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If the transition is truly just, it will lift our communities, not leave us behind.

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Between Smoke And Sunrise

South Africa's Just Transition Story

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About ActionAid South Africa

AASA is a rights-based organization working for gender justice, good governance, and the eradication of poverty. We challenge patriarchy and extractive economic systems, amplify the voices of women, girls and young people, and build agency through grassroots organising, partnerships, and feminist alternatives. Our work is grounded in South Africa's constitutional commitment to human rights, but we recognize persistent failures in implementation as we implement our Theory of Change.

Vision:

AASA envisions a South Africa that is inclusive, just, resilient, and free from the overlapping challenges of inequality, gender-based violence, unemployment, insecure livelihoods, and climate vulnerability

Mission:

To eradicate poverty and injustice by working with people living in poverty and exclusion, civil society organisations, activists and movements wherever they are.

Introduction



In Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, coal has powered South Africa’s economy for decades, but communities living alongside mines and power stations bear the costs. Polluted rivers, degraded farmland, and dusty air affect daily life, while women and youth experience the heaviest burdens from caregiving and managing households to navigating shrinking economic opportunities and heightened risks of gender-based violence.

These stories bring a human lens to South Africa’s energy and climate challenges. They show how environmental damage, social vulnerability, and inequality are interconnected, and they highlight the resilience of women and youth and their leadership in shaping solutions. By centering lived experiences, these stories aim to inform policy, guide inclusive planning, and advocate for a Just Transition that ensures no one is left behind as the country moves toward a low-carbon future.

Background: Getting the Just Transition Right from the start

Communities across Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal are at the frontline of South Africa’s energy transition. Their experiences show that communities are not resisting change – they are resisting transitions done to them rather than with them.

Poorly managed shifts risk worsening unemployment, deepening poverty, and destabilising local economies, while a well-managed Just Transition can create new economic opportunities, improve public health, and support long-term sustainable development.

Although South Africa has embraced the principles of a Just Transition, translating policy into meaningful action on the ground is still in its early stages. The Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) plays a key role in guiding this transition. Established as an advisory body, the PCC brings together government, labour, business, civil society, traditional leaders, and research institutions to ensure that climate policies are fair, inclusive, and people-centered. Its main functions include:

- **Advising on policy:** Supporting development of climate policies, including the Just Transition Framework, to reduce emissions while protecting workers and communities.
- **Engaging stakeholders:** Creating platforms for dialogue so that communities, labour, business, and government can have a voice in climate decisions.
- **Monitoring accountability:** Tracking progress on climate commitments and ensuring transparency in implementing transition policies.
- **Supporting social and economic planning:** Helping integrate skills development, social protection, and economic diversification, especially in coal-dependent regions like Mpumalanga.

Key Principles



Distributive Justice

Ensuring fair distribution of benefits and burdens among communities, particularly those most affected by environmental and economic changes.



Restorative Justice

Repairing the harm done to communities and ecosystems through mining, industrial activity, or other unsustainable practices.



Procedural Justice

Guaranteeing that decision-making processes are inclusive, transparent, and allow affected communities to have a meaningful voice.

Despite these frameworks, South Africa's Just Transition has faced criticism. National plans and international support often fail to translate into tangible benefits for coal-affected communities. Too often, transitions are top-down, slow, and disconnected from the people most affected. This leaves communities to bear the environmental, health, and social burdens of coal while seeing little improvement in livelihoods or well-being.

Getting the transition right from the outset is therefore both a technical necessity and a matter of justice. Inclusive, people-centered approaches lay the foundation for a transition that strengthens communities, safeguards livelihoods, and protects the environment.



Defining Just Transition

A Just Transition is the shift from fossil fuel-dependent economies to low-carbon, environmentally sustainable development in a way that protects workers, communities, and vulnerable groups.

In South Africa, it addresses both climate change and the country's legacy of inequality, high unemployment, and coal dependence.

