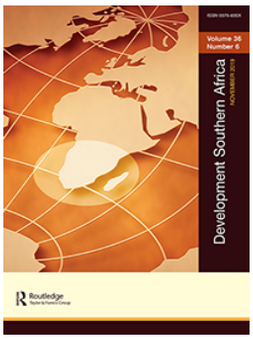

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Resistance to coal inequalities and the possibilities of a just transition in South Africa*

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ABSTRACT

Coal mining and burning are among the most destructive activities on the planet, and a major driver of environmental inequality in South Africa. This article suggests that, despite heavy constraints, initiatives involving resistance to coal are building a 'counter-power' which challenges inequality, generates solidarity, and is potentially infused by imaginative visions of another world beyond coal. Following the 'social power' approach this vision could, with deeper connections between three sites of resistance to coal – organised labour, mining affected communities and environmental justice organisations – cohere into a vision of a 'just transition'. This could embed the anti-coal struggle in a social movement for an alternative development path to challenge deepening poverty and inequality.

KEYWORDS

Resistance; dispossession; just transition; inequality; coal

1. Introduction: An alternative view of coal

This article argues that coal mining and burning is a major driver of environmental inequality in South Africa. Environmental inequality involves disproportionate environmental impacts on specific social groups. Such inequality is evident in poor people's exposure to toxic pollution, in the lack of universal access to critical resources such as clean water and air, fertile land, clean, affordable energy, and in their vulnerability to the extreme weather events such as droughts, heat waves, crop failures and floods associated with climate change. Southern Africa is the region that will be the worst affected by such events (Winkler & Marquand, 2009; Bassey, 2018). Such inequality is also evident in the many poor black communities living close to the operative coal-fired power stations and open-pit working or abandoned mines who are subjected to the dispossession of their land, livelihoods and life worlds.

Environmental inequality intersects with other forms of inequality, domination and exclusion, specifically those of race, class and gender. The gendered and racialised nature of South African capitalism means black working-class women, while being the least to blame, are the worst affected by climate change. They are the 'shock absorbers',

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*This paper draws from a collaborative project on the politics of coal funded by the Ford Foundation (Project number170-0890). The author is affiliated to the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies and the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP). Using a research framework that emphasises the co-production of knowledge, rather than simply 'extracting' information from informants, the article emphasises the importance of the lived experience of people in mining affected communities. It has benefited from comments by my colleague, Victor Munnik.

having to work harder to obtain clean water, to grow food on degraded land and to care for those ill from exposure to toxic pollution. This care work involves intense levels of anxiety and overburdening. As a woman from one rural community said, 'We are the rock, we have to deal with everything' (Participant at Community workshop, Somkhele 8.6.2018). 'Everything' often includes agency, so that women form the majority of people resisting coal and many of the leaders. Clearly addressing all these forms of inequality is urgent.

Doing so involves challenging the conventional view that coal is necessary to economic development and the alleviation of poverty and inequality. With 2500 operating mines, 6000 ownerless or abandoned mines and 1500 coal trucks on the road to Eskom every day, coal is clearly important to our economy. Coal provides 90% of our electricity and is a major source of foreign exchange and of employment. 'In 2016 the coal industry employed 77 506 people and indirectly created 173 093 jobs mainly in the transport and storage sector … ' (COM, 2018:16).

However, this conventional view frequently fails to recognise that mining activity means that communities give up their land and their livelihoods and suffer severe health effects, along with water and air contamination and soil erosion (Capel, 2018:4). Globally it is increasingly acknowledged that coal is a major source of the carbon emissions causing climate change and consequently there has to be a shift to alternative sources of energy.

The time lines for this shift are intensely contested. The Draft Integrated Resource Plan announced by the Minister of Energy in 2018 speaks only to the partial decommissioning of Eskom's 16 coal-fired power plants and of reducing our reliance on coal for energy to less than 20% by 2050. The document appears oblivious to the immediate urgency of responding to climate change. Two new coal-fired power stations, Thabametsi and Khanyisa are being built even though the polluting energy they will generate is surplus to requirements (Burton et al., 2018). These will negate most of the government's emission mitigation plans and undermine commitments made under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

This article considers resistance to coal mining and burning that is emerging from three different social spaces: mining affected communities, environmental justice organisations and the labour movement. In all these social spaces there is a growing recognition that we have to change our dependence on fossil fuels, which means that South Africa is at a turning point. The country can create another energy regime based on renewable energy in the form of solar and wind power particularly, or it can remain tied to the old energy model of the 'minerals-energy complex' that has shaped South Africa's development to date. This is based on cheap coal, cheap labour and dangerous air pollution. 'It is unsustainable economically and socially; environmentally catastrophic and is now collapsing' (Hallowes & Munnik, 2017:177). This view is fuelling a growing resistance to coal mining and burning.

