



# GROUND**WORK**

**HAMBA KAHLE WASTE PICKER PIONEER**



# **SIMON**

**M B A T A**

## IN THIS ISSUE:

- |    |  |    |  |
|----|--|----|--|
| 3  | From the Smoke Stack   | 16 | Meet Tsholofelo                                  |
| 5  | Simon Mbata: the waste picker pioneer who had dinner with the pope | 17 | UMI Energy Democracy                             |
| 8  | Waste picker issues gaining traction                               | 19 | JUNEA 5 – pushing for a global treaty on plastic |
| 10 | Warwick Zero Waste Project looking into 2022                       | 21 | Bad breath in Glasgow                            |
| 11 | Procurement power  | 22 | Memorandum from ex-Thor Chemicals employees      |
| 13 | Climate crisis crisis  | 26 | Mine closure and what it means to communities    |
| 15 | Engagement initiative by mining-affected communities               | 28 | Virtual toxic tours                              |

Cover picture by Lunga Bhengu



Help us spread the word  
[www.facebook.com/groundWorkSA](http://www.facebook.com/groundWorkSA)



[www.twitter.com/groundworks](http://www.twitter.com/groundworks)

*groundWork is a non-profit environmental justice organization working primarily in South Africa, but increasingly in Southern Africa. groundWork seeks to improve the quality of life of vulnerable people in Southern Africa through assisting civil society to have a greater impact on environmental governance. groundWork places particular emphasis on assisting vulnerable and previously disadvantaged people who are most affected by environmental injustices. groundWork's current campaign areas are: Climate Justice and Energy, Coal, Waste and Environmental Health. These campaigns are supported by the Media, Information and Publications Campaign and the*

*Environmental Justice Education Campaign.*

*groundWork is constituted as a trust.*

*The Acting Chairperson of the Board of Trustees is Judy Bell. The other trustees are: Farid Esack, Patrick Kulati and Richard Lyster.*

### AFFILIATIONS:

*groundWork is affiliated to the following international organizations: Health Care Without Harm; International POPs Elimination Network; Basel Action Network; Oilwatch International; Global Anti-Incineration Alliance; groundWork is the South African member of Friends of the Earth International*

### groundWork's STAFF ARE:

**Director:** Bobby Peek \* **Deputy Director:** Gill Addison \* **Administrative Assistant:** Bathoko Sibisi \* **Waste Campaign Manager:** Musa Chamane \* **Coal Campaign Manager:** Robby Mokgalaka \* **Campaign Coordinator:** Rico Euripidou \* **Campaign Research and Technical Assistant:** Niven Reddy \* **Community Activist:** Thomas Mnguni \* **Media, Information and Publications Campaign Manager:** Tsepang Molefe \* **Researcher:** David Hallows \* **Environmental Health Campaign Manager:** Mafoko Phomane \* **Health Care Without Harm - Africa Regional Coordinator:** Azeza Rangunwala \* **Bookkeeper:** Gill Waterworth \* **Financial Consultant:** Shelley Paterson \* **Coordinator for Africa Coal Network:** Lorraine Chiponda \* **Assistant Coordinator for Africa Coal Network:** Nerissa Anku \* **Friends of the Earth Africa Regional Facilitator:** Nerisha Baldevu \* **GAIA Communications Coordinator:** Carissa Marnce \* **UMI Waste Project Campaigner:** Asiphile Khanyile \* **UMI Energy Democracy and Sovereign Project Organiser:** Mary-Joy Masetlane \* **Environmental Justice Education Campaigner:** Tsholofelo Sepotokele \* **EJS Coordinator:** Jeanne Prinsloo \* **groundWork Research Associate:** Victor Munnik \* **Executive Assistant to Director:** Joan Cameron.

### HOW TO CONTACT US:

8 Gough Road  
Pietermaritzburg  
P O Box 2375, Pietermaritzburg,  
3200  
Tel: 033-342-5662  
Fax: 033-342-5665  
e-mail: [team@groundWork.org.za](mailto:team@groundWork.org.za)  
Web: [www.groundWork.org.za](http://www.groundWork.org.za)



groundWork

Layout by Boutique Books  
Printed by Digital Action



Photo by FoE

# From the Smoke Stack

by groundWork director, Bobby Peek



**T**hree months into 2022, and it feels like we have been through the pain, sorrow and demands of a lifetime.

Simon Mbata, the co-founder, first chair and coordinator of the South African Waste Pickers Association, a long-time groundWork partner, died in a motor vehicle accident in February – a loss to the movement and to groundWork. He was known from the dusty streets in Kroonstad and Sasolburg to the many venues of the United Nations globally.

Then, just as I started writing these quarterly reflections, I got the news of the assassination of Abahlali baseMjondolo leader Ayanda Ngila, in eKhenana, Cato Crest, Durban. Here, groundWork – together with the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, Sustainable Energy Africa and Vukani Environmental Movement – is working with Abahlali baseMjondolo on an energy democracy project. Ayanda was falsely accused by the state of murder, imprisoned for six months, released when charges could not be proved, only to be gunned down in front of the community in broad daylight.

This is in the month of March, in which Berta Cáceres, an environmental justice activist and indigenous leader in Honduras, and Sikhosiphi ‘Bazooka’ Radebe of Xolobeni on South Africa’s Wild Coast, were murdered in 2016 because they chose to stand for a better world against corporate and state sanctioned violence caused by “economic development” that destroys people, destroys their democracies and make them servants of the political and corporate elite.

Will the murderers ever be brought to justice? Mr President, as you push for a Just Transition, it has to start with a stop to all violence and finding those who murdered MaFikile Ntshangase, Bazooka and Ayanda.

We cannot preach a Just Transition with daily violence and undemocratic practices.

During the same period, as a commissioner on the Presidential Climate Commission, we started our work face to face. I found myself suddenly with ministers in the same room and then with the United Nations in posh venues, where I felt under-dressed in jeans and a groundWork T-shirt – okay, I did come with a coat. As I sat in these meetings, Phil Ochs, an American protest singer of the 60s and 70s came sharply into focus as he warns of revolution in his lyrics in the *Ring of Revolution*:

And soft middle class crowded in to the last,  
for the building was fully surrounded.  
And the noise outside was the ringing of  
revolution.

Sadly they stared and sank in their chairs ...  
Wet their minds in bitter emotion.  
And they talked about the ringing of revolution.  
We were hardly aware of the hardships they  
beared,  
For our time was taken with treasure.

I often realise that, as we sit and talk, we do not understand the pain of people on the “outside”. Yes, the Commission is now visiting communities, but from the first meetings held, as I write this people are demanding more than just meetings. They are demanding change and they want it now. They are tired of talking. They also want commitments that, as commissioners, we will come back and work out a future with them and not for them. Let the Commission, and indeed other spaces of influence, not be blinded to



the fact that change can only come with people and not for people.

And we must remember that change can often be spoken of but is seldom delivered. And there is no better place than Thor Chemicals to understand this. After nearly three decades, ex-workers of Thor Chemicals have still not attained worker justice. While great strides have been made in cleaning up this toxic waste nightmare, as the waste is now being shipped off to Switzerland, workers are asking the question: What about us?