Key principles include: social justice and equity to ensure no one is left behind; participation and inclusivity to involve affected communities in decision-making; decent work and economic diversification to create new jobs and livelihoods; environmental sustainability to restore ecosystems and reduce pollution; and energy access and affordability to ensure reliable, fair, and sustainable energy for all.

Why a Just Transition Matters in South Africa

In Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, the legacy of coal and mining is visible everywhere in the rivers that run murky, the land scarred by mines, and the thick haze that lingers over towns and villages. Power stations and mines dominate the landscape, yet the benefits of coal-driven energy rarely reach the communities living alongside them. Instead, people carry the costs: polluted water, degraded farmland, poor air quality, and rising health risks impacts that disproportionately affect women, children, and the elderly.

For women, the consequences are immediate and deeply personal. Many shoulder the responsibility of caring for family members suffering from pollution-related illnesses while also facing economic vulnerability when jobs vanish or incomes decline. These pressures can increase exposure to gender-based violence and exploitation. Young people, especially young women, face uncertainty as coal-related jobs dwindle. Without access to education, skills training, or safe employment, youth are economically excluded and exposed to unsafe conditions.



Climate change intensifies these challenges. Droughts, floods, and food insecurity compound existing inequalities, making daily survival even harder for already vulnerable communities. These stories highlight the mining crisis, climate crisis, and other systemic failures such as weak accountability, economic exclusion, and environmental destruction, showing how deeply interlinked these challenges are.

At the heart of this narrative is resilience. Women and youth are not only affected; they are leading solutions. They are innovating, advocating, and guiding their communities toward inclusive, sustainable futures. These stories remind us that a Just Transition is more than an energy shift. It is about protecting lives, restoring dignity, and creating opportunities for communities to thrive. By centering the voices of those most affected and aligning with South Africa's Just Transition Framework and the Presidential Climate Commission's guidance, the country can ensure that the move to a low-carbon future is fair, inclusive, and truly just.



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The climate of fear makes it even harder to defend our land, livelihoods, and rights.”

”

echoes from the field

The cost of extraction: Khethi's Story

The mine is growing, but Khethi's world is shrinking. From poisoned rivers to silenced voices, her testimony is a powerful reminder that there can be no progress without consent.

Khethukuthula grew up in Newcastle where her father owned a big beautiful home. She recalls how he owned livestock and used his earnings to pay for her schooling, provide food, and support the family without struggles.

But then the mine came and everything changed.

Khethi and her family were forced to vacate their home. She recalls how her house was destroyed whilst she was still living in it because they refused to settle with the mine. The company used its power to push them off their land and relocate them without meaningful consultation or compensation. Even their ancestors were not spared as the company uprooted their graves with little consent.

Displacement was only the beginning.

The environment around them begins to deteriorate. Rivers that once supported their livestock are contaminated, and many animals have fallen ill or died. The dust and noise from regular blasting make it hard to sleep. And sometimes, their houses shake so badly that cracks appear in the walls.

Yet Khethi witnesses the mine expand without consent.