'Resistance' is an ambiguous category. It is multi-dimensional, containing different meanings, forming a continuum of opposition rather than a sharp and unambiguous binary between acquiescence and confrontation. It operates on different scales ranging from localised 'militant particularisms' to a national critique of coal mining as a development strategy, to transnational advocacy opposing extractivism. This article builds on the notion of transformative resistance which involves both negation and creation, in this case

not only mobilising against the agenda of the coal mining companies but also promoting an alternative just and equal social order with a different energy regime. The alternative is often framed by the notion of a 'just transition' from coal and other fossil fuels.

2. The labour movement and a 'just transition'

However, there is no consensus on the goals, which vary from shifting to a new renewable energy regime, to transformation towards an eco-socialist order. In broad terms a distinction may be drawn between two broad approaches:

i a minimalist position that is primarily defensive, emphasising social protection of vulnerable workers and shallow, reformist change with green jobs, 'green growth', reskilling and consultation.
ii an alternative notion involving transformative change with totally different forms of producing and consuming to create a more just and equal society (Cock, 2016).

This distinction relates to that drawn between 'social dialogue' and 'social power' approaches. It is maintained that globally '… social dialogue is the dominant trade union discourse on just transition today' (Sweeney & Treat, 2018:18). The political success of this approach is largely due to the Just Transition being defined in a 'benign and non-confrontational way which poses little or no challenge to the mainstream, pro-growth, business-dominated narrative – a narrative that was largely created by the liberal wing of the global corporate elite' (Sweeney & Treat, 2018:27). In Sweeney's view, the social dialogue approach is simply not up to the task of bringing about the kind of revolutionary, transformative change that the climate crisis requires. By contrast the social power approach involves militant, class-based activism. It is willing to challenge existing power relations and call for public ownership and democratic control of key resources.

In general terms, the social dialogue approach is dominant in South Africa, as evidenced in different policy statements and in the series of workshops initiated by the National Planning Commission (NPC). The notion of a just transition originated in the global labour movement and has been promoted in South Africa largely by COSATU. But despite extensive debate within the labour movement there is no coherent shared understanding of a just transition and the emphasis has come to be on protecting jobs. This emerged clearly at the March 2018 'National Labour Climate Change Conference' convened by Naledi and attended by representatives of the three main labour federations, COSATU, FEDUSA and NACTU. Both the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) were absent on this occasion and both are closer to a 'social power' approach.

The unions' protective stance is totally comprehensible in the light of the unemployment rate of 37% (one of the highest in the world) and massive losses in the mining industry recently. However, the Climate Jobs Campaign has listed over one million new, alternative 'climate jobs' meaning 'those that help to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases and build the resilience of communities to withstand the impact of climate change' (Ashley, 2018:27). Examples include developing renewable energy plants, public transport and small-scale organic agriculture. However one trade unionist insisted that the climate

jobs campaign 'to have any traction should be driven by labour and housed within SAFTU' (Interview, Pretoria 14.3.2018).

2.1. Co-operation between the labour and environmental movements

Given that the climate crisis is deepening, and that workers in the extractive sector are most vulnerable in a shift away from coal to a new energy regime, it could be expected that the most powerful driver of a transformative just transition would be co-operation between the labour and environmental movements, a 'red-green' alliance.

2.2. An incipient red-green alliance

An embryonic form found organisational expression in two COSATU/Naledi committees established in 2011 consisting of representatives of all 22 affiliate unions and some key environmental activists which met monthly. The emphasis was on popular education and research on climate change and reducing carbon emissions. Over the next five years, the group produced a climate change policy framework, supporting a just transition which was endorsed by the COSATU Central Committee. This was based on 15 principles linking sustainability and justice. In hindsight insufficient attention was paid to the interests of vulnerable workers in the extractive sector, to the question of redundancy and retraining, and too much focus on principled rather than strategic questions. Red-green collaboration was grounded on understanding the nature, causes and effects of climate change rather than on the content and the modalities of a just transition.

