

Targeted Investigation Reports 2024

The Impact of the Voelpan Dam on Mosala Secondary School



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1. Background and Context

The closure of the mines around Matjhabeng has resulted in serious struggles for the communities that hosted the mining companies. No one was spared from the disaster of mine closure. The legacy of the mining operations continues to be a burden on the hosting communities.

Mosala Secondary School is one of the two secondary schools in Nyakallong near Allanridge, a small mining town in Matjhabeng Local Municipality of Lejoeleputsoa District. The school was established in 1986, and it was named after Mr Mosala Makate, the father to Inspector Makate. Inspector Makate was a leading academic and former school principal who named the school in honour of his father.

2. Problem description

Mosala Secondary School is situated within the community of Riverside in Nyakallong, adjacent to the Voelpan Dam. The school has suffered its fair share of problems created by the Voelpan Dam. The architecture and the facade of the school illustrate its modernity and high level of professionalism that was applied when the structure was erected, with meticulous attention to the finest detail. The backyard of the school tells a different story. The fence is submerged in the water and shows all the signs of corrosion from the acids that are contained in the Voelpan water. Members of the school community have no access to the space in the backyard of the school. This problem has been going on for many years without any solution in sight. The problem has hurt the school community.

During the winter months when the water levels decrease, white and green patches can be seen on the ground. Sometimes they turn brown and nothing grows to full height in that soil. The grass is not green enough and quickly turns yellow even during the middle of summer, you can extirpate the grass and its roots by simply kicking it.

The community food garden that was initiated by a group of local women could not yield the desired results. They planted maize and tomatoes, but their crops could only grow a few centimetres above the knee of an adult person of average height.

All these symptoms illustrate the high level of acids and TDS gases that are contained in the soil. When the strong winds of the spring season blow in the direction of the classrooms, the windows have to be closed to deter the terrible smell that comes from the dam.

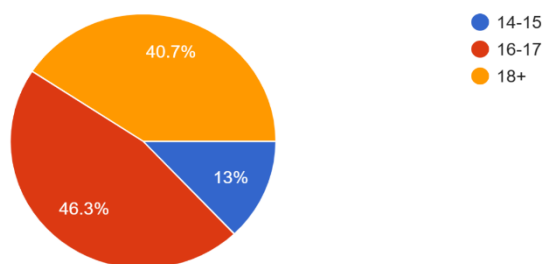
The teaching and learning program is always disrupted, because learners have to miss classes on some days as a result of respiratory problems.

During summer when the water levels rise after the heavy rains, the backyard of the school premises is inaccessible because the water that can drown learners. This is where the community food gardens are and it's difficult to get to the crops.

3. Investigation results

We conducted a survey with the school community. 54 learners responded to the survey. Nearly half of the respondents were 16-17 years old (46,3%). 40,7% were 18 years and older and 13% were 14 or 15 years old.

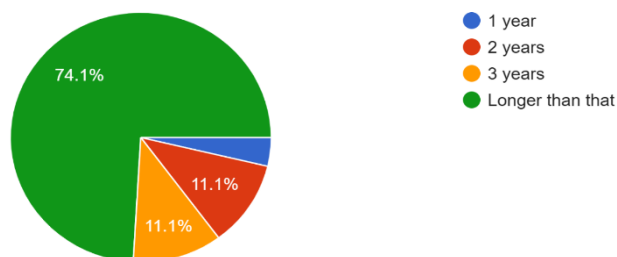
What age group do you fall into?
54 responses



Two out of three learners were female (64,8%) and 35,2% were male. The young girls were more accessible through their participation in the extramural activities around the school. It was also much easier to approach the girls than the boys because they are more organized. Boys were more concerned about what is going to happen with their responses than the girls.