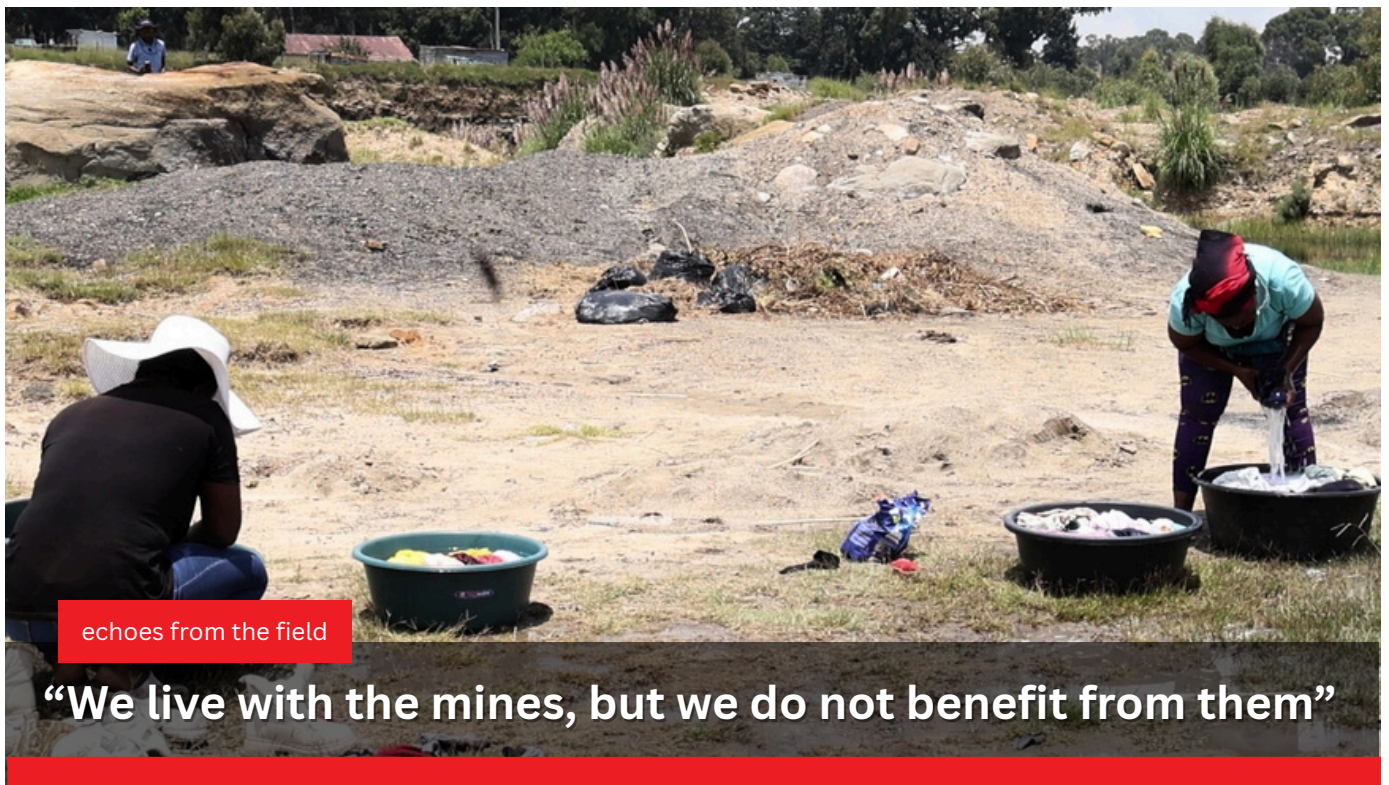
“It was like losing everything over night!” she says as tears roll down her face. “Our home, our animals were all gone and we were left with nothing, but no one listened to us!”

“We have demanded Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), but so far, our voices have been ignored.” she says.

The situation has created fear in the community and community leaders are now hesitant in taking action against the mine due to fear of intimidation.

“We were promised support, but the promises were empty. All that remains are memories of what we lost, and the struggle to rebuild our lives,” she says with a voice breaking.

The story of the mine is a story of displacement, lost opportunity, environmental harm, broken promises, social trauma, and fear. It shows how mining operations can harm well-being and community cohesion when there is little accountability and weak protection of rights. The relocation of their graves reminds us that the impacts of coal mining are not only material but deeply personal, touching even the memory of their ancestors. ■



I am Nelly, a community organiser in Ermelo. Every time I look at the abandoned Mbabala coal site, I see the deep scars that mining has left on our land. Look at it the mine has destroyed our soil, and now the land can no longer support agriculture or safe living.

This is the reality for Wessolton, our small township in Ermelo, where families have lived for generations. What used to be farmland and natural streams is now filled with polluted water and abandoned mining pits. Every day, women walk long distances to collect water, and we are forced to wash our clothes in contaminated streams. Children play dangerously near deep mining pits, and sadly, some have even drowned.