Furthermore, there were differences between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), which should have been addressed more directly. NUM was increasingly defensive of the interests of coal miners, in the face of the threats of job losses from mine closures, falling coal prices, mechanisation, absolutist demands from environmental activists and the divestment movement. NUM objected to the slogan 'keep the coal in the hole' and favoured 'clean coal' from expensive and untested technological innovations such as Carbon Capture and Storage. NUMSA strongly promoted the notion of energy democracy, as a building block towards an alternative future. This involved resisting the agenda of the fossil fuels corporations and reclaiming the energy sector as part of 'the commons' with social ownership and democratic control.

2.3. Red-green tensions

Since 2017, renewable energy has become something of a scapegoat for projected job losses from the threat of coal mine and coal power plant closures. Unions have mobilised to protect jobs and in 2018 NUMSA took the government to court to stop the signing of another round of agreements with Independent Power Producers of renewable energy. The real issue is the privatisation of such energy. The Labour movement is increasingly adamant that there should be no job losses in the name of a just transition, while the environmental movement is increasingly adamant about the closure of coal mines and coal-fired power stations and a shift to renewable energy as essential to a just transition.

The transition from coal is not some future, uncertain event. It is already underway (Burton et al., 2018). For example, Hendrina is one of Eskom's five coal-fired power stations scheduled to be closed by 2020. Two units have already been closed. However the bulk of the workforce are 2300 contract workers hired by labour brokers for whom Eskom is taking no responsibility (Key informant interview, Pullenhope, 8.1.2018). No provision has been made for the job losses involved in these closures.

At present, despite much discussion, little content has been given to the concept of a just transition apart from COSATU's document on climate change, NUMSA's projects and call for socially owned and democratically controlled renewable energy, SAFTU's commitment to 'deep transformation' and AIDC's one million climate jobs campaign which proposed alternative employment and income support for workers who lose their jobs in the transition. While there are calls for a co-ordinating committee driven by the presidency to co-ordinate a just transition, to date this has not materialised. A 2018 march in Pretoria brought together NUMSA, NUM and SAFTU but was more against the privatisation of energy, than coal specifically.

While the labour movement has the potential to drive a just transition, this potential is not being realised, and its power has weakened. Increasing fragmentation, outsourcing, precarious employment, ideological divisions, rising unemployment and the emphasis on protecting jobs means their resistance to coal is highly ambivalent. Their main focus has been on the ideological level, on competing definitions of a just transition rather than on coal directly. While not homogeneous, mining affected communities (MACS) are focusing on the experiential level. So both labour and these communities are focusing on impacts, but impacts of a very different order: the impacts of climate change are diffuse and prolonged, the impacts of coal are immediate and concrete.

3. Mining affected communities: The negative impacts of coal

Many poor, black communities living close to the operative coal-fired power stations and open-pit working or abandoned mines are experiencing the direct loss of their health due to air pollution, and dealing with forced removals, social dislocation and dispossession. They also face loss of their land-based livelihoods, such as producing food and keeping livestock (e.g. cattle, goats and chickens), threats to food security, limited access to clean water, violation of their ancestral graves and inadequate consultation in the awarding of mining licences (Halllowes & Munnik, 2016, 2017).

The health impacts are estimated at some 2000 deaths a year, as well as 9533 cases of chronic bronchitis in children aged 6–12 and 2781 cases in adults in Mpumalanga where most of Eskom's coal mines and coal-fired power stations are situated (Hallowes & Munnik, 2017:53). Inadequate nutrition is widespread and increases vulnerability to illness. With rising food prices, household gardens are increasingly important but by 2014 61.3% of the surface area of Mpumalanga fell under prospecting and mining rights applications. Mining involves the removal of quantities of topsoil essential for cultivation. In the case of Arbour, an informal settlement near Kendall power station, water is brought into the community irregularly by municipal tankers, and the land is degraded, so household food gardens are not possible. In Arbour, a woman described how renting a backyard room to a coal miner brought in an income of R800, which provided 'food

for the household'. The food items consumed were 'tea, sugar and mealie meal' (Interview Arbour 12.11.2018).

