



Government: Wheels come off the Eskom offset

Tsepang Molefe in conversation with Sunnyboy Skhosana

14 August 2018 - By its own admission and the extensive evidence tabled before it, our government can no longer claim convenient ignorance about the harmful results caused by coal fired power stations. Corporate citizens will invariably fail to take proper initiatives to reduce their pollution because that means less dosh as profit and less money for the big bosses. This is why we have a democratic government and a Constitution – it makes promises and gives us hope for environmental justice.

In a report titled **Broken Promises: The Failure of the Highveld Priority Area** which was compiled by the Center for Environmental Rights in collaboration with groundWork, and Highveld Environmental Justice Network; the report highlights in full detail the failure of our government to improve air quality in the Highveld and it also makes sound recommendations on the way forward in the quest to improve the wellbeing of the people who reside in the affected communities.

Eskom is the biggest air polluter in the land through its intensive coal fired power stations. This makes Eskom not just a producer of energy but also a manufacturer of illnesses and deaths. The power utility has failed to comply with the minimum emission standards (MES) set by a democratic process, which included all role players and led by the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), which is aimed at reducing outdoor pollution from coal fired power stations, in order to protect the lives of the people who are already suffering from respiratory diseases and dying from the pollution from coal facilities. It is also important to mention that the standards set by the DEA are less protective of health compared to those of the WHO (World Health Organization).

Instead of meeting these standards, Eskom opted to start an offset programme in a few Highveld communities aimed to reduce outdoor air pollution by addressing indoor pollution by improving the insulation of the houses and providing LPG gas stoves, heaters, wall insulation, and ceiling to the communities. Their basic idea and intention is to cut domestic emissions by switching households to cleaner energy sources, low emission appliances, and insulation as an offset to the millions of kilograms of pollutants they emit from their fleet of coal fired power stations.

Representatives from the Centre for Environmental Rights, groundWork and other coal affected community representatives visited the community of KwaZamokuhle township, Hendrina in Mpumalanga, which is part of the Highveld which within a region that was declared an air quality priority area HPA (Highveld Priority Area) by the government in 2007. The primary objective of the visit was to assess the effectiveness of the intervention projects that was implemented by Eskom in order to reduce air pollution within these communities and households.

Through observation and engagement with some of the members of the community we discovered a number of challenges that the community is facing. From the way the project was presented and communicated, to the financial implication of replacing coal stoves with electric ones, to shoddy workmanship on ceilings and walls, to commitments and promises that were never fulfilled.



Sunnyboy and Petunia Skhosana outside their home in KwaZamokuhle township, Hendrina in Mpumalanga.

At the home of Sunnyboy and Petunia Skhosana for example, the roof/ceiling has countless leaks, they couldn't afford the high cost of power with the electric stove and were promised gas heaters but instead they received electric heaters.



Evidence of one of the many leaks in the Skhosana home

The plastering on their outside walls where insulation was installed is simply a disaster, to put it mildly. Styrofoam used as a cheap insulator is now peeling away from walls and is likely soon going to be an environmental hazard in the community where no formal waste management exist among the smoldering waste dumps which are the norm.



Styrofoam cladding coming away from brickwork

Some of the windows on their structure don't even open, post the terrible handywork. Next door to the Skhosana's is the home of Ntombifuthi Nkosi and her story is not any different. Nkosi had to dig into her own pocket to fix some of the damages as the result of the project. The Skhosana and Nkosi houses were among the first where the offset project was implemented, and when some of neighbours realized that this was a step back in their livelihood; they rejected the project.

What makes this even more disturbing is the fact that most of the people affected cannot afford the everyday cost of energy which is simply above their daily means. The people were also promised an electricity subsidy for a period of two months, but this never materialized. There are no measures in place to evaluate the project through follow up visits, and the people have no one to communicate their frustration to. From having to inhale polluted air, now the people have to do with damaged houses.

It's only fair to conclude that the offset project in this area has created more problems than solutions. To add salt to the wounds, our government is aware of the true and real cost of coal power emissions, but they have been nothing more than just a bystander as people are being polluted. There has been no government intervention in the interest of the people to make sure that Eskom accounts and takes full responsibility. It is clear that there seems to be a collaboration between government and the power utility to make the lives of our people a hell on earth. As the situation stands, Sunnyboy and Petunia Skhosana, their children, and many others affected; do not only have to do with living below the poverty line and a health hazard caused by pollution; they now have to carry the burden of living in damaged homes. This is a clear and ongoing gross violation of the constitution and the rights of our people. When will it stop?

What is urgently needed is for Eskom and government to understand that service delivery protests are about people saying they're 'gatvol' about the conditions of their existence. People are not only sick, living in atrocious conditions, they are also losing their jobs as Eskom and coal is declining because of corruption and a lack of vision. Eskom and government is lost in the haze and fog of the Highveld. If we are to prevent the melt down of society and chaos, it is critical that government, Eskom, communities and workers get around the table, under the tree, in bosboraads or imbizos, starting at a local level to figure out a Just Transition for the energy needs of all. Time is not on our side.

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