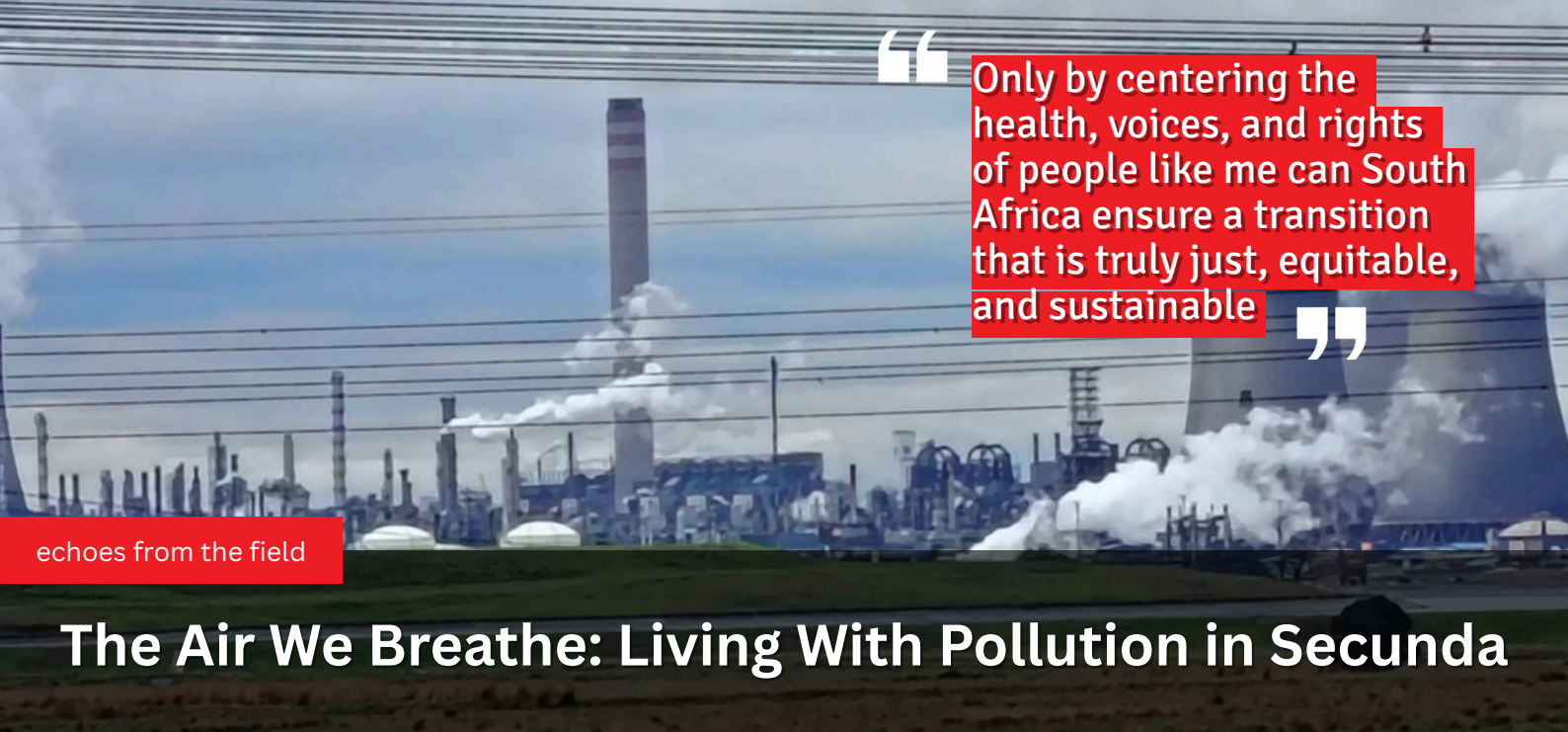
For women in Wessolton, the pressures of mining go beyond the environment. The lack of jobs, economic instability, and inadequate social services increase household stress, and the presence of male workforces in mining areas puts women at higher risk of harassment, exploitation, and domestic violence. We carry the double burden of caring for our families and trying to survive in unsafe environments. Livestock grazing next to the mine pits and drinking the very dirty water. Small-scale farmers have also struggled as mining activities reduce access to grazing land and affect soil and water quality.

