

# GROUNDWORK



## Coal, Covid and the Climate Crisis

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Cover picture by Daylin Paul

*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*

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**groundWork**

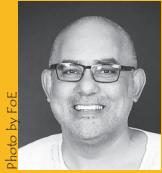


Photo by FoE

# From the Smoke Stack

by groundWork director, **Bobby Peek**



**A**s I write this, I feel a sense of panic. groundWork has warned for many years of the eminent collapse of the fossil fuel industry. Government and society are not prepared for this. Since the birth of groundWork in 1999, we have been working to challenge those in power to ensure that there is a just transition. We have at the best of times been ignored: whatever recognition we got for a just transition, we had to fight hard to get it.

Now everyone is scrambling and ignoring the crisis they have created – and Eskom is the leader of the pack. “If you look at some of these communities, they have been dependent on the power station and, in some cases, mining for many, many decades, generations,” and, “You can’t just lock the door, throw away the keys and walk away,” proclaims Mandy Rambharos, Head of Eskom’s ‘Just Transition’ office, as she tries to deflect attention from Eskom’s inability to deal with its reality. We questioned them about this on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2016, when we asked them about their funding for the decommissioning that was to start in 2020. They had no plans for this and neither had they set budget aside for this. The fact that Eskom now has a Just Transition office is a step forward. But what do they understand by a just transition?

We have been ahead of the curve on the just transition. And in December, groundWork was appointed to the Presidential Coordinating Commission on Climate Change. We also are called upon to advise on forums globally. The just transition is firmly on the discussion table. Corporates and Eskom, however, are fighting hard to hijack this narrative with their own version. In some areas, where people are challenging for state accountability and pushing back on corporate power and for a just transition, democratic space is closing up and activism has been met with violence and murder. We are working hard to expose this and, if we are to build upon the gains to date, this has to

be the focus of our future work. We are fighting for the meaning and delivery of a just transition that is based on people’s needs and not corporate profits. Just transition must not be allowed to be appropriated by corporates, as they want to run away from their responsibility for a meaningful just transition that will also deal with reparations.

The oil refinery industry is wanting to ‘throw away the keys and walk away’ as the Engen explosion of the 4<sup>th</sup> of December has highlighted. The plant is old and crumbling – and incidents of this nature are commonplace in the poorly maintained fossil fuel industry in South Africa. Just in July last year, the Caltex oil refinery was shaken by an explosion that killed two workers. Engen has not denied that they want to close their refinery in south Durban in 2023 – but they do not want to talk about it because they know that the just transition debate is something they do not want mentioned, for it means worker justice and community reparations. But, instead of this, the contrary is at play. The South African Petroleum Industry Association, which represents Engen, clearly wants our tax money to pay for the oil refineries to move to cleaner fuels. The oil refinery sector have known for years that they have to start developing cleaner fuels that are less harmful to health and well-being, but they have been ducking and diving – and Covid-19 has given them the perfect excuse to say that they cannot do it.

But what are we to understand by the recent judgements in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom? Shell Nigeria is deemed liable for the damages caused by oil spills in the villages, which could lead to nearly “50 000 claimants in total – suing Royal Dutch Shell and its Nigerian subsidiary Shell Petroleum Development Corporation for their alleged involvement in damaging peoples lands and poisoning their waters”. Is the just transition going to have to be



fought out in the courts of law? Or will companies come to the table and engage in a sincere way about the just transition? I doubt it will be the latter. These victories are important, but Shell will not give in easily.

We are emerging out of the ‘second wave’ of the pandemic. A year ago, at the outset of the pandemic, we said that “the coronavirus has disrupted profoundly interconnected and fragile global systems. However, this gives us an opportunity to make our world more equitable and to test our just transition to a society with decent jobs for all, universal healthcare, and energy systems that benefit people and the biosphere. We have to change systems that place profit over health and wellbeing. We have to recognise and address the political, social and economic factors that govern how health or illness move through our communities. For example, many people living in informal settlements have no access to running water, making frequent hand washing very difficult, and crowded living conditions make social distancing almost impossible.” When we review the recovery plans, we have to ask ourselves, are they addressing the reality we reflected upon in March 2020?

Gains have been made during this past year. The environmental justice movement is stronger, despite Covid-19, or one could say because of Covid-19 – which was a wakeup call for our fragile society. Organisations and workers are realising that they must work together for environmental justice. In the coal fields of Mpumalanga, potential fracking spaces in the Karoo and Matatiele, the coastal areas facing oil and gas exploration, or in south Durban’s oil refinery neighbourhoods, there is deeper collaboration

and solidarity than before. Still, there is much more work to be done.

These contradictions between what government says and what really happens on the ground is covered in *The groundWork Report 2020: “The elites don’t care” – People on the frontlines of Coal, Covid and the Climate Crisis* which will be released in March 2021. It reflects on the fact that the latest version of government’s recovery, as of October 2020, does not address the real issue of the social wage that gives people services that allow for dignity. The recovery plan is reminiscent of previous plans in South Africa that have gone nowhere, except to sink us further into debt and poverty. The gains of the R350 Covid grant come at a cost. Just see the queues of people in the hot sun and inclement weather, the distance people have to travel and the fact that women who get caregiver grants are not eligible for the Covid grant. The 276 ‘catalytic projects’ that Public Works has is nothing more than a list of projects that have been around for a decade or more, but with little progress. So, we are in for a fight, for the recovery for people on the ground looks slim.

As stated in December’s *From the Smokestack*, we are presently excited about hiring new people to support the campaigners and respond to an increased workload. Adverts are out, interviews have been done and probably by the time you are reading this people

will already be busy working and we will be stronger.

The year 2021 is going to be a tough year, what with increased workloads and dealing with the uncertainty of Covid-19, but it is also going to be exciting, for solidarity has strengthened and collectively we will be stronger.

A luta continua. 



# On the frontlines of Coal, Covid and the Climate Crisis



by David Hallowes

“The Elites don’t care” was launched on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2021. This is the 15<sup>th</sup> groundWork Report on the state of environmental justice. Always ahead of the curve, always on point, always in dialogue with those who are resisting, and now on the ground under Covid with community researchers sharing their experience and analysis.

**T**he climate crisis is part of the broader ecological crisis created by global capitalism and its devotion to profit and growth. The coronavirus emerges from the rent in the web of life and, while climate change is a slow-motion wreck, Covid demonstrates the impact, synchronised across the world and compressed into weeks, months and a year or two, of nature’s ‘revenge’. It does not merely foreshadow climate change. It is an instance of the disruptions that follow from widespread ecological disturbance—including climate change. And the baleful fires of the pandemic have illuminated and widened the fault lines of the global economy – exposing rank inequality, poverty and hunger. It also torpedoed an elite economy that has long been sustained by bubbles, which primarily function to inflate stocks and shares – effectively transferring ever more wealth from poor to rich.

