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July 18, 2020

**The Honourable Minister Zwelini Mkhize**

Minister of Health

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**The Honourable Minister Barbara Creecy**

Minister of Environment, Forestry and  
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**Honourable Minister Gwede Mantashe**

Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy

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**Mr Jacob Mbele: Deputy Director General**

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Dear Minister

**RE: A Call for Public Health Leadership in Building a Post-COVID-19 South Africa**

I write on behalf of the Climate Energy and Health Special Interest Group (SIG)<sup>1</sup> of the Public Health Association of South Africa (PHASA), which was formed in 2017 to advocate for healthy energy policy, prevent climate and air pollution-related diseases, and to promote approaches for healthy living in South Africa.

In our previous letter (1 November 2019: URGENT ACTION NEEDED ON CLIMATE, ENERGY AND HEALTH IN SOUTH AFRICA – copy attached) we emphasised that health is the bottom line of the climate crisis, and that the injustice of “climate apartheid” in South Africa demands action from the health sector. We recognised that the public health community needs your leadership in addressing this crisis. We set out the reasons that, we believe, compel you to adopt an active position in steering the work of the **Presidential Climate Change Commission**. We also recognised growing calls for an **urgent and just energy transition** from unsustainable polluting fossil fuels to cleaner renewables that will require a collective effort from all sectors, especially the health sector. We pledged our commitment to assist your leadership in this challenge too.

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<sup>1</sup> The Climate Energy and Health (CEH) Special Interest Group: <https://phasa.org.za/special-interest-groups/climate-energy-and-health-sig/>

We are writing to you now during the environmental and public health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Climate change and pandemics interact in multiple ways to worsen the impact of each<sup>2</sup>. Air pollution from the burning of fossil fuels is already killing millions of people from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and air pollution is linked to higher coronavirus mortality, particularly among those with pre-existing morbidity<sup>3</sup>. Sadly, air pollution in the Mpumalanga Highveld, in particular, is amongst the worst in the world due to the concentration of our coal-fired power stations and weak enforcement of both the air quality standards<sup>4</sup> and the air quality management plan for the area. Air pollution is also driving global heating via the ‘greenhouse effect’, with catastrophic consequences for environmental and human health, such as extreme weather, heatwaves, droughts, floods and sea level rise.

We appreciate that South Africa is still very much in the midst of the COVID-19 storm, imposing an enormous strain on our national, provincial and local public health resources. Health workers have been justly praised for their essential role on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic response, and they have no less a role to play in protecting public health from the slower developing but more harmful crisis of climate change. It is for this reason that, while fighting today’s COVID-19 battles, we must also look ahead to building a just and sustainable post-COVID-19 South Africa. In its recently issued ‘*Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19*’, The World Health Organisation (WHO) has warned that we cannot afford repeated disasters on the scale of COVID-19, whether they are triggered by the next pandemic, or from mounting environmental damage and climate change. South Africa cannot go back to “normal”.<sup>5</sup>

Government decisions in the coming months must avoid locking South Africa into “*economic development patterns that will do permanent and escalating damage to the ecological systems that sustain all human health and livelihoods*”.<sup>6</sup> We therefore urge Cabinet to heed the following:

- 1) a July 2020 resolution by the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA)<sup>7</sup> **demands that governments stop the opening of all new coal mines worldwide, accelerate closure of existing coal mines, accelerate the transition to clean renewable energy, and secure a just transition for affected workers and communities;**
- 2) an open call from health workers to G20 leaders for a ‘**#HealthyRecovery**’ from the coronavirus pandemic;<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Karliner, J. (2020). "Coronavirus and the climate crisis: Common causes and shared solutions." Retrieved 2020/06/16 from <https://medium.com/@HCWH/coronavirus-and-the-climate-crisis-227c36bf07d0>.

<sup>3</sup> Environmental Action Germany (Deutsche Umwelthilfe). (2020). "Relationship Between Covid-19 and Air Quality" (summary of 16 international studies). Retrieved 2020/06/16 from [https://a9g3u8k4.stackpathcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020\\_05\\_11\\_relations-Covid19-and-air-pollution-1.pdf](https://a9g3u8k4.stackpathcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020_05_11_relations-Covid19-and-air-pollution-1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) (2017). "Air pollution from coal power stations causes disease and kills thousands of South Africans every year, says UK expert." Retrieved 2020/06/16, from <https://cer.org.za/news/air-pollution-from-coal-power-stations-causes-disease-and-kills-thousands-of-south-africans-every-year-says-uk-expert>.

