfold."

Encouragingly, there has been some success in using the legal system to improve the lot of those affected.

In 2012, Seinoli, Lesotho's first independent public interest legal centre, won a court case with an order that forced the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority to restore access to running water for the 610 residents of Mapeleng village after phase one had resulted in them losing this. It is a legal precedent that will benefit more than 4,000 other Basotho who have also lost water.

Another court victory three years later resulted in the authority having to pay compensation to the Ha Lejone Community Co-operative for brushwood, fodder and medicinal plants lost as a result of the dam. The ruling should lead to compensation for the 63 other co-operatives formed to represent the interests of affected communities.

Although about seven years behind schedule, preparations for the next phase of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project are under way. With roughly 5,000ha that will be flooded to make way for the new Polihali Dam, phase two is likely to cause similar upheaval for the communities who live there.

Tente Tente, divisional manager for phase two, says this time it will be different. "A much-improved compensation policy, a Livelihoods Restoration programme and a strong public participation approach are some of the improvements that underpin the intent of the Lesotho Highland Development Authority," he says.

He did not respond to further questions about what these would entail.

With the grinding poverty and near non-existent employment prospects around Katse, I ask why there haven't been greater efforts to deliver job opportunities to the communities affected by phase one.

Tente suggests that "many avenues of beneficiation were created". This included "vocational training (plumbing, metal works, shattering, bricklaying, handicrafts, cooking and catering). Many schools, clinics and community centres were also built at this time and handed over to the government at the completion of this phase."

Asked how many people received vocational training and how many schools, community centres and clinics were built, he did not reply.

Should funding allow, Southwood intends to document the region that will be affected by phase two - the lure of Katse remains strong - and he will be returning to the dam soon.

His visits are as much about solidifying relationships, listening and sharing images as they are about capturing new ones. A portable printer he keeps in the boot of his car ensures that all of his subjects receive hard copies of their photographs.

His images from the dam were posted over the course of a week on the Open Society Instagram account in August 2016, while a portfolio of more than 20 photographs will be exhibited at the 2017 Joburg Art Fair from 8-10 September.

Southwood's images offer a reminder of the human cost of ensuring SA's water security, even as the media focuses on phase two's delays and tender irregularities. (The Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse plans to take legal action against the Department of Water and Sanitation over alleged delays.)

Through continuing to document and share the stories and struggles of people at Katse, he hopes they - and the others who will be affected by future phases of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project - ultimately get a better, fairer deal.

A portfolio of Dave Southwood's Lesotho prints will be showcased at the AVA Gallery booth Ao5 at the 2017 FNB Joburg Art Fair.

Source: Business Day

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