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Desperately in need of water to take her chronic medication, widow Phindile Nyembe (48) approached managers of a coal mine operating in her village for help.

Streams, springs and wells have dried up since Kangra Coal Mine's operation in Mpumalanga expanded from Saul Mkhiziveville near Piet Retief to Entababusuku - a deeply rural village with sparse homesteads - in December 2016.

"The manager I found there gave me a 500ml bottle of spring water," Nyembe said. When Nyembe and fellow villagers made follow-up visits to the mine, the same manager allegedly told her: "Why are you complaining? I gave you water to take your pills."

Nyembe's corrugated iron-roofed house has empty containers lining the walls. She is now harvesting rain water. The dam water available to her is about 4km from her house, near Kangra Coal's site office.

Before the mine arrived, Nyembe's husband had connected a pipe from a spring about 500m away, and all it took was opening a tap in her yard to get water. She has now dug up the pipe and left it lying coiled at her home because the water no longer runs.

The vegetable garden has not been planted since the water problems started.

"Since I had a stroke I can't push a wheelbarrow to fetch water. And you know what? Our livestock are also struggling. Cattle come around the house hoping the containers have something for them to drink inside them," Nyembe said.

Kangra Coal is owned by Shanduka Coal Investments, a company in which President Cyril Ramaphosa used to have a stake before he divested in the mining business in 2014.

Robby Mokgalaka, a senior campaign manager for the environmental justice organisation Groundwork, said mines used large volumes of water to wash coal, and this could lead to streams running dry.

"It's possible that this mine [Kangra] uses water from one of the streams and, because the streams are interlinked, it affects the smaller ones," Mokgalaka said.

"Mining does affect water in many ways in terms of pollution and scarcity. The mine might also have drilled boreholes so they have back-up when the stream dries out. There have been such cases," he said.

Kangra Coal's risk, legal and governance manager, Peggy Malele, said the mine was "interacting" with the community and other stakeholders on the issue.

"We are concerned that there are complaints about the scarcity of water in this community. It is the policy of our company to take into account the needs of people in all areas where we have our mining operations," she said.

"In this specific area we interact regularly with the local community forum and other stakeholders to discuss joint programmes to tackle pressing social matters such as wider access to water. We advise the affected people to contact the local leadership so their complaints can be speedily resolved. Access to clean water is crucial for the well-being of humans. We are always sensitive and supportive of the local communities and we consider them important stakeholders."

But Entababusuku community chairperson Themba Mayisela denied any such interaction.

"They have never met us about the concerns around water scarcity that we are raising. We've gone to their offices to ask them to supply us with water, but they've turned us down and made empty promises about giving us water tanks," Mayisela said.

Malele said the mine had invested in infrastructure to improve wider access to clean and fresh water for local communities by installing water tanks and drilling boreholes. City Press, however, did not see any of this investment when it visited Entababusuku on Tuesday last week.

Malele said Kangra Coal conducted a baseline study and compiled an environmental management plan to outline priority social needs in the local communities.

"We are implementing our social and labour plan (SLP) that was approved by the mineral resources department. Through

TALK TO US

Does the mine have an obligation to the local community to provide water?

SMS us on 35697 using the keyword MINE and tell us what you think. Include your name and province.

SMSes cost R1.50

THIRSTY Phindile Nyembe used to get water from a spring using a pipe directed to her yard. Since the mine moved in, the spring is dry

PHOTO: SIZWE SAMA YENDE

THE MINE THAT TOOK THE *water*

They have not spoken about **scarcity**, but made empty promises about giving us storage tanks

this SLP we have embarked on wide-ranging measures to improve the standard of living of local communities," she said.

The Entababusuku community members, however, said Kangra Mine had done nothing to improve their lives. The neighbourhood has no electricity and no clinic. A tar road from Piet Retief ends abruptly after Saul Mkhiziveville.

According to census information collated by Wazimap.co.za, 10% of residents of Ward 2 in Mkhondo Municipality, in which Entababusuku is situated, get their water from a river and 16% get it from a borehole.

Department of Mineral Resources spokesperson Ayanda Shezi said the department was not aware of the water problem allegedly caused by Kangra Coal at Entababusuku.

"The mine, communities and the local municipality should engage in order to explore alternative sources of water," Shezi said. She said Kangra Coal had a social labour plan that the department had approved, and it was being implemented.

TALK TO US

Is the environmental legislation around the issuing of mining licences comprehensive enough? What more could be done to ensure local residents don't suffer when the mines move in?

SMS us on 35697 using the keyword WATER and tell us what you think. Please include your name and province. SMSes cost R1.50