

SA's just transition from fossil fuels is "all to fight for"



File image.

By Sheree Bega , March 13, 2020

When it's windy, clouds of fine dust blow across the village of Rietkuil from a mountainous ash heap from Eskom's Arnot coal-fired power station.

"It's terrible," says local resident Gerda Geldenhuys. "It looks like mist all over the town."

She has lived in Rietkuil since 1999 when her husband started work at the Arnot mine, where he was later retrenched.

Coal dust also billows from the weighbridges and out Arnot's chimneys.

"This results in health problems," says Geldenhuys, describing how Rietkuil is an unsuitable place to retire.

Obed Mabuza, who has spent a lifetime working for the Arnot mine next to Arnot, which is scheduled to be decommissioned before 2030 with five other Eskom coal-fired power stations, tells how proper management of the ash heap stopped a decade ago.

"Previously, they used to spray water on it. Now when the wind blows, especially in August, you can't even see the street. Bringing coal to the power station on trucks rather than the conveyor belt also results in a lot more coal dust blowing about.

"Nobody has a food garden because the vegetables would be smothered in dust. Eskom must decommission. They must clean up before they leave."

Geldenhuis and Mabuza are quoted in a new report by non-profit environmental justice group, groundWork, *Down to Zero: The Politics of a Just Transition*, which was released last week.

The report "picks a path through the politics" of the decline of the coal industry and "takes a close-up look at the chaotic transition now under way on the Highveld".

Eskom villages such as Pullens Hope next to Hendrina and Rietkuil are "left in the shadow of massive toxic legacies" in the form of the power station ash dumps, it says.

"It is not only the mine workers who are facing the end of coal," says groundWork.

"People in the small company towns are also wondering if there is life after coal. These towns include Rietkuil and Pullens Hope. What happens there foreshadows what will happen in the Highveld region as a whole if the unplanned transition is left to gather momentum."

A just transition, says groundWork, is not only about energy. "It is also about settlements, housing, water, sewage, land, food, transport and pretty much everything else. "It is about the workers in fossil fuel industries but also about communities polluted by those industries and about everyone who the system makes poor.

"Most of all, it is about changing relations of power between people to create a more equal society where people can live well with each other and with the earth. "This is the vision of environmental justice organisations on the ground: in the coal fields and on the fencelines of polluting industries in SA."

But it is all to fight for, says groundWork. "There is indeed a transition under way in SA but it is unplanned and certainly unjust. It is driven by the breakdown of Eskom, which is itself a symptom of the wider decline of the minerals energy complex that has shaped SA's unequal development for over a century."

Every one of Eskom's 15 coal-fired power stations has produced an enormous ash heap, sometimes more than one, write the report's authors David Hallows and Victor Munnik.

"Only two power stations have liners separating their coal ash heaps from groundwater underneath, namely Medupi and Kusile which were built after the new Waste Act of 2008 was passed. This means that 13 coal-fired power stations have ash heaps that are leaking toxins into the groundwater.

"This situation has not been addressed. Eskom's 'ash strategy' is limited to a plan to sell some ash from existing heaps for brick and cement making and so free up space to avoid building new – and lined – ash heaps."

Hallows and Munnik write how Eskom's coal ash strategy stands as a symbol of the "corporation's wilful misrepresentation of the ecological realities it has created.

"Eskom, together with politicians and government officials, point to the high costs, in money and in scarce natural resources like water, of environmental compliance, particularly with the minimum emission standards governing air pollution.

"While unwittingly presenting an argument against production of electricity from coal, and against 'clean coal' in particular, they in practice externalise and postpone the costs of dealing with Eskom's growing environmental legacy.

"It is only one part of the mess that the coal economy will leave to the people of the Highveld, imposing serious constraints on how they can use the land after coal."

The consequences of the absence of a planned end to coal are already visible on the ground.

"They are mixed in with other factors – particularly the Gupta rip-off of the coal industry – but the Gupta strategy would not have worked without the profound and ongoing weaknesses of regulatory practices and the active participation of bad politicians and their predatory networks.

"And while the unions are trying to respond to the decline of coal on the Highveld, it is not clear that they name it as such as they are confronted by the symptoms, the dodgy corporate deals (not only the Guptas), the confusing politics of business rescue, new forms of collusive regulation and old forms of regulatory neglect."

Unions have been calling for a just transition for a decade or more and might question where to invest their energies, "in fighting for a just transition or in defending coal.

"The latter choice would deny them, and the workers they represent, the opportunity to influence the debates and decisions about coal mining regions as coal quickly nears its end."

A "vigorous and generous" debate about life after coal is in the interests of workers and communities and should engage them in finding common ground on a just transition strategy that carries their interests forward.

"Failing in this will result in deepening poverty for workers and communities in a poisoned landscape," Hallowes and Munnik write.

The report shows how this agenda is urgent "because the climate crisis is upon us.

"Parts of our country have become hotter and drier, climate health impacts are escalating, and we have experienced floods that have not only wrecked homes but taken many lives too ...

"The failure to transition from a fossil fuel driven and extractive economy will result in the ultimate injustice. And it is urgent that this is a just transition.

"Otherwise it will fail as it collapses into violence, at different scales, over the control over resources."

The impacts of climate change need to be dealt with. "These will include droughts, floods, sea level rise, sea storms and tsunamis, and the resultant social disruptions, health problems, streams of refugees and political challenges of migration.

"This will require solidarity and ingenuity, but it is also an opportunity to create a new society."