3.1. Illustration: The case of Somkhele

The 4000 residents of 10 villages in Kwa-Zulu Natal's Somkhele area between Hluhluwe–iMfolozi Park and Mtubatuba began their battle with Tendele when it started mining in the area in 2007. The residents, who had lived there for generations, lost the land on which they depended for grazing their livestock and growing food (Key informant interview, Pietermaritzburg 8.6.2018). It involved massive social and ecological disruption. On a site visit, we were told that 'everyone here is sick' and saw the damage done to remaining homes by blasting and the fence blocking access to the stream which had been a major source of water. A lawyer supporting the community maintains that,

> … the mining activities of Tendele have had an extremely negative effect on all present there. The lives of the rural subsistence farmers have been destroyed forever. The beautiful indigenous landscape has gone in the areas where the mining has taken place. There are about 500 hectares of devastation as trees, plants, rivers and grassland has been ripped up and covered by rock, roads, huge pits and discard dumps. There is nowhere to graze cattle, no water resources and coal dust in the air and in the water. This is now a dangerous place to live. (Young, 2018:2)

Many residents we spoke to emphasised the social dislocation caused by the mine. Mpondle Dladla who lost his home, grazing land for 12 cattle and goats, and was forced to relocate to Utrecht said,

> I don't believe in money, I believe in my livestock … I want to live the same life I was living before … . It's a good thing that people are organising against the mine. But when you are poor you are vulnerable. (Interview with Mr Dladla, Mtubatuba 10.6.2018)

Several informants emphasised how mining corporations damage social cohesion in the community. Speaking of Somkhele an informant said,

> They look for fault lines in the community and then fill them with money and shatter the cohesion of the community … . promises were made to the locals for jobs and contracts, promises which created tension and conflicts. … They said mining would drive development, many people would pour into the area and there would be building jobs and taxis. (Key informant interview, Pietermaritzburg 8.6.2018)

Another said, 'We are attached to the land and to our neighbours. With land you can do everything, with money you can do nothing. … the loss of our land and price of removal cannot be expressed in money' (Interview with Bongani Pearce, Somkhele 9.6.2018). Most of those who received financial compensation for the loss of their homes felt the amounts were unjust, especially as the holding company of Tendele, Petmin, reported profits of R217 million (2014/15), R230 million (2015/16) and an increase of 7% in the share price (Young, 2018:3).

3.2. Challenge and dependence on coal in Mining Affected Communities (MACs): A contradictory relation

Coal dominates these communities and creates some contradictory patterns, ranging from confrontation to dependence. Many of these communities are informal settlements, spaces

of displacement and exclusion. Most of the inhabitants are migrants from other parts of the country who lack deep attachments to the land, and who are excluded from municipal services such as housing, electricity, water and roads. A local dependence on coal generates a kind of socially complex, ambivalent resistance. For example, X is active in the grassroots organisation, Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA) and participated in the mass protest of 5000 people organised by MACUA at the giant coal power station, Khusile, despite the fact that she sells *vetkoek* (doughnuts) outside and her husband is employed there. Others rent backyard rooms to migrant coal miners, wash clothes and cars, drive the coal trucks, do cleaning work and some depend on a free weekly wheelbarrow load of coal for cooking and heating. Several informants explained their ambivalence about coal because of a dependence on mine workers as consumers of informal sector activities, such as spaza shops and shebeens. These forms of dependence create a 'captive imaginary' which cannot conceptualise a just transition to a world without coal. However where resistance is not ambivalent is in response to the threat of dispossession through the expansion of coal mining, as in the case of Fulani near Somkhele. In these KZN communities, there are deep attachments to land and homes, which represent identity, memory, and connection to the ancestors, as well as livelihoods. Whether ambivalent or direct, the question of asymmetrical power relations is central to understanding resistance. As Ortner writes, 'In a relationship of power, the dominant often has something to offer, … the subordinate thus has many grounds for ambivalence about resisting the relationship' (Ortner, 1995:175). Acceptance and complicity does not always inhibit opposition, but one informant commented, 'The people just think coal mining means job opportunities. Where there is coal there is money' (Key informant interview Witbank, 8.6.2018).

