

Targeted investigation report 2025

Free State: Nyakallong The impact of the Voelpan dam on livestock farmers

First edition



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- The volunteers from the Nyakallo foundation played a very pivotal role in the compilation of this report, and their contribution cannot go unnoticed and unappreciated.



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1. Background and Context

Mining operations around the Free State Goldfields have historically been seen as the lifeblood of communities whose survival depended on mining. For over half a century, people have known nothing but mining, and it has never dawned on anyone that alternatives to mining will have to be sought in the end. The closure of mines was never foreseen or planned; its introduction came as a terrible blow to local communities, and people had to find quick solutions.

Unemployment was on the rise, and poverty was beginning to rear its head among the community. People of Nyakallong had to seek other means of survival to make ends meet and sustain themselves. Most of the former mine workers ventured into livestock farming on a small scale as a means of survival and fighting poverty that was beginning to surface. Some of them had to use their lifetime savings to buy livestock to start farming on a small scale.

2. Problem description

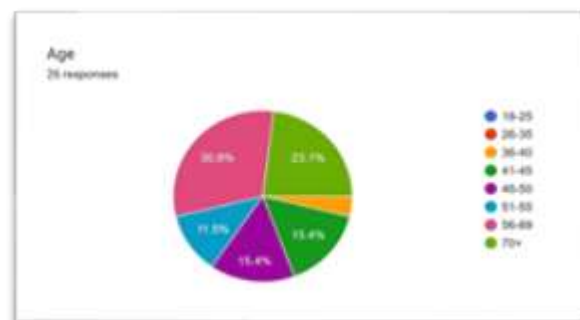
The small-scale farmers of Nyakallong are mainly elderly men who worked in the mines for a better part of their lives. Others died as a result of ailments that they inherited from years of working under terrible conditions, and left their animals with either their wives or children.

The only available land that the municipality could allocate was the open space adjacent to the Voelpan dam, unknown to them that their excitement would soon turn to misery due to the mine operation. Their kraals are situated next to the discharging point of the underground water from the Target No. 1 shaft. They are now bearing the brunt of the corporate impunity of the mine because their animals are exposed to the chemical waste and the toxins that come from the underground. The mine is not showing any commitment to owning up to the problem or being part of the solution.



3. Investigation results

We interviewed 26 farmers, and 30,8 percent of them were young people who own livestock that they inherited from their late fathers. Young women make up less than a percentage in this age category, middle-aged men make a fair but less representation because others are still in formal employment in the mines, but hire young men from Lesotho to work as shepherds for their livestock.



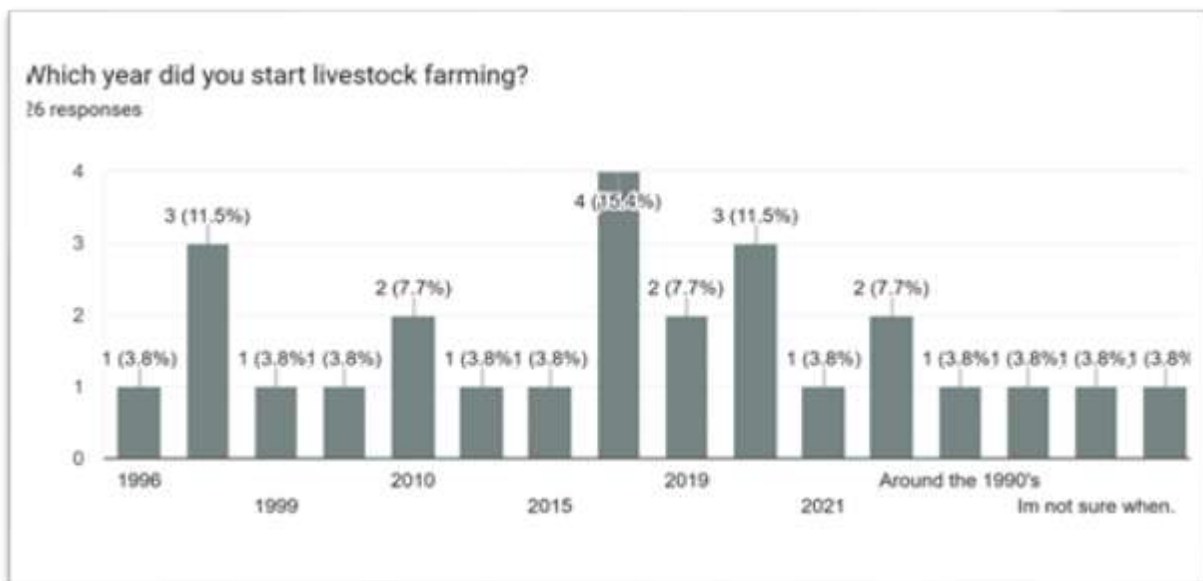
The elderly men who have passed their employment age make up a greater number of the category who live off their livestock as a means of survival and generating income.