So, in a protest in which ex-workers threatened to stop the clean-up, they articulated their concerns deeply and emotionally, and they state:

Regrettably, we, as former employees of Thor Chemicals, feel that our rights to life, rights to dignity, rights to a protected environment as well as our rights to health as enshrined in our Bill of Rights have been violated and tampered with by the gross negligence of Thor Chemicals and the culpability of the government. We therefore plead to our democratic government to kindly rectify the injustices caused to us by both the previous government and Thor Chemicals.

It is with a sense of hope in our democracy that workers once again reach out and ask government to assist. One last time. Will government bring worker justice to the workers of Mpumalanga, Fredville and KwaXimba who today still live with the pain of Thor Chemicals?

It is this hope that the president seeks to deliver annually in his State of the Nation Address, referred to as SONA in South Africa. But there are always mixed feelings about how this all lands in real life. It is a mixed bag of goodies that the president offers, implications of which are at times dangerous, such as cutting red tape

– led by ex Exxaro CEO Sipho Nkosi – a dangerous appointment, I would warn. What the president should focus on is understanding the structural and political reasons for delays in government officials closing out on projects.

The Zuma years created a fearful bureaucracy where decisions, unless instructed from above, were never taken. The president must create a culture of bureaucratic energy and honesty where officials are guided by the law and policies rather than by expediency and pressure of the corporate-connected political elite. At the same time, there are concerns that the president is “stripping the state” of playing a meaningful role in ensuring service delivery and making an impact on the nearly 50% unemployment rate. There is suspicion that SONA lays a foundation for the outsourcing for profit for the delivery of basic services. While the Just Transition was mentioned, there is a feeling by our Life After Coal Campaign and our partners such as the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance that the focus on mining, oil and gas is going to lead us into more climate chaos.

Finally, I want to close off with what was a momentous and bonding occasion for all of us in groundWork. In February, more than 50 of us met for the first time since 2020 at groundWork’s annual partner and community gathering to review our work and to plan for the year. For the first time, many new staff got together with the community people we have worked with for more than two decades. It was powerful.

Sadly, for many of us it was also the last time we saw Simon Mbata alive.

May all those fallen in battle rest in peace.

A luta continua 🌀





# Simon Mbata: the waste picker pioneer who had dinner with the pope

by Musa Chamane



*On the night of Saturday the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, Simon Mbata, coordinator of the South African Waste Pickers Association, was involved in a fatal motor vehicle accident. Simon's death has been a blow to the waste picker movement globally, throughout South Africa, the South African Waste Picker Association, groundWork and to very many people who struck up a friendship with him in the struggle for dignity for waste pickers. Below is a short tribute from Musa Chamane, groundWork's waste campaigner who spent many days on long roads travelling throughout South Africa from Springbok to Umtata, from Cape Town to Ermelo and across Africa and the world.*

He had a very familiar surname among the Zulu clan and he used me to learn the isiZulu and English languages, perfecting his isiZulu over time, even though at the beginning he couldn't construct a sentence. He joked that people should speak to me in seSotho because I did not want to learn seSotho. We started working very closely, roaming the country trying to encourage waste pickers to organise themselves because waste management was on the brink of being fully privatised, which meant that waste pickers would lose their livelihoods. We worked together in diverse and multicultural communities around the country because he was able to converse in almost all our South African languages. He could speak seTshwane, Afrikaans and isiZulu, switching

## **Tribute to my dearest friend, colleague and brother**

It all started in the Free State, at the waste dumpsite in Sasolburg, South Africa, 15 years ago. It was a chilly, dry winter when I accompanied groundWork researchers to the landfill in 2007. We were met by a couple of very dark-skinned people in very dusty clothes. It looked as if they had been walking on the side of a busy dirt road. I communicated with them in English, which was not their common dialect. They spoke seSotho and Afrikaans, which I am bad at. Simon stood out from the group, just by making sufficient effort to communicate with us, telling us of the difficulties they faced in their daily work of salvaging recyclable materials in exchange for money. The relationship between Simon and me started on that particular winter's day, in 2007.





between different languages and groups, depending on which province we were in.

After travelling to almost every town in South Africa, a national waste pickers meeting was held in Johannesburg, in 2009, the first of its kind in Africa. The South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA) was born during that conference. At that very same gathering, Simon was elected as chairperson of the organisation and was also mandated to speak to the media on behalf of the organisation. He excelled at serving and leading SAWPA. His confidence grew tremendously, and groundWork made sure that he was exposed to different social issues, information and spaces. He attracted media attention and he even commanded respect in places like the national parliament, having been invited to represent SAWPA at portfolio committee discussions on issues around the concept of Zero Waste.

Simon spoke his mind and had a very strong personality; he would argue and drive his points. Whether speaking to a professor or a fellow waste picker, he would take you on. He had a broad smile and his eyes at times made people uncomfortable when he was engaged in debates. He had a deep and emphatic voice.

He travelled the world to countries such as India, Brazil, Egypt, Spain and France, to name a few. The contribution he made was very telling – he was instrumental in the formation of SAWPA and he represented Africa in the Global Movement of Waste

Pickers. He was very instrumental in making sure that the rights of vulnerable waste pickers were not abused. He was involved in a number of activities, nationally and globally. The late Minister Edna Molewa once hosted him for lunch so that she could understand waste picker issues. Even the current minister, Barbara Creecy, had engagements with him on COVID relief for waste pickers in South Africa. At the peak of the pandemic waste pickers were declared essential workers because he wrote a letter to the government demanding this.

Simon made a massive contribution to the waste movement. He strongly stood by the term *Waste Pickers*, a term that was considered a shame in the early 2000s but which now has been embraced and imbued with a sense of dignity. Because of his drive and work ethic, today there are even guideline documents for municipalities on how they can integrate waste pickers into their waste management systems. In 2014, newspaper headlines claimed “*Junk collector meets the Pope*”, when Simon had dinner with Pope Francis in Rome.

Simon, the accident near Sebokeng on the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup> of February has robbed us by taking your life back to your Creator. We are heartbroken, sobbing and confused, due to your passing. We will make sure that we take up the baton and continue the good work you have started.

May God comfort the Mbata family in these trying times. 🙏





## Message of condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of the late Mr Simon Mbata

The Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Ms Barbara Creecy, and Deputy Minister, Ms Makhotso Sotyu, wish to express their deepest condolences at the passing of Mr Simon Mbata, the National Coordinator of SAWPA (South African Waste Pickers Association).

The South African Waste Pickers Association is one of the organisations formed to promote, protect and defend the rights of waste pickers in the country, with Mr Simon Mbata as its advocate. He was also a member of the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers.

The waste pickers' role has been widely recognised nationally and internationally, including at the current United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) 5.2 held in Kenya, Nairobi, this week.

At national level, collaboration with South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA), African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO), the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) and the Department of Science and Innovation led to the development of guidelines for the integration of waste pickers into the municipal waste management systems. Mr Mbata participated in the inaugural 2019 Plastic Colloquium in his capacity as the chairperson of SAWPA.

In 2020, he also worked with the private sector and the DFFE to facilitate relief support to waste pickers amidst the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the waste collection systems. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, the day before he met his untimely death, Mr Mbata briefed the Portfolio Committee on Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment on matters affecting the waste pickers. Minister Creecy and Deputy Minister Sotyu convey a message of comfort to his family, friends and colleagues. 🙏

*Issued by: Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment*

## Parliament, Wednesday, 3 March 2022

The Portfolio Committee on Environment, Forestry and Fisheries has learnt with shock of the tragic death of Mr Simon Mbata, who was the national coordinator for the South African Waste Pickers Association.