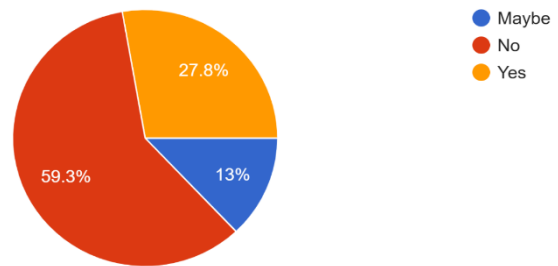
Most of the learners who took part in this survey are matriculants. Two out of three learners were from Grade 12 (66,7%), 20,4% were from grade 10 and 11 and 13% were from grade 8 and 9. The level of maturity in them was a clear indication of the many aspirations that they carry and hope for the future after completion of their high school years. Learners in the lower grades did not show much enthusiasm as their matriculant counterparts. Three out of four learners (74,1%) have been at the school for more than 3 years.

Since when have you been attending at Mosala Secondary School?
54 responses



More than half of the respondents (59,3%) feel that Mosala Secondary School is not a conducive environment for learning. 27,8% felt it is ok and 13% said it is maybe conducive. While the school was not considered as conducive, the teaching staff has played a big role in the development and well-being of the learners and created a warm and homely environment for the learners at school. Those in the senior phase find the school environment more relaxing and exciting than the junior phase. They feel that the teachers have prepared them well enough for future challenges post-matric.

Do you think that Mosala is a conducive environment for learning.
54 responses

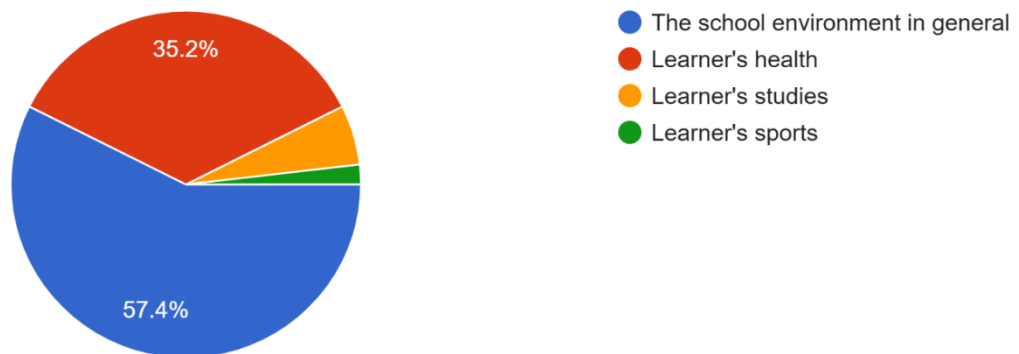


Those that said it is not conducive explained their response further and said:

- The Voelpan dam is a distraction
- The Voelpan dam can destroy the infrastructure at any time
- The school is very cold and very smelly
- The environment we live in is not hygienic and the damage from the Voelpan dam creates an unpleasant smell
- The Voelpan dam at the back of the school is polluting the air and disturbing us as grade 12's
- The Voelpan dam has brought us lot of sicknesses
- There is misbehaving of learners

What did the Voelpan Dam have an impact on?

54 responses



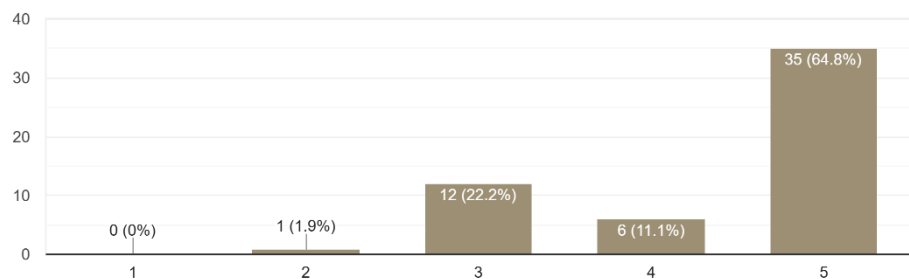
When the learners were asked what the Voelpan Dam had an impact on, more than half of them (57,4%) said on the school environment in general. One in 3 (35,2%) said it had an impact on their health. Most of the learners feel that the local government and the mine have failed them by not considering the impact the Voelpan dam has had on their school, their education and their health. They know that this will affect their results at the end of the academic year. The lack of proper sporting facilities is a direct result of much of the space having been taken by the water that overflows into the school premises during the rainy season between October and April. The learners feel both the mine and the government could do more to address the problem of the Voelpan Dam.

