

## Effective structures required for engagement and public participation to achieve a Just Transition

There is general agreement across key local stakeholders, such as trade unionists, community environmental justice activists, local government and business, as to the challenges around a transition to a low-carbon economy. However, for the transition to be ‘just’, it requires all stakeholders to ensure that the structures in place for engagement are used effectively not just as a compliance and tick box exercise. In this process, accountability lies with everyone – it is not just about holding politicians and public servants accountable.

These emerged as key themes from the diverse group of constituencies who participated in the third in a series of dialogues which aims to provide a platform to hear from and engage with people from Steve Tshwete and Emalahleni, in Mpumalanga. The webinar - **People's Voices: Key priorities and challenges for a Just Transition in Emalahleni and Steve Tshwete: How can the public participation of workers and communities be improved in South Africa's coal transition?** – was organized by Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS) and the National Labour and Economic Institute (NALEDI) and supported by Groundwork and Peta Wolpe, who facilitated the dialogue. It is part of an initiative funded by the United Kingdom Partnering for Accelerated Climate Transitions (UK PACT).

In setting the scene for the conversation which unfolded, TIPS senior economist Gaylor Montmasson-Clair explained why participatory justice was at the core of the just transition process to an inclusive green economy. The Just Transition is about people, he stated, and this meant that “it is about people who are at risk, who are losing their jobs especially with the phasing out of value chains such as the coal value chain. It is about the workers and their families who are at risk of losing their livelihoods with the change in economic activities triggered by climate change.” Montmasson-Clair stressed that it starts with workers and people at the shopfloor who are at the core of this Just Transition.

According to Montmasson-Clair procedural or participatory justice forms one of three key elements to a Just Transition. Procedural justice, he explained focuses on facilitating an inclusive decision-making and implementation process, paying particular attention to enabling and empowering vulnerable and oft-neglected stakeholders to take part. The underlying assumption here is that a just outcome can only emerge out of an inclusive process which was at the heart of the dialogue that was held, The other two dimensions of a Just Transition include distributive and restorative justice. Distributive justice, he stated is about who bears the costs and who reaps the benefits. It aims to address the direct impacts of the transition on affected stakeholders. To unpack this approach, Montmasson-Clair gave examples of workers in the coal value chain who are set to lose their jobs but also of small businesses relying on the sector for their livelihoods. The third dimension is where the truly transformative nature of the just transition agenda lies. It involves pursuing restorative justice which is critical in the context of South Africa. This he argues is about rectifying or ameliorating the situation of harmed or disenfranchised communities which have suffered historical damages. He noted that too many communities run the risk



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of being left stranded once more, after having been scarred (for decades) at the hands of an extractive economic model.

Picking up on this point, Michael Nkosi, from the Local Economic Development Department, Steve Tshwete Local Municipality expressed some serious reservations as to whether the structures and platforms in place involve the most affected people but also how they are used and for what. Nkosi presented a rather critical critique of how government and business (particularly the mining industry) use these structures as a mere mechanism to “tick the boxes”. He explained that whilst “we might have the right platforms and legislation for participation purposes”, it is questionable whether these structures are used correctly and for the right purposes. He argued that “we are using them for compliance purposes”, but “are we using the structures to draw inputs from the communities that will influence how we structure the end products, I have my doubts.” In addition, he questioned whether these structures are being used to provide proper feedback directly to the communities. “For example, if a mine starts, there will be some consultation but are we using the same process to provide feedback to the communities” once the company has a mining license. He raised questions around both government and business accountability to affected communities as well as the challenges facing government in terms of intergovernmental relations. He concluded that “we have some way to go” in terms of how effectively we are using the mechanisms in place to engage; how to address the fragmentation of information and processes and the lack of co-ordination within government and ensuring affected communities and business have a role to play.

In continuing to explore how participation could be improved, Matshepiso Makhabane, CEO of the Green Business College and Coordinator of the Gender and Energy Network of South Africa (GENSA) pointed out that for people to engage, they need to be given the skills and knowledge to actively participate in a change process and to make decisions. Real participation also requires education and awareness building. It also necessitates another key ingredient, which is people wanting to engage and actively willing to change. Makhabane stated that climate change presents us all with an opportunity to change the way we live our lives so that we can improve things for all of us and the planet as a whole. In this vein, she made a call that “we need to go back to basics and stop being selfish, we need to change our lifestyles.”

Matthews Hlabane, the National Organizer of the Right to Say No in South Africa and the Co-ordinator of the Southern Africa Green Revolutionary Council (SAGRC), stressed the need to prioritise human rights and address the power relations within this process. He pointed out that power relations and community exclusion need to be addressed. He then elaborated on the fact that, from his perspective, a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy requires a radical transformation in which community and workers play an active role in their future. Whilst stressing that “there is no livelihood or jobs in a dead planet”, Hlabane pointed out that workers continue to lose their jobs and unemployment in mining-related communities, which is leading to violence (including gender based violence) whilst there is a loss of biodiversity and communities face challenges around the quality of soil and water. He stressed that communities must reclaim their power from civil servants who have stolen the power



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together with politicians who are protected by privilege. Communities, he stated, need to organise themselves as ultimately, “for us a Just Transition means the future and freedom from hunger, poverty etc.”

Drawing on the input from the various participants, Hameda Deedat, Executive Director, National Labour and Economic Development Institute (NALEDI), stressed the need to address the power dynamics as power plays an important role in terms of how people engage. She endorsed the view presented by Hlabane, that “we must contest the current dogma.” In relation to labour’s role in this process, her organization and others are trying to ensure workers have the knowledge and “we are trying to facilitate a process where workers feel confident to articulate their concerns.” Workers, she stressed, are the people who do not have access to clean air, water and the like – “there are no better people to tell what is happening and what the Just Transition means for them.” She concluded that the Just Transition process should not only be a bottom up approach which recognizes the most marginalized but it should be a worker centric approach and labour should be given the space to ensure that it is “the leading voice in the Just Transition.”

Peta Wolpe, Energy and Climate Change Practitioner, in drawing on all the inputs concluded that the dialogue highlighted the need for all stakeholders to address the power relations in an open and honest way. She emphasized the need to look at the structures in place to ensure they are used effectively and that all voices are heard. Ultimately, everyone should be held accountable for this process.

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