The participation of women in livestock farming is still very minimal, and most of them either inherited from their late husbands or fathers. They are excluded from decision-making because this industry is still seen as a male territory. One woman lost two cows in less than twenty-four hours and had to depend on her male counterparts for advice on which vaccines to buy for her livestock.

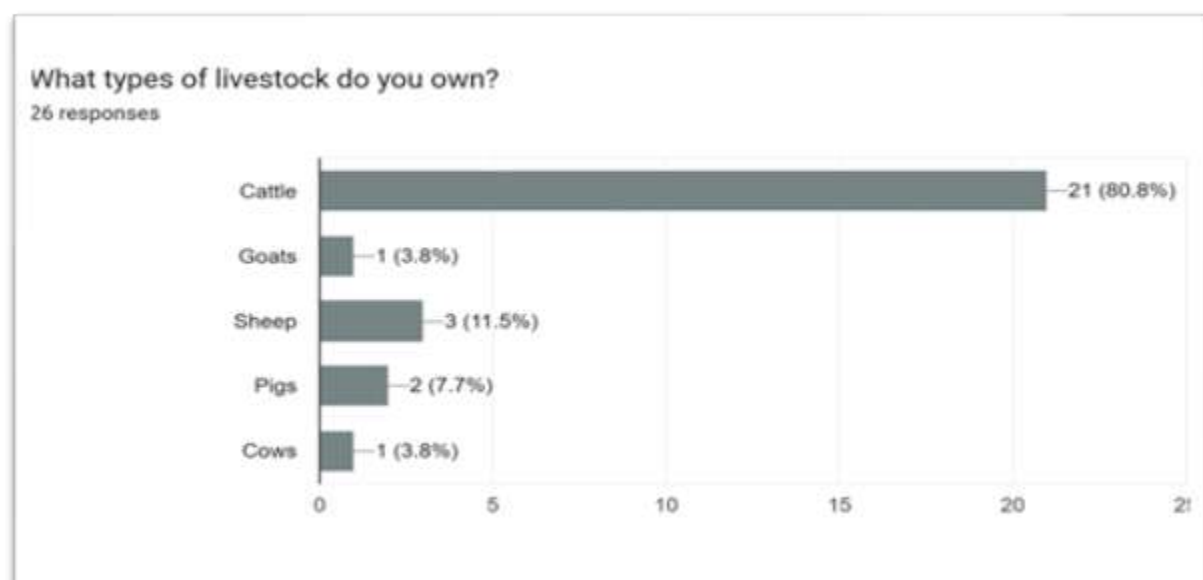
Riverside is the section of the township where the Voelpan dam is most dominant and does the most harm to the community. Unfortunately for the farmers, it is the only site where they can have their kraals. Most of the farmers believe that an alternative site is the only solution for them and their livestock. Other available sites are either under private ownership or not suitable for grazing or earmarked for housing development.



