

# Off-grid power brings forgotten villages to light



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**M**ASERU - Hasetefane and surrounding communities in Mokhotlong will finally come to light by the end of 2023, after staying in darkness from time immemorial.

While electricity is a basic need, Hasetefane community in Mokhotlong is among the majority of mountain communities that do not have access to electricity, which has worsened animal and property theft in the area.

Their long-awaited dream of having access to electricity will finally come to pass through the UNDP project named 'Development of Cornerstone Public Policies and Institutional Capacities to accelerate Sustainable Energy for All (SE4All) Progress' which is funded by GEF and implemented by the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Through this project, thousands of Basotho across the country, particularly those in rural areas, will be connected to off-grid solar energy.

To the Hasetefane community, owning a television or having electrical appliances has always been a far-fetched dream for them.

They have always wished that one day they will be brought out of darkness into light owing to the struggles and suffering they encounter daily due to lack of access to electricity.

In an interview with Public Eye, one of the community

members, Moeti Mokhehi, said they do not just wish for the comfort that comes with having access to electricity, but believe having power will curb property and animal theft that the village and surrounding communities experience daily.

He said since they don't have electricity, the villagers and surrounding communities rely on wood, paraffin and gas which they say is very expensive and poses danger to their lives.

"One of the most common challenges that we face is communicating during emergencies. We are compelled to travel to town to have our phones charged so we are unable to effectively respond to health emergencies and sometimes people reach health centres in worse condition or even dead.

"Calling a car to take a patient to a doctor has always been a struggle without a charged cellphone," he said.

He said the struggles that come with not having electricity have made them feel like second class-citizens in their own country and made them believe that the government only values people who live in towns.

Another community member, Mankutloeleng Molantoa, said as a mother and a wife to her home, she is exposed to a lot of danger as she has to travel long distances in isolated places to seek firewood so that she can be able to cook for her family.

She said with access to

electricity, she will not only be safe from GBV that has escalated in Lesotho but will safely stay at her home assured that no animal or property thieves will take advantage of darkness and rob her family of their property.

She added that their children who are currently left behind in terms of technology will be able to use the latest technologies and learn from educational programmes offered through television and radio which would empower them in a long run.

Owning electrical appliances has always been her dream, not just so she can too enjoy the benefits that come with having electrical appliances but also so that she can save her food in a refrigerator and stop the wastage that comes with disposing of them early.

"It is saddening to see other children progressing in life because they have access to the latest technologies. Our children are not restricted by our poverty, but by not having access to electricity since most of the technological appliances need electricity connectivity," she said.

Another concern for the community which depends on farming is that they do not get warning messages on time from relevant ministries and departments about weather forecasts.

They say since they do not have access to electricity, they do not have televisions while their radios and phones more often than

not run out of battery.

"The ministry of natural resources, through the Lesotho Metrological Services, warns communities on expected weather conditions via cellphone messages, television and radio. Given our situation, this all becomes a challenge.

"As a result, our animals and crops often die and get destroyed due to extreme weather conditions," Moeketsi Ramothangoana, another community member said.

In an interview with Public Eye, SE4All project manager Thabang Phuroe said the project is aimed at affording Basotho with off-grid electricity generated from solar.

He said at the time of the project's formation, access to electricity within Lesotho was in the region of 30% with only 9% of rural households accessing the grid.

"Importantly, electricity only accounted for 7% of consumed energy with biomass making up the most significant portion (63%) of overall national energy demand," he said.

However, he said the costs of grid connecting remote rural communities are not economically viable and the government at the time it approved the project had very little experience in pursuing off-grid alternatives. As a result, an off-grid programme was urgently needed.

He said with the project, they will have 10 green mini-grids and

10 energy centres.

Phuroe said for this to be achieved the programme had to ensure the necessary supportive conditions and capacities were in place.

"To this end the programme has invested in the development of the necessary policy and regulatory frameworks. For instance, supporting the development of the Mini-Grid Regulatory Framework, which was approved in 2020, in mapping the more sustainable locations by supporting feasibility studies, in sensitising potential customers and local governments through community outreach programmes," he said.

He added that the Lesotho Bureau of Statistics and the Department of Energy have been trained and empowered to measure, monitor and track key energy-related statistics.

The programme further established an inclusive Investment Committee (IC) which involves representatives from various government departments and entities to provide practical exposure into the tendering, evaluation and financing processes.

He said to date 10 mini-grid concession agreements have been signed with a locally registered company (IPower) and preparatory work is well advanced in terms of infrastructure location, licensing, system design and procurement.

According to him, the mini grids will provide power to households, businesses and public sector and community institutions such as schools, clinics, administrative facilities and churches, further noting that once the 10 mini-grids are developed, electricity services will benefit over 25,000 people across five remote rural districts.

He said to date the 10 energy centres are operational in five districts; Mohale's Hoek, Quthing, Qacha's Nek, Thaba-Tseka and Mokhotlong.

"The energy centres offer a range of energy goods and services to remote off-grid communities including small scale solar PV systems, solar lanterns, energy saving cookstoves, phone charging services and the like.

"Based on the foundation or 'Cornerstone' work of this UNDP programme, interest in supporting and investing in the off-grid market in Lesotho is on the increase.

"Recent indications are that the World Bank is showing interest in Lesotho's off-grid potential through its Scaling Up Renewable Energy Program, while the European Union Delegation appears to be considering possible re-engagement with the Lesotho Energy sector having supported energy centres in the past within its Multi-annual Indicative Programme (2021-2027). But most importantly, the Cornerstone Programme has successfully leveraged private sector and commercial investment in the sector which is a most promising statement for the future health of the off-grid sector," he stated.