Young women and girls face even more risks. With few opportunities for education or employment, some are forced into unsafe situations just to help their families. Access to health services, protection mechanisms, and safe spaces is limited, and this makes the impacts of both environmental destruction and social inequality even worse.

Mining is not just an industry for us. It shapes every part of our lives: our health, our safety, our livelihoods, and the future of the young people growing up in Wessolton. I have watched coal operations change our environment and economy, and yet our community rarely sees any real benefit.

We have lived through extraction. Now, we want to live through restoration. We want a future where our land is healthy, where jobs and opportunities are available, where women and youth are safe, and where our communities can thrive not just survive.

Despite these long-standing challenges, Nelly says community members often feel their concerns are ignored.



“ Only by centering the health, voices, and rights of people like me can South Africa ensure a transition that is truly just, equitable, and sustainable ”

echoes from the field

The Air We Breathe: Living With Pollution in Secunda

Secunda, home to some of South Africa’s largest carbon emitters, is one of the most polluted areas in the country. The Sasol petrochemical plants and coal operations release enormous quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change while directly harming the health of local communities.

The air in this area is heavy with dust and chemicals and for young people here, life feels uncertain.

Sibongile who recently moved to this area, has since then started getting sick due to the dust and fumes that she breaths in everyday through the air. She explains how the constant dust, smoke, and chemical emissions make it hard to sleep, and how the smell is sometimes overwhelming.

“The healthcare services we receive are inadequate. Medicines and specialized care are often limited, leaving many of us to suffer at home. We have asked the government to provide mobile clinics to reach communities like ours, but our requests have not been fully addressed.”

For many families here, this is not just an inconvenience. It is a constant threat to survival. Children and the elderly are falling sick with coughs, asthma, bronchitis, and other respiratory illnesses. Many adults are developing lung and heart problems, including cases of tuberculosis whilst pregnant women worry that the air and chemicals may affect their babies. Young children frequently suffer from chronic coughing, wheezing and frequent hospital visits, making it difficult to attend school; whilst women, who carry the responsibility of caring for children and the sick, bear an added burden of stress and health risks while also managing households

“We have raised environmental complaints many times, but there is little response,” Sibongile explains. “It feels like our health and our environment are not being prioritized.”


While mines provide some jobs, opportunities are shrinking as operations reduce.

Heavy coal trucks pass through these streets daily, damaging roads and creating serious risks for pedestrians. Sibongile has learned that mining companies have Social and Labour Plans (SLP) that are meant to support them with employment, training, infrastructure, and development projects. Yet, most residents do not know what benefits exist, how to access them, or who to contact. Promised projects often never materialize, leaving many feeling that the SLP is more about fulfilling legal obligations on paper than actually improving lives.

Young women and girls are particularly affected as they are forced to help at home, exposed to polluted air, and are often excluded from decisions that affect their community's future.

The story of Sibongile and the residents of Secunda shows why a Just Transition in Secunda must be centered on people, health, and accountability. It cannot focus only on energy or economic growth.

A Just Transition must protect their right to clean air, ensure proper healthcare access, provide transparency and accountability around Social and Labour Plan benefits, and prioritize meaningful participation of women, youth, and vulnerable groups. It must address social, environmental, and economic impacts together, so that no one is left behind. ■

A woman with a cast on her right arm and a crutch is leaning over a metal fence to talk to two children. One child is holding a water bottle. The background shows a yellow building and a clear sky.

“We are not against change, we want a future where our children can breathe clean air, find jobs, and live in communities that are safe and supported. But that future must include us.”