The possibility of employment in coal mines and power stations looms large. Many informal settlements have sprung up all over the country next to coal mines and power stations to house both mine workers and job seekers. For example in the informal settlement of Mashakane near the Duvha power station an informant from KZN employed by the mine as a machine operator and earning between R9000 and R10 000 a month 'depending on the shift,' referred to some 300 'homeboys' employed there. Like them, he rents a backyard room in a shack and has done so for 13 years. 'Many miners live here and some bring their wives … .but conditions are bad. Everyone has breathing problems. You feel there is something in your body and you have to buy water at R2 a container.' An informant said, 'It is hard to get a job here … you need to pay someone or have a KZN connection … but I can't move to another area because transport would be too expensive' (Interview Mashakane, 22.6.2018). Mashakane now has a population of 3400 households living in desperate conditions (Olalde, 2017:3).

Nationally the majority of coal miners are migrants and younger, more skilled and better paid than in the past (Burton et al., 2018). They are mostly employed on short-term contracts. Formally employed coal workers like Litha clearly benefit from their wages but also experience the impacts on their health. Sometimes a strange disassociation surfaces: as one coal miner commented,

> I know the more we mine next to people's houses the more trouble we cause. Coal mining is affecting people in a very bad way. But this does not affect me because I have a job there now and money comes before everything else. (Cited by Riven, 2018:33)

A woman said, after she lost her job with a coal company, 'I only saw coal mining as a beautiful thing at the time. I did not realise all the negative impacts it caused because I was making money' (Ibid). Another said, 'When I see a coal mine, I see success. I know there will be job opportunities and money. I love mining' (Ibid). Riven concluded that 'community members are connecting coal mining with growth and job creation rather than with destruction and injustice' (Riven, 2018:34).

It could be that the strongest potential in building resistance to coal and the inequalities it produces and reproduces lies in the increasing linkages between mining affected communities and environmental justice organisations. The difficulties are immense: mining affected communities are not homogeneous and contain widely different and competing interests, but they are building counter power.

3.3. Building counter power

Coal mining affected communities and environmental justice organisations are drawing on different forms of power to advance their interests. For example, disruption of the public domain through road blocks, demonstrations, protest marches and picketing, which could also involve symbolic or societal power meaning going beyond the workplace to appeal to a wider public, often using social media with a strong normative appeal, and drawing on constitutional power to make policy interventions. New grassroots organisations are drawing on associational power meaning organising to increase numbers, build social networks, formal or informal alliances and a collective identity through an emphasis on shared everyday experiences. Lastly, judicial activism is using institutional power as a source of agency, appealing to institutionalised human rights and procedures such as the constitutional right to a safe and healthy environment. Five specific features could be harbingers of a counter-power:

(i) New grassroots organisations in frontline communities

Many new grassroots organisations are emerging. For example, the Highveld Environmental Justice Network (HEJN) is a network of community-based activists on the frontlines of coal mining and industries. Its vision is to

> seek to create unity amongst environmental and social justice, faith, labour, youth and other relevant organisations based in the Highveld in order to have a common voice on environmental justice issues; to be a platform of solidarity for local communities against environmental injustices relevant to the Highveld and its people; to educate, organise and mobilise with organisations and public on environmental justice issues … respond to grassroots concerns and environmental injustices relevant to the Highveld and its people. (HEJN, 2014:1)

Formed with the help of the environmental organisation groundwork in 2011, it operates as a network with affiliates in Arbour, Ermelo and other areas. Promise Mabilo from the Witbank township Kwa-Guga belongs through her organisation, the Vukani Environmental Movement, which meets weekly and has 'many issues to address'. Promise maintains that

> we are living in hell here at Witbank … it is not a happy place, with infrequent refuse removal, irregular supplies of water so people rely on streams which are already

> contaminated with sewage and the air is dirty. We have electricity but it is too expensive … we cook with paraffin and coal … This is a very poor place. There are no jobs … people rely on the government grants and borrow money a lot. The miners are all from outside, local people fail the induction test.

Promise is the director of programmes.