A day before the tragic accident, Mr Mbata presented to the Portfolio Committee on Environment, Forestry and Fisheries on the informal sector within waste management.

Committee Chairperson Ms Faith Muthambi said Mr Mbata was a zero-waste champion, representing the waste pickers. He was instrumental in assisting waste pickers to form cooperatives and ran awareness campaigns on the separation of waste in communities, so that those without jobs could find a means to support themselves.

As early as 2013, he was fighting for the protection of waste picker jobs, promoting recycling rather than incinerating waste. At that time, he said waste incineration will lead to people losing their jobs, as people working on dump sites provide a livelihood for families.

Mr Mbata saw waste pickers as essential services workers because of the impact of their work on the environment. He also identified business opportunities for the unemployed, such as the picking, transporting, sorting and recovery of waste materials, which assisted many poor communities.

Ms Muthambi praised Mr Mbata as a leader and a champion of the environment who will be sorely missed. His contribution to the environment will live on in the communities he has helped to organise into cooperatives. The committee sends their condolences to the family, friends and communities who have worked with Mr Mbata. 🙏

*Issued by the parliamentary communication services on behalf of the chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, Ms Faith Muthambi.*





# Waste picker issues gaining traction



by Musa Chamane

## Trucks and personal protective clothing support for waste pickers

The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) has responded to COVID-19 by working with stakeholders to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to members of the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA) at four integration sites. The sites are in the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. Having the PPE has made a huge difference to the working lives of the waste pickers.

Waste pickers are an especially vulnerable group because all the COVID-19 infected waste ends up at their places of work, be it at the bin or at the landfill. The South African Waste Pickers Association has extended their request for support from UNIDO, which is in collaboration with the government of Japan, to provide more than 300 sets of PPE to waste pickers. The UNIDO initiatives fall under the UN Environment-led National Stakeholder Platform and are aimed at expanding activities on safety and security for healthcare waste management during the pandemic. These activities did not stop with PPE. UNIDO decided also to provide the organisation with two trucks with which to move their materials to the market.

## Real support for waste pickers

In South Africa the UNIDO project is supporting the transition from conventional plastics to more environmentally sustainable alternatives. The project is funded by the government of Japan and is executed jointly with partner institutions in the country, including the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), and the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF). One of the outputs of the project is specifically designed to support waste

picker integration by ensuring that the role of waste pickers is formally recognised and valued, and that they are integrated into the design and implementation of separation at source and other recycling initiatives.

### Integration

Integration of waste pickers into municipal waste management systems is growing in leaps and bounds and in various forms. Integration comes in many forms and has different steps to ensure its efficacy. We have seen a number of municipalities registering waste pickers, due to COVID-19. We have seen municipalities assisting waste pickers to apply for COVID-19 relief from national government. We have seen municipalities starting projects together with waste pickers. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has taken the lead regarding Recommendation R204 (the formalisation of the informal) globally, and this is already taking place in South Africa as well. All the above activities are important steps towards waste picker integration and creating an enabling environment for waste pickers.

<https://www.unido.org/stories/helping-south-africas-waste-pickers-face-COVID-19-crisis-and-beyond>

## First successful separation at source project in South Africa

Two trucks have been donated by UNIDO to the South African Waste Pickers Association. The association decided to give these two trucks to two projects, one of which is based in Sasolburg in the Free State. The second project is based in Paarl in the Western Cape.







**Vaal Park truck sponsored by UNIDO. Credit groundWork**

The trucks will make life easier for these projects since they will be able to move the materials from the Materials Recovery Facilities (MRF) to the nearest market. This is one of the most important tools required for integration, as well as for separation at source, projects.

Sasolburg Vaalpark is a separation at source project and a collaborative effort by the waste pickers and the municipality to establish a materials recovery facility operated by waste pickers. The project collects waste from 3 200 households and moves these materials to the facility. The truck is used mainly to collect waste from each household, but also to take materials to the market.

## **Progressive municipality on waste recycling**

In the past, the Drakenstein Local Municipality in the Western Cape tried to resolve their problems with waste by applying for an incinerator. The SAWPA members stopped the application and, following protests against the incinerator, a material recovery facility by waste pickers was launched instead. A municipal exchange between Drakenstein and

Sasolburg resulted in the Paarl project. The project has matured, and the local municipality has reported an increase in waste recycling statistics to the Department of Environmental Affairs.

## **SAWPA is becoming stronger**

Our thanks go to all the parties who are part of the project. It has resulted in recognition of the work being done by waste pickers in South Africa and has encouraged sponsorship for their efforts. The trucks will strengthen the organisation and will revitalise other members who were losing hope due to the snail's pace at which recognition was achieved in the past. The projects that were allocated the trucks will grow even further. We hope to see the first Zero Waste town in South Africa within the next couple of years. Municipalities will learn from others and hopefully more and more materials recovery facilities will be developed. Municipalities such as Tshwane, eThekweni and Nelson Mandela Bay have started their own waste recycling projects, which will facilitate the integration of waste pickers into their waste management systems. 🌱





# Warwick Zero Waste Project looking into 2022



by Asiphile Khanyile

**A**fter two years of COVID-19, we enter the year 2022 with excitement and anticipation for the unknown. Much of 2021, the first year of this ground-breaking project, paved the path for us as the Warwick Zero Waste Project and what we need to look out for in 2022. The WZW Project kick started 2022 with hope and excitement as the media covered the project, giving readers an overview of the partnership between groundWork, Asiye eTafuleni and Urban Futures Centre from the Durban University of Technology and how our project offers socio-economic, environmental and climate benefits.

Gradually, the term **zero waste** is becoming mainstream in both the waste management sector and within movements demanding a Just Transition towards a regenerative and restorative economy that serves people first. More zero waste projects are the epitome of the practical and are immediate sources for information about how systems should change for the better in waste management. Hence, I would say the timing of our project sets the tone of what is to come in terms of demonstrating a climate change mitigation strategy at local informal markets such as those in Warwick.

The focus of waste management has been on reducing carbon dioxide emissions, as this is one of the major greenhouse gases contributing towards the heating of our earth. However, more attention is now being focused on the reduction of methane as well. From this point of view, our project is inextricably linked to this scope of work because the Markets of Warwick are a big source of organic waste, and this is common throughout the African continent. More organics in the landfills or dumpsites results in an increase of methane emitted. Thus, our focus for 2022 must consider the organics for our pilots.

On the flip side, we will continue to work closely with informal traders, street vendors and waste pickers to foster future capacity building with lifelong skills. We also want to keep on learning from other zero waste projects in and around Africa, hence keeping the topic of zero waste an open dialogue. Thus, I believe the latter is one of the mechanisms to open more spaces to share knowledge and experiences with the help from ongoing cutting-edge research. Personally, the more I work in the project, the more I see zero waste being the “hot topic” in the management sector and it looks like the WZW Project is going to get a lot bigger. For now, the WZW Project will fine tune its plans for the year ahead and we are going into 2022 with eagerness and minds open to being filled with great ideas and knowledge. 🌀

## Plans for 2022

- To have a learning exchange or visit for the project team and informal workers in the project.
- To conduct a workshop for waste pickers in Durban, so that they can learn and understand the project.
- To conduct a workshop with all informal workers in the project in order to encourage stronger solidarity and movement building.
- To conduct research with informal workers in order to plan what the pilot study should ideally look like.
- To co-develop and implement a pilot study with informal workers to demonstrate zero waste solutions from the informal markets.





