

Life goes on under cloud of pollution

Air quality in Vaal region dangerous to health

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IT'S MID-MORNING and the air in Zamdela stinks. "It's the sulphur," explains Samson Mokoena knowingly, pulling a face at the pungent smell. "It makes my throat close."

But sitting next to Mokoena in his small, well-tended garden, 50-year-old Happy Daniel Khumalo appears not to notice.

"I've lived in Sasolburg my whole life and I'm used to the smells from all these chemicals," he says, with a shrug. "There are so many factories and industries all over the place. There's nowhere else to go."

Khumalo, who lives a few kilometres from the vast refinery run by petrochemical giant Sasol, should be more worried about the impact of pollution, warns Mokoena, the co-ordinator of the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (Veja).

"These compounds are dangerous and can cause diseases like cancer."

The industrial town of Sasolburg in the Free State falls within the Vaal Triangle Airshed Priority Area, which spans nearby Emfuleni, Doornkop and Soweto, Diepkloof and Meadowlands and Ennerdale and Orange Farm.

Here in the Vaal, notes Rico Euripidou, of ground-work, levels of particulate matter pollution for PM10 and PM2.5 have exceeded national annual standards permanently over the past five years.

"Particle pollution is one of the most dangerous pollutants for human health.

"It causes cardiovascular and respiratory disease, asthma, hospital admissions and premature death," Euripidou says.

In October, the country's national air quality officer, Dr Thulie Khumalo, outlining the 2017 State of Air report, agreed, stating particulate

matter "is still the greatest national cause for concern in terms of air quality due to numerous pollution sources.

"Many South Africans may be breathing air that is harmful to their health and well-being, particularly in South Africa's air pollution priority areas."

A few streets away from Khumalo, William Mokoena voices his concerns.

"I've lived here since 1956, first in Zamdela and now in Taylor Park. We were born in this area and all this pollution maybe affected us a long time ago.

"My wife and I suffer from high blood pressure, the children here suffer from asthma

and red eyes and all kinds of sinus problems. All these chemicals must be inside us, but we don't know."

Earlier this year, Sasol announced it was again seeking to postpone a 2020 deadline to meet the minimum emission standards (MES) under

the Air Quality Act, particularly for sulphur dioxide and hydrogen sulphide, because it "lacks credible viable solutions for dealing with these pollutants".

For Veja's Mokoena, more needs to be done to ensure South Africa's biggest polluters like Sasol and Eskom comply with the country's Air Quality Act.

"The Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) is aware of the problems but there is no one to say, 'hey you, sort it out'."

He is referring to the "continuous" postponements to comply with the MES, which set the maximum limits on each pollutant that can be emitted during various industrial processes.

The postponements from air quality standards was the subject of a portfolio commit-

tee on environmental affairs workshop last month.

"The intervention of Parliament is important to review the Air Quality Act and how companies comply with it.

"The problem is that these polluting companies have seen loopholes in the act and they have exploited that to have continuous postponements.

"But the postponement applications were meant to be a once-off," he explains.

The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) points out how the MES were phased so that weaker "existing plant" standards should have been met by April 1, 2015, and stricter "new plant" MES from April 1, 2020.

Both Eskom and Sasol first applied to be exempt from the MES, but this was rejected and

both applied for controversial wide-ranging postponements of compliance, despite all of their operations being located in air quality priority areas.

"The negative health impacts of granting postponements were shown to be devastating," says the CER.

In 2014, Sasol sued the Environmental Affairs minister Edna Molwena and Khumalo in its bid to set aside the MES, while postponement decisions were pending.

In February 2015, Khumalo largely granted the postponements, in exchange for an offset programme, despite opposition. Sasol then withdrew its litigation.

For Sasol, its offset programme includes reducing domestic fuel burning, veld fires, dust and waste burning. "Offsets are used to justify the unjustifiable: projects

that should be rejected are permitted on the basis of offset proposals; illegal practices (for example, exceedance of minimum emission standards) are permitted on the basis of offsets," remarks Euripidou.

Since 2015, "as civil society organisations and experts had predicted, air pollution in South Africa is high, with devastating impacts for human health and wellbeing.

"This is especially the case in the priority areas", says the CER.

Although the provision for MES postponements was intended to provide industries with an opportunity to comply with the MES within, at most, a five-year period "in practice, it appears that this provision has been abused".

Sasol disagrees, emphasising its commitment to comply with air quality laws.

"We have consistently communicated that we already meet most of the MES for existing plants, and will also be able to meet most of the new plant standards by about 2025.

"This will enable an extended time frame within which to safely implement the necessary abatement technologies in accordance with our roadmap schedules.

"In this regard, we will be reliant on further postponements, as provided for in law. In the interim, our licences contain stretched targets under which we operate."

Sasol says of its offset projects: "We continue to support offsets as a meaningful, complementary lever to improve ambient air quality."