The 2020 groundWork Report (gWR) was initially conceived as a follow on to the 2019 report on the politics of an (un)just transition. It was intended to track and update transitional developments on the coal fields, explore some issues more deeply while also broadening out from the focus on coal to take in oil and gas. Covid-19 upended – or transformed – these plans. It was no longer possible to make field visits or hold workshops as intended. Instead, we set up the ‘corona watch’ research team composed of community researchers from 10 locations on the coal fields who each paired with an ‘office’ researcher – an academic or NGO staff member.

The process consisted of a series of dialogues between each pair, guided by a common set of questions. Along the way, first by phone conference and later by zoom, we were able to bring the whole team together

to jointly review the questions and to evaluate the process. The process closed in October with a webinar in which each of the community researchers gave their key insights from the research. The intention was to sustain contact with local organisations, to document how people on the fencelines of coal mines and polluting plants were coping with the lockdown and to explore what that experience might mean for the longer term response to the climate crisis and to the project of a just transition.

The 2020 groundWork Report opens with the unnatural history of the coronavirus on the frontiers of global capitalism and looks at how it followed the money down the globalised routes of production, trade and tourism. It then considers the worldwide economic hit as countries around the world went into lockdown. The rich world did not escape, which is no doubt why it registers as a global crisis, but the impacts were and are uneven. The poor world and the poor of the world have seen their slender means of livelihood cut off and have no cushion. Elite policy responses, in South Africa as elsewhere, have been about maintaining the system.

The central chapters report from the fencelines of the coal economy. The community researchers describe their experience of the harsh disciplines of lockdown on the one hand and observe state failure on the other. They also show the shock to people’s economies and livelihoods. The questions raised in these chapters include the unequal health system that barely caters for poor people in ‘normal’ times, the role of community health workers and air pollution and health. They also look at municipal services, land, water, food, energy and waste.

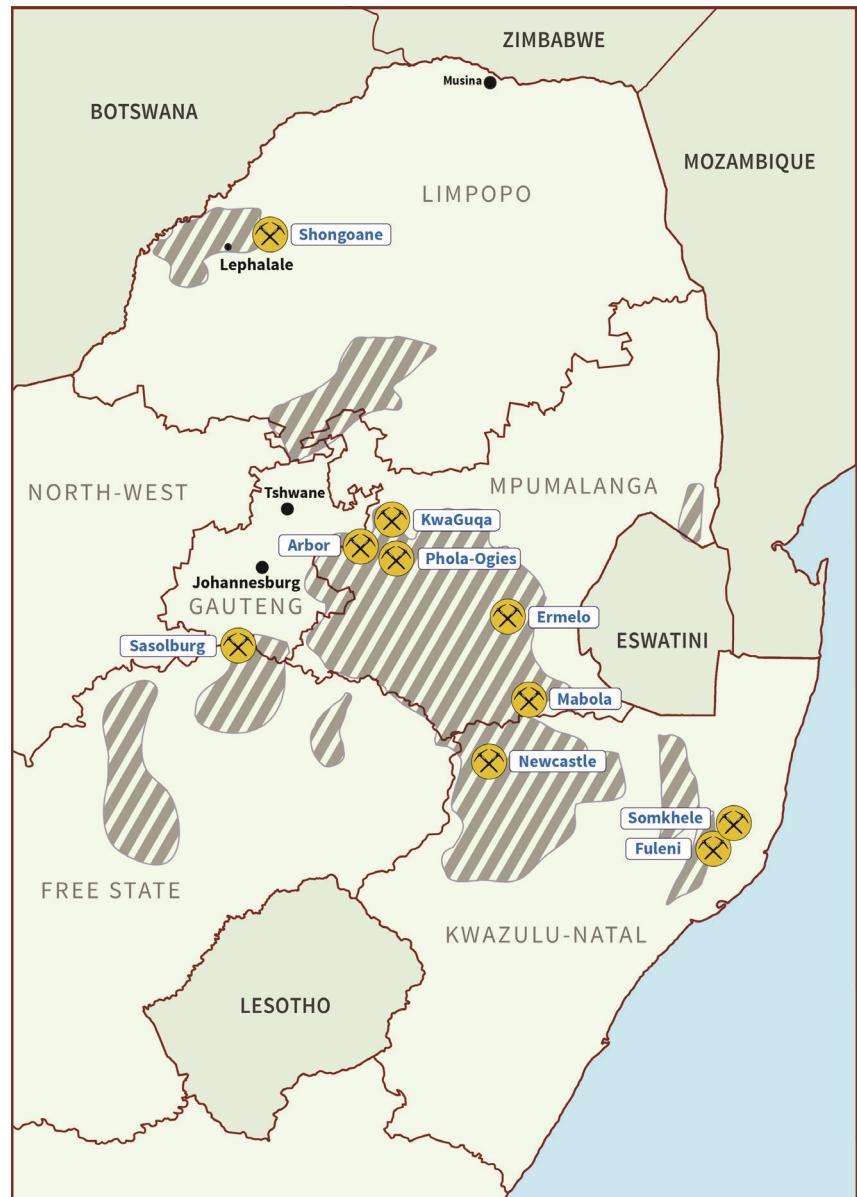


People's security and violence are key concerns: domestic violence, state violence, the structural violence of inequality and elite deployment of informal violence. The report is dedicated to Ma Fikile Ntshangase, who stood in the way of the expansion of the Tendele colliery at Somkhele and was assassinated just as our research process was coming to an end. This was a particularly brutal instance of the closing down of the political space of resistance to corporate and political elites and of people's participation in defining a just transition. The gendering of impacts and responses is threaded through these themes.

The report does take in oil and gas. Government hopes to become a petro state. It sees economic redemption in the discovery of gas offshore and hopes to frack its way to wealth on shore. And it claims gas as the 'bridge' to a low carbon economy, even as it hangs onto coal. The old and rusty oil refineries are meanwhile cracking up. Two are closed following major explosions and fires and the call for a just transition on the fencelines of petro pollution is being led by the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance. We also look at the abject state of air quality management, the failure of water provision and the rank madness of the proclaimed Energy & Metallurgical Special Economic Zone in Makhado.

The community researchers get the last word. Given the experience of Covid, what should people expect as the climate crisis intensifies? There are local differences in people's experience of government's Covid response, but the overwhelming conclusion is that government is not there for us and will not be there for us through the climate crisis. It is likely that systems that are failing now will not be fixed. So the people must be ready to prepare their own climate response but, since government controls the people's resources, they must also build the movement to demand accountability and open democracy.

The team members from the 10 community organisations were: Promise Mabilo of the Vukani



Environmental Movement in eMalahleni; Yvonne Sampear of the Greater Phola-Ogies Women's Forum; Elizabeth Malibe of Guide the People in Arbor; Linda Magagula of the Khuthala Environmental Care Group in Ermelo; Jabulisile Makhubu of the Mabola Alternative Committee; Nduduzo Dlamini of the Newcastle Environmental Justice Alliance; Molebogeng Mathafeng of the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance; Zanele Gumede and Zamapho Ndimande, both of the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation; and Leseka Shongoane of Matjoba in Shongoane, Lephala. The 'office based' researchers were Jacklyn Cock and Dineo Skosana of SWOP; Bongi Matsoha of Earthlife; Robby Mokgalaka, Thomas Mnguni and Avena Jacklin of groundWork, together with Victor Munnik and David Hallowes who coordinated the work.



