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A study of the impact of Lesotho Highlands Water Project on residents of Khohlo-Ntso : is it too late for equitable benefit sharing?

Letsebe, Phoebe Harward

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ABSTRACT

Large-scale water project development is one of the most contentious areas of infrastructure development, physically displacing an estimated 40 to 80 million people throughout the past century. Overwhelming evidence of the adverse socio-economic impacts on local communities resulting from large dam construction has called into question whether such development truly benefits the majority or, rather, serves to promote elite accumulation of wealth at the expense of marginalized peoples. One of the most glaring issues concerning large dam development is the age-old question of distribution as those living in dam areas or downstream of dammed rivers suffer a disproportionate share of costs while enjoying few benefits. Recognized by the WCD (2000) as one of seven strategic priorities in decision-making concerning large dams, benefit sharing is one way to increase equity among stakeholders. A handful of countries around the world have incorporated benefit sharing mechanisms into large-scale water and hydroelectric projects, including Lesotho. With construction of Katse Dam beginning in the late 1980s, residents of Khohlo-Ntso have a quarter of a century's experience with Africa's second largest water transfer and hydroelectric project, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP). While the adverse impacts of the LHWP on rural highlands Basotho communities has been widely documented, only one other study has researched benefit sharing within the LHWP.

The central aim of this study was to discover what were local residents' perceptions of LHWP benefit sharing as a community living only 10 kilometers downstream of Katse Dam. This research utilized a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth account of local residents' experiences, including their level of awareness of the LHWP benefit sharing mechanism, their experiences as a downstream community and their suggestions for transforming the LHWP into a more equitable project. Triangulation of qualitative methodological research techniques was employed to collect data including in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus groups and primary document analysis. The main findings of this study were that after living with Katse Dam for 25 years, local residents of Khohlo-Ntso are still unaware of their rights under the LHWP Treaty, do not know about the LHRF and have little hope of sharing benefits of the project.