We asked learners how has the dam affected them as a learner in general?

- Learners said I get sick most of the time, there is a lack of concentration. “My health is at stake.”
- Learners said the dam causes respiratory problems, sinuses and flue. They also mention having TB, Asthma and bad coughing.
 “Breathing is difficult lately and my assumptions point directly to the issue of the Voelpan”,
 “The illnesses have affected my attendance and disturbed my studies.” “As a learner the smell of the dam has affected me as I have problems in breathing and have serious headaches.”, “It makes me sick most of the time.”, “I’ve had health issues where I couldn't even breathe. Now I am forced to use a mask consecutively when attending school.”
- It smells bad. Many develop digestive problems.
 “I have developed diarrhoea. I get an upset stomach every time I smell it.”
- The smell and coldness of the water is unbearable. “The stinky air from the dam causes a distraction in class making it hard to concentrate and it produces mosquitoes which could lead to malaria.”
- “I don't get a chance to study effectively at school because of the air pollution the dam creates.”
- Sometimes I am not able to study at school because of the badly stinking air we're breathing
- It threatens the health of the learners and the school community in general because of health impacts in terms of cancer and respiratory diseases
- We can't eat because of the smell sometimes.
- I love to play soccer. That space at the back was used for sports before. Since it is not smelling good at all I don't go there and the sports are cut off because of the Voelpan dam.
- We can't plant anymore and the mosquito bites take a time long to go away

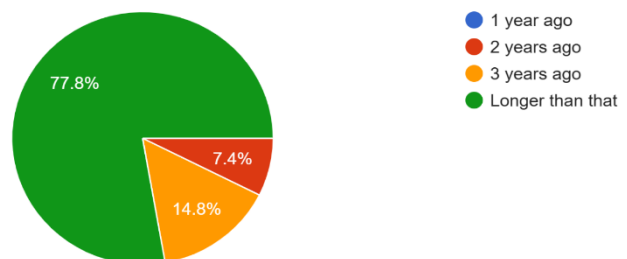
The majority of learners (64,8%) shared that the impact of the Voelpan on their lives has been very high.

Please rate the impact it has had on you as a learner?
54 responses



The majority of learners (79,6%) also indicated that they have experienced problems with water at the school.

When did the Voelpan start affecting the school?
54 responses



When asked how long the Voelpan has already been a problem 3 out of 4 learners (77,8%) said that it has been a problem for more than 3 years.

A small number of learners (13%) knew that the principal has tried to report the challenges faced at the school. One learner said that the principal told the Minister of Science and technology about the

dam. Three learners said that he informed the local municipality and another learner said that he reported it to the mine and also to a TV show but nothing happened.

We also asked learners about their suggestions for the dam? They had the following to say:

- The dam must be dealt with ASAP
- The dam should be drained, removed or eradicated immediately because it affects us
- They must clean the dam
- Once cleaned kids could be taken to the dam and see the aquatic life of the organisms and be shown the importance of water
- They should clean the dam and create a chance to do water sports
- Create a plantation. This dam position can be used to plant sunflowers so that people can be employed
- Treat the water and use it for irrigation for the all surrounding farms
- Drain the water or reclean so that we can use it again and use it as a water supply
- People living in Nyakallong and Allengridge should be compensated for the damages caused by the dam
- The government and the mine should take accountability and be responsive in solving this issue
- The community should mobilise itself to make sure the issue of Voelpan reaches a conclusion “A conducive environment is important for us ... the government should make sure the issue of the Voelpan is solved.”
- The mine and the government should buy RDPs for the people of Riverside because their houses have been broken down and sponsor the school
- There must be warnings about that dam
- This mine can hide its pollution far from people
- They must build a wall around the dam

When asked whether the dam could be used for research purposes by the school, 44,4% of the responding learners said yes.