> We plan and share ideas … groundwork feeds us with information … The learning process is what makes us activists. … we try to educate people about waste and recycling … some women have food gardens growing spinach and carrots. … we engage with the municipality. We teach people about climate change but they know the basics and campaigns on climate change are not that easy … people are more interested in the immediate impacts. (Interview with Promise Mabilo, Witbank. 8.6.2018)

Her path to agency was the illness of her son. She joined Vukani when she found out he had bronchial asthma and 'the doctor told me to leave Witbank. When we visit Nelspruit he is fine.'

Another grassroots organisation is Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA), which is active on the ground according to several informants. It was started by Matthews Hlabane in 2012 (Interview Witbank 21.6.2018). MACUA has 15 affiliated community organisations as members and is connected to about 150 mining affected communities. It practices 'rightful resistance', 'a form of political practice which revolves around a rationality which sought to hold state and project authorities accountable to laws and provisions … ' (Nilsen, 2010:42). Recently it started a petition to the South African Department of Mineral Resources demanding the right to say no to mining developments arguing that 'mining affected communities are repeatedly denied the right to free prior and informed consent when it comes to mining developments in their backyard.'

Matthews describes it as 'a loose network of mining affected communities which should build itself into an organisation which could co-ordinate struggles and could convene a day of action country wide to blockade mining operations but we haven't got there yet.'

Throughout the last 5 years MACUA and the women's wing, Women Affected by Mining United in Action (WAMUA) have followed a wide repertoire of contention, having engaged communities across the country in protest marches, picketed outside a shareholders meeting of Petmin in May 2017, organised a demonstration of 5000 people at Khusile, initiated community capacity building workshops and dialogue, hosted educational tours, regularly attended the alternative mining indaba and made submissions to various government departments and legislative processes.

(ii) Catalytic work by environmental justice organisations

These grassroots activists from fenceline communities benefit from contact with environmental justice organisations who, in a different context, Nilsen (2010) describes as 'catalysts'. They catalyse resistance by developing local skills, knowledge and confidence to challenge state authorities and mining officials. They often transform 'militant particularisms' from local claims and demands on local state and mining officials to national state agencies to global networks and transnational institutions. They also connect local awareness of loss and destruction from coal mining and burning to the larger issues of environmental justice. Connections between mining affected communities and environmental justice organisations are facilitated by a process of 'bridge building' which involves

annual schools providing training in environmental justice theories, monitoring and research methods, as well as support and organisational work building networks and solidarity by organisations such as groundwork, Action Aid, Benchmarks, WoMin and the Global Environmental Trust.

These organisations are represented in regular 'Push Back Coal' workshops, which are structured on a process of horizontal collective learning involving a sharing of theoretical knowledge from academics and experiential knowledge from mining affected communities.

The eco-feminist, anti-extractivist organisation WoMin operates throughout Africa with different levels of partnership with 50 allies in 14 countries. The main mission is 'to support the building of women's movements to challenge destructive extractivism and propose development alternatives that respond to the majority of African women's needs.' In a recent document, 'Women building power,' they call for 'a gender just transition' because 'the current energy system is unequal and unjust, leads to energy poverty and has to change'. They are committed to participatory action research that will 'enable women to carry out social investigations into their own issues and articulate the problems from their own perspectives' (WoMin, 2017). For example after a participatory action study of water, 'we were more confident we were able to sit down with the municipality and talk about the problems' (Interview with WoMin official, Caroline Ntopane, Muldersdrift 13.7.2018). They run annual feminist schools throughout the African continent and are organising in different ways, for example, a weeklong camp of 80 women from MACs at Ogies. 'There were women of all ages from mines all over the country and we learned about things like climate change and renewable energy'. The camp meant women cooking their own food, sharing limited water and sleeping on the floor of a local church, 'people are so poor in this area, we wanted to organise differently which didn't involve staying in expensive hotels … instead we were practicing simplicity and sharing' (Interview Caroline Ntopane WoMin organiser, Muldersdrift 14.7.2018).