# **Pmb landfill crisis now a matter before the High Court**

by Musa Chamane

**T**he case against uMsunduzi Municipality on the management of the New England Landfill in Pietermaritzburg has finally reached the high court, thanks to the South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC) formal investigation into human rights and dignity impacts because of the dump. This matter was set down in the Pietermaritzburg high court for hearing on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2021. This comes as a result of the complaints leveled by city residents due to fires that have been occurring regularly at the landfill because of poor site management.

In April last year, the whole of Pietermaritzburg city was engulfed in smoke from the landfill fires which lasted for more than three days. As a result, schools temporarily shut down for days, and residents became sick from the toxic smoke from the landfill fires. The SAHRC subsequently received a number of complaints from Pietermaritzburg residents, and a protest was held near the site, with a petition against the dump, which was also handed over to the commission. The SAHRC then consulted the stakeholders who made complaints and acted on what had been reported in the media.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2020, groundWork, the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA), Shepstone and Wylie and some of the affected residents met with the SAHRC to provide more information and insight on the issue. The commission also gathered grievances from Sobantu, Hayfields, Mkondeni and Scottsville residents, the Save PMB organisation, various ratepayers associations, and also from civil society organisations.

To say the SAHRC was not impressed with the municipality's lack of urgency in addressing this issue is putting it mildly. The commission was very concerned that official compliance directives that were issued by the Provincial Department of Environmental Affairs in their efforts to intervene and make sure that the landfill problems got resolved, were ignored.

The case is of huge importance to South Africans because it could set a precedent for so many of the poorly managed landfill sites that exist in our country. There are more than 1 000 licensed waste disposal sites across South Africa, the majority of which are badly managed.

We are also pleased that the municipality is planning to acquire a new site and close the current one. However, we hope that the new site will include a materials recovery facility (MRF). Waste pickers, who drive recycling and materials recovery in South Africa, have previously protested, demanding the construction of the Material Recovery Facility (MRF) that was supposed to be funded by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) in 2014.

Despite this funding having been made available, the uMsunduzi municipality refused to build it. As a result of incompetence and corruption, the money sadly went back to COGTA. MRFs are very effective approaches to waste management and can go a long way in assisting the municipality in what has become a permanent waste management crisis in Pietermaritzburg.

The MRF was meant to create an enabling and safe environment for waste pickers, and also create an effective recycling system for the city, but that was all denied by uMsunduzi Local Municipality without any sound reason. Ideally, even the current site needs to be converted to a waste transfer station, receiving only recyclable waste materials, enabling an aggressive recycling and separation at source of waste system from residents and business that will ultimately lead to zero waste going to landfill. This is the progressive, modern way of dealing with waste.

Nationally, more than 90 000 waste pickers derive their daily livelihoods from waste. The installation of MRFs can facilitate the integration of informal waste pickers into the municipal waste management system.



Waste pickers should not be displaced. Instead, an enabling environment should be created for them to operate in, so that an economy based on waste emerges.

It is unacceptable in this day and age that vast tracts of land are used for archaic methods of waste burial without coming up with viable alternatives to manage waste. Zero waste is the only solution! ☀



*The New England Road Landfill in Pietermaritzburg burns – again. Photo: groundWork*



# Adopting Best Available Practices during a pandemic



by Luqman Yesufu

**A**s hospitals around the world continue to grapple with the coronavirus pandemic, it is important to recall that we are experiencing one of the most silent existential threats to our existence – climate change. This is a forced multiplier for all economic, racial and social injustices in our society.

In moments like this, people turn to the healthcare sector for refuge, trusting them to hold true to their healing mission and Hippocratic Oath of “First Do No Harm”. This responsibility and trust placed on health institutions means that adopting and implementing best available practices that are health and environment friendly, safe and equitable, should be top of the health sector agenda. So, when the opportunity to substitute mercury-containing thermometers and blood pressure devices arose, through funding from the Sustainable Health in Procurement work, many green hospital members were keen to participate in the pilot project.

Mercury is a naturally occurring heavy metal that has been used by people since ancient times. It is also a neurotoxin, as mercury vapour can impair cognition and may be fatal. In hospitals, mercury is found in healthcare equipment such as thermometers and blood pressure devices. When these are broken and the mercury spills, significant amounts of liquid elemental mercury transform to a gas, exposing workers or patients in the area to potentially highly toxic levels.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2021, groundWork, in collaboration with its international partner, hosted a mercury awareness and exchange event at Sizwe Tropical Disease Hospital. Participating health institutions included both Bongani Regional Hospital and Dr. JS Moroka Hospital from the Free State, as well as Sebokeng Hospital from Gauteng province. The aim of the workshop was to train and raise awareness on health implications of mercury exposure and sustainable alternatives, and to assist them with

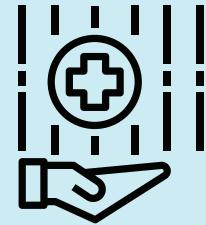
the collection and substitution of mercury-containing thermometers and blood pressure devices.

In addition to the presentations that were made, several interviews were conducted with participants. The Chief Executive Officer of Sizwe Tropical Disease Hospital, Dr. Louw, said in an interview, “It is a known fact that mercury is a public health risk to those exposed to it, especially when inhaled. It is toxic and dangerous to environment and community. Therefore, we are committed towards completely phasing out our mercury-containing devices by engaging international best practices, which will ensure that we have a healthier hospital, healthier community and a healthier environment for the community we serve.”

The Assistant Director, Research and Policy Development at Gauteng Health, Ms. Azeeza Rangunwala, also said, “What makes me really happy is that we have been able to safely collect and dispose of these mercury-containing devices, because if these devices were disposed of as waste, they could make their way into the environment where it can bio-accumulate, impacting human health and the environment.”

In general, groundwork believes that working with these health institutions – providing technical support, training and assisting them with the identification, substitution and disposal of the mercury-containing devices – will help change behaviour and encourage the adoption of best practices that are safe for humans and the planet. In addition, by addressing mercury exposure in health settings, the health sector can not only protect patient and worker health, but also actively demonstrate the safe management of toxic chemicals like mercury, thereby leading by example.





# A just and healthy recovery from Covid

by Rico Euripidou

*The pandemic is a reminder of the intimate and delicate relationship between people and planet. Any efforts to make our world safer are doomed to fail unless they address the critical interface between people and pathogens, and the existential threat of climate change, that is making our Earth less habitable.*

WHO DIRECTOR-GENERAL DR. TEDROS GHEBREYESUS.  
ADDRESS TO THE 73<sup>RD</sup> WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY.  
MAY 18<sup>TH</sup> 2020.

**I**n May 2020, hundreds of health professional organisations around the world signed on to a letter calling on the G20 global political and economic leaders to invest in a healthy recovery that would prioritise climate action, sustainability and health equity in the Covid-19 stimulus and response – linking climate change and health.

Air pollution and climate change are interlinked. In 2018, during the first WHO Global Conference on Air Pollution and Health, the WHO's General Director, Dr. Ghebreyesus, called air pollution a “silent public health emergency”. Climate is the other side of the same coin that reduces the quality of life on our earth.