Photo 1: Cattle drinking from the Voelpan Dam



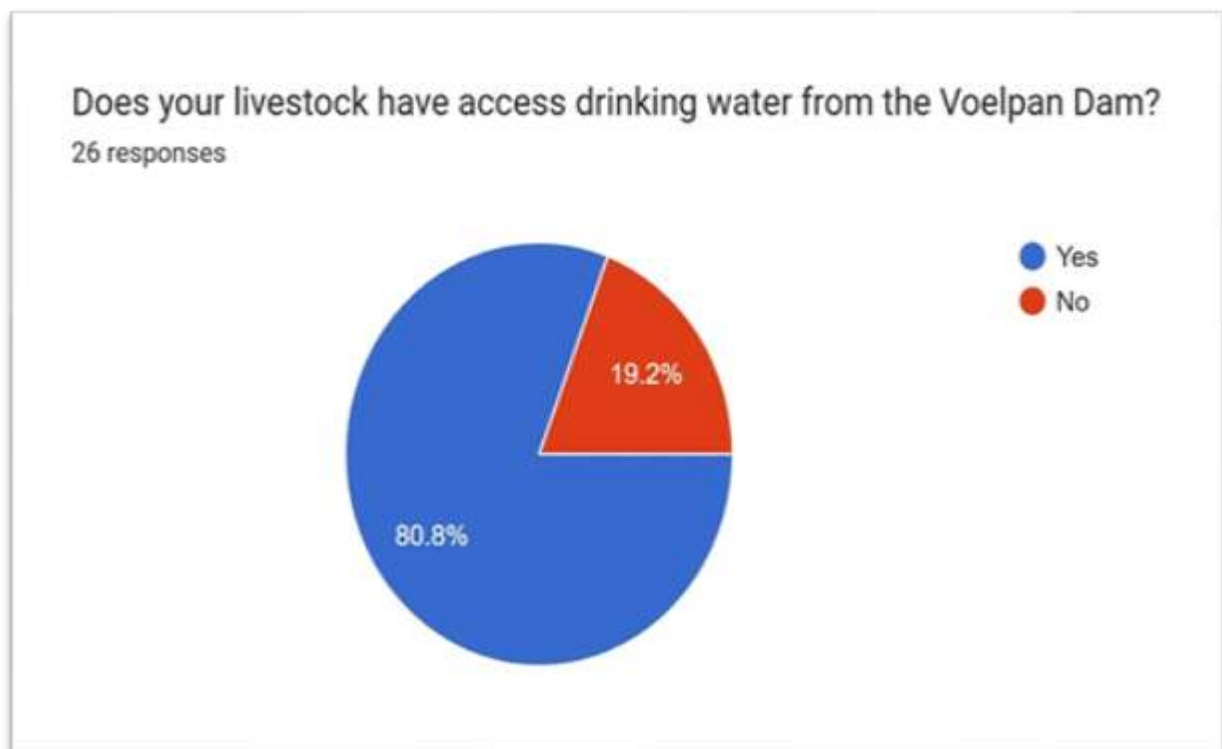
3,8% of farmers have experience based on the number of years they have spent in the industry. The decline of the mining industry around the mid -1990s forced people into early retirement, and for some, livestock farming was the only available option. Others inherited from their late father's while others decided to go into livestock farming as a means of making a living after the closure of mines in the area.



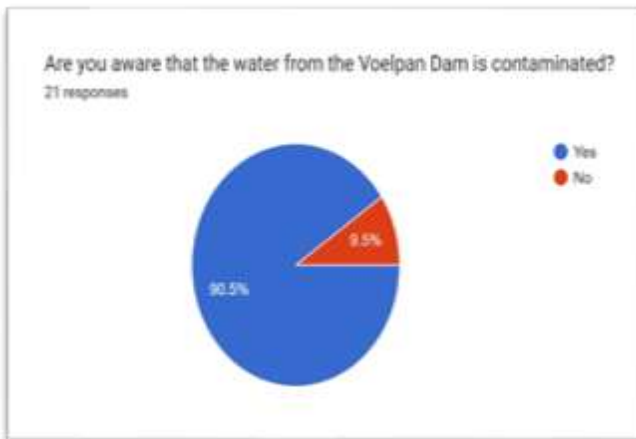
- **Cattle (80,8%):** The most dominant form of farming, as it is perceived to be profitable and relatively easy to maintain.
- **Goats (3,8%):** Not widely practiced due to cultural differences, social stereotypes, and prevailing paradigms.
- **Sheep (11,5%):** Considered expensive to maintain and slow to provide a return on investment.
- **Piggery (7,7%):** Faces challenges such as limited space, rapid reproduction, and the need for specialised feed to prevent disease spread.