(iii) Connections with conservation organisations

There are tentative connections that are beginning to close (or at least, to narrow) a historic gap between conservation and environmental justice organisations. A dramatic illustration of this change is the role of an environmental organisation in the struggle against Tendele Mining Corporation. The Global Environmental Trust (GET) was formed in 2011, the trigger being the case of a local man, Mr Gednezar Dladla, who was arrested by the police when he called a meeting of Somkhele residents about how Tendele was polluting streams and groundwater. Besides providing funding and arranging legal challenges, GET uses social media such as Facebook, Twitter and a newsletter very effectively to promote an understanding of the destructive impact of the mine in Somkhele both here and internationally, as well as the threatened expansion of the mine to Fulani.

GET's involvement intensified in 2014 when the Save our iMfolozi Wilderness Alliance was triggered by the threat of a new coal mine to be built at Fulani at the edge of the iMfolozi Reserve. This was established in 1879 and is the oldest nature reserve in South Africa and the largest concentration of Southern White Rhino in the world. Some one thousand people were removed when the park was fenced in including the grandfather of a resistance leader Bongani Pearce. Initially this alliance comprised local organisations and

several conservation organisations such as the Global Environmental Trust (GET), the Endangered Wildlife Trust, the World Wildlife Fund and the Wildlife and Environment Society of Southern Africa (WESSA) but all of these have subsequently withdrawn apart from GET (Interview with Sheila Berry, Pietermaritzburg, 10.6.2018).

(iv) Judicial activism: Strategic litigation as a resistance strategy

The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) is dedicated to advancing environmental justice through court action to hold corporate and state authorities accountable, and educating citizens on their constitutional rights. This also involves 'rightful resistance' which challenges the abuse of power by the powerful. Such actions run the risk of depoliticising issues and displacing mass mobilisation, but have been very effective in the short term. For example, they successfully challenged the construction of the new coal-fired power station, Thabametsi, on the grounds that no environmental impact assessment of the climate change impacts had been undertaken.

(v) New tactics, which draw on social power

These are aimed at obtaining the support of a wider community, such as promoting 'the right to say no to mining' and the extensive use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, different web sites and newsletters.

These five overlapping features are evident in a pattern of increasing resistance to coal mining and burning that is scattered, uneven and ambivalent. Localised resistance to coal is often contradictory because of a material dependence on coal in MACs. Their priorities are land and livelihoods, and many residents find it difficult to imagine a world without coal. Many of the grassroots organisations seem small and fragile, including different agendas and understandings, as well as diverse interests and claims such as demands for compensation for damage to properties, or relocation, or for mine closure. Local communities are often focused on problems in their immediate, lived experience. As a groundwork organiser commented,

> I focus on the cost not the cause of issues that people can identify with. … Health and air quality are my main mobilising issues. People protest about electricity but they don't ask why electricity is expensive. It is difficult because people want overnight solutions. Protesters focus on the municipality, the immediate, visible and source of power, not Eskom which seems too remote … . (Interview, groundwork official, Middleburg 21.6.2018)

But with support from a diverse range of environmental justice organisations, these communities are forming loosely structured grassroots networks, tapping into new sources of societal and institutional power and adopting new innovative strategies and tactics. And there are some success stories. The sustained efforts of the Makhasaneni villagers over five years drove the Indian mining company, Jindal, off their land, though 'the process was bumpy, characterised by coercion, intimidation, divisions and resistance' (Yeni, 2:218).

4. Environmental justice organisations

It has been asserted that has 'there is no clearly identifiable, relatively unified and broadly popular environmental movement' in South Africa (Death, 2014:1216). However social

movements from below can be viewed as 'immanent forces that emerge on the basis of needs and capacities that are simultaneously spawned within and frustrated by a given historical totality' (Nilsen, 2010:201). Such a 'spawning' is likely in the strong contradiction in post-apartheid South Africa between the constitutional right to 'live in an environment that is not harmful to health and wellbeing' (Section 24 of the 1996 constitution) and extensive, racialised environmental inequality and injustice.

In the past environmental initiatives involved a fault line which divided the 'movement' into two main streams: those organised around the discourse of conservation of threatened plants, animals and wilderness areas and those organised around the discourse of environmental justice. The traditional preservationist approach to conservation neglected people's needs and involved the dispossession of many black communities, as they were forcibly removed to create national parks and 'protected areas' (Walker, 2008). That gap is beginning to close, and the discourse of environmental justice is spreading. This rejects the market's ability to bring about justice or sustainability, and the increasing financialisation of nature, packaged as 'the green economy'.