As global Covid-19 infections spread, a lack of universal health coverage left billions of people, including many in rich countries, without reliable and affordable access to medical treatment. Massive inequalities meant that the likelihood of death or loss of livelihoods was closely linked to factors such as environmental pollution where you live and your socioeconomic status, often compounded by gender and minority status.

National governments are now committing trillions of dollars as part of their stimulus efforts to resuscitate economy activity. These decisions could “lock in” existing economic development patterns that are doing permanent and escalating damage to the ecological systems that sustain all human health and livelihoods. But, if wisely taken, the could promote

a healthier, fairer, and ultimately human, habitable world. Nowhere is this more important than in their effects on environmental degradation and pollution, and particularly on the greenhouse gas emissions that are driving global warming and the climate crisis.

## Health as a driver for action on climate change

Given the potentially overwhelming effects of climate change on social wellbeing, the protection and promotion of public health is one of the most important motivations for climate action. Indeed, the protection of health and welfare is one of the central rationales for reducing emissions in the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

In addition to this, climate change mitigation investments can deliver many additional benefits to health worldwide. If designed with ‘health co-benefits’ in mind, climate mitigation policies have the potential to substantially improve public health, reducing the burden of disease from a variety of illnesses, including lung disease, obesity, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, mental illness and road injuries. These co-benefits will also result in a substantial reduction in the cost of healthcare in many countries.

These are the essential prescriptions for a healthy and fair recovery as summarised by the World Health Organisation:

### 1) Protect and preserve the source of human health: Nature

Economies are a product of healthy human societies, which in turn rely on the natural environment – the original source of all clean air, water and food. Overall plans for post-Covid-19 recovery, and specifically plans to reduce the risk of future epidemics, need to go further upstream than early detection and control of disease outbreaks. They also need to lessen our impact on the environment, to reduce the risk at source.



## 2) Invest in essential services, from water and sanitation to clean energy in healthcare facilities

Around the world, billions of people lack access to the most basic services that are required to protect their health, whether from Covid-19 or any other risk. Handwashing facilities are essential for the prevention of infectious disease transmission.

Overall, avoidable environmental and occupational risks cause about one quarter of all deaths in the world. Investment in healthier environments for health protection, environmental regulation, and ensuring that health systems are climate resilient, is both an essential guardrail against future disaster, and offers some of the best returns for society. For example, every dollar that was invested in strengthening the US Clean Air Act since it was implemented has paid back 30 dollars in benefit to US citizens, through improved air quality and better health.

## 3) Ensure a quick, healthy energy transition

Currently, over seven million people a year die from exposure to air pollution – one in eight of all deaths. Over 90% of people breathe outdoor air with pollution levels exceeding WHO air quality guideline values. Two-thirds of this exposure to outdoor pollution results from the burning of the same fossil fuels that are driving climate change.

At the same time, renewable energy sources and storage continue to drop in price, increase in reliability, and provide more numerous, safer and higher paid jobs. Energy infrastructure decisions taken now will be locked in for decades to come. Factoring in the full economic and social consequences, and taking decisions in the public health interest, will tend to favour renewable energy sources, leading to cleaner environments and healthier people.

A rapid global transition to clean energy would not only meet the Paris climate agreement goal of keeping warming below 2°C, but would also improve air quality to such an extent that the resulting health gains would repay the cost of the investment twice over.

## 4) Promote healthy, sustainable food systems

Diseases caused by either lack of access to food, or consumption of unhealthy, high calorie diets, are now the single largest cause of global ill health. They also increase vulnerability to other risks – conditions such as obesity and diabetes are among the largest risk factors for illness and death from Covid-19.

## 5) Build healthy, liveable cities

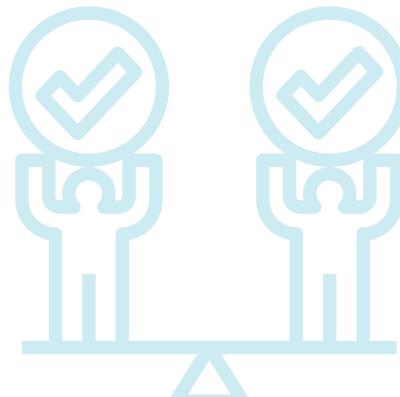
Over half of the world's population now lives in cities, and they are responsible for over 60% of both economic activity and greenhouse gas emissions.

## 6) Stop using taxpayers' money to fund pollution

A good place to start is with fossil fuel subsidies. Globally, about US\$400 billion of taxpayers' money is spent every year on directly subsidising the fossil fuels that are driving climate change and causing air pollution.

Placing a price on polluting fuels in line with the damage they cause would approximately halve outdoor air pollution deaths, cut greenhouse gas emissions by over a quarter, and raise global GDP in revenue. We should stop paying the pollution bill, both through our pockets and our lungs.

The world it seems cannot afford repeated disasters on the scale of Covid-19, whether they are triggered by the next pandemic or from mounting environmental damage and climate change. Building back better must incorporate principles of a regenerative economy operating and embedded within the living systems and boundaries of our biosphere. We must reimagine our economies and what prosperity means for us as a collective whole. Going back to "normal" is not good enough. ☀





# The Great Reset

by Lorraine Chiponda



**I**n 2020 and 2021, the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos formally brought out a proposal: The Great Reset, which others are calling the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The agenda, amongst other issues, is committed to reshaping economies and introducing a new form of capitalism based on net zero emissions.

The WEF Davos meetings are where the world's most powerful elites, global corporations and political leaders meet to discuss and plan for the economic structures and future as well as other issues. Note that there is no community representation in the Alpine resort. And if labour is there, it is only cleaning up the mess after corporates and elite politicians get together. The meetings have been held since its formation in 1971 and have shaped global economics to benefit the elite.

Coal is one of the largest greenhouse gas emitters and has contributed to the global warming that has caused climate change. In Africa, civil society groups, environmentalists and communities who have been affected have for years pushed for a coal phase out though a transition that recognises the various dimensions within which the coal industry in Africa operates. This includes recognition of energy, environmental and climate justice concerns related to a capitalist-driven industry that has perpetuated inequalities. This has resulted in the displacement of communities from their traditional lands and has grabbed and polluted shared communal resources such as rivers and grazing lands.

They also seek recognition of concerns around the continuation of energy systems modelled from colonial times intertwined with patriarchal systems that affect women's access and control of energy. In the Great Reset agenda, the world's global elites are not looking to let go of monopoly capitalism but are pushing for new ways of getting away from accountability for their externalised costs.

The Great Reset does not address the justice issues highlighted above. The Agenda strengthens dominance and monopoly of the rich global corporations that have managed to take hold of political leaders in order

to ease the implementation of the reset. The Covid-19 pandemic, as was expressed by many, is an opportunity to Build Back Better. Global corporations are aware that they cannot evade the realities of the climate crisis and thus have taken charge of the narrative to advance their own type of green revolution that does not increase corporate accountability, and thus the predator economy will continue unchecked.