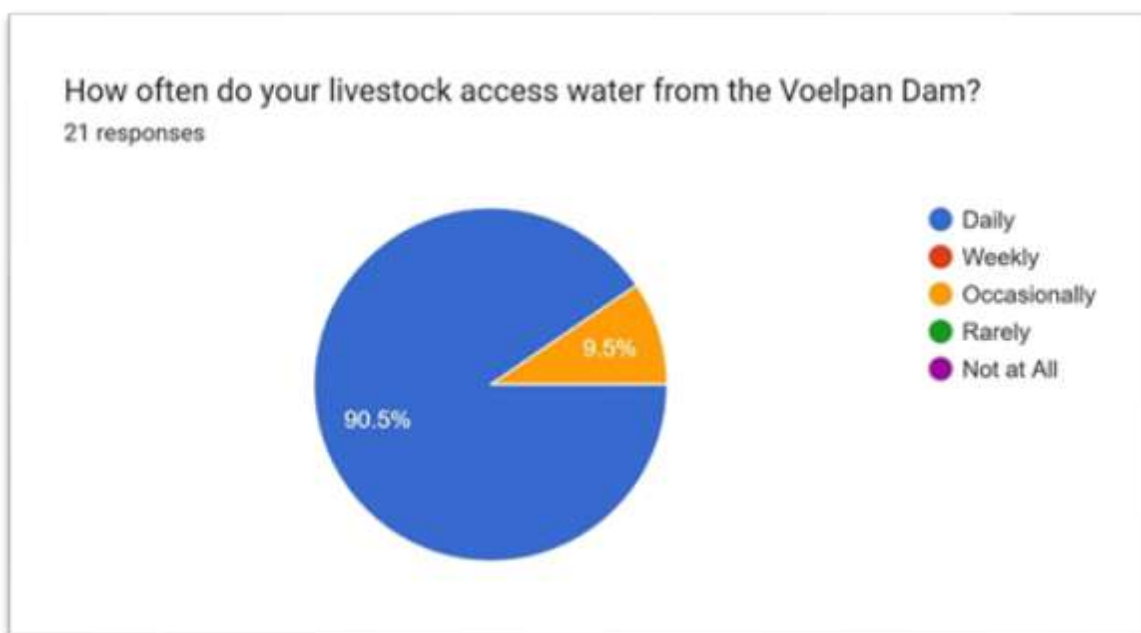
The issue of ownership varies from different types of animal breeds, and order of preference, the weather, and availability of grazing land also play an important role in the choice of animal breeds.



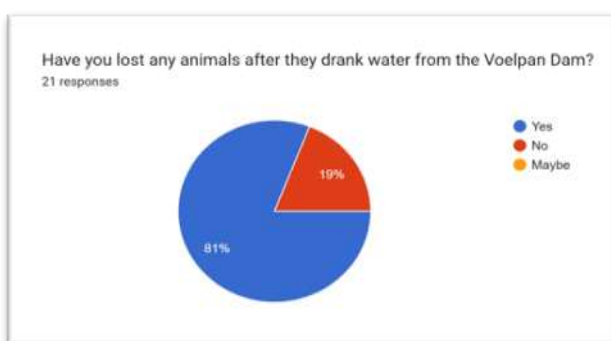
80,8 % don't have access to drinking water from the Voelpan Dam. Most of the farmers put the blame on their shepherds, who allow the animals to drink from the Voelpan dam. Some of the shepherds don't understand the impact of contamination on the dam. The dam is very close to the community and the kraals, and it is the only source of drinking water for the animals. Other wetlands are available, but they are situated far from the kraals, and it is risky for the animals to go there because they have to cross the main road to reach them.



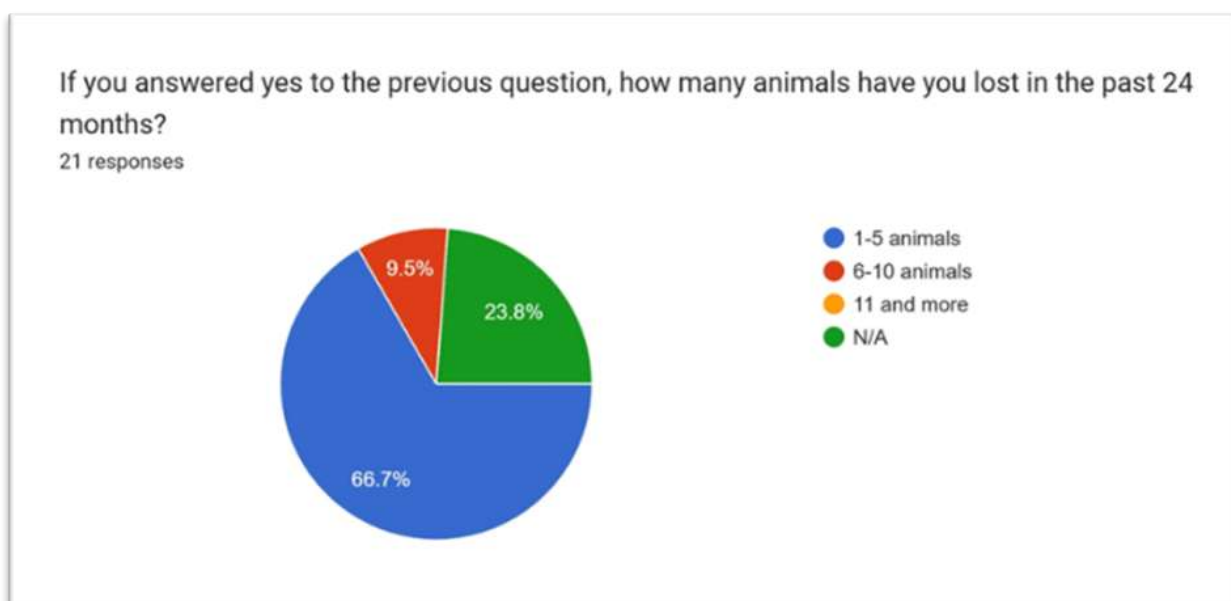
90,5 % of the farmers are aware of the contamination, but have nowhere else to go. The local council promised to relocate them, but most of the available land falls under private ownership, either owned by the mine or commercial grain farmers. This has created conflict between the livestock farmers and the commercial farmers in the past; others even had their cattle impounded by the grain farmers after they were found grazing on the mealie fields.