**P**re-pandemic, in 2018, South Africa spent 8.3% of its GDP on healthcare. Spending on COVID-19 impact mitigation had a significant impact on health spending over the past two years. We are aware that there is a strong correlation between a country's health sector climate footprint and health spending. The higher the spending, measured as percentage of a country's GDP, the higher the per capita health care emissions are. The South African health sector derives its energy from coal-fired power stations, which is another consideration. The health care waste sector had adopted the "polluter pays" principle and the paradox of the health system is being both the polluter and the healer.

When looking at climate change mitigation strategies, we should follow the trail money takes. Hence, we look at spending and the focus for this year is on sustainable procurement. There has been a major focus on the pandemic, without the full context of how climate change is not a threat anymore, but a reality. We must look beyond short-term needs and consider the longer-term impacts of each purchase and payment.

Sustainable Procurement is defined as "a process whereby organisations meet their needs for goods, services, works and utilities in a way that achieves value for money on a whole life basis in terms of generating benefits not only to the organisation, but also to society and the economy, whilst minimising damage to the environment". According to Treasury, the total consolidated spending in the public sector amounts to R2 trillion each year over the medium term, of which the health portion was R248.8 billion in 2021/22. Beyond just the health sector, up to 50% of the South African budget is being spent directly and indirectly on the purchase of goods, services and works. Thus, public procurement comes to the fore as a key tool available to government to achieve sustainable development goals.

Our Global Green and Healthy Hospital Network members have been implementing sustainable projects at healthcare facilities, in key focus areas such as waste, water, energy and food. This has been led by environmental health practitioners in most cases. For the Sustainable Health in Procurement Project (SHiPP), we would like the supply chain to not only be involved in future projects, but to drive them. We aim to seek alignment between sustainability initiatives and public health procurement.

In the network, we recognise the value of peer-to-peer exchange as an effective mechanism for change with specialist technical assistance. This process has been stalled due to the on-going pandemic, but we plan on resuming this year within safe COVID-compliant protocols. This year we are offering hybrid events, virtual and online – starting with a procurement forum combined with GGHH planning for 2022 in the Western Cape.

National government plays an important role in providing leadership and an enabling environment for sustainable procurement. However, sustainable procurement has not been mandated nationally. To our advantage, the nature of our governance structure allows independent and aligned action to be taken at provincial and local levels that can meet or exceed national guidelines. In 2021, health institutions joined the United Nations Race to Zero Campaign and this year we expect more to lead the way.

Sustainable procurement in health care became a global trend in the lead up to the Minamata Convention on Mercury, when Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), with the World Health Organisation and UNDP, worked with hospitals, health systems and governments to substitute mercury-based thermometers and blood pressure devices by purchasing alternatives. groundWork has facilitated this process in South Africa with one of the main beneficiaries being Sizwe Hospital, based in Gauteng.





By harnessing its tremendous purchasing power in many countries, the health sector can impact the supply chain, compelling manufacturers to provide safer, more environmentally sustainable products, produced under ethical and healthy working conditions. It is important to focus on preventative care, viewing healing the planet as healing its people. We are part of an ecosystem and are reminded of this when tragedies such as pandemics strike. 🌱

“The health heroes who are leading us on the road to recovery from the pandemic crisis are the very same who can help lead us out of the climate crisis. They are demonstrating this leadership by forging climate solutions for healthy hospitals and people, and a healthy, more equitable planet,” said Sonia Roschnik, International Climate Policy Director, Health Care Without Harm.







# Climate crisis crisis

by Lorraine Chiponda



**T**he globe is still off track to beat the climate crisis, despite global leaders gathering each year for the past 26 years in the UN Climate Change Conference of Parties Summit (CoP). Africa has experienced an acceleration of extreme weather conditions and in particular persistent droughts and cyclones. The recently launched IPCC Report states that, if emissions are not cut faster, the damages from climate change will cause unprecedented impacts on people, economies and the environment.

In 2019, Madagascar, Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe were devastated by Cyclone Idai, which killed at least 1 303 people and left the countries battling for recovery and funding. In the same year, Cyclone Kenneth also left its own trail of destruction. In the 2020/2021 season, a la Nina season resulted in drought, and in the 2021/2022 rain season, before recovering from the effects of the past two seasons, we experienced Cyclone Ana, which resulted in 83 deaths, destruction of crops and damaged people's homes and infrastructure.

The impacts of the cyclones are further compounded by the recurring climate-induced droughts, along with other disasters, and this has the potential to increase the risk of conflict, food insecurity, poverty and hunger. The climate crisis has become a threat multiplier and will increasingly cause human suffering. The State of the Climate in Africa 2020 Report states that more extreme weather and rising temperatures are hitting Africa hard, and that the rate of temperature increase and sea level rise in Africa is higher than the global average.

There is an urgent need for drastic measures to do away with emissions from burning coal and fossil fuels if we are to save the planet, along with financing of climate resilience and mitigation which speak to the vulnerabilities faced by communities and marginalised groups. During the CoP26 Climate Summit in Glasgow, countries made several pledges that included net zero pledges with various commitments to reduce methane and greenhouse gas emissions. Prior to the CoP26 summit, the Chinese president announced that China would stop funding overseas coal projects.

One commitment that rich nations have failed to fulfil and are not addressing is the pledge to channel US\$100 billion a year to less wealthy nations by 2020, to help them adapt to climate change and mitigate further effects of global warming. Despite accelerating climate impacts as shown above, it has been reported that banks continue to invest billions of dollars into the fossil fuel industry in gas and oil projects. Share Action, which holds that finance systems should serve our planet and people, reported that HSBC put an estimated \$8.7bn (£6.4bn) into new oil and gas in 2021, while Barclays put in \$4.5bn, and Deutsche Bank loaned \$5.7bn.

With recurring cyclones resulting in increased vulnerability in many African countries and communities, the financial systems at the global, regional and national level are failing to treat the climate emergency with the required urgency. Mitigation and adaptation funds still need to reach citizens and reduce the physical and socio-economic vulnerability and ensure there is adequate public infrastructure and structural changes, reflected in changes and adjustments of policy, administration systems and emergency response mechanisms. Financial institutions should go further to support technological transfer to vulnerable countries that support early warning, emergency relief, resilient infrastructure and services.

A number of African countries are still dependent on coal as a source of energy, particularly Southern Africa with South Africa being highly dependent and also the highest producer of greenhouse gas emissions through its massive coal industry. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) Country Report No. 22/37 cited dependence on coal as a climate challenge, along with increasing intensity and frequency of extreme weather conditions, citing South Africa. The IMF made a number of recommendations anchored on green and digital transition and these include: a stable macroeconomic environment and a coherent set of actions to encourage private-sector participation and develop green finance that will help build a climate-resilient economy; removal of structural



obstacles; a more efficient reallocation of resources; a just transition hinged on more dynamic product and labour markets and strong institutional credibility; technology adoption and innovation as well as training and education reforms.

However, the following is crucial if we are to achieve a just transition for Africa:

- a transformative approach away from fossil fuel that does away with extractivism;
- the cancellation of debt to reduce the financial burden on African countries, noting that the finance sector itself requires an overhaul from the national to the international level to ensure it serves the poorest and most marginalised and vulnerable, tightening accountability,

transparency, prior informed consent and putting people and the planet ahead of profits.