While climate change will exert extra and constantly increasing pressure, it's an "opportunity to realise the urgency of the situation and transform our current dysfunctional systems – local

government, water, health, agriculture – into systems that enable and support, and indeed are integral to creating, a just society.

"We will need to deal with the strategies of the rich and powerful as they plan and plot to abandon the majority of humanity, choose choice climate proof retreats and erect barricades and armies against climate refugees.

"We need to be clear about false solutions, such as 'clean coal', or geo-engineering of the atmosphere to allow greenhouse gas emissions to continue, or the continuance of industrial agriculture in the guise of 'sustainable' solutions.

"We need to square up to the coal lobby and get coal out of the way – but in processes that build a just transition. The coal lobby is defending coal and profiteering from the continued intensification of climate change with its negative effects on millions of people and on the planet's ecosystem."

There is no doubt that the best option for the people and the country is for a rapid transition to renewable energy starting with the power system, the authors write.

"This will create more jobs than the mines and coal power stations and we believe that a substantial proportion of those jobs will be on the Highveld. There is also a skills base for manufacturing renewables in the area."

But equally, the pitfalls of the transition to renewable energies need to be understood.

"At present, the renewable IPPs are all privatised. Will new plants be socially owned and will the system be reconceived to include small-scale embedded generation, including community energy?

"Or is it a continuation of capitalist enterprise in which the public sector will be drained and municipalities and poor people left with slum grids? What are workplace conditions at the privatised IPPs like?

"What is the relationship between transnational energy corporations and host communities – shaped, it should be noted, by a government determined to outsource all responsibility? And we need to look at the production chains, including mining and waste management, in what we expect to be a fast growing renewables sector."

In the meantime, the report says, the legacy of the coal economy must be addressed.

"People have streamed onto the Highveld and other coalfields in search of jobs. Some have stayed, others are still part of a migrant labour regime that is transformed but not done.

"The cost of a job, for many of them, is the ruin of their health. But the income is critical to their families and to local and sending communities alike. Workers need to feel secure in the transition – either that they will get a fair pension or a decent alternative job."

People in local communities, the neighbours of the mines and power stations, have been "injured by the pollution".

"The impacts of climate change on health are beginning to take their toll and will rise steeply.

"We need a health system that understands and responds appropriately to environmental health issues. We need to deal with what the coal economy destroyed: land, rivers and wetlands.

"This may well happen in a context of inadequate financing from under-funded rehabilitation funds, a dysfunctional regulator in the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy and mining corporations that abscond and abandon their responsibilities."

However, says the report, this work is "socially and ecologically necessary.

"We need to take responsibility for how we live on this planet and relate to other living beings and ecosystems.

"Our earth is not only our life support but also our home and the source of our knowledge and understanding, the place of our work. We are part of nature and by killing it, we are killing ourselves."

In SA, says the report, ecological systems are seriously eroded while various systems for social provision are "on the edge of collapse.

"The water management system is broken; the power system represents a national hazard; the food system is highly unequal and serves poor food to poor people, leaving millions malnourished and hungry; human settlements are in a state of disrepair and municipal services are collapsing, particularly in poor areas; and the faltering health sector has barely begun to get to grips with what fossil fuel pollution and climate change mean for health. All these sectors will be put under ever more stress as the climate grows more hostile."

The report makes clear suggestions on what effective actions need to be taken including rapidly reducing fossil fuel burning and hence emission to zero; "looking to the survival of the people through our democratic organisation and common control of resources; restoring the land and its capacity to absorb and store carbon, including through the way we grow food claim the climate debt owed by the north to south and rich to poor".

Bobby Peek, groundWork director, writes how for environmental justice campaigners, workers, unions, politicians and the "community people living in the plume of poverty that dirty energy dumps on us", 2019 could be seen as the year of the just transition.

"Not that it was delivered," he notes, "but rather that it become a central talking point from the UN to the streets of Mpumalanga, where coal defines life."

"This we must take as a victory. If it were not for community people, workers, unions and environmental justice organisations remaining vigilant, this debate would not be on the table.

"We even got a just transition into our Integrated Resource Plan - although (Mineral Resources and Energy Minister Gwede Mantashe) appears to be using the just transition as a brake on renewables - but government is not pursuing it with urgency."

Peek writes how making a just transition happen in reality will be difficult, "and especially so because it will require a deep, honest and meaningful discussion between community and labour...

"This coming together of community, labour movements, people's organisations and progressive NGOs is what we have to strive for, before we seek to engage with government, corporates and the elite - for they are planning on the just transition being another money spinner for capital via their false solutions and fallacy of green growth, clean coal, geo-engineering and gas as the transition agency. "

That Eskom is in trouble and is crumbling is no longer news, Peek says. "Their flagship white elephants Medupi and Kusile are failing, and they have dragged the country to the verge of bankruptcy.

"Walking through the streets of Pullens Hope, there is no hope left. People are desperate. Workers' talk about how Eskom's 50-year-old coal-fired Hendrina power station is collapsing and being scavenged for spare parts rather than being repaired is alarming ...

"What is even more brutal is when the flagship Kusile plant is also being used as a quasi-salvage operation, as parts are stripped from one unit to another to repair other units."

A just transition has no blueprint. "It is not one process. It is not one plan. In nature, diversity is critical - a diversity that supports the collective Mother Earth.

"Our survival as humans depends upon this. We need 'a world of many worlds' that allows us to support each other, rather than feed off each as in the present system, where those who accumulate wealth do so at the expense of the poor.

"We must accept the Xolobeni and Fuleni communities' right to say no to mining. It is going to be a difficult next decade as we strive to reduce greenhouse gas emissions down to zero and build just transitions."

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