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Medupi slammed as a sulphur-pumping climate crime that will kill thousands

Sinesipho Schrieber



A general view of Medupi Power Station on January 1, 2015. The station, previously called Project Alpha and Charlie, is a new dry-cooled coal fired power station being built by Eskom. When completed it will be the largest dry-cooled fired power station in the world. (Photo by Gallo Images / Mail & Guardian / Madelene Cronjé)

Economists and environmental experts have warned the 2020 launch of one of South Africa's biggest coal-fired stations, Medupi, could result in a climate and economic catastrophe.

David Hallowes, environment justice researcher from civil rights group Groundwork, said the official take-off of Medupi would fail to revamp the economy and pose danger to human life and the environment.

Medupi would be one of the largest environmental polluters, operating without sulphur scrubbers.

“Medupi will commit one of the greatest climate crimes when it fully takes off. There was a huge fault in planning to build the coal station without flue-gas desulphurisation sulphur dioxide scrubbers, which eliminate chances of the dangerous gas being released in the atmosphere.

“The gas largely attacks the respiratory system and, when the station fully operates, it will come at a huge cost to the environment and human health,” he said.

Groundwork research in 2018 predicted that Medupi in full operation without sulphur scrubbers, emissions would produce 30 million tons of carbon dioxide and 22,233,225 tons of sulphur dioxide a year.

Its operating sister station, Matimba, was predicted to emit 22,733,225 tons of carbon dioxide and 309,262 tons of sulphur dioxide.

Economist Mike Holland calculated that the emissions from Medupi could cost 626 equivalent deaths each year from lung cancer, heart disease, lung disease and strokes. Aside from deaths, there could be 3,500 cases of bronchitis, over a million “restricted activity days”, with some 26,000 children suffering asthma attacks and nearly 280,000 lost working days.

The economic costs would total around R9.2 billion.

Already, communities next to the station complained about the lack of breathable air and a strong smell of sulphur choking them.

Eskom was applying for a postponement of the emissions compliance for its stations and was expected to install sulphur scrubbers at Medupi by 2025.

Until then, air pollution, land degradation and human respiratory attack would continue.

Furthermore, the launch would come with bad news to construction workers, who were being “demobilised”. At its peak, there were up to 24,000 workers – 18,000 on Medupi and 6 000 on Grootegeluk coal mine.

Once completed, Medupi would employ about 500 people.

University of the Witwatersrand economist professor Patrick Bond said the mega projects would fail to recover the billions of rands invested in them due to a bloated construction budget of more than R300 billion over the past 12 years.

Bond believed the station’s high tariffs would compromise affordability for struggling consumers, which would result in low returns, tempering Eskom’s ability to pay off its debt.

He added government should consider moving away from carbon-addicted investments and consider renewable energy. – *news@citizen.co.za*