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New bridge connects villagers to services and gives safe passage to pupils

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For decades, rural residents in parts of eMaXesibeni in Umzimvubu local municipality, relied on a decaying cable bridge to reach the town centre.

The only alternative — a low-lying bridge built a few years ago, — becomes impassable whenever the Umzimvubu River overflows.

As a result, families had to carry coffins from funeral parlours in town across the swaying cable bridge for funerals.

Children missed school, patients could not reach clinics and ambulances avoided the area. Transport costs rose sharply as vehicles took long detours, while elections and social services were disrupted.

Now, residents of ward 6 say their lives have changed with the construction of the Welisizwe bridge.

Built under the government's Welisizwe Rural Bridges programme by the SA National Defence Force (SANDF), the new structure connects the villages of Sihlahleni and Welakabini.

"It was a painful life. Children dropped out of school when the river flooded. Some people even lost their lives.

"Buying food in town was difficult because if the river was full, you couldn't carry it across," resident Lwando Sibalo Qangule said.

Funerals and elections were particularly difficult, he said.

"Men carried coffins across the water to reach undertakers on the other side.

"People were unable to vote during elections because we could not cross.

"Services never reached us."



SAFE PASSAGE: Residents of at least 10 villages in rural eMaXesibeni, who were forced to use an unstable cable bridge for decades, are now smiling, thanks to the construction of a new bridge by the SANDF. Picture: SUPPLIED

The new bridge has reduced travel time and brought essential services within reach.

"Ambulances can now drive right up to a household, even during bad weather," resident Sinethemba Ngwiqi said.

"We don't need to hire vans

any more to take patients to hospitals. Police are also able to access the area."

For schoolchildren, the impact has been immediate.

"Before, children waited by the river for the water to drop.

"Sometimes they stayed

home the whole day.

"Now they go to school safely and return the same day," Ngwiqi said.

Qangule said the bridge has improved relations among villages.

"Families can now visit each

other. We are united in fighting stock theft, crime and gender-based violence.

"The bridge has closed the gap between us."

The project involved the department of public works and infrastructure, the SANDF, the

provincial department of transport, the local municipality and traditional leaders, and drew support from political parties across the spectrum.

Residents, however, stressed that the bridge should be a first step towards further development.

"The bridge is strong, but it must be maintained.

"Roads in Ward 6 are in poor condition. We need tar roads, better clinics and proper schools.

"Even with the bridge, the cost of health care is high for unemployed people," Qangule said.

Ngwiqi added that education and job creation were priorities.

"Forests and rivers here can create jobs if used responsibly.

"Our children also need safe classrooms and bursary support to continue their studies."

Qangule said residents also expected improved government accountability.

"The government listened to us, and we are thankful. But officials must be among the people regularly, not only at handovers.

"Implementation of policies must be faster."

For Ward 6, the Welisizwe Bridge is more than an engineering project. It is a lifeline that allows children to reach school, patients to access healthcare, and families to gather without fear of being cut off by the river.

Umzimvubu municipal spokesperson Nokhanyo Zembe had not responded to questions by the time of publication to questions sent on Monday regarding the new bridge.