

# Wanted: socially just transition to sustainable energy

*System needs a rethink and empowerment of citizens in an inclusive, democratic manner*

## COMMENT



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SOUTH Africa's ability to transition to an affordable, clean and climate-resilient energy system will have to address questions concerning the ownership of energy.

The current system neither serves all people's needs nor produces affordable clean energy for all. The road ahead is challenging and pitted with non-compliance, failing infrastructure, bailouts, rising debt and inadequate leadership potholes that are not repairable with mere plugging in here and there.

Our energy system needs a rethink on a national scale and empowerment of people and workers on the ground, while addressing energy usage and needs in an inclusive and democratic manner. People cannot afford the energy that is being produced.

As a result of the Covid-19 economic slide, the Treasury expects a wage loss of between 5% and 15% this year pushing people further into poverty. With job losses, another 10% of people will find themselves there by year's end. How do we make clean energy affordable for all?

We should be investing our resources in meeting people's energy needs and buffering communities from future blows of pandemics and climate crises. Privatisation of energy with foreign investment will not address the rising cost of energy for the poor.

Our heavy reliance on fossil fuel places us in the top 15 countries responsible for two-thirds of global carbon dioxide emissions. Carbon dioxide accumulates and lasts a long time in the atmosphere, causing global warming, drought, ocean acidification, loss of biodiversity, frequency and intensity of storms and related climate crises.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that climate change will amplify risks and create



SMOKE rises from a coal-fired power station owned by Eskom near Johannesburg. The transition to clean energy has to happen as fast as possible to limit the risk to people and planet, says the writer. | EPA

new risks for natural and human systems, disproportionately affecting the poor. As a water-scarce country, we are vulnerable to drought. This will drive up food prices, increase malnutrition and intensify inequality. Covid-19 has given us a glimpse into how fragile our systems are under duress and revealed the need to become resilient to the impacts of climate change.

The transition to clean energy has to happen as fast as possible to limit the risk to people and planet. The Integrated Resource Plan limits renewable energy to force coal in. Polluting Eskom, rooted in an apartheid past with crumbling infrastructure and corrupt political manoeuvring, has plummeted our country into debt of R450 billion and cannot continue to be propped up with more debt.

The same goes for any new push for investment in fossil fuel gas infrastructure subject to booms and busts, that will leave us with stranded assets, for future generations to pay the price.

Globally, we are witnessing

divestment from coal and a growing struggle to push out fossil fuels. The draft Upstream Petroleum Resources Development Bill, published for comment by Minister Gwede Mantashe, attempts to lock in fossil fuels by promoting the exploration and extraction of oil and gas.

The bill fails to make adequate provision for consultation with affected communities, particularly those unable to participate during lockdown. Without proper public participation on national energy policy and enabling peoples' right to choose, a new era of segregation is emerging that is unjust, illegal and unconstitutional.

Those in power are widening the chasm between the haves and have-nots, intensifying inequality. Politicians and corporates collude to ride rough shod over people's rights while smoking pipe dreams of building empires for their short-term benefits.

Several groups including the Centre for Environmental Rights, Earthlife Africa, Frack Free South Africa, Support Centre for Land Change, Oceans not Oil, Enviros, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance and groundWork, have called for the minister to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and invest in enabling a just and equitable transition to clean energy

that benefits all. The National Union of Mineworkers supports the transition to a renewable energy system. The union also supports the idea that the social solution to climate change is not private capitalism and sees the need for a socially owned renewable energy sector as a way to resist foreign multinational corporations capturing South Africa's energy production.

Monopolisation and privatisation excludes all sectors of our democracy and any possibility of social change of energy. People need to transition from being consumers to both users and producers, that is, "prosumers".

This means understanding how we use energy and what it means to produce and supply energy as a collective to the grid. Part of a socially just transition to energy will include the repurposing of fossil fuels infrastructure, rehabilitation of land and water, creation of jobs in renewables, and less reliance on polluting minerals.

The pathological capitalist tendency of detachment from the natural world and losing our core values and human touch is what got us into trouble in the first place. Political parties in power can meaningfully engage with people affected by fossil fuel extraction and combustion, Covid-19 and the transition to cleaner energy. And not exclusively with those who have the resources to communicate virtually.

Empowering people with knowledge and listening to people's voices through constitutionally sound public participation processes that include the most vulnerable will ensure that no one is left behind.

Democracy is about dialogue with each other, understanding each other and jointly building a future together.

It will take hard work, inclusion and equality to build a more resilient and socially just energy system that addresses peoples' needs in a sustainable manner. And, through our recovery from Covid-19, to ensure that we are all protected from the next round of blows expected from the ravages of climate change.

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