The hidden cost of Energy Poverty: Nthabiseng's story

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Collecting coal had become a survival routine.

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“I am Nthabiseng and I live in a small community near an abandoned coal mine in Ermelo. For years, access to safe and affordable energy has been a daily struggle for my household. Like many women here, I carry the responsibility of making sure my family has food and warmth, often under difficult and unsafe conditions.

One morning, before the sun had risen, I joined a group of women from my community walking toward the abandoned Mbabane coal mine. Collecting coal from abandoned mines had become a survival routine for many who cannot afford rising electricity costs. It is dangerous, but for families like mine, it is often the only option.

I will never forget the day when we were digging with our shovels, trying to collect coal, when suddenly a huge wall collapsed and fell on top of me. I was trapped and could not move. I thought I was going to die.

Other community members rushed to help me, removing the heavy debris piece by piece until they could reach me. I was eventually pulled from the rubble and rushed to hospital. The doctors confirmed that my right leg was severely broken. I underwent surgery, but the injury left me with permanent pain and limited mobility. Today, I rely on pain medication just to manage my daily life.

This injury changed everything.

As a mother of six, I had previously found ways to support my family through small informal work and household responsibilities but since then, I have been unable to work. I now rely largely on child support grants to care for my family.”

Nthabiseng's voice is one of many.

Women in mining communities like hers often bear the responsibility of securing household energy, exposing them to serious health and safety risks. Her story shows the gendered burden of energy poverty.

“ We do not go there because we want to. We go because we have no choice. Electricity is too expensive, and our families still need to cook and stay warm. ”

It also reflects the intergenerational impact of economic vulnerability; when one person is injured or loses income, it affects the entire household and the future of children.

When asked why she took the risk of entering an abandoned mine, she says simply:

“ We do not go there because we want to. We go because we have no choice. Electricity is too expensive, and our families still need to cook and stay warm. ”

These realities show that South Africa’s Just Energy Transition cannot only focus on infrastructure and technology. It must prioritise human rights and community wellbeing. It must create pathways that allow households to access safe energy, sustainable livelihoods, and dignified living conditions.





Khuthala's Garden: A Story of Hope

For many years, families in coal-affected communities shared the same story of polluted rivers, dusty air, and land that could no longer feed them. They told their leaders, they told the government, they told anyone who would listen, but change was slow. Policies that were meant to protect them often had holes, leaving communities to face the hardships on their own.

Amid these struggles, something beautiful began to blossom. The **Khuthala Environmental Care Group** started a small garden, right in the heart of the community of Ermelo. At first, it was just a patch of soil and a few seeds, but it soon became a symbol of hope. The garden brought light, not just through the fresh fruits and vegetables it produced, but through the joy and pride of families who worked together to nurture it.

Some of the harvest is sold to neighbors, helping the garden sustain itself. But much of it is shared freely with families who cannot afford food, especially single mothers who often carry the heaviest burdens. Through this garden, Khuthala shows that even with small support, communities are capable of creating real change.

But the garden is only the beginning.

Khuthala dreams of building a Just Transition Centre, a place where people can gather to share ideas, learn new skills, and find solutions for a fair and sustainable future. It will be a home for knowledge, creativity, and community spirit a place where women, youth, and everyone who wants to help can join hands to imagine a better tomorrow.

Khuthala's story reminds us that hope can grow anywhere, even in places where the world seems tired of listening. Sometimes, all it takes is a seed, a dream, and a community willing to care. And from that care, a brighter future can blossom.



Women and Youth Leading the Just Transition

In coal-affected communities across Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, women and young people face many challenges, including polluted air and water, health risks, and fewer job opportunities. Despite these hardships, they are becoming leaders of change and helping build a cleaner and fairer future.

Women and youth are educating their communities about their rights, the impacts of mining, and opportunities created by a Just Transition. By sharing knowledge, they help people speak up and take part in decisions that affect their lives.

