

Light and opportunity: UNDP brings clean energy to remote Thaba-Tseka school

‘MATHATO SEBOKA

THABA-TSEKA – The remote Itekeng Combined School in Pitseng has been illuminated with new possibilities, celebrating its recent connection to clean, reliable electricity.

This transformative development, delivered through the Access to Affordable Renewable Energy (AARE) project, marks a significant leap forward for a community long left in the dark, promising to reshape the educational and future prospects of its students.

The school is one of the first eight facilities to be electrified in the district under the ambitious Renewable Lesotho Programme. The initiative is a powerful collaboration, implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with crucial funding from the European Union (EU), alongside contributions from the Government of Ireland and UNDP itself.

For the school’s head, ‘Matšelisio Mosehle, the flickering on of a light switch signifies the dawn of a new era.

“We have electricity right now and we have been donated 20 computers,” she expressed with palpable gratitude. “We are truly thankful that you ensured that even the elementary school students know about technology, so that when they get to high school, they would not struggle.”

However, Mosehle also highlighted the stark challenges that remain, underscoring that electricity alone is not a panacea. The school is critically understaffed, with only three teachers



for the primary section and four for the high school. This places an immense burden on educators, with one science and technology teacher reportedly delivering 54 lessons per week, often by mixing students from different grades to ensure no child is left behind.

The District Administrator of Thaba-Tseka, Tlali Mphahla, echoed the sentiment of gratitude, emphasizing the fundamental role of power in modern life.

“We live in an age of technology, life is changing rapidly and if our children do not have access to technology they will be left behind in so many things,” he stated, framing the electrification as a vital anti-poverty measure. Sekhele Morebetsana, the Member of Parliament for Mashai, made a heartfelt plea to the community of Pitseng, urging them to safeguard the new infrastructure. “Let us preserve this



electricity that has been given to us and use it for the betterment of our children,” he said, recognizing the community’s role in sustaining the project’s benefits.

The event served as a testament to international partnership. Dr Jacqueline Olweya, a UNDP Representative, stated, “Through this project, we are proving that when the Government, development partners and the communities unite around a shared vision, we can power progress, advance climate action and build a more inclusive Lesotho.”

She provided sobering context, citing statistics that reveal a deep energy divide: while urban areas enjoy 71.5 percent electrification, the rate plummets to just 11.4 percent in rural areas like Thaba-Tseka. “This inequality is seen in the learning disabilities of children in the rural areas even in life in general,” Dr Olweya noted.

EU Ambassador, Matte Sunnergren, highlighted the dual benefit of the initiative, combining funding and expertise to expand sustainable energy for both Lesotho and the planet.

“This collaboration ensures that efforts on the ground contribute directly to global environment goals while fostering national energy security and growth,” the Ambassador explained.

The AARE project is specifically designed to tackle energy poverty and gender inequality in rural communities. Its comprehensive approach includes establishing a financing facility for energy transition, improving household energy access via green mini-grids and solar home systems, and electrifying essential public facilities.

The project’s ambitions are vast. By its conclusion in 2028, it aims to deliver over 4 400 mini-grid connections, install thousands of solar home systems and efficient cook-stoves - prioritizing female-headed households - and bring power to two dozen off-grid schools and clinics.

Since its launch in August 2024, the project has already made significant headway, establishing its financial mechanism and, most importantly, connecting 564 households - nearly half led by women - and eight schools, already brightening the lives of 1 136 students. For the learners of Itekeng Combined School, the future is no longer a distant dream but a connected, powered reality within reach.

News

Maseru billboard purge ignites business backlash

RETHABILE MOHONO

‘We paid for permits, now we are told it’s illegal’

MASERU – A campaign to clear road reserves for safety sparks allegations of negligence, double standards, and a devastating blow to local enterprise, exposing a deep rift between the Maseru City Council (MCC) and the business community it once licensed.

A fierce confrontation is escalating between the city council, the Roads Directorate and the local business community, threatening to derail trust in public institutions and jeopardize livelihoods. The flashpoint is a nationwide campaign to remove billboards from road reserves, a move authorities defend as critical for road safety but which business owners condemn as a haphazard, unjust and poorly planned assault on their operations.

The dispute has laid bare allegations of shocking negligence, a glaring lack of coordination between government bodies and accusations of selective enforcement that seemingly favours large foreign companies over indigenous entrepreneurs.

At the heart of the turmoil lies a simple, yet explosive, question: how can a billboard, legally permitted and paid for years ago, suddenly be declared illegal by the very authorities that approved it? The tension reached a boiling point on Wednesday when Public Eye contacted Lintle Mosala of the MCC.

When questioned about the growing business community outcry, Mosala, a former journalist, responded with aggression, demanding to know the identity of the complainant before she would comment. “I will not be able to answer while I don’t know who complained, because we serve different clients with different contracts,” she said curtly.