90.5% of farmers access water on the Voelpan Dam Daily Some of the owners have drilled boreholes inside their kraals, while others have to rely on the Voelpan Dam for drinking water for their animals, although this is in itself not a solution because much of the underground water is highly contaminated with Acid Mine Drainage as a result of the proximity to the dam. Others simply can't afford to buy the necessary equipment for drilling water.



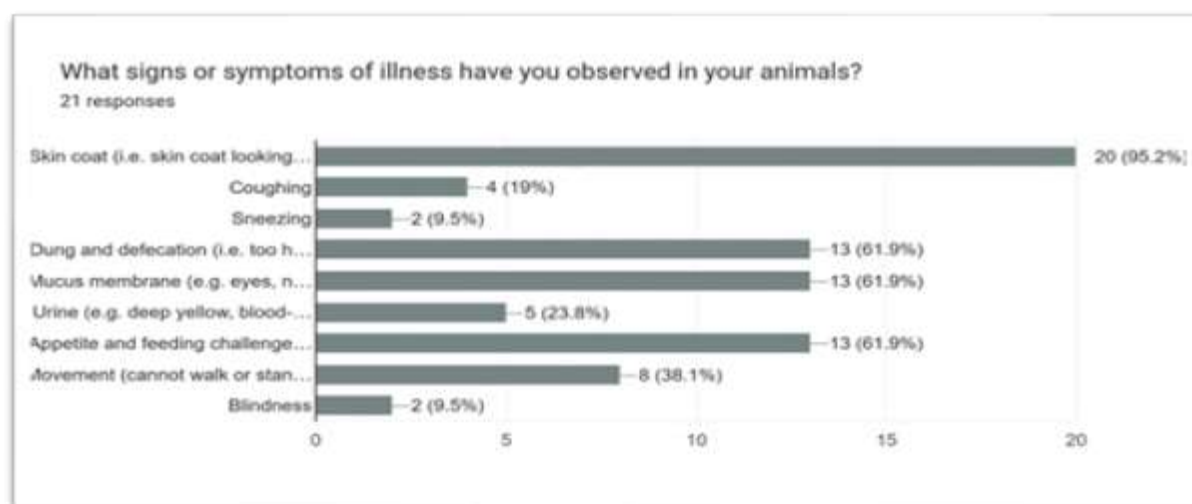
81% of them have suffered loss due to the dam, and others don't understand the impact that the dam has on their livestock.



Cattle owners (66,7%) experienced the highest losses over the past twenty-four months, largely because they make up the majority of livestock farmers. Losses varied by farmer and cattle breed.

Examples include:

- **Mr Naong:** Lost six cattle over a period of nine weeks after the animals developed large lumps. The disease spread rapidly and could not be contained.
- **Mrs Molutsoane:** Lost two cows in a single weekend; the animals were oozing blood from their hindquarters and had white foam coming from their mouths.
- **Mr Sekhejane:** Lost three cows and one breeding bull within one month. Two of the cows were in gestation, resulting in the loss of two unborn calves.
- **Additional impacts:** Some farmers were forced to cease operations entirely, and their kraals remain empty.