They are also demanding to be included in decision-making spaces, ensuring that policies and plans reflect the real experiences of affected communities. At the same time, they are promoting new and sustainable livelihoods, such as skills training and community renewable energy projects, which help reduce dependence on coal.

Women and youth are monitoring pollution and social impacts in their communities and using this information to hold companies and authorities accountable. By working together and building strong networks, they are strengthening their voices and pushing for meaningful change.

Through their leadership and determination, women and youth are helping shape a Just Transition that supports healthier environments, stronger communities, and better opportunities for future generations.

Recommendations



Ensure Meaningful Participation

Government, industry, and policymakers must guarantee the full and meaningful inclusion of women and youth in Just Transition planning, decision-making, and implementation processes at local, provincial, and national levels.



Invest in Skills Development and Green Livelihoods

Increase funding and support for training programmes, agroecology, renewable energy, and other sustainable livelihood opportunities that create decent work beyond coal.



Support Community-Owned and Inclusive Energy Systems

Promote policies that enable community ownership of renewable energy projects, ensuring equitable economic benefits for local communities, particularly women and youth.



Strengthen Accountability and Monitoring Mechanisms

Support and resource community-led monitoring of environmental and social impacts to ensure mining companies and government institutions comply with environmental, health, and social obligations.



Address Gender and Youth Inequalities

Develop targeted policies and programmes that respond to the specific social, economic, and safety challenges faced by women and young people in coal-affected communities.



Strengthen Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

Foster collaboration between government, civil society, private sector, and communities to amplify grassroots voices and support locally driven Just Transition solutions.



Protect Community Health and Environmental Rights

Ensure implementation of policies aligned with Section 24 of the Constitution, guaranteeing the right to a safe and healthy environment for present and future generations.

Just Transition is not only about shifting energy systems it is about transforming power, participation, and development pathways. By placing communities, particularly women and youth, at the centre, South Africa can ensure that the transition delivers justice, opportunity, and a sustainable future for those most affected by the legacy of coal.

Conclusion

South Africa's Just Transition presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Moving away from coal is essential to address climate change and environmental degradation, but it must be carefully managed to avoid worsening unemployment, deepening inequality, or leaving communities behind.

In coal-affected regions such as Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, the transition must prioritize the voices and needs of communities. Civil society organizations, community leaders, youth, and women play a critical role in holding institutions accountable, ensuring policies reflect lived realities, and shaping locally relevant, equitable, and sustainable solutions.

A Just Transition is not only about changing energy systems – it is about transforming South Africa's economy and society to promote dignity, equality, and long-term sustainability for current and future generations. Communities and grassroots organizations provide essential platforms for local voices, monitor environmental and social impacts, and champion locally driven initiatives such as alternative livelihoods, environmental restoration, and community-based renewable energy projects.

When communities are placed at the centre, the transition can heal rather than harm – creating new economic opportunities, reducing social vulnerabilities, improving public health, and strengthening resilience. True justice in the transition is achieved only when those most affected are empowered to shape the future they will inherit.

A Just Transition is more than moving from coal to cleaner energy. It is about ensuring the shift is fair, inclusive, and people-centered, empowering communities – especially women and youth to shape their own future. Without this focus, the transition risks increasing inequality, deepening energy poverty, and exacerbating social harms. By centering justice, equity, and participation, the Just Transition transforms climate action into an opportunity for economic empowerment, social justice, and environmental restoration.

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<https://www.ilo.org/resource/article/south-africa-advances-just-transition-skills-green-jobs>

<https://www.climatecommission.org.za/just-transition-framework>

Aknowledgement

To the women who spoke when silence was easier, and the communities that welcomed us, thank you.

These stories belong to you. We share them in the hope of a future that honors your strength and answers your call for justice.

- Khuthala Environmental Care Group
- Sonke Environmental Justice Network
- Highveld Environmental Development Networking Alliance

And to SwedBio, thank you for your steadfast belief in this project. Your support and partnership allows us to keep challenging poverty and injustice alongside the communities we serve.

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