She deflected further inquiries to the Roads Directorate, stating, “all we did was to inform them that they have to remove the billboards, and they were given time to do so.”

This defensive posture has done little to assuage a business sector feeling victimized by a system it once trusted. Business owners,

many of whom requested anonymity for fear of reprisals, describe a process that is both absurd and devastating. “What is very disappointing is that before billboards were installed, the MCC had assessed the locations and we paid for the permits,” one business owner lamented.

“Now, after so many years, we are told this is not the right place. How come the MCC did not know or work with the Roads Directorate before approving our applications? This shows complete negligence.”

Another pointed out the profound economic fallout, stating, “We have workers who rely on us, and with what is happening, it means businesses will be lost and workers will lose their jobs. This is more than just about billboards; it’s about people’s lives.”

Compounding the sense of injustice are widespread allegations that the enforcement campaign is not being applied uniformly. Multiple business owners claim that while their locally-owned billboards are being torn down, those belonging to South African outdoor advertising giants, such as Primedia, remain conspicuously untouched. This has fuelled accusations of double standards and economic protectionism, with local enterprises accusing the MCC and the Roads Directorate of unfairly targeting Basotho businesses.

When confronted with these allegations, Mosala distanced herself entirely, raising her voice to insist, “I am not in a position to answer that. The Roads Directorate can answer that.”

The controversy deepened further when Mosala was questioned on whether the campaign was a coordinated effort to clear the market for businesses linked to business tycoon and local government minister, Lebona Lephema.

She dismissed the query as baseless, claiming, “I am totally clueless about that.” The legal justification for the removals rests on the definition and regulation of road reserves. According to the national road design standards, a road reserve is

a designated strip of land reserved for current and future road infrastructure, including the roadway itself, sidewalks, drainage, utilities and safety features like guardrails.

The width of these reserves is legally defined – For Class A roads in rural areas, the reserve extends 15 metres from the centreline on each side while for Class B roads, it extends 10 metres on each side. Any structure within this reserve, without explicit permission from the relevant road authority, is considered an encroachment and is illegal. The Roads Directorate’s campaign is based on the argument that the billboards in question violate these spatial regulations.

Internationally, the principle of keeping road reserves clear is a cornerstone of traffic safety, endorsed by global bodies like the World Road Association and the World Health Organization. The primary reasons are that obstructions like billboards can severely limit a driver’s ability to see oncoming traffic, pedestrians, cyclists, or potential hazards at intersections and around bends. Clear sight lines are critical for allowing drivers enough time to react and avoid collisions.

While all advertising poses some distraction risk, international best practice dictates that signage within the immediate roadway environment should be minimized. Overly cluttered or strategically poorly placed billboards can cognitively overload drivers, increasing the risk of accidents.

The concept of a ‘clear zone’ is also a key international standard. This is an unobstructed, traversable area beyond the edge of the travel lane that allows a driver who has left the roadway to recover control. Billboards and other rigid structures within this zone are deemed fixed-object hazards, turning a simple run-off-road incident into a potentially fatal crash, giving credence to the argument that unobstructed reserves provide space for emergency vehicles to pull over, allow for the future construction

of sidewalks and cycling lanes, and facilitate access for road maintenance and utility crews. In an official statement on Facebook, the Road Directorate leaned heavily on these safety and regulatory principles.

The agency stated the campaign followed “extensive consultations with stakeholders” and is “crucial for improving road safety.” It argued that clear reserves improve visibility, reduce accident likelihood, and provide space for emergency pull-overs and safety infrastructure. However, the business community finds these justifications hollow in the face of their lived experience. For them, the issue is not the theory of road safety, but the practice of governance.

The core of their argument is a devastating contradiction, the MCC, a city planning authority, previously assessed, approved, and collected fees for the very billboard locations the Roads Directorate now deems illegal. This indicates a catastrophic failure in inter-departmental coordination and long-term planning.

“It’s unbelievable that the MCC approved these locations years ago and collected fees from us, only to later say the placements were wrong,” a frustrated business operator said. “They need to take responsibility for their poor planning instead of punishing businesses that followed the rules.”

This lack of coordination was further highlighted when Mosala was asked if businesses would be relocated or given new sites after the removals. She admitted uncertainty, saying, “We did ask the Roads Directorate to allocate billboard spaces if there will be any available,” a statement that offers little comfort to businesses facing financial ruin.

As the removal campaign continues, it has become a stark flashpoint for broader debates over transparency, accountability, and the government’s role as a reliable partner to the private sector. Until the MCC and the Roads Directorate can provide a coherent, unified explanation for how legally permitted structures became illegal overnight, and until they present a fair path forward for the businesses they licensed, the storm brewing in Maseru is unlikely to subside.

The billboards may be coming down, but the questions they raised about governance and justice are now towering over the city.