

Tangible plans for economic diversification critical to a just transition in Mpumalanga

There is general agreement across key local stakeholders, such as trade unionists, community environmental justice activists, local government and business, that a transition to a low-carbon economy is inevitable. However, for the transition to be ‘just’, it requires tangible projects and real plans that enable a diversification of the affected economies to take place and for all stakeholder voices to be heard.

While there is an agreement for economic diversification, divergent views exist among the constituencies in terms of their own direct interests and the impacts on their sector and communities. This will require on-going dialogue and discussion to inform and define a just transition. These were some of the key themes that emerged from the diverse group of constituencies who participated in a webinar seeking to create a platform for those directly affected from a shift away from the use of fossil fuels in Mpumalanga. The webinar – “Peoples’ voices: Key priorities and challenges for a Just Transition in Emalahleni and Steve Tshwete” – was organised by Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS) and the National Labour and Economic Institute (NALEDI) and supported by groundWork. It is part of a larger Just Transition project funded by the United Kingdom Partnering for Accelerated Climate Transitions (UK PACT). In creating a platform for engagement of the “people’s voices”, attendance by the local community and workers from Steve Tshwete and Emalahleni was encouraged. To this end, the project provided data for the online event as well as transport assistance to a central venue with connectivity.

Setting the scene for the engagement, social activist Jay Naidoo, a former cabinet minister and trade unionist, shared some of his thoughts and experiences. He pointed out that the just transition debate is not new and the labour movement had deliberated on this issue more than fifteen years ago, where the view was “there are no jobs on a dead planet.” He stressed that the country had made commitments around the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and there was no option but to move away from coal. Challenges remained however, “around articulating how to move from the current context to where we want to be, as a country.”

Lucky Moni, an energy researcher and national educator at the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (CEPPWAWU), based in Mpumalanga, acknowledged Naidoo’s point that the just transition is not a new debate. Moni underscored the anxiety of workers in Mpumalanga due to the association between coal and livelihoods. While stating that “coal has given us life”, he pointed out that “we value life ahead of jobs but we know that poverty is a threat to life – anything that looks like taking us toward poverty is a problem to us.” He added that the current discussions

around the shift away from coal focuses on the potential of new economic activities, “but not the reality” of how renewable energy will support the economy “as that is what fossil fuel has done.” Particular emphasis was placed on the need for renewable energy projects (among others) to be demonstrated to workers and for project developers or investors to engage with workers and showcase how they can be involved in renewable energy. This was a call for more practical information as to what economic activities would replace coal and hence jobs.

Promise Mabilo, the co-ordinator of Vukani Environmental Justice Movement in Action (VEJMA), a community-based organisation in Emalahleni spoke passionately about the fact that the community felt that they did not see the benefit of being surrounded by power stations or coal mines. The “only benefit we see is in terms of illnesses” as the production processes led to water and air pollution, affecting people’s health. She concluded that “we need to consider a low-carbon future and we are looking into a future in which we can raise our children without air pollution.”

In acknowledging how the mines and power stations had contributed to air and water pollution, Nonkululeko Mthombeni, the climate change champion at Emalahleni Municipality, pointed out how the municipality had “joined hands” and collaborated with all key stakeholders in transitioning to a just and future low-carbon economy in the region. This was in relation to the development of Emalahleni’s climate change strategy as well as a climate change vulnerability and resilience plan, which were being presented to council for approval. Thereafter, these plans would form part of a public participation process. She stressed that local government and the province were taking climate change and a just transition seriously. Mthombeni pointed out that “we will be faced with a lot of resistance” if we think of job losses and inequality and if “people fail to see the good in this transition” with reference to Moni’s comment about coal giving people life. She concluded that the challenge was to get everyone to understand and buy into the just transition and what it would mean for them. This meant practical options, in terms of diversifying the economy and real alternatives to replace jobs lost in coal.

Minerals Council’s head of social performance Alex Khumalo provided an overview of the role and importance of coal in the economy. While its role in terms of revenue to the country, government and workers could not be “sneezed at”, industry agreed that there was a need for a just transition and “we all want climate justice and to raise our children in an environment which is not polluted.” The challenge in moving forward is to ensure alignment with stakeholders affected by the transition and “we need to think differently and wear different hats.” In this, he added, “we need to understand different scenarios for the province and country as a whole as 90% of electricity currently comes from fossil fuels.” Khumalo also acknowledged that certain technologies that provided comfort to some for continued coal consumption, such as clean coal and carbon capture technologies, had limited utility in



South Africa given that existing power stations were not capacitated with the necessary infrastructure to easily absorb these technologies, in addition to their excessively high capital and operational costs. He concluded that the coal mining industry was closely tied to the national agenda and whatever approach adopted would require that it takes everyone on board and that solutions do not leave anyone behind.

During discussions, Naidoo picked up on some of the issues emerging and highlighted that the transition away from coal should not deepen poverty, inequality and exclusion. Most importantly, it should happen in a democratic and transparent way. Ultimately, what would be critical here, he indicated, was the need for ‘political will’, which is currently lacking. Various other voices emerged during the discussions from business owners to trade unionists. One trade unionist spoke about worker concerns around the impact of the transition as well as the fourth industrial revolution which might impact on the skills needed by workers, some of whom did not have the education to acquire such skills. Businesses from Steve Tshwete and Emalahleni also voiced concerns about the lack of policy alignment, with the lack of an enabling framework for investment in independent, alternative electricity supply generation appearing out of kilter with the pressure of capital markets to diversify away from coal.

Bringing the session to a close, facilitator Peta Wolpe, an energy and climate change practitioner, highlighted the need of having community and worker voices in this process. This would be key in moving forward along with exploring further some of the issues which have emerged, such as communication, education and ensuring a political will exist to make such a transition an inclusive process.

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