Certainly there is no master frame encoded in any blueprint and no co-ordinated, coherent centre or tidy margins, but there are growing multiple, diverse initiatives. Furthermore, while there are tensions, there is also increasing co-operation between a range of social and environmental justice organisations, and many of these address environmental issues in terms of livelihoods. The organisation 'Life Beyond Coal' which includes groundwork, Earthlife and the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER), and the Push Back Coal informal alliance are spreading a new understanding of coal as a driver of poverty and inequality. This co-operation is part of transnational advocacy networks as evidenced in the locally grounded campaign against World Bank funding of coal-fired power stations, which mobilised more than 200 organisations globally. But the obstacles to achieving a transition that is socially and environmentally just are formidable.

5. Obstacles in resistance to coal and the achievement of a just transition

Building a counter power faces formidable obstacles, such as the power of the minerals-energy complex (MEC) which continues to dominate the South African economy, rising unemployment, the repression and intimidation of anti-coal activists and collusion between mining corporations and traditional authorities, particularly in KZN.

There are frequent accounts of mining corporations dividing communities, as well as threats and intimidation of anti-coal activists, especially in areas where traditional chiefs control natural resources. One informant said, 'Organising in Somkhele and Fulani is difficult because people are afraid of the chiefs. They fear for their lives. Even pickets and marches are becoming dangerous.' A young Zulu woman at a workshop stressed the power of the chief and his indunas to allocate land and impose fines. She attended a public meeting in Fulani, organised by the mining corporation. 'The mining man told us that the traditional council gave them the authority to mine but no one ever came to my house and asked my permission.' After the meeting an induna (local councillor) visited her home and said, 'I don't like what you are saying. If you continue to say that mining might be bad, you and your family will be banned from this village and you will have to pay a fine' (Interview with workshop participant, Muldersdrift, July 2018). Asked why she never reported this to the police, she commented, 'No, you

can't go to the police station. You have to deal with it in a traditional, cultural way.' Another Zulu informant commented, 'With their powerful traditional authority the chiefs rely on fear and intimidation to maintain power and control.' This represents a form of oppression which generates submission and dependence. But, one woman leader in Makhasaneni said, 'we are not scared of dying, we even sleep with doors unlocked. If they kill us it will be known that we died fighting the mine' (Cited by Yeni, 2018:16).

Violence of different forms against environmental activists is increasing. In the case of Somkhele this also seems to involve mine management instigating violence indirectly through linking resistance to job losses and bonus payments. In 2016, an activist's car was set alight the night after a community march he organised. The support of mining by local authorities generally – not only in KZN – is a major obstacle. For example, in justifying his decision to grant approval for coal mining to Atha-Africa Ventures in the Mabola Protected Environment, a government official maintained that the severely impoverished local communities 'would benefit directly both socially and economically from the mine' (cited in *The Saturday Star* 2.12.2017).

6. Conclusion: Looking to the future

Clearly a just transition must be an inclusive, participatory process. This is challenging as there are many competing interests involved. The South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) has stressed that the process must 'protect the livelihoods of mining and energy workers and the lives of communities most affected by environmental pollution' (SAFTU statement 2.6.2018). In May 2019, the President of SAFTU called for an inclusive social dialogue on the energy transition. Nedlac could be the platform to bring different parties together, but this should only be a starting point. The just transition should be part of a national conversation on the transformation of our society.

This article has emphasised coal mining and burning as a driver of environmental inequality and injustice in South Africa. It considers anti-coal initiatives emerging from three different social spaces: mining affected communities, environmental justice organisations and labour. In each space there are different priorities of resistance: dispossession of land and livelihoods for rural communities, the reduction of carbon emissions for the environmental movement and jobs for the labour movement.

However, these priorities are the subjects of intense contestation. The article suggests that, despite heavy obstacles, anti-coal initiatives are building a 'counter-power' which challenges inequality, generates solidarity and is potentially infused by visions of another world beyond coal. This vision could, with deeper connections between three sites of resistance to coal – organised labour, mining affected communities and environmental justice organisations – cohere into a vision of a 'just transition'. This would embed the anti-coal struggle in a social movement for an alternative development path to challenge deepening poverty and inequality.

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