Proponents of the Great Reset have expressed that the pandemic is a catalyst needed to push for a reset. Whilst a transition to green and sustainable is needed, it is critical to use democratic processes to bring about the necessary transformation and ensure people and the environment are at the centre of the change and that justice is not just a commodity of the rich but accessible to all.

If implemented, the Great Reset will require heavy financing and availability of the technology, to which a number of African may not have access. To finance the green agenda under the reset, African countries may have to borrow, which will further entrench Africa in debt and in turn burden citizens. Thus, mega green projects, as pushed by the large Davos corporations and political elite, may not work for a number of African countries. Instead, smaller renewable energy projects implemented at local level will better avoid the debt trap and also ensure marginalised populations not on the main grid have access and better control of energy.

The fight for a just transition from coal to renewable energy in Africa will continue. Groups will continue to engage in deliberative democratic discussions to shape the type of transformations required by African countries to achieve energy and climate justice. This transition will NOT include clean coal narratives, carbon markets and geo-engineering, green economy and a centralised energy systems that leave out marginalised groups. A just transition should ensure that all decisions and policy have the input of the people, are clear and that, where rights are violated, affected groups are able to appeal against decisions that affect them or their environment. A just transition needs an Open Democracy not a Davos Democracy! ☀



# The government doesn't care

by Robby Mokgalaka



**T**his piece of writing is aimed at keeping the world in the loop about developments regarding the arrest of the suspects who killed MamFikile Ntshangase and Bazooka Radebe. As I write this, the perpetrators have still not been arrested for the murder of these two human rights defenders.

Government is the custodian of the rights of the people and as such it is duty-bound to protect the rights of its own people against all kinds of violence. Surprisingly, the South African government is acting contrary to its constitutional duty. These two incidents are typical examples of where human rights defenders were killed for defending their environmental rights in terms of Section 24 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and government has done nothing to discourage this criminal behaviour: not even made a public statement to announce its dissent.

In March 2016, Bazooka Rhadebe was murdered execution-style when two men posing as policemen shot him eight times in front of his family. At the time of his death, Rhadebe was the chairperson of the Amadiba Crisis Committee (ACC), a community-led organisation that has been opposing the opencast mining of titanium and other heavy minerals on communal land in Amadiba in the Eastern Cape Province. Until now, the government has failed to secure the arrest of the people responsible for his death.

In another instance, in April 2020 the Somkhele community, located the north of the KwaZulu-Natal province, had two families attacked with guns for opposing the Somkhele mine, which is still wreaking havoc in the community. One family had its family members held down at gunpoint by unknown men asking for Sabelo Dladla, who was strongly opposed to the mine. Mr. Dladla escaped with his life as the assailants did not know who they were looking for. The perpetrators are still at large.

In the same month, another family in the Somkhele community area was attacked by unknown men who shot a hail of bullets through the window. It is no coincidence that this family was also opposed to the

expansion of the Somkhele coal mine. The case fell into a dark hole and the suspects are still on the loose.

In October 2020, when the community was still in shock about the life-threatening incidents, the community was again struck by the shocking news of the murder of Mama Ntshangase, who was shot in her own house by four unknown men in front of her 11-year-old nephew. The incident left the community with a dreadful atmosphere that touched the whole world. The government acted as though everything was normal, with no words of care for its people.

Civil society groups tried by all means to bring the incident to the attention of the general public, including the government, but the attempts fell on deaf ears in the government. The president has shown no interest.

The silence on the side of the government and their failure to respond is an indirect act of promoting the killing of the human rights defenders. This can only be understood to mean that human rights defenders' constitutional right to expression is being suppressed. We should not have to anticipate this kind of behaviour from the government in instances where human rights defenders are killed. ☀





# Revisiting Communication

by Thomas Mnguni

**W**hen South Africa went into lockdown in March 2020, the gap between the rich and poor was made even more apparent. Not only did it expose the levels of unemployment, poverty and health problems, but it exposed how ordinary communities rely on face-to-face interaction to communicate effectively.

Currently, as much as lockdown regulations have been eased, it is still a risk to hold a meeting, as this could turn out to be a spreader event.

But the regulations also brought about a big challenge for activists, community based organisations and school-going children, as they had to rely on alternative ways to communicate and study. Almost everything was now done online, with the majority of people having limited access to smartphones, laptop or internet. But government never indicated how this would be resolved, and couldn't even ensure that data was made affordable so as to help more people to access the internet.

With limited access to internet, there is a big threat that democratic spaces are being closed, and that community people will not be consulted in cases of environmental authorisations or policy development. Most municipalities have continued with business as usual and passed their IDP and budgets without any consultations. Lack of consultation has become

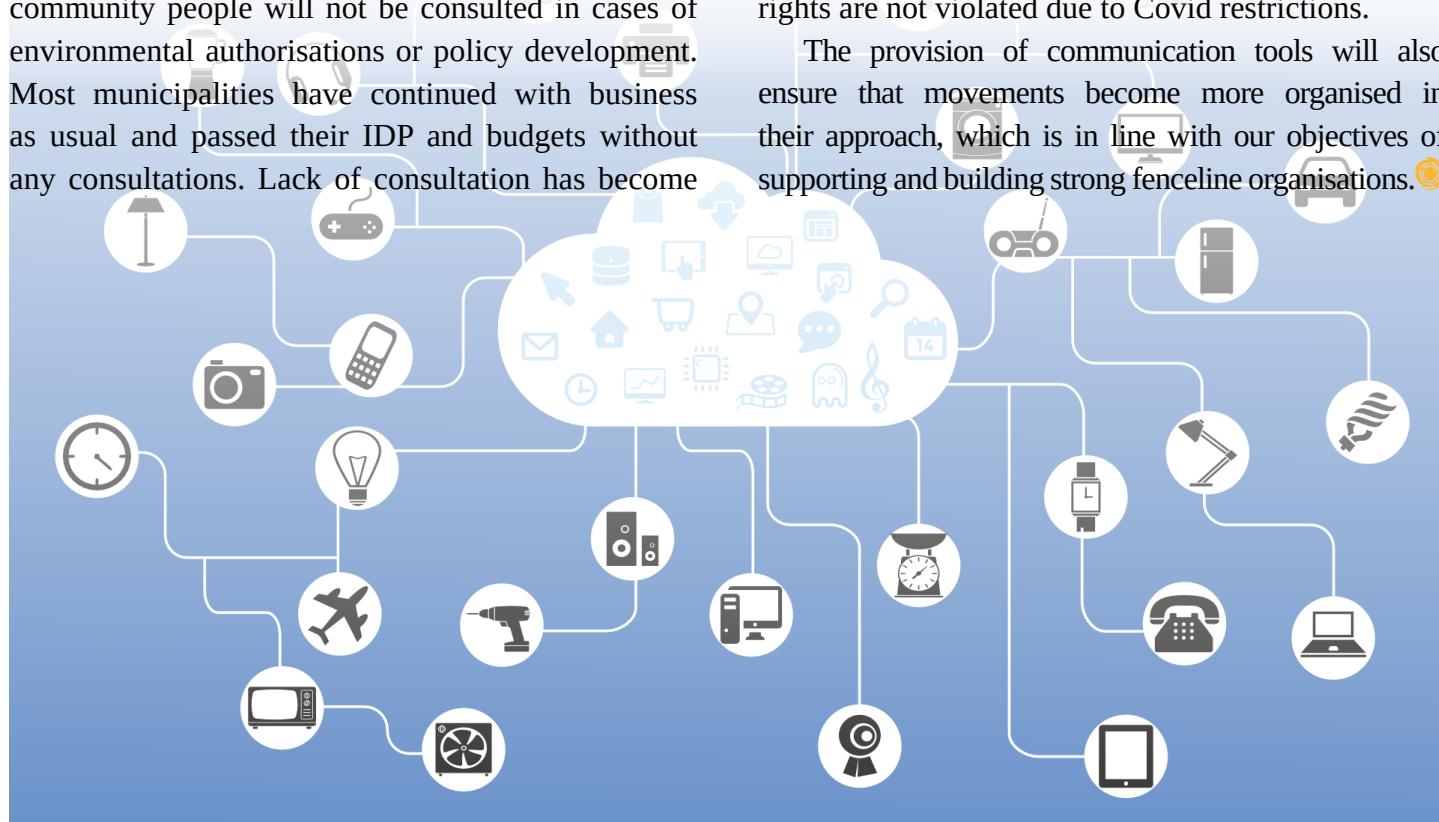
a threat to our democracy and has perpetuated the injustices that people have always faced.