4. Action and advocacy approach

Our investigation into the issue of Nyakallong has unearthed what has been a thorny matter for the local government. No one is prepared to take the fall on this matter.

The situation at Mosala Secondary School was left to deteriorate until it reached catastrophic proportions. The situation could have been averted but people failed to do their jobs and act on time. The School Governing Body could not act on the matter because they could not act alone. The current mining operation blames the previous one. The previous one is blaming the current one because they say they sold all their assets. According to them, they can no longer be held accountable for what is happening to the school and the community at large. The issue has entered its fourth year and there is no solution on the horizon.

Members of the Mosala community don't have a thorough knowledge of how the constitution of the country can be applied to protect their environmental rights. Through our engagements with them, we could see the void in terms of knowledge about their rights.

The constitution of the Republic of South Africa is one tool that we have to utilize to win our battle against powerful forces like multinational companies. As ordinary citizens and community activists, we have nothing at our disposal to fight against people who can afford the best legal representatives except the Constitution. Chapter Two of the Constitution deals with the Bill of Rights for all citizens of South Africa. Residents of Nyakallong need to seek assistance from all avenues that protect their rights.

Section 24 (a) and (b) sub-section i to iii states that:

Everyone has the right to

- (a) an environment that is not harmful to their health and well-being;
- (b) to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that-
 - (i) Prevent pollution and ecological degradation
 - (ii) promote conservation; and
 - (iii) secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development.

The National Water Act 36 of 1998 also seeks to protect residents against any form of pollution and violation of their rights by big conglomerates such as mining companies.

Section 19 of the Act states:

Prevention and remedying effects of pollution

1 An owner of land, a person in control of land, or a person who occupies or uses the land on which-

- (a) any activity or process is or was performed or undertaken; or
- (b) any other situation exists,

which causes, has caused, or is likely to cause pollution of water resources, must take all reasonable measures to prevent any such pollution from occurring or recurring

(2) The measures referred to in subsection (1) may include measures to-

- (a) cease, modify, or control any act or process causing the pollution;
- (b) comply with any prescribed waste standard or management practice;
- (c) contain or prevent the movement of pollutants;
- (d) eliminate any source of the pollution;
- (e) remedy the effects of the pollution; and
- (f) remedy the effects of any disturbance to the bed and banks of a watercourse.

These two pieces of legislation are the most powerful weapons that we intend to utilise in the course of seeking justice for the community of Mosala Secondary School.

The majority of the learners have a fear of the unknown when it comes to the dam. They know that the dam has the potential to make them sick although they can't tell all the types of diseases that can be caused by the dam.

The introduction of the phytoremediation program¹ has brought temporary relief to the Mosala Secondary School. Phytoremediation is a plant-based technology to remove metals and toxins from the soil through the roots of plants. Sunflower is good for that. With phytoremediation the toxins stay in the root of the plant, the stem and the flower remain toxin free. Both the teachers and the School Governing Body have accepted us with open arms and can't wait for the program to start.

¹ See for more on phytoremediation: [PHYTOREMEDIATION IN SNAKE PARK, SOWETO – Tunatazama – Community Monitors](#)

Our role as organs of civil society is to guide the community that we work with, we can speak to our partners in the legal fraternity to assist in educating the communities about their constitutional rights. Environmental rights must be our main focal area, which we emphasize more to ensure that we achieve this goal. The monitoring school will assist the learners in sharpening the community's writing skills in the writers' group that they have already opened. This is the platform where learners post monthly articles about the impact of Voelpan on their school. This initiative was inspired by what we do in the Community Monitoring School of the Bench Marks Foundation through our interactions with them. Our long-term goal is to build a partnership with the learners that will go beyond the school premises.

We will be supporting Mosala Secondary School in their fight for justice and we intend to emerge victorious.

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