<sup>5</sup> WHO (2020). "WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19". Retrieved 2020/06/17 from <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-manifesto-for-a-healthy-recovery-from-covid-19>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> A call to Ban Coal for Electricity Production: [https://www.wfpha.org/images/A\\_Call\\_to\\_Ban\\_Coal\\_for\\_Electricity\\_Production\\_final.pdf](https://www.wfpha.org/images/A_Call_to_Ban_Coal_for_Electricity_Production_final.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> World Economic Forum (2020). "Thousands of health professionals call on world leaders to prioritize a greener future, post-pandemic". Retrieved 2020/06/16 from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/thousands-of-health-professionals-call-on-world-leaders-to-prioritize-a-greener-future-post-pandemic/>

- 3) demands from youth representatives in South Africa calling on government to ensure that **economic recovery from Covid-19 is just, green, inclusive and youth and gender-responsive**;<sup>9</sup>
- 4) the WHO's urgent prescriptions for the above-mentioned healthy recovery, which includes **investing in essential basic services, ensuring a quick healthy energy transition, and ending taxation-based fossil fuel subsidies**.

In South Africa, the pandemic is highlighting the challenges we will face as the climate crisis grows, so this is an opportunity to build the institutions and social solidarity that can dismantle the current unjust order. The *Just Recovery* report released this week<sup>10</sup> calls for a people-centred recovery from the pandemic to overcome existing inequalities. A **well-funded public healthcare sector and a low-carbon energy system** are seen as essential to the first of the five principles of a just recovery: *Putting People's Health First*.

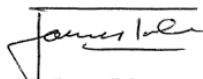
We reiterate that the Presidential Climate Change Commission (the "Commission") is integral in driving this just transition/just recovery in South Africa. We have been informed that Minister Creecy advised a group of climate change stakeholders during a meeting on 1 June 2020 that the terms of reference for this Commission were being finalised. We repeat our plea for the Commission to begin in earnest, and **request a copy of the terms of reference to consider ways in which our PHASA group can support your Department and the Commission's work**.

As a group with a special interest in the links between climate and energy systems and public health, in a national association of public health professionals and advocates, and in a country both historically responsible for, and increasingly vulnerable to, climate change, we call for your strong leadership on finding shared solutions to the converging crises of the immediate coronavirus pandemic, and the growing pandemic of climate-health impacts in South Africa. We align ourselves with international and national efforts, including the above references, to lay the foundations of a new economy that lives within the planet's natural limits and emphasises human health and the wellbeing of our life-support systems<sup>11</sup>.

We offer you our support in this vital endeavour for the wellbeing of all our people, and, in closing, we highlight a statement from the WHO Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, to guide our way forward as nation:

*"The pandemic is a reminder of the intimate and delicate relationship between people and planet. Any efforts to make our world safer are doomed to fail unless they address the critical interface between people and pathogens, and the existential threat of climate change, that is making our Earth less habitable."*

Sincerely



**James Irlam**

**Chair: Climate Energy and Health Special Interest Group, Public Health Association of South Africa**

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<sup>9</sup> South African youths call for a just and green recovery from COVID-19. Retrieved 2020/07/15 from [https://www.environment.gov.za/mediarelease/creecy\\_justgreenrecovery\\_covid19youthdialogue](https://www.environment.gov.za/mediarelease/creecy_justgreenrecovery_covid19youthdialogue)

<sup>10</sup> 350Africa.org & Climate Justice Coalition (2020). No going back to normal: Imagining a Just Recovery in South Africa. <https://350africa.org/just-recovery-report/>.

<sup>11</sup> The Ecologist. (June 11, 2020). "George Monbiot: From coronavirus to public luxury". Retrieved 2020/06/16 from <https://theecologist.org/2020/jun/11/george-monbiot-coronavirus-public-luxury>

**Climate Energy and Health Special Interest Group exco members:**



**Maxine Brassell**



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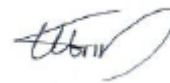
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