In April 2020, groundWork realised that one of the challenges community people faced was to ensure that they put bread on the table. groundWork then started an initiative to provide grants so that people could have food and other needs like medication or electricity met, but then it became even more important that communication was dealt with.

“We need to provide tools of communication to our community partners so that they can continue with activism, assist school kids with their work, monitor and ensure that communities are properly consulted.” These were the words echoed by groundWork staff on a regular basis.

Then an initiative to provide computers, cellphones and routers with data every month was started. This process will assist communities to bridge the digital divide, but most importantly it will benefit the school kids who will use them for their studies. It will also assist community partners in terms of doing their research, store information and, lastly, ensure their rights are not violated due to Covid restrictions.

The provision of communication tools will also ensure that movements become more organised in their approach, which is in line with our objectives of supporting and building strong fenceline organisations.



# Responsible handling of renewable energy minerals



by Avena Jacklin

**T**he future will most likely be powered by renewable energy. The demand for new types and quantities of metals used in renewable energy technologies will have an impact on extraction, but there is the potential to offset these demands through substitution, efficiency and recycling. The transformation of our energy systems from fossil fuels to renewable energy is, however, more than reducing the carbon impact and improving resource management and energy efficiencies. It is also about the social aspects of the transition.

Even if the present model does not currently serve the needs of the poor, energy is, after all, produced to serve the needs of all people, including the poor and marginalised. The entire lifecycle approach of our energy production must include the safety of people: from extraction, production and handling, to disposal, recycling and producing secondary materials.

According to the Institute for Sustainable Futures based at the University of Technology in Sydney, metal requirements associated with a high share of solar, wind and electric vehicle (EV) technologies and battery storage *will* rise dramatically. EV and batteries are the main drivers of demand for key metals. New mines are already under development for cobalt, lithium, copper, rare earths and nickel. Cobalt, lithium and rare earths in particular are of great concern with the highest projected demand, supply risks and impact.

Three strategies to reduce demand are recycling, efficiency and substitution. Generally, industries are focused on efficiency and substitution where possible, mainly for economic reasons. Industries, for example, are proactive with EV batteries, with some battery recycling taking place, but generally it is only the high value materials such as cobalt and nickel that are being recovered and not lithium. Recycling can reduce demand but not meet all demands. Cobalt recycling has the largest potential to reduce demand but may not be technologically viable. For solar or photovoltaic (PV) metals, it is interesting to note that recycling is not the

most important strategy, but rather efficiency: that is using less of the metal in each panel. PV panels have a lifespan of 30 years so, by the time they are ready to be recycled, many more would have been produced. Metals requiring the largest volumes of extraction will therefore include aluminium, copper, manganese and nickel.

Responsible sourcing is essential when supply cannot be met by recycled sources. Natural resource extraction, use and disposal creates environment challenges of pollution, climate change and ecosystem destruction. Recycling is often done by the informal sector, but consideration needs to be given to safe and appropriate recovery technologies and the elimination of toxic and hazardous materials. Policies covering the entire life cycle of a product are crucial in setting standards and to guide thinking through all life stages and stakeholders involved.

Satish Sinha of Toxics Link emphasises that materials cannot be viewed in isolation from the human interface. The cost to human health and the environment must be considered in the context of low- and middle-income countries, where waste handling and recycling operations take place in the informal sector, employing millions of low-skilled workers. Social and environmental costs from high-income countries (consumers) are transferred to low- and middle-income countries (producers) where the production takes place. Waste, including hazardous waste, is exported back to these countries. Secondary raw materials are problematic and recycling operations can be highly polluting and unsafe to the health of workers and consumers. Hazardous chemicals in materials must be phased out at source to prevent the contamination of entire material chains. For energy producing devices, it may be difficult to substitute all hazardous chemicals, such as heavy metals in alloys for example. Systems need to be put in place to safeguard the informal sector from handling these components.



## KEY RENEWABLE ENERGY METALS

**Lithium-ion batteries:** cobalt, lithium, nickel, manganese, aluminium, copper

**EVs:** rare earths (neodymium and dysprosium), aluminium, copper

**Solar PV:** cadmium, indium, gallium, selenium, silver, tellurium, aluminium, copper

**Wind power:** rare earths (neodymium and dysprosium), aluminium and copper

### WHERE NEW MINING IS LIKELY TO OCCUR:

**Cobalt:** Australia, Canada, DRC, Indonesia, US, Panama, Vietnam.

**Nickel:** Indonesia, Philippines, Zambia.

**Lithium:** Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Chile, Canada, Mexico, Serbia, US, South Africa (in KZN see <https://sahris.sahra.org/cases/dantoprox-mining-permit-application>)

**Rare earths:** Australia, Canada, Greenland, Malawi, South Africa, Uganda.

### RENEWABLE ENERGY METALS SUPPLY CHAIN RISKS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Metals with the biggest expected growth potential resulting in new mines include cobalt, lithium, nickel and rare earths.

Production concentration is limited to a few countries: Cobalt (DRC), Tellurium (China) and Rare Earths (China)

The largest production of metals for lithium-ion batteries occurs in Australia, Chile, DRC and South Africa.

