

Eastern Cape villagers say they've been left out of huge water project

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Villagers who live close to the Xonxa Dam on the Witkei River in the Eastern Cape have accused the authorities of using their water to supply Queenstown while they are drinking dirty water.



Image source: www.chrishanidm.gov.za

The villagers, from Xonxa in the Lady Frere district, say they are being overlooked in the multi-million Xonxa water project.

The R546-million project, launched in 2014, was designed to supplement water supplies to Queenstown (Komani) whose main water source, the Bonkolo dam, dried out due to drought. Queenstown currently depends on the Waterdown dam in Whittlesea 60km away.

Villagers who live 500 metres from the Xonxa dam say that when the Chris Hani District Municipality launched the project in 2013 they were told they would be the first to benefit.

But now the project is nearing completion and they have not been included.

On 23 November the municipality said on its website that the project was “95% complete” and would be completed by the end of November. The final phase, the municipality said, was the transfer of water to the villages of Ilinge and Machibini, which were also experiencing water shortages.

Concerned that their villages were not mentioned, the Lady Frere villagers have set up an association to take the matter further.

Nomfusi Soboyisi from Gxabane village said that in her village the taps were dry because of the drought. “The river is far and sometimes it also runs out of water. Then we are forced to hire a tractor or truck to fetch water in Xonxa river which is supplied by Xonxa dam,” said Soboyisi.

She said it cost at least R250 to hire a tractor or truck. Some villagers used donkeys.

“The water we are getting from the river is not clean and Chris Hani District Municipality (CHDM) is aware of that but seemingly they do not care about us,” said Soboyi.

'Politicians were playing with our feelings'

Speaking for the residents' association, Lubabalo Nojekwa said when the municipality visited the villages in 2013 before launching the water project, people were very happy.

“But now it is clear these politicians were playing with our feelings,” he said.

Municipality spokesperson Thobeka Mqamelo told GroundUp there had been a misunderstanding. She said the project would include Xonxa and this had been communicated to the villagers. But asked when Xonxa would be included, since the project is “95% complete”, she said the treatment works that will purify water for the Xonxa village community “is on CHDM plans and will follow once the funds are made available by the Department of Water and Sanitation”.

Nojekwa said villagers wanted a timeline.

He said the Xonxa dam belonged to the people of Lady Frere not Queenstown.

If we are not going to benefit from this project then the project will stop until Chris Hani District Municipality go back to what they promised us,” said Nojekwa.

Sizwe Witbooi, chairperson of the residents' association, said the association was consulting lawyers in Grahamstown and intended to apply for a court order to stop the project until the municipality made a clear commitment to the villagers.

This article was [originally published](#) on [GroundUp](#).