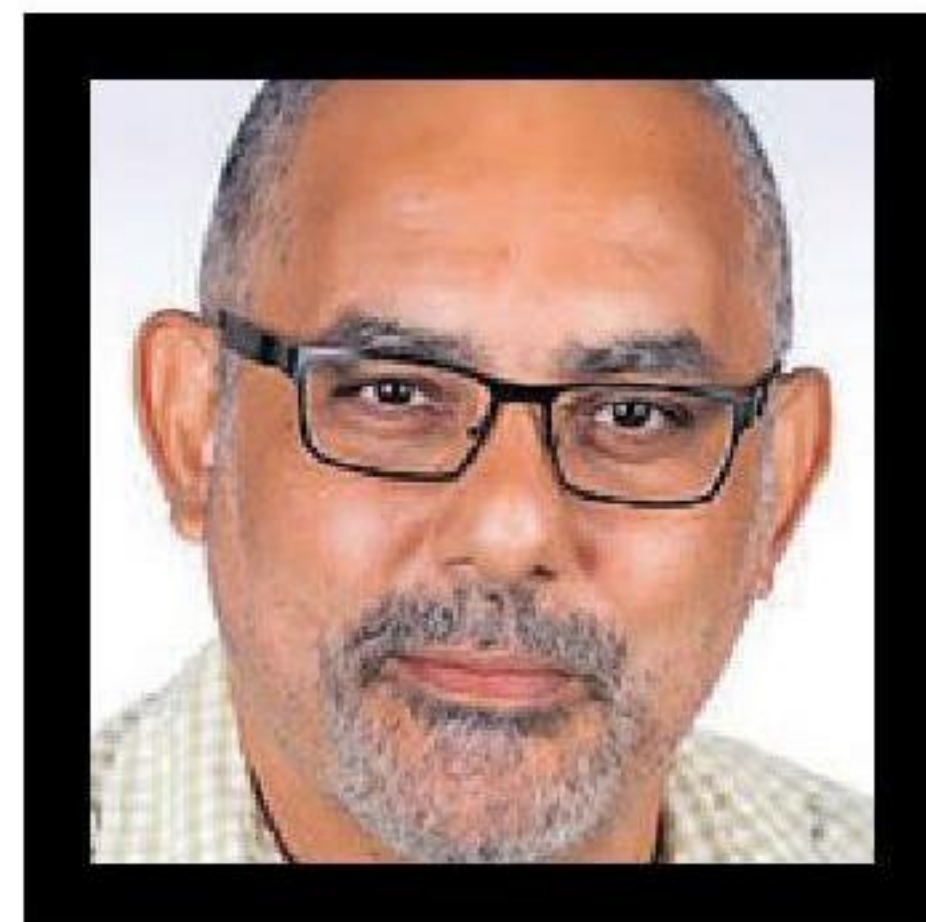


# Growing urgency to take on power to change our world

## COMMENT



BOBBY PEEK

This was a year of confusion, blurred boundaries between home, work and public space – for those lucky to maintain employment – and of the harsh visualisation of the deep inequality in South Africa.

The inequality not only between those of us lucky to have income and those who are unemployed – now more than 30% of the population, according to Statistics South Africa (StatSA) – but also those millions who are said to have some type of work, most often casual and precarious, and which has no protection.

According to StatsSA, in 2015, more than half of South Africans (55.5%), or 30 million people, lived below the national poverty line of R992 per month. I do not even want to contemplate what we are going to hear from them at the end of this year.

But the very depressing unemployment statistics are not as a result of the pandemic as many would believe. The pandemic has only served to highlight how severe the situation is, and how deep the chasm between the rich and poor worldwide really is.

Aside from its devastating health impacts, Covid-19 and the consequent lockdown responses from governments had a brutal effect on the poor when economies shut down, but at the same time – amid the gloom clouding over the entire world – the 1% holding the reins of power, continued to flourish.

Poverty, however, has its roots far beyond 2020 – in the colonialism forced upon us, which was entrenched by apartheid and which democracy has worsened by perpetuating elitist policies as a panacea for all the troubles in our land.

This included policies in support of the extractive industry, its dirty energy model, its inhumane, slave-like forced labour practices, and its obliteration of the earth through poisoned lands, water and air.