Japan, Korea, Canada and Russia produce metals for PV, while China produces metals for both batteries and PV

60% of cobalt extraction takes place in the DRC with processing in China

Lithium is extracted in Australia and processed in China

China is the main manufacturer of PV and lithium-ion batteries and its supply chain

During 2020 almost 50% of cobalt and lithium has been used for RE

### ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS:

**Silver:** heavy metal contamination and social conflicts (South America)

**Cobalt:** severe health impacts from heavy metals contamination around mining sites, dangerous working conditions and child labour

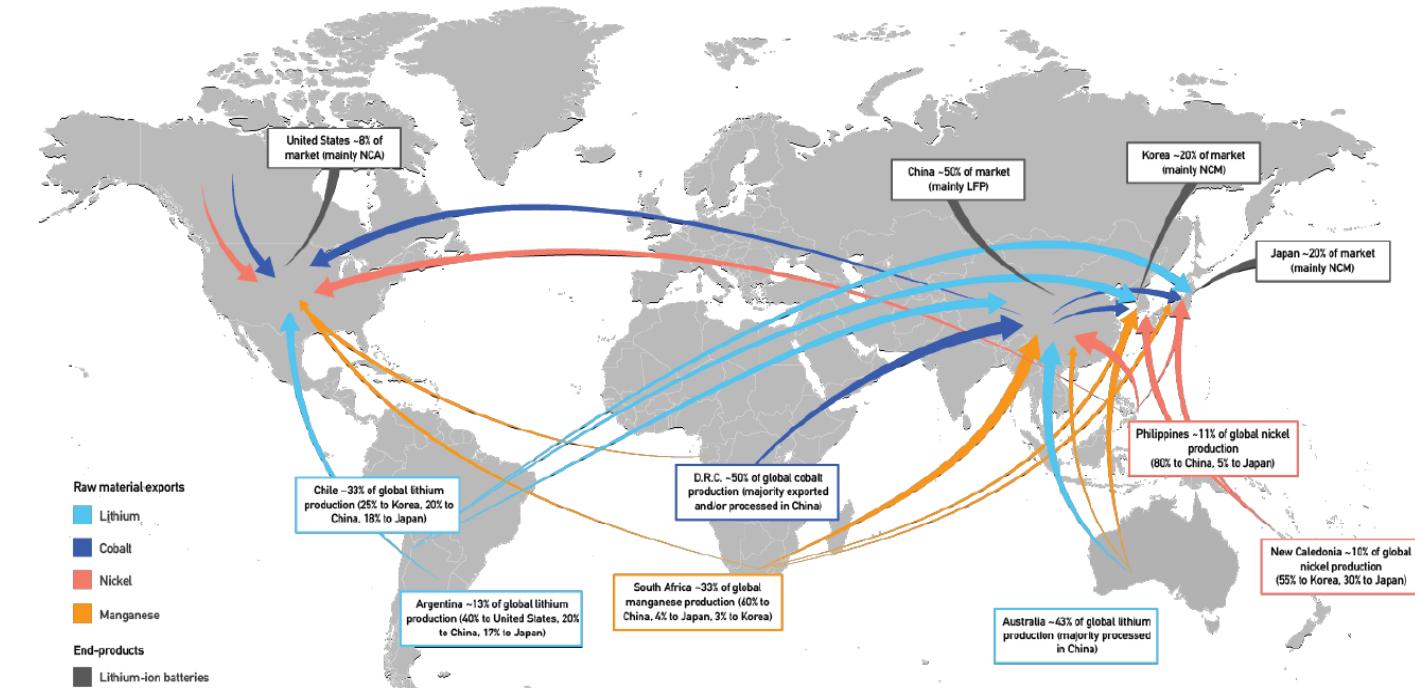
**Copper:** failure of tailing dams, health impacts on workers and communities, for example in the Copper Belt in Zambia

**Lithium:** water contamination, water shortage and conflicts with communities in the lithium triangle: Argentina, Bolivia and Chile

**Rare Earths:** difficult to mine and found in low concentrations. Processing requires water and chemicals which produces waste (China, Malaysia, Australia)

**Nickel:** mining dust is carcinogenic and associated with several environmental impacts ☣

Lithium-ion battery supply chain: raw materials and battery manufacturing



<sup>100</sup> Based on Comtrade data available at: <https://comtrade.un.org/data/>



# No “back to normal”

by Niven Reddy and Carissa Marnce



**W**e cannot go back to normal, it's time for a change!

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing flaws within our current social, economic and political systems. As we enter this new moment of post-pandemic recovery in the waste management sector, there is an opportunity to address these unjust, undemocratic and unstable systems, which manifest themselves in the corporate-led profit-making waste machine that trashes the people and the planet.

Regional and municipal governments around the world have begun to invest in projects and strategies to recover the economy post-Covid-19. However, recovery is just not enough. We can't go back to investing in extractive systems that harm our people and our planet. We can't go back to relying on unsustainable and expensive waste management systems that exclude waste pickers, the often unrecognised heroes of recycling. We can't go back to unfair trade practices, that allow Africa and other places in the global south to be a dumping site for countries from the global north. We can't go back to a future where multinational corporations are not held accountable for their role in extracting our natural resources and polluting our environment. It's time for a change!

Now is the time to build a more just and resilient global society. We believe zero waste is a way to achieve these transformations. Zero waste is not only about designing waste out and managing materials, but also about building social and environmentally just resource management systems. It is a comprehensive waste management approach that prioritises waste reduction and material recovery, with the ultimate aim of creating a closed loop system, shrinking waste disposal to zero. In contrast, disposal-based systems rely on incineration (“waste to energy”) and landfills to handle most of the waste stream, resulting in higher economic costs and environmental consequences, and profits for a few.

Zero waste systems not only create more jobs, but they also create better jobs. For many governments, job creation is a top priority in their recovery plans, as the pandemic skyrocketed unemployment rates across the world. Zero waste offers a strategy to create good, safe jobs and reduce pollution without breaking the bank. The Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives’ (GAIA) new publication on Zero Waste and Economic Recovery, shows that jobs in zero waste go beyond basic manual labour, provide higher wages, offer more permanent positions and improve the quality of life.

A new project based in the Warwick Markets of Durban and facilitated by groundWork, Asiye eTafuleni and the Urban Futures Centre, plans to develop a zero waste pilot project with informal workers and waste pickers to explore these possibilities.

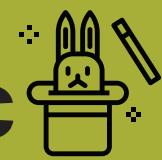
To demonstrate how economic recovery funds can be redirected away from extractive industries and towards a transformation to a just and waste-free world, GAIA is launching a cross-regional campaign called Beyond Recovery. The campaign will run throughout 2021, peaking with a Global Day of Action (GDA) on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, to support grassroots organisations. groundWork will be working with local waste pickers as part of GAIA’s GDA to advocate that decision makers start to think beyond recovery and recognise that we need a just transition to zero waste systems. ☀



Informal Workers at the Warwick Markets of Durban City  
Credit: Dennis Gilbert by permission Asiye eTafuleni



# Greenfly in the Land of Magic



by Greenfly

**T**here's magic in Limpopo. There was money conjured out of the air and rapidly converted into Bentleys, Rollers, Ferraris and Lamborghinis. There were kings and commoners, the ANC and the EFF, mayors, union comrades and celebrities, international consultancies and the CEOs of corporate South Africa. And there was Brand South Africa, ever woke to the deep glamour of bling.

And the money rained down like blessings from heaven. Well, not quite. It was more like sucked up like curses from hell. Most of it was state money siphoned from notoriously impoverished municipalities while the streets run with sewerage, goats pick through the street corner rubbish dumps, and water and electricity does not reach the people.

