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Going coal turkey: SA's dilemma as it aims to develop greener economy

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A study by Greenpeace in 2018 determined that Mpumalanga had the worst nitrogen dioxide emissions from power plants of any area in the world.

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Saturday, 5 June marked World Environment Day, initiated by the United Nations to raise awareness and encourage actions to protect the environment.

While 196 parties committed to the Paris climate agreement with a goal to limit global warming, for countries like South Africa, adopting a less carbon-intensive development path will have challenges.

Coal producers will have to halt new mining projects and reduce their output 11% each year till 2030 in order to meet the targets of the Paris Agreement, according to a study.

Saturday marked **World Environment Day**, initiated by the United Nations to raise awareness and encourage actions to protect the environment, and it warrants a reflection of what a transition to a greener economy would mean for South Africa.

South Africa is one of the 196 parties to the **Paris Agreement on climate change**. Countries in 2015 committed to keeping global temperatures below 1.5 degrees Celsius by reducing emissions.

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According to a study released by Global Energy Monitor this week, coal producers need to halt new mining projects and expansions as well as reduced their annual output by 11% each year until 2030 in order to meet the Paris Agreement target for global temperature.

While there are great global ambitions to respond to climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it will be challenging for South Africa, whose economy is powered by fossil fuels.

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According to data from the Minerals Council of South Africa (MCSA), in 2020 coal was the biggest mining sector, accounting for more than 24% of production volumes. The industry employs over 91 000 people, and more than a third (36%) of coal is exported.

One has to look no further than the Mpumalanga **municipality of eMalahleni**, whose name means "place of coal", to consider the economic impacts if the entire industry were to shut down. eMalahleni is known for the coal-fired power stations in the area and coal mining activity. It forms part of the Highveld Priority Area, which spans over parts of Mpumalanga and Gauteng.

A study by Greenpeace in the third quarter of 2018 found that Mpumalanga had the worst nitrogen dioxide emissions from power plants of any area in the world, **Fin24 previously reported**. Coal-fired power station Kusile is also situated in the province.

Environmental organisations GroundWork and Vukani Environmental Justice Movement and Action (VEJMA) lodged a case to hold government to account for the air pollution in an area, and the matter **was heard in May**.

Sickness, contamination and pollution

Promise Mabilo, a representative of VEJMA, said that coal mines and power stations were only resulting in sickness, contamination of water, and air and land pollution. Mabilo was one of the panellists of a discussion on the priorities and challenges of a just transition for eMalahleni and the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality, hosted by the independent, economic research institute Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS) this week.

Even though coal mining and power stations threaten public health, unions experience "discomfort" or "mixed feelings" about possibilities of shutting down of coal power stations, especially because of the economic benefits coal has provided to the people of the eMalahleni and Steve Tshwete municipalities, according to Lucky Moni, a representative of the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union, which also participated in the TIPS dialogue.

"We value life ahead of jobs ... But we know that poverty is a threat to life," said Moni. "Anything that looks like it is taking us toward poverty is a problem to us."

Moni said that while there have been statements of the job creating potential of renewable energy projects, such as solar PV and wind farms that provide cleaner energy, it was hard to see

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how these jobs would be practically created and how renewable plants would create the same economic value as coal-fired power stations. "We are not given any assurances that if renewable energy takes over from coal, will it be able to support our economy like fossil fuels have done? We still need the assurance," he said. "All we heard is potential. But no one has given us the reality."

He raised concerns that South Africa would become an importer or consumer of solar panels, as opposed to manufacturing them locally. "We want to also produce the solar panels. If you come with a plan on solar panels - 'This is it from production to generation' - that will be just to us."

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Founding general secretary of the Cosatu and minister of communications in former president Nelson Mandela's Cabinet, Jay Naidoo, recalled how eMalahleni and Steve Tshwete in the past were where powerful trade unions were built.

Naidoo said that the debate on a just transition is not new, and that years ago trade unionists agreed that there are no jobs on a dead planet. "I am glad the just transition is in place because in all my conversations with coal miners not just in SA but across the world, I have never met a coal miner who said he enjoyed working underground," he said. Naidoo noted the environmental hazards and health issues related to coal mining, but pointed out that people had no alternative employment.

It is inevitable that fossil fuels will be phased out, now the task is to determine how to create pathways for people to earn livelihoods, he explained.

Naidoo said that the Presidential Climate Change Coordinating Commission will lay the groundwork for the transition. "So anyone who questions or tries to hold up this transition is working against interests of not just workers or people today, but future generations."

He said that government should actively support a renewable energy industry to create jobs, as an alternative to the coal industry. Communities should be supported by government to have their own grids in villages and have the option to sell excess power to the national carrier, like Eskom, and in turn earn revenue. "We must think through delivering renewable sector in a context where communities can own these assets. Why should it be just affluent rich people, investors sitting in banks, or hedge funds controlling assets like this?" Community-owned assets could help address unemployment, poverty and exclusion, he added.

Game changer

Prof Eugene Cloete, deputy vice-chancellor of research, innovation and postgraduate studies at Stellenbosch University, shared views that fossil fuels are on their way out, but African countries - especially without existing power plants - could leapfrog into the renewable energy industry relying on solar PV and wind.

But in the interim, while coal is still being used there is an opportunity to develop clean technologies to strip from flumes gases such as carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen gases and use them in other projects. Carbon dioxide in particular could be used as a nutrient for plants like algae, which in turn are protein-rich and can be fed to livestock.

"The technology is there, but it is expensive; I do not think the full value-chain is explored," he said. "Coal will be used in South Africa for a while, but while we are using coal, we need to move toward producing clean coal energy."

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