- There is a need to put an end to unequal trade rules and intellectual property rights that during the COVID pandemic made it difficult for countries to produce and manufacture COVID vaccines to save lives.
- Recognition and support for community-based initiatives with regards to climate mitigation and adaptation is crucial.

As we map the road to COP27, it is crucial that marginalised groups call for greater accountability with regards to the 100 billion dollar pledge, the climate debt. 🌍



# Engagement initiative by mining-affected communities

by Robby Mokgalaka



**I**n January 2022, Sukumani Environmental Justice (SEJ), with help from groundWork, arranged and hosted a meeting in Dannhauser that brought together senior officials of the South African Police Service (SAPS), the National Prosecution Authority (NPA) and officials from the municipality to sit down and talk about building a better relationship and understanding between the people who live in the area and who are threatened by expanded mining and the police. This event was the first of its kind, especially since it was organised by community people.

The event was a strategic response to the arrests, shooting and beating up by the police of the community people protesting peacefully against the Ikwezi coal mine. In March 2021, in the Dannhauser area of Newcastle, SEJ lead the coal-affected community living next to Ikwezi coal mine in the peaceful protest against the mine for their failure to stop coal mine impacts affecting the community and its livestock. The community had tried several times to engage with the mine without success, as the mine just ignored them. The police arrived at the protest and demanded that people disperse from the gathering, but people sat down, refusing to leave as they were demanding the mine come and receive their memorandum. The police started shooting at the people with rubber bullets and also used stun grenades against the peaceful protesters.

The shooting left many protesters injured and others were arrested and spent three nights behind bars. The arrested were released the following Monday, as the charges against them were withdrawn. A civil case of unlawful arrest and detention has been opened against the department involved. Another case against the police has been opened with the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) for using unnecessary and excessive force.

It has become the norm to find police in conflict with protestors. Often the conflict is inspired by

misconceptions between the opposing groups. We have seen encounters between police and communities happening all around the country, and these sometimes lead to the death of protesters. The coal impacts from the coal mining affected communities has led to community members resorting to protests, either due to failure by the mine to remedy the situation or deliberate ignoring of the request to engage with the mine.

After realising that the conflict between police and community protesters was often based on misconceptions about each other, SEJ and groundWork decided to create a platform for engagement between the groups involved the Ikwezi coal mine struggle to dispel the misconceptions and develop a common understanding of each other.

The proposal for the meeting was well received by those invited, as they saw a need to create a respectful and friendly working environment. The outcome of the meeting was that a response committee should be established, consisting of representatives from each stakeholder. The primary focus of the committee would be to attend to all conflicts between the coal mines in the area and surrounding communities, in order to circumvent bad outcomes such as arrest and court appearances.

The organising team, made up of community leadership, assisted by groundWork, is working on inviting all government compliance enforcement authorities to be included in the response committee. The idea is to rope in compliance officers to ensure that the mining companies adhere to the environmental regulations.

We are aiming for this pilot project to be also used elsewhere, in other affected communities where social justice issues are rife and the human rights defenders are on a collision course with law enforcement. 🌀





# Meet Tsholofelo



**A**lthough her ancestral roots are in Botswana, Tsholofelo Sepotokele was born in Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa. In the past decade of her life, she has resided between Orange Farm in Gauteng and Makhanda in the Eastern Cape. She recently moved to KwaZulu-Natal, to Durban, to join the groundWork team as part of the Environmental Justice Education Campaign.

She is a University of Johannesburg graduate, holding a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities, majoring in Anthropology and Development Studies. She also holds an Honours Degree in Journalism and Media Studies from Rhodes University, where she focused on Critical Social Theory, Critical Media Studies and Critical Research Methodologies, amongst other courses. Tsholofelo is currently writing-up her thesis for her Masters in the same field, as part of the Media and Social Belonging postgraduate programme at the Rhodes University School of Journalism.

Prior to joining groundWork, she taught courses ranging from academic writing, English home language strategies and techniques for Foundation Phase teachers, to critical media studies at three higher education institutions. She also played an instrumental role of research assistant in the 2021 Tracer Study, which set out to get in touch with Environmental Justice School for Activists alumni as part of groundWork's evaluation process.

With a keen interest in mapping histories, understanding the complexities of society, and the role that the media and government have in perpetuating or addressing social issues, she is consequently concerned with finding solutions towards eradicating poverty and bridging social disparities.

To her new role she brings her expertise in module coordination, higher education lecturing, data collection and analysis, and research report writing. She intends to be instrumental in strengthening groundWork's efforts of mobilisation towards building a critical and democratic leadership of activists through people's education, which is based and organised on Freirean approaches and principles. 🌟







**I**n August 2021, groundWork, together with Sustainable Energy Africa (SEA), Abahlali baseMjondolo, Vukani Environmental Movement (VEM) and the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), kick started a transformational project: *Mobilising Social Movements for Energy Democracy and Sovereignty in South Africa: Towards socially owned renewable energy solutions*. The project (the UMI Energy Democracy project) is funded by the Urban Movement Incubator (UMI) and is a first of its kind project in South Africa. It aims to strengthen communities and enable fruitful engagement with government and other actors, towards achieving an inclusive Just Transition that encourages and advocates for community-led and socially-owned renewable energy solutions and Energy Democracy.

The first six months of the UMI ED project was focused on strategic planning for the project. This entailed in-depth planning for dialogues, workshops and stakeholder mapping sessions, as well as finalising the project time line. So far, the project has hosted two successful community activities in KwaZulu-Natal (with the eThekweni Municipality) and Mpumalanga (with the eMalahleni Municipality). The first of these was a dialogue that introduced the project to the communities.

The dialogues were very insightful: all three communities engaged positively with us and provided insightful questions that were incorporated into the feasibility study conducted by SEA. Many people from the communities gave testimonials about their experience of how solar PVs have worked for their neighbours in rural areas. This was an integral part of the first dialogue because it instilled trust amongst the community members.

In addition, we hosted a workshop that was aimed at elevating awareness and capacity building around concepts such as the Just Transition, climate change, renewable energy and energy democracy. groundWork has had a positive impact on the people in these communities, who indicated real enthusiasm

for being part of the project and who engaged with us in a meaningful way.

As part of the feasibility study, a survey was carried out by the CBOs in the three communities. A total of 35 surveys were conducted in low-income households. The findings from the survey have provided great insights into the affordability and access to energy for the households, including their knowledge about renewable energy and its ability to supply clean energy. In addition, energy use patterns from the three communities have been highlighted as well as the extent to which harmful and polluting fuels have been utilised to meet their basic energy needs. The feasibility study, released on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, explores viable options for community-led and socially-owned renewable energy solutions in the three chosen communities.

The next six months of the UMI ED project will be filled with much exciting and hard work. The procurement process for the off-grid solar PV demonstration units commenced on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2022. Installation of the solar PVs will be accompanied by a training session at which community members will be trained on how to maintain and operate the system. This will be done in parallel with a documentary that will capture the installations and the voices of the people discussing energy democracy. Moreover, groundWork, together with the CBOs, will engage with local and provincial government officials with the aim of scaling up solar PV installations in other communities.

