

INDUSTRY DAMAGE

Environmental justice focus

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COMMENT

AS A CITY, Durban is the epitome of historical apartheid planning, which today, 24 years after democracy, remains largely unchanged.

The city is recorded to be the first that instituted racial apartheid planning, back in the 1920s, which resulted in dirty industry housed in and adjacent to black communities, which provided cheap labour for the benefit of white South Africa.

These are the sacrificial communities who bore the ills of poor health and dysfunctional social lifestyles for the sake of development. And they still do, sitting cheek-by-jowl with dirty polluting industries. But although faced with little choice in where they had to live and work, this diverse group of communities did not sit back passively.

They stood together to resist further development and pollution of their neighbour-

hoods, giving birth to one of the most respected and consistent environmental justice movements in the country, and laying the foundation for organised resistance to harmful industries.

So it is a great irony that these communities and their representatives have not been included among the government officials, experts and others from around the world converging in Durban this week for the International Association for Impact Assessment and Assessors (IAIA) annual conference.

It is a greater irony that they have been excluded as the conference delegates discuss the theme “Environmental Justice in Societies in Transition”. Who better than those living daily with polluted industries, mines and toxic dumpsites in their neighbourhoods to make input at such a gathering?

For these communities, the meaning of environmental justice will most certainly not resonate with the IAIA's understanding or practice of this critical concept that emerged out of the civil rights movement in the US and the very many struggles of indigenous

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peoples globally to save the land, water and air that their lives depend upon.

For those of us organising with movements and those on the fence line, environmental justice is about people who have agency and power working with all sectors of society in solidarity and equity with each other in non-degrading and positive relationships with our environments.

There is no doubt in my mind that business and industry and those that facilitate their expansion, the impact assessors who are gathering here this week, do not have the same understanding or experience.

An interesting exercise for the organisers will be to hold

a dialogue on what assessors' understanding of environmental justice is.

When you glance through the conference programme, the context of Durban is clearly spelt out through the reference of “plush upmarket residential suburbs adjacent to impoverished informal settlements and the residential areas in the immediate proximity of large-scale industrial operations”, but specific training programmes organised for delegates do not include areas showing these juxtapositions.

None of the practical work takes assessors from around the world to the residential areas where environmental injustice is a reality as industry continues to expand and asthma rates in pupils are at 52%, and the risk of cancer is 250 times the acceptable norm, all because of the oil refineries and other polluting industries in their area. Nor do these tours take you to the areas where toxic dumps and resulting fumes engulf people daily.

Delegates will not see firsthand the proposed mining area of Xolobeni and the Tendele mine in Somkhele just a few hours from Durban, where people are resisting mining

which assessors facilitated through their environmental impact assessment reports that try to sanitise dirty development in bland and sterile language.

This is the kind of development that people do not want; development that has and will destroy the land; development that has led to murder and destruction of people's property but will nonetheless increase the infamous GDP while destroying local livelihoods and lives.

There are, however, exceptions, when assessors have called a spade a spade, and at these times it is welcomed, and indeed, this is what should be demanded by those who lead the IAIA.

As we speak of transition, many communities around South Africa are saying no to coal, as the evidence of the destruction of life and land mounts. Thus it was encouraging that the climate impact assessment that was done on the proposed coal-fired Thabametsi power station revealed there will be significant greenhouse gas emissions and highlights the fact that water scarcity will “pose a high risk to the power station's operations”.



Consultation with residents who feel the immediate effects of toxic dumpsites and environmental hazards caused by development should be mandatory, says the writer.

However, it was cold comfort, for the Department of Environmental Affairs, even with evidence available, decided to grant the go-ahead for this, the first independent power station in South Africa. But this is not going uncontested.

Beyond this, the community from Xolobeni have decided to go to court and challenge developments that destroy their land by insisting that there must be prior informed consent. People must have the #Right2SayNo, and consultants should understand and learn how to assess this meaningfully in the assessments they undertake.

Finally, in 1995, the IAIA was in Durban, just one year

after our democracy. It was at this time that participants were bold enough to visit a local toxic dumpsite and advise local activists on how to challenge this toxic dump across the road from residential homes in uMlazi. This advice led us to challenge this site successfully, and in February 1997 it was finally closed.

It is clear that two decades later the IAIA and its participants have gone mainstream. Who will dare and take on such an assignment? Who will dare and break the mainstream mould and go against convention? As participants ponder on this, let us remember the words of Justice Albie Sachs, who is expected to be the key-

note speaker at the gathering: “When we breathe the air of freedom we do not wish to choke on hidden fumes.”

Let it not be the IAIA and its assessors responsible for impact studies who hide the reality of environmental injustices from society.

● **Peek is an environmental justice organiser, campaigner and the director of groundWork, Friends of the Earth, South Africa. The International Association for Impact Assessment conference takes place at the ICC from today until Saturday and will focus on environmental justice.**