

Documentary Launch: “Voices from under a dark cloud – towards a just transition in the coalfields of South Africa” in Steve Tshwete Municipality

Hundreds of Mpumalanga residents from across the province welcomed the launch of a documentary in Steve Tshwete last week which casts a spotlight on what a transition away from coal means in reality for the affected communities and the future of the province. This included community members, environmental activists, local business organisations and workers.

In his opening at the launch of “Voices from under a dark cloud – towards a just transition in the coalfields of South Africa”, Mavuso Msimang, political veteran and public figure, called for urgent action and the need to be proactive in planning to avoid further hardships.

In highlighting the need for action and acknowledging that global warming was real, Msimang along with other speakers and community members indicated that this was not a time for figure pointing but it was a time now for everyone to work together to find solutions. Finding solutions was not going to be easy and searching among alternatives was imperative that needed to be supported by appropriate planning.

The launch of the documentary forms part of a joint initiative by Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS), the National Labour and Economic Institute (NALEDI), groundWork and Peta Wolpe who have been involved in a project engaging with local stakeholders from Steve Tshwete and Emalahleni, in Mpumalanga to progress the thinking and policy around the Just Transition in these municipalities. This initiative has been funded by the United Kingdom Partnering for Accelerated Climate Transitions (UK PACT) South Africa Programme. The production of the documentary was also supported by the European Union, through the Green Economy Coalition.

Produced by Joelle Chesselet and Lloyd Ross of Shifty Media, the documentary intends to relay the importance of a Just Transition for the locales, the tensions that exist, and explore some of the potential solutions that can play a role in ensuring an equitable transition. These themes are supported by a diverse set of voices of those affected by living in and around the coalfields. The documentary builds on a series of webinars and local engagements held over the last year to provide a platform for affected communities to have their voices heard. This intends to kick start a dialogue around how to ensure that the transition away from the use of coal is just and that real tangible projects and employment opportunities emerge. Whilst the spotlight of the documentary is on two municipalities in Mpumalanga, the process will draw important lessons for how the rest of the country transitions towards a low-carbon economy.

Msimang stressed that government has to be at the centre of responsibility for the move towards a Just Transition whilst companies had to do more. He also called for a consistent government position on key issues with no inconsistent policy directives.

During a panel discussion with representatives from the affected communities, Ronesa Mtshweni, a former mine employee and resident of Carolina, who now works for Womanxndla Community Development, highlighted the challenges facing her community. She urged policy makers to engage with daily challenges that vulnerable people face on the ground, such as water service and poverty issues. Promise Mabilo, a co-ordinator of Vukani Environmental Justice Movement in Action (VEM), a community-based organisation in eMalahleni stressed the



need to explore better methods of community interaction. Both Mtshweni and Mabilo highlighted the health issues facing their communities as a result of the impact of coal.

Picking up on the theme of community involvement, Ruth Ndlovu from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) stressed the importance of communities being involved in the transition process, being proactive and playing a watchdog role in ensuring that policymakers are held accountable. As part of the transition, she indicated that a skills assessment of future employment opportunities was needed, in order to prepare future employees.

A number of community members shared their thoughts about the documentary and the situation they currently face. The documentary was well received with community members pointing to key issues impacting them. Discussions centered on the health impacts of coal activity and pollution, water quality and availability, the role of key government departments, the scaling of existing projects, and the role of women in the Just Transition. The health impacts highlighted included poor respiratory health through asthma and tuberculosis. Community members also complained of the lack of water supply and contamination of water with mine water. There were strong calls for the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) and the Department of Health (DoH) to play a more active role in protecting communities from the ill effects of coal activities and for engaging with communities on the ground to understand the issues. It was highlighted that there was a lack of knowledge around existing rehabilitation activities and community members wanted to know why rehabilitation activities were not being scaled up. Community members also raised the importance of a specific need to prioritise employment for women in the Just Transition.

The link to the documentary on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7_BAigMpQJAHHeyzKFmSxA

The direct link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRQki-SEVho>

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