One farmer lost a cow and two calves on the same day, and the suspicion is that they may have contracted foot and mouth disease, although we don't have the facts to corroborate that suspicion. One of the most common signs is dryness on the nose and mouth. 61,9% of farmers lost their livestock due to mucus membrane infection in the eyes and the mouth.



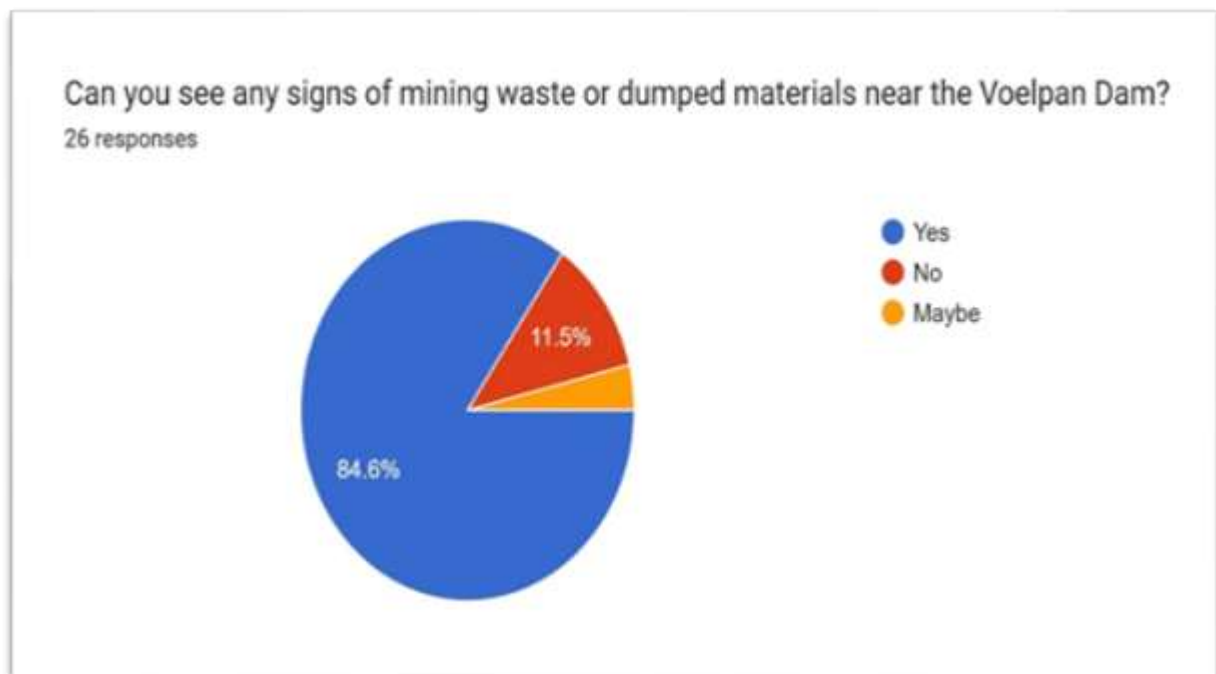
Photo 4: Cow dry mouth



Photo 5: Cow dung defecation



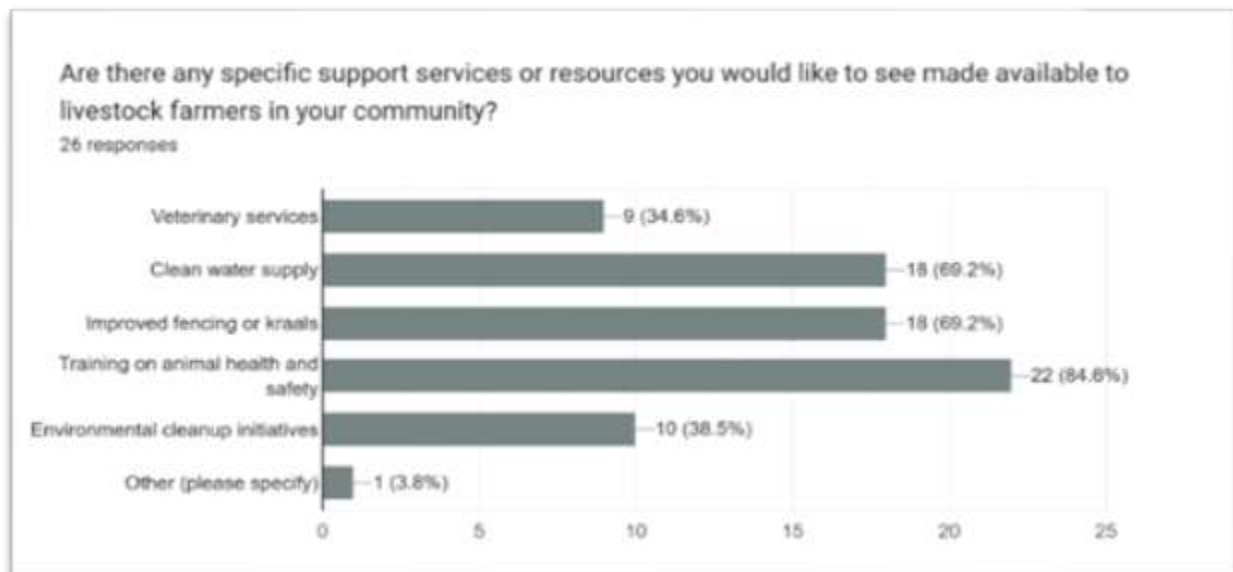
Photo 6: Cow urine infection



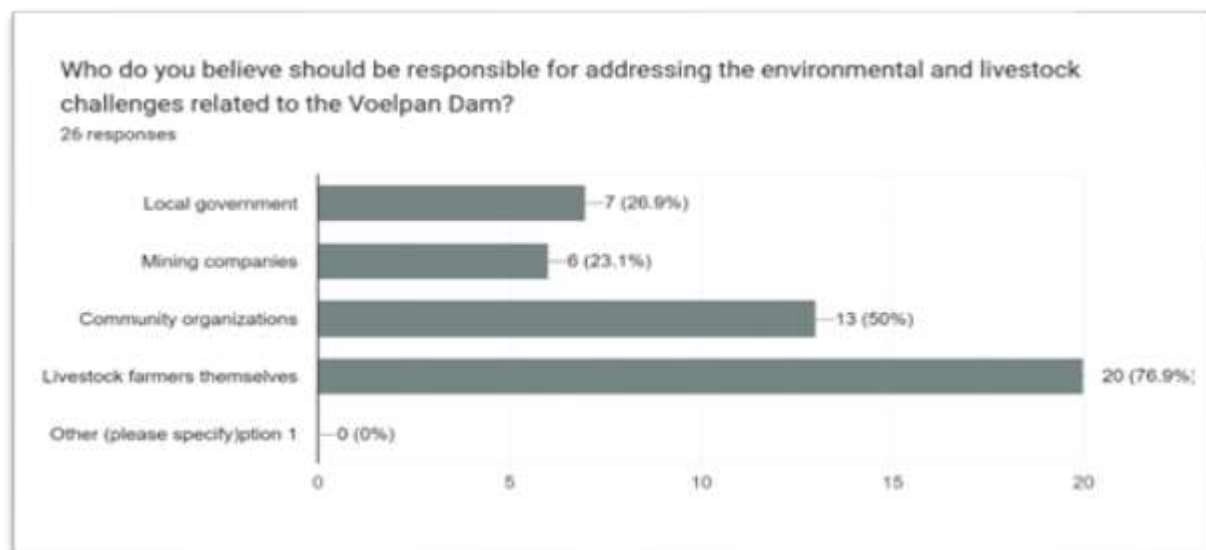
The dam is situated overlooking the rock dump from Harmony and Target shaft one. 84,6% is mining waste, and the pipe that discharges water from the underground into the dam is visible when the water level is low during the dry months between May and September. The small rocks that are strewn on the edge of the dam have attracted fortune seekers and cultivated a fertile ground for illegal mining.

The Voelpan dam is adjacent to the R30 national route that links the Free State Goldfields with the North West province. The road was flooded by the water and eventually swept away by the torrential water during the rainy season, which had a huge impact on the economy because trucks that carry goods from the coastal provinces to the inland had to be diverted. The provincial government had to

reconstruct the road by adding concrete channels to allow the water to flow underneath instead of over the top.



The support from the government is seen as not being enough and effective by the livestock farmers. The only available service is the veterinary surgeon, who only comes once in a while, or does not come for a period of more than three months. Relocation to a new site is the only solution to the problem faced by the farmers because even the grass is contaminated by the underground water that has risen closer to the surface. It is easier to drill underground water next to the dam than at any other site across the township of Nyakallong and Allanridge.



