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# South Africa's complicated coal conundrum

At a time when South Africa's unemployment rate continues to rise, job creation is more important to the majority than the issue of climate change.

by **Luke Daniel** — 2018-11-05 14:35 in News



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South Africa's hedonistic reliance on coal as its main source of energy has split society down the middle.

**South Africa is blessed with an abundance of coal.** The fossil fuel which is harvested from deep beneath the ground accounts for 77% of the country's electrical output. Mining operations tasked with bringing coal to the surface employ hundreds of thousands of South Africans.

Yet, while coal has historically been the nation's backbone of power, global trends against 'dirty energy' are threatening to tear South Africa's already divided society further apart.

## South Africa's dangerous reliance on coal

While the country's expansive coal reserves have afforded South Africa relatively inexpensive and accessible energy; the mining and burning of coal to keep the lights on has led to some dastardly consequences.

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South Africa has one of the highest per capita emissions ratings in the developing world, accounting for more than 40% of Africa's total coal-derived CO2 emissions. Despite, reluctantly, joining the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and promising to abide by regulations set by the Group of 20 (G20) summits, South Africa has come under international fire for its destructive reliance on coal.

Worryingly, South Africa has been slow to capitalise on renewable sources of energy, despite, geographically, being well positioned to do so. Instead, the nation continues to construct new coal-fired power plants, as noted by Energy Minister Jeff Radebe's Integrated Resource Plan (IRP).

## Coal-fired power stations facing fierce opposition

Globally, financial institutions, human rights groups and environmentalists are beginning to **fight back against coal-fired power plants**.

Recently, Standard Chartered Bank announced that it would **stop financing the construction of coal-fired power plants**, anywhere in the world, in line with recommendations tabled by the Paris Agreement on climate change. Bill Winters, CEO of Standard Chartered Bank, argued that the use of coal for power was an antiquated and dangerous method of energy production, saying:

"Recent developments in technology mean that alternative sources [of reliable power] are increasingly available to meet that need without the impact of coal-fired power on the environment."

Locally, Standard Bank has also threatened to cut funding for coal-fired power plants.

The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) has argued that the construction of new coal-fired power plants was wholly irresponsible, considering dirty energy's "devastating" effect on human health, which was responsible for 2 200 deaths a year.

Robyn Hugo from the CER also added that the construction of new coal-fired power plants would raise the country's emission levels by 60%, which would result in R28 billion "fine" as prescribed by the Paris Agreement.

## Mineworkers fear job cuts over renewables

While the promise of renewable energy sources, including wind and solar farms, seeks to clean up South Africa's emission act and create employment for locals, employees of the coal industry worry that clean energy alternatives may rob them of an income.

The fears are not without merit, considering that many towns, especially in the Mpumalanga province, are solely reliant on the coal industry as a source of employment. **Times Live** recently reported on a statement issued by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which hit back at environmental groups pushing for renewable energy, saying:

"NUM in Highveld has noted with utter disgust a reckless statement made by Greenpeace Africa. "The reckless and impetuous statement is a clear campaign by Greenpeace Africa that the government should close power stations and coal mines in Mpumalanga."

The Greenpeace report in question points to Witbank area as having the "world's dirtiest air" as a result of its coal operations. According to the report, Mpumalanga is the global number one hotspot for NO2 emissions.

While Greenpeace pointed to scientific evidence gathered by the European Space Agency's Sentinel 5P satellite, which analysed the world's nitrogen dioxide hotspots, disgruntled mineworkers have bemoaned an agenda which will collapse local economies, saying:

"If the power stations and coal mines are closed in Mpumalanga several towns including Witbank will become ghost towns. If the power stations and mines are shut down, the economy of our country will collapse and the people will be left in darkness."

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This leaves South Africa in a power predicament. It is true that many communities rely on the coal industry for jobs but it is also true that the adverse health effects resulting from 'dirty energy' have a marked impact on locals.

For renewable energy to succeed in South Africa, it needs to prove its propensity for job creation, especially in embattled rural towns. At a time when South Africa's unemployment rate continues to rise, job creation is more important to the majority than the issue of climate change.

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