**Conflict Factsheet**

"Water Coup" in Lesotho

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of conflict</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Conflict Locality</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Southern Africa</td>
<td>1986–1986</td>
<td>Lesotho</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conflict Summary**

Amidst serious drought conditions and increased water demand in South Africa in 1986, the Government of South Africa facilitated a military coup against Lesotho's prime minister Leabua Jonathan, which opposed an important water development project destined to divert large amounts of water from the Basotho highlands to South Africa's industrial heartland around Johannesburg.
Conflict History

Despite Lesotho’s economic dependence on South Africa, relations between both countries were strained throughout the early 1980s (Wentworth, 2013). For one part, Lesotho’s prime minister Leabua Jonathan offered sanctuary to African National Congress (ANC) rebels fighting the South African Apartheid regime, leading to repeated incursions of the South African Army on Basotho territory in 1982 and 1985. For the other part, he opposed an important water project destined to supply South Africa with water from the Basotho highlands: the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP).

Eventually, the refusal of Jonathan to turn over ANC activists incited the Government of South Africa to strictly regulate all cross-border activity in December 1985, effectively imposing an economic blockade on its tiny landlocked neighbour. The resulting economic anxieties of many Basotho added to popular discontent with Jonathan’s regime. On January 20, 1986, Jonathan was ousted by the pro-South African general Justin Lekhanya in a bloodless coup and with the alleged support of the South African government. Only nine month later, the governments of Lesotho and South Africa signed a treaty authorizing the LHWP (ICE).

Growing water demand in South Africa

The South African government had numerous reasons to support a coup against Jonathan, including the fact that Lesotho was offering sanctuary to ANC rebels. More importantly, however, it sought greater access to Lesotho’s water resources (ICE). Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, South Africa’s water demand had consistently increased, especially in growing urban centres and the industrial hub around Johannesburg. Serious drought conditions in the mid-1980s, which drained reserves to a fifty-year low, added to growing water scarcity and threatened the regional economy. This incited the South African government to seek greater access to the southern water resources in the Basotho highlands (ICE; Wolf & Newton 2008).

Pressures on Leabua Jonathan’s government

Plans and negotiations to divert water from the Basotho highlands to the Vaal river system south of Johannesburg dated back at least to the 1950s. They were followed by a feasibility report in 1979, which established that the LHWP could deliver about 70m3/s water to the Vaal river system - roughly corresponding to 17.7% of South Africa’s annual freshwater withdrawals between 2010 and 2013 (The World Bank, 2015). The project further provided for the generation of hydroelectric power through the building of several dams in Lesotho and South Africa, and thus the reduction of Lesotho’s dependence on South African energy imports (Wolf & Newton 2008). From January 1984 to February 1985, the Government of Lesotho commissioned a review of the study by a panel of independent international expert. Yet, Jonathan’s government remained sceptical as to the high economic and environmental costs of the project. Moreover, the project implied tighter political relations with the South African Apartheid regime, which Jonathan fervently opposed (ICE; Wentworth, 2013).
South Africa and Lesotho could not agree on the provisions of the LHWP treaty up until 1986, after Jonathan had been ousted by the pro-South African Justin Lekhanya. Since then, the treaty has proven to be quite resilient despite dramatic political shifts in South Africa in the early 1990s.

**Resolution Efforts**

A treaty governing the LHWP was eventually signed in October 1986. It provided for the creation of a Joint Permanent Technical Commission (JPTC) to represent Lesotho and South Africa in the implementation and operation of the LHWP. It also committed both parties to the implementation of the first two phases of the project and provided the options for developing further phases in the future. Phase 1A and 1B were implemented between 1987 and 2008, including the construction of Africa’s highest dam at the time, the Katse dam, at 185m above the sea level, but also the development of tunnels, roads, power lines, engineering stations and administrative facilities.

The project also included environmental protection measures, compensation and resettlement for locally affected populations, as well as a development fund channelling project revenues to development programmes. Funding was provided by the World Bank, which approved a loan of $100 million for Lesotho in September 1991. Other donors included the African Development Bank (AfDB), the European Development Fund, the Development Bank of Southern Africa, as well as numerous private Banks from South Africa, Italy, France, Germany and the United Kingdom (Wolf & Newton 2008; ICE; Wentworth, 2013).

**Detrimental impacts on local populations and the environment**

Despite environmental measures and compensations, the LHWP has repeatedly been criticised. Sceptics challenge Lesotho’s ability to continue exporting such large amounts of water in the future, as the countries resources have been strained by recurrent droughts and increased domestic water demand, which have not been adequately accounted for in the LHWP. Moreover, the project has had a series of detrimental impacts for local populations and biodiversity. Floods resulting from sabotage and accidents during the construction of the LHWP have reduced available grazing land by nearly 10%, undermining food security in Lesotho. People displaced by the project have not been adequately compensated, while the generated hydro-electricity remains unaffordable for many Basotho. In addition the LHWP has been plagued by controversies over bribery and embezzlement of royalties paid by South Africa (Earle & Turton 2005; Tlali 2012; Ntaote 2013). Critics also deplore that most construction contracts have been awarded to South African firms and that the LHWP has not created sufficient jobs for Basotho (ICE; Wolf & Newton 2008; ICE; Wentworth, 2013).

Since its inception the LHWP treaty has been renegotiated several times, leading at times to minor arguments. The treaty has however proven to be quite resilient and both countries could agree on the implementation of phase 2 of the project in May 2013 (Wentworth, 2013; LHDA, 2015).
### Intensities & Influences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensities</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International / Geopolitical Intensity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Suffering</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

| Influences           | | |
|----------------------|---|
| Environmental Influences | | |
| Societal Influences  | | |

### Resolution Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Success</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in geographical scope</td>
<td>There has been no reduction in geographical scope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased capacity to address grievance in the future</td>
<td>The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievance Resolution</td>
<td>Grievances have been mostly ignored.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity</td>
<td>Decrease in conflict intensity at least partially the result of conflict resolution strategies.</td>
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</table>

### Diplomatic Crisis

- **Diplomatic crisis involving non-violent tools such as economic sanctions**

### Violent Conflict

- **Yes**

### Salience with nation

- **National**

### Mass displacement

- **None**

### Cross Border Mass Displacement

- **No**
### Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

#### Treaty/agreement
A treaty governing the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP) was signed in 1986. It involved the creation of a Joint Permanent Technical Commission (JPTC) to represent Lesotho and South Africa in the implementation and operation of the project. It also committed both parties to the implementation of the first two phases of the project and provided options for developing further phases in the future. The treaty has proven to be quite resilient despite dramatic political shifts in South Africa in the early 1990s.

#### Compensation
Although the LHWP includes compensation and resettlement measures for locally affected populations, people displaced by the project have not been adequately compensated.

#### Environmental restoration & protection
The LHWP includes environmental protection measures, but these have been repeatedly criticised since the project may have failed to take into account the increased domestic water demand and the recent recurrent droughts.

### Resources and Materials

References with URL:

ICE - The Inventory of Conflict & Environment (date unknown). Lesotho "Water Coup". (Case Number 56). Washington, DC: American University


Further information

https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/water-coup-lesotho