All of this will be followed by two more dialogues and workshops that will focus on amplifying the voices of community people by sharing their stories and creating their narrative of what an energy democracy means for them, raising awareness and advocating for a just transition. Finally, year one of the project will end with a reflection and learning workshop, hosted by all the project partners. Here's to a fruitful year ahead! 🌞





## Principles of Energy Democracy

- **Social ownership:** The ownership of energy companies by citizen collectives (energy cooperatives) and municipalities to serve the public interest. This means the production of energy is democratised and socialised, implying that people are able to reap the benefits of a new, renewable energy system.
- **Public participation:** Communities need to be empowered to participate more in the transition of the energy sector as a whole. This way, energy policies and decision making will include the voices, public knowledge and environmental justice concerns of disadvantaged communities.
- **Decentralisation:** Energy technologies such as solar PVs, wind turbines and so on are generally decentralised. Decentralised energy could act as a key tool for empowering local communities, as well as achieving a fair distribution of power. Decentralising energy can also result in communities becoming prosumers (producers and consumers simultaneously) of energy.
- **Universal access and social justice:** Approximately one billion people throughout the world population are without access to electricity and the number of people who cannot pay for their energy needs is rising. But everyone has the right to access affordable and reliable energy to meet their basic needs. The energy system should prioritise the needs of poor families, women and marginalised communities.
- **Renewable, sustainable and local energy:** The goal is to make the energy system 100% renewable and to ensure that fossil fuel remains underground. In order to limit the adverse impact of climate change, it is our responsibility to advocate for a low-carbon economy. There are numerous ways to reach this goal, one of them being authorities divesting funds from fossil fuels and investing funds in renewable energy, to create thriving communities.

*Credit: Teresa Cotrim*







# JUNEA 5 – pushing for a global treaty on plastic

By Carissa Marncce and Niven Reddy

**P**lastic pollution is ubiquitous. It is in our food, our water, the air we breathe, the deepest ocean trenches and the most remote mountains. It is harmful to human health and ecosystems, and it serves as a carrier for even more potent toxicants that cause cancer and other serious illnesses. Plastic also has an enormous climate impact – if it were a country, plastic would be the fifth-largest greenhouse gas emitter on earth.

Addressing these problems requires an international framework because plastic pollution does not respect borders. Oil and fossil gas (plastic's feedstock materials), plastic polymers and additives, plastic products and packaging, and plastic waste are all widely traded internationally. In particular, limitations on plastic production require international cooperation to prevent production being outsourced from one country to another.

Currently, plastic is largely unregulated under international law; only a few aspects are patchily addressed by treaties such as the Basel, Stockholm and London Conventions. A new legal instrument, covering the entire life cycle of plastic, is required to tackle this planetary crisis.

## A plastics treaty should focus on three core goals:

### 1. Reducing the total quantity of plastic produced.

Plastic production is doubling every 15 to 20 years and with it the volume of plastic waste generated. The oil and gas industry sees plastic as its primary growth market and is investing billions of dollars in new and expanded facilities. Through National Action Plans, countries would choose their own policy instruments (like bans on single-use plastics, a plastic tax, quantitative caps) to scale back production to meet globally agreed upon goals. The reduction in plastic will open economic

opportunities for local businesses based on alternative service models, including material reuse, bulk stores and compostable packaging.

2. Improving circularity in plastic. Very little plastic is currently recycled; plastic's most notable quality – its durability – has become a primary drawback as it is treated as a disposable material. Improving circularity means eliminating toxic additives and fillers and avoiding some polymers, such as PVC, entirely. It also requires clear definitions (like compostable, biodegradable and bio-based) and labels to facilitate effective recycling. Harmonised standards and data collection would be the responsibility of an international body, while national policies could restrict plastic production to types that are readily and economically recyclable or reusable.
3. Eliminating plastic pollution in the environment. Even with reduced levels of plastic production, improved waste management will be needed to ensure that end-of-life plastics are recovered and dealt with in an environmentally safe manner. This is best accomplished through an integrated zero-waste system.

\* Many jurisdictions struggle with the high cost of waste management; it is important that the financial costs of managing plastic accrue to plastic manufacturers rather than to the public.

## Recommendations

A new plastics treaty would establish measurable goals while allowing countries flexibility in their approaches to reach those goals. Comprehensive monitoring will allow progress toward the global goals to be transparently reported and measured. Financial and technical assistance will be needed to support both implementation and reporting.





Several elements are critical to ensuring the success of a new plastics treaty. First, **it must cover the full life cycle of plastic**, from precursors (fossil fuel), through production and use, to disposal. It must lead to a regenerative and restorative economy – based on environmental justice and pathway for the just transition of plastic production.

Many of plastic's worst impacts, such as greenhouse gas emissions and toxic air emissions, occur primarily in the production phase. Other problems, such as the transfer of toxic compounds into food, happen in the use-phase, while non-recyclability of most plastics is an end-of-life issue.

Similarly, the treaty should have an **open mandate** to address any issues relevant to plastic. This will allow it to consider new concerns and devise new solutions as the science develops. The treaty must be **legally binding** to ensure compliance and stimulate national policy. It must be well-supported through clear and transparent reporting, as well as financial and technical assistance.

## Pitfalls to avoid

The treaty's scope should not be limited to plastic waste or marine plastics, as this would preclude addressing some of the most important problems. It would also rule out the most effective interventions to limit the quantity and types of plastics produced.

Neither the treaty nor national action plans should rely on voluntary or corporate-led programs, such as voluntary Extended Producer Responsibility, Plastic Pacts or offsetting schemes. These are greenwashing efforts whose primary purpose is to prevent effective regulation while doing little to address the real problems.

Finally, the treaty must be grounded in current technical realities; it should not leave problems to be dealt with by technologies such as chemical recycling that are immature or do not yet exist. Clearly, the treaty must not promote polluting technologies and practices such as incineration and co-processing of plastic waste in cement kilns, which would create other environmental and climate hazards. ☀

*For more information please visit: [no-burn.org/unea-plastics-treaty](https://no-burn.org/unea-plastics-treaty)*



# Bad breath in Glasgow

by Greenfly



**O**n the outside, they called it the shitshow in Glasgow. Not surprising really, with Boris Johnson slouching his ego across the global stage and the slathering of 'world' leaders who let it be understood that their importance greatly exceeds the bounds of earth. The medium is the message.

The medium is big and physical. America is back. It arrived in the Imperial Jumbo Jet with the press corps swooning on the ground. And the overflow following in fleets of corporate jets. It transferred to the roads in convoys of big black cars with motorcycle outriders and flashing lights surrounding the monstrous Presidential Cadillac known as the Beast. The message is power.

On the inside, the medium is stuffed with publicists, caring and sharing with the brigades of the press, and with you and me on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Chrome, Edge and a trillion bytes and pixels streaming by in words, pictures, videos. All gone before sense can be made of it. But glowing with significance.

The world leaders are corporate and political. And not always easy to tell apart as the one spins through the revolving door to become the other – even quicker than Superman in a telephone booth. Inside the CoP blue zone, the zone of decision makers, of back rooms, double deals and whisky, they gather in the country pavilions where the symbiosis of governments and corporates is displayed and power advertised.

At the centre of the zone, the earth hangs over the heads of delegates rushing to the next meeting. This is what it's about. Not to save earth. But to celebrate power over it. The world leaders. We have it hanging from the roof. We will decide.