Livestock owners and the majority of residents have lost all hope in the government and feel that they would rather solve their own problems. Most of the farmers pay for the veterinary surgeon from their pockets and buy the vaccines themselves, despite promises of a free vet and vaccines from the government. This is the area that saw the significance of civil society organisations, and our intervention came in handy as the monitoring school, working hand in hand with Nyakallo Foundation and the Bench Marks Foundation.

4. Views of stakeholders on the issues

1. Farmers (Livestock Owners & Smallholders)

- Feel neglected and betrayed by government inaction.
- Reject charitable handouts; want genuine partnership and accountability.
- Deeply frustrated by the mine operator's refusal to take responsibility, which they see as punitive and dismissive.
- Suffered economic losses due to unexplained cattle deaths over the past year.
- Believe local government's leniency toward the mine has eroded trust and left them with no viable options.

2. Mine Operator

- Claims the pollution problem was inherited from the previous operator.
- Positions itself as not responsible for existing contamination.
- This stance has intensified animosity with farmers, who view the company as avoiding accountability.

3. Government (Local & National)

- Intervention is seen as minimal and insufficient.
- Provides only veterinary support, which is inconsistent and unavailable during emergencies.
- Farmers believe the government could do far more to assist and act as a true stakeholder.
- Local government's leniency toward the mine has caused a loss of confidence among the community.

Overall Sentiment

- Farmers are demanding meaningful partnerships, accountability, and stronger intervention to address the ongoing challenges affecting their livelihoods. They are calling for collaborative solutions that involve all relevant stakeholders, including the mine and government authorities, to prevent further losses and ensure sustainable farming practices.
- The mine has increasingly distanced itself from responsibility, denying or downplaying its role in the challenges faced by surrounding farming communities. This perceived lack of accountability has intensified tensions, frustration, and conflict between the mine and local farmers.
- The government's limited involvement and delayed response have contributed to a significant erosion of trust. Many affected community members feel abandoned, as they believe that authorities have failed to provide adequate oversight, enforcement, and support, leaving farmers to manage the consequences on their own.

5. Action and Advocacy approach

Community Engagement & Evidence Gathering

- The monitoring school team initiated structured engagement with local livestock farmers, creating safe and open communication channels that allowed farmers to share challenges they had previously endured in silence due to fear, fatigue, or lack of response from authorities.
- First-hand field observations, including incidents where livestock such as two cows died within a single day, highlighted the urgency and severity of the situation and prompted immediate intervention measures.
- Water samples were collected from affected areas and submitted for laboratory testing to assess possible contamination and determine the presence of toxic substances that may be contributing to livestock deaths.
- Findings from previous targeted investigations in the area will be consolidated and used as corroborating evidence to strengthen the overall case and establish patterns of environmental harm.

Government Intervention

- The Free State Department of Agriculture was formally engaged and committed to providing veterinary services to investigate the unexplained livestock deaths. This includes post-mortem examinations and technical assessments to determine possible causes linked to environmental exposure.
- Farmers' experiences are framed within a human-rights context, with particular reference to **Section 24 of the South African Constitution**, which guarantees the right to an environment that is not harmful to health or well-being and obliges the state to protect the environment for present and future generations.
- The situation raises concerns about the adequacy and timeliness of government response, particularly in rural and farming communities that rely heavily on livestock for livelihoods and food security.

Legal & Legislative Framework

- Mining companies operating in the area, specifically Harmony and Target Mine, have been identified as potentially being in violation of the **National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) No. 107 of 2002**.
- Alleged violations relate to failures in preventing environmental degradation, inadequate mitigation of pollution, and insufficient monitoring of environmental impacts on surrounding communities and ecosystems.
- These legislative breaches form the basis for holding responsible parties accountable under environmental and administrative law.

Planned Action

- Preparations are underway for **civil litigation**, supported by expert environmental assessments, veterinary reports, laboratory results, and documented community testimonies gathered during investigations.
- Advocacy efforts frame the issue as a broader struggle of **profit over people**, emphasising how economic interests have been prioritised at the expense of community health, environmental sustainability, and constitutional rights.
- The planned action seeks not only compensation and accountability but also long-term corrective measures to prevent future harm and restore trust between communities, industry, and government.

**We acknowledge and appreciate the support
from the following organisations:**

**Bread for the World
Church of Sweden
Ford Foundation
Norwegian Church Aid
Steelworkers Humanity Fund – Canada.**

Issued by



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