After VBS, there is EMSEZ which, just to save confusion, is part of MMSEZ. Definitely the larger part. The rest of the Musina Makhado Special Economic Zone is squeezed into a rounding error of the towering Energy & Metallurgical Special Economic Zone. And indeed, these economic zones are special. Like Maseratis and executive jets.

And no mere kings in a corner of the unbeloved country. Presidents parade before the guard of honour, the silken flags of China and South Africa flutter on high, and the national anthems call out to the glory of the state. Ministers and premiers jostle in line for the greatest metal magic on earth.

Too big to fail, they said. And signed it over to a man who is just a step or two ahead of an Interpol red notice. A neo-colonial hustler out of China, freshly expelled from the nest of conspirators that constituted the board of a minor and debt-ridden Zimbabwean mining house on suspicion of fraud. And, it seems, with nothing but this one prospective investment to boast of.

“Money, money,” sing it out. “I’m an investor.” Such music to the ears of South Africa’s political-business class. R400 billion and rising. Bigger than Medupi. Bigger than Kusile. Bigger than Medupi and Kusile. But hurry, hurry, hurry. And jobs, jobs, jobs. It was 20 000 jobs in January but by February it was

53 800. That’s magic. No time to waste. It’s magic. Never give the mark time to think.

The investors are getting impatient, say the zone managers. So, Limpopo’s Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET) demanded that the environmental impact assessment should be on its desk by the end of January – despite being told that it’s incomplete. Coming, ready or not. LEDET has given itself the right to issue the environmental authorisation. A curious arrangement since its own ‘implementing agency’, the Limpopo Economic Development Agency (LEDA), is the ‘project sponsor’.

What used to be a conflict of interest is now a synergy – as the investment banker said to the regulator.

And what will they authorise? The EMSEZ is to have a coking coal mine, one big coal washery, one coke plant, one iron plant, one high-carbon ferrochrome plant, one ferromanganese plant, one silicon manganese plant, one stainless steel plant, one high vanadium steel plant, one high manganese steel plant, one metallurgical lime plant, one titanium dioxide plant, one vanadium pentoxide plant. Amongst other things. All powered up with a 3 300 MW coal-fired generator.

And then there’s a few million tonnes a year of toxic waste, which can apparently be disposed of in the MMSEZ rounding error.

The climate can go to hell. Hell will certainly come to Limpopo. Floods now. Drought tomorrow, as yesterday. Searing heat like they’ve never known. And world class pollution to beat even eMalahleni. And there’s the matter of water: 80 billion litres a year needed and all of it to come from magic since there’s not a drop available.

But hurry. There’s 8 000 hectares of baobabs, marulas and leadwoods to be bulldozed away. It is a project of stupendous stupidity. But hurry. There’s money to cascade down in floods of fraud.

But hurry. Before it fails. But who will be cheating whom? Who’s the mark, who’s the patsy, who’s the magician?



# The Deadly Air Case

by Tsepang Molefe



**P**ollution is defined as the introduction into the environment of substances harmful to humans and other living organisms. Pollutants are harmful solids, liquids or gases produced in higher than usual concentrations that reduce the quality of our environment.

The impact of air pollution from burning coal is detrimental to people's health. Our dependence on fossil fuels has left a trail of destruction globally and it continues to be one of the biggest challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And there is no other way around it: we need viable, environmentally friendly and cleaner alternatives.

As more pressure mounts for a more accelerated shift away from fossil fuels, more and more studies are now proof that our dependence on fossil fuels is costing us lives and the destruction of the world we live in. According to new research from Harvard University, in collaboration with the University of Birmingham, the University of Leicester and University College London, more than eight million people died in 2018 from fossil fuel pollution. This number is significantly higher than previous research suggested. Researchers estimated that exposure to particulate matter from fossil fuel emissions accounted for 18% of total global deaths in 2018 — a little less than 1 out of 5. Previous studies and research released in 2017 had put the number at 4.2 million deaths from all outdoor airborne particulate matter — including dust and smoke from agricultural burns and wildfire.

The burning of fossil fuels, especially coal, petrol and diesel, are also drivers of the climate crisis which could lead to environmental and health disasters. Climate change now requires a sense of urgency and stronger action to mitigate its impacts.

## Covid and air pollution

Exposure to high levels of air pollution results in a number of negative health outcomes. It increases the risk of respiratory infections, heart disease and lung cancer. This is for both short and long term exposure to air pollution.

There are good reasons to suspect that air pollution worsens Covid-19. Many health studies investigating the impacts of air pollution on health conclusively find that air pollution is known to cause and exacerbate a variety of long-term health conditions affecting the respiratory system (the lungs) — impairing our capacity to fight off lung infections, the cardiovascular systems (the heart and blood systems) and also many other cancer-related health outcomes.

## Deadly Air case

In June 2019, groundWork, together with Mpumalanga-based Vukani Environmental Movement, filed a landmark case against the South African government on the impacts of air pollution from coal combustion in Mpumalanga. groundWork and the VEM are represented by the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) in what is now known as the Deadly Air Case. Named as respondents in the Deadly Air Case are: President Cyril Ramaphosa; the minister of the environment, forestry and fisheries, Barbara Creecy; national air quality officer Thuli Khumalo; and the MECs for agriculture and rural development in Gauteng and Mpumalanga.

Minister Barbara Creecy recently filed a responding affidavit. Amongst other things, the minister asserted that the applicants had not submitted any forensic evidence to show factual causation between the air pollution and the alleged harm suffered by any particular individual to his or her health and wellbeing. The case will be set down for hearing in May this year.

The case will be of great interest not only for the media but also for the South African public. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, people have become more health conscious, especially around what is carried in the air they breathe. Either way, the outcomes from the Deadly Air Case will change the way we live, for the better. With judicious application of the law to irresponsible mega polluters like Eskom and Sasol, the constitutional rights of affected people and communities can be upheld and protected, and the health hardships that the less privileged experience can be avoided. ☀



# **“The elites don’t care”**

People on the frontlines of  
Coal, Covid and the Climate Crisis



**“The elites don’t care”**

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**The groundWork Report 2020**

The climate crisis is part of the broader ecological crisis created by global capitalism and its devotion to profit and growth. The Covid crisis emerges from the rent in the web of life and, while climate change is a slow motion wreck, the impact of Covid is synchronised across the world and compressed into weeks, months and a year or two. It does not merely foreshadow climate change. It is an instance of the disruptions that follow from widespread ecological disturbance – including climate change. And the baleful fires of the pandemic have illuminated and widened the fault lines of the global economy – exposing rank inequality, poverty and hunger.

This report follows on from *Down to Zero*, the 2019 groundWork Report on the politics of an (un)just transition, but not in the way we expected. It looks at the impact of the pandemic from global to local level, in particular reporting on the research of local community activists in each of South Africa’s active coal fields. It also examines government’s actual climate response, as it bets on a fossil gas bonanza to deliver economic redemption and still punts ‘clean coal’, even as Eskom abandons that boondoggle. The community researchers get the last word: Given the experience of Covid, what should people expect from government as the climate crisis intensifies?