These policies are all now manifesting themselves in climate change



THE massive explosion at the Engen Oil Refinery south of Durban earlier this month was a culmination of a history of abuse of the environment and the people who live nearby, says the writer. | **SHELLEY KJONSTAD** | African News Agency (ANA)

and climate injustice, where the poor is affected the most by global warming caused by the rich, both in the North and South, as the advantaged seek to continue to hold and grow their wealth at the cost of the lives of the poor and their lands.

Challenging to reverse this injustice and build an equitable, democratic and caring society is what our fight for environmental justice is.

The brutality of mining is all too well known globally, and in South Africa. Ask the millions of families who have lost loved ones to HIV/Aids, tuberculosis, asbestosis, black lung disease and silicosis.

Grandmothers suddenly become mothers again. In most traditional societies and even in the nuclei modern family, grandparents play a key role in nurturing grandchildren.

Even more than their children, grandchildren become their legacy. Perhaps it's a second chance at doing it better, having learnt from the parenting mistakes with their own children. MaFikile Ntshangase, of Somkhele, mother and grandmother, will not see her legacy blossom. She was shot down in her house on Thursday, November 22, where she lived with her grandchild.

MaFikile was opposed to the Tendele mining operations that want to mine the land her family's house is on.

Bridget Pitt writes that when Ntshangase was killed, "she became yet another martyr in the increasingly ruthless global fight to force rural com-

munities to allow mining on their doorsteps". This is the "development" that we have inherited from centuries of colonialism forced on us, as legendary Uruguayan and anti-capitalist writer Eduardo Galeano eloquently wrote about in the *Open Veins of Latin America*, painting a literal masterpiece of how colonialism and capitalism extracted the blood of the Americas – both of the people and their land.

The world has changed in 2020 but the fundamental principles of extraction at all costs maintain. This is starkly illustrated in the aftermath of the Engen explosion on December 4, which was felt as far as Durban North, more than 20km away.

The Engen oil refinery, owned by Petronas, the Malaysian state oil company and local South African extractive giant Phembani, and is operated on the same principles of colonialist, apartheid and democratic extractivism, makes as much profit as possible for as little cost as possible while harming neighbours and workers with their toxic pollution.

Ask the people of Merebank, Wentworth and the Bluff and they will give you the blow-by-blow history. Engen's response to community concerns on the explosion is nothing but contemptuous and emboldened by years of abuse of local people and their environment.

Their response about the impact of Engen's operations on the rights of workers, community members and children is: "As an organisation,

we take allegations of this nature extremely seriously and can assure you that these allegations are both unfounded and untrue."

Ask the maimed workers, the unemployed, the 52% of children with respiratory problems, the leukaemia sufferers and families who lost young children to various cancers such as lupus, and you will hear a different story. Ask the professors at the Nelson Mandela Medical School and various international university research institutions, and their researchers will paint a different picture.

But Engen continues to evade accountability and lives comfortably with its impunity facilitated by a crumbling state and supportive politicians.

Although there is much more to say about the sad state of affairs in South Africa in 2020, the year has also been marked by a growing urgency among people that they have to take on power to change their world.

After years of calls for a basic income grant (BIG), President Cyril Ramaphosa established the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress grant in response to the pandemic.

Yes, there is much about it that can be criticised, but as civil society we need to take this as a victory and rally around the likes of Black Sash and others who are leading the charge on the BIG.

The moves towards a just transition continue to be pushed by various quarters and Ramaphosa has finally appointed the Presidential Climate Change Coordinating Committee. Some have questioned the composition of the committee\*.

The commission's work will only be a success, if indeed the positive steps taken by Environment Minister Barbara Creecy to pursue criminal prosecution of Eskom in respect of air pollution by Eskom's Kendal Power Station, and ensuring that it is taken to the logical conclusion of holding people accountable and getting Eskom to become transparent, and democratic – void of self-interest and political influence – and become a renewable energy giant answerable to the people of South Africa and not vested interests.

*Peek is a director at groundWork, Friends of the Earth, South Africa.*

*\*Disclaimer: Peek is among those appointed to the Presidential Climate Change Coordinating Committee*