'Keep 1.5 alive' they said on the inside, almost as if they believed it while they burn through the remaining carbon budget on the way to two or three degrees.

On the outside, the people expected little. More blah, blah, blah, said Swedish youth leader Greta Thunberg. And even worse than blah. Not just hot air, but toxic breath. "Our leaders are lost and our world is damaged," said Vanessa Nakate, an African youth leader from Uganda. People are drowning in floods, starving in droughts, dying in heatwaves and wildfires, even in the global North, but mostly in the global South. In Uganda, in Mozambique, in Madagascar,

in Bangladesh, in the Caribbean, in the Philippines. That's loss and damage. "Who will pay for that?" she asked.

This was advertised as the 'climate finance CoP'. And what the Northern powers, the world leading decision makers, decided was that they would not be paying any loss and damage. No liability. And no accountability for imperial plunder. Pump that oil.

They apologised profusely, but the '\$100 billion by 2020', promised in 2009 by the world leading USA, was short of \$20 billion on the Northern calculation. More like \$90 billion short on a Southern reckoning.

The real bad breath of Glasgow came with agreement on carbon markets. Markets is the cuddly code for Capital. As if Capital was about the Saturday morning market in the park, where you can chat to neighbours and traders and find the thing you need or something of delight.

Big money hangs on the carbon market, trading nothing of delight. In fact, trading nothing. Trading carbon not emitted for carbon emitted. And finding that it adds to net zero.

Carbon is part of all life and is cycled between earth, air and ocean. About a third of historic carbon emissions are from the loss and damage to forests, wetlands and grasslands of three centuries of imperial plunder. Fossil fuels are from dead carbon long buried underground, extracted with a hot breath of sulphur and burned into the sky. That accounts for the other two thirds of historic emissions.

The market makes it all equivalent. A tonne of living carbon for a tonne of dead carbon. And there you are at net zero. The corporates call it 'nature-based solutions' to keep on with real fossil emissions in exchange for planting trees. Never mind three centuries of imperial damage. Leave that out of the account.

And they'll need to take a whole lot of land to plant the trees for an equivalent quantity of carbon to what they plan to emit. The carbon traders started practising that under the market mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol. They grabbed land in Southern countries and took away the rights of peasants, pastoralists and forest dwellers – and called it 'sustainable development'. 🌱



# Memorandum from ex-Thor Chemicals employees

## **M**EMORANDUM FROM THE EX-THOR CHEMICALS EMPLOYEES (hereinafter the “former employees”)

### **To:**

Ministry and the Department of Labour  
Ministry and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries  
and the Environment  
Thor Chemicals

### **Copied:**

groundWork, Friends of the Earth, South Africa  
Portfolio Committee on Employment and Labour  
South African Police Services  
eThekweni Metro Police Services

**Date:** 28 February 2022

**Venue:** Former Thor Chemicals premises (now Metallica) (Corner Old Main Road and Eddie Hagen Drive)

We have gathered here today as former employees of Thor Chemicals with one common purpose.

We are here today mainly to ask the government to suspend this cleanup campaign by Thor Chemicals with immediate effect and until such time as the issue of compensating all the former Thor Chemicals employees (Cato Ridge Plant) has been properly dealt with by both the government and Thor Chemicals.

This decision taken by the former employees is after several failed attempts by the latter to have this matter resolved. On several occasions, the former employees through their representatives have been trying to reach out to both the government and Thor Chemicals for an amicable solution to this matter. In fact, we have peacefully exhausted all the internal remedies that are available to us as former employees and citizens of this country. For example, our representatives have

contacted all the relevant government officials from the local sphere to the national sphere of government and they have even raised this issue with the Parliament, but all in vain.

### **Our history:**

1. We, as former employees, find ourselves in this situation today because of the negligent conduct of the previous government by allowing Thor Chemicals to transfer the mercury plant from Margate (England, United Kingdom) to Cato Ridge using an unmonitored system of work which was hazardous and unsafe to us as employees. We as former employees are also made despondent by the fact that it's now been nearly three decades since we have raised the same issue with the current democratic government officials (as the government in waiting), but nothing has transpired. Instead, we find ourselves being driven from pillar to post by those in charge.
2. We are in this situation today because of the culpable conduct of the previous government, which allowed Thor Chemicals to use this country as a dumping area by allowing the company to import thousands of tons of toxic mercury waste for disposal in this country. This was happening despite a warning by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in Britain to Thor Chemicals about the dangers of their mercury plant operations in Margate. Instead of closing down, Thor Chemicals decided to transfer its mercury plant from Margate to Cato Ridge (South Africa), replicating the same deficiencies that had been highlighted by the HSE in Britain.
3. In the early nineties, we started to feel the symptoms of mercury poisoning. Our families started to notice our behavioural changes, our gums and our noses started to bleed, we had some memory loss, some of our colleagues were even going mad and, worse, some of our colleagues passed away due to mercury





*Ex-Thor Chemicals employees march for justice. Credit: groundWork*

poisoning. We tried to report these incidents to the company officials but instead we were given milk and orange juice and we were told that these liquids will help us to reduce the level of mercury in our bodies.

4. In 1993 the founding president of our democracy, President Nelson Mandela visited three of our colleagues (Mr Engelbert Ngcobo, Mr Peter Cele and Mr Albert Dlamini) while they were lying in a comatose state at King Edward Hospital. Unfortunately, both Mr Engelbert Ngcobo and Mr Peter Cele succumbed to the mercury poisoning and Mr Albert Dlamini survived but he is still paralysed as we speak.
5. The resultant was that the former President, Nelson Mandela appointed a Commission of Inquiry (the Davis Commission) in 1995 to look specifically at the issue of Thor Chemicals including the safety of former workers. In its findings, the Davis Commission succinctly provided that there were flaws in the applicable legislation and that there was a total absence of coordination between the

relevant government departments responsible for the environment. In a nutshell, the Commission found that both Thor Chemicals and the government by then were jointly culpable for all the problems that occurred at Thor Chemicals, and one of the Commission's recommendations was that both Thor Chemicals and the government should deal with the issue of mercury waste.

6. It is not within our powers as former employees to ask both the government and Thor Chemicals as to why it took more than twenty (20) years after the recommendation was made for this cleanup campaign to resume now. What we, as former employees applaud is the fact that our first democratic president, the Honourable Nelson Mandela, wanted to see to it that justice is being done for us, the former employees. Madiba knew that taking over the reins of power meant that the government was not only taking all the assets but also the liabilities of the previous government and, for the same reasons we, as the former employees strongly believe that the pain and suffering caused





to us by the previous government must be rectified by the current government.

7. As for Thor Chemicals, we know that the company has done everything in its powers to avoid compensating all the affected employees. As soon as the claims were lodged by some of our colleagues, the company used all the technicalities available at its disposal to frustrate us and to ensure that future claims are being avoided at all costs. For example, the company demerged, changed its names, moved its assets; the company declared itself bankrupt and finally left the country. For all these years we have been struggling to communicate with Thor Chemicals. In 2004, for example, the former Minister of Environmental Affairs, former Minister Rejoice Mabudhafatsi, visited us at Inchanga and promised to visit Thor Chemicals in UK on our behalf, but unfortunately nothing yet has materialised. This is one of the indications of how difficult, if not impossible, it was for us to communicate with Thor

Chemicals and to get a meaningful response from our democratic government.

8. In 2019 the abandoned stockpile of mercury waste at Cato Ridge caught fire and as a result the government ordered Thor Chemicals to come back to South Africa and to clean up that mess. We are told that an amount of R300 million will be used to facilitate this process. We, as former Thor Chemicals employees, are so disgruntled by the fact that the company is prepared to spend so much money only for the cleanup campaign without considering the victims of the same chemicals. This process is currently underway as we speak and that is our main cause for concern and the sole reason why we have gathered here today.
9. As much as we advocate and applaud the view that the same mercury waste must be returned to where it came from, and as much as we do not promote vigilantism, we feel that Thor Chemicals now back in South Africa to clean up the toxic waste is a



*Ex-Thor workers Vincent Mkhize and Thuthuka Khanyile presenting the memorandum during the protest.*

*Credit: groundWork*





*Officials from the department of labour accepting the memorandum. Credit: groundWork*

blessing in disguise for us as former employees. We therefore feel that this is a golden opportunity for both the government and Thor Chemicals to deal with this matter once and for all. By losing this opportunity, we feel that it will be a huge blow to us as former employees because we do not have the necessary funds and resources to pursue this matter abroad.

10. We furthermore would like to bring to the attention of both the government and Thor Chemicals that since 1992 more than 50 former Thor Chemicals employees have passed on. We would also like to bring to the attention of both the government and Thor Chemicals that 95% of former Thor Chemicals employees who are still alive are currently unemployed and most of them are in terrible health conditions, with their lives deteriorating each day.

11. Regrettably, we, as former employees of Thor Chemicals, feel that our rights to life, rights to dignity, rights to a protected environment, as well as our rights to health as enshrined in our Bill of Rights have been violated and tampered with by the gross negligence of Thor Chemicals and the culpability of the government. We therefore plead to our democratic government to kindly rectify the injustices caused to us by both the previous government and Thor Chemicals.

12. Lastly, we would like to bring to both the government and to Thor Chemicals' attention that there is no amount of money that can justify the pain and suffering that we are currently going through as former employees of Thor Chemicals, and hence we agree with Watermeyer JA that *there are no scales by which pain and suffering can be measured*. There is no amount of money, and there is neither gold nor silver, no any treasure trove, that can compensate for the souls of the families of the deceased former employees for the loss of their loved ones. What we are asking for from both the government and Thor Chemicals is an appropriate relief to sustain ourselves in the meantime and while we are still alive. An appropriate relief to sustain the families of those who have since passed away in this tragedy.

We therefore leave everything in the hands of both the government and Thor Chemicals, in the hope that in a period of 14 days from now we will be able to receive a positive response from both the government and Thor Chemicals. Until then, we urge both the government and Thor Chemicals to suspend this cleanup campaign until this matter is resolved.

THANK YOU. 🙏



*Marchers disperse at the end of the day. Credit: groundWork*



# Mine closure and what it means to communities

by Thomas Mnguni

**O**ver the past few years there has been a strong call to decarbonise our economy and also to reduce the levels of pollution drastically in order to protect people's health and their rights as enacted in the Bill of Rights. This is no easy task as it has several implications.

While the most positive impacts could be improved health and protection of the land, ecosystem and biodiversity, it also carries a huge social burden, as provinces like Mpumalanga are heavily reliant on the coal economy and the country's energy system is dependent on coal. So, in talking about mine closure, one needs to also think about both positive and negative spin-offs.

Currently, we have seen a lot of mines being closed and we have a better understanding of the negative social impacts mining has created. Although we are not in a position to quantify the exact damage to land, water and the entire ecosystem, we do know that it has been almost destroyed.

In order to deal with the closure of mines and to move to a low-carbon and environmentally just economy that serves people first, a process around a Just Transition has been started. Even though there is no common agreement between government, corporates and affected communities of what a Just Transition looks like, one thing is clear: we need to transition away from the fossil-fuel-based economy to one that is restorative and regenerative and is based on equity and solidarity.

Part of a Just Transition will be focused on the closure of coal-fired power plants and associated coal mines.

But let's first look into the legacy of coal, which has been very clear in terms of destruction, the common trail being that people have lost their land and livelihood to make way for mining. There has been destruction of the water table, contamination of water and reduction in biodiversity. This is the legacy mining leaves behind, and important is the lack of

enforcement by government to ensure that everyone is compliant and operates within the confines of the law. We also know that there are a lot of abandoned, unrehabilitated or derelict mines. The government has failed to ensure that mines provide closure plans and that these plans are subject to community input or involvement.

With the envisaged closure of mines, whether due to power plants closing or any other economic/market challenges, a mine closure plan must be developed in order to mitigate the negative impacts thereof and should feed into a process that ensures the detoxification of the Mpumalanga region as a whole.

To ensure this happens, the following should be considered:

- \* Cancel all coal mining expansion plans.
- \* By 2030, close and reduce coal generation, and develop a plan for a complete coal phase-out.
- \* Phase-out plans should include facility-by-facility closure dates, with all the least efficient plants shut by 2030.
- \* Ensure that coal facilities are closed and not sold to new owners.
- \* Claims of future retrofitting with carbon capture and storage cannot be used to delay closures.
- \* Ensure that plant closures are accompanied with asset-based Just Transition plans, and that all worker and environmental remediation obligations are funded and fulfilled.
- \* Companies must pledge not to challenge the phase out of coal facilities through investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms.
- \* Companies must pledge not to lobby against government action on climate.
- \* Mines must invest in closure plans and not expect government to finance their closure plans





In order to make this work, we also need to ensure that mine closure must be broadly understood as needing to secure people's livelihoods when economies are shifting to sustainable production, including regeneration, rehabilitation and restoration of ecosystems, protecting biodiversity and zero waste. In addition, the term necessitates inclusiveness in decision-making, democratic processes and the recognition of people's sovereignty of commons.

Already a draft national mine closure strategy has been gazetted in May 2021 and comments and submissions were received by June 2021, with another round of consultations happening in early 2022. But most of these consultations and submissions are done online or via written input, which leaves the majority of the affected communities out and without a say. This already points to a process of exclusivity, as it is only limited to a privileged few.

In order for us to understand what closure of a mine means, we need to engage meaningfully with affected communities and workers so that the plans reflect their concerns and how they will be addressed. What we know is that a closure of a plant will lead to unemployment, poverty, workers losing their property and other assets due to debt, kids failing to attend school due to non-payment of fees by parents and much more. This and more could be mitigated when we consider how to re-skill workers, and by providing a social net or a basic income grant.

Setting clear principles and developing monitoring and evaluation tools is important. Also, the policy of the polluter pays principle should be adhered to, because that money could be used to rehabilitate derelict mines or restore the ecosystem 🌞.



*Thomas Mnguni speaking about mine closures and a just transition during the Presidential Climate Commission public consultations in eMalahleni, Credit: groundWork*



# Virtual toxic tours

How does the  
**virtual Toxic Tour**  
work?

**The Toxic Tours**  
is a community-led storytelling and mapping experience.  
You can virtually visit different locations across the globe to learn,  
firsthand from frontline communities, how plastic production  
impacts their lives.

#breakfreefromplastic

**TOXICTOURS**

ToxicTours.org

Toxic Tours is a community-led storytelling experience highlighting the impacts of plastic production on frontline communities. The tours elevate local voices from around the globe and ensure that community fights are amplified.