

Coal industry under increasing pressure to focus on a just transition.

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The coal industry, which is a big polluter in South Africa, is facing major threats with investors pulling out of the country. (Paul Botes/M&G)

The coal industry, which is [a big polluter in South Africa](#), is facing major threats with investors pulling out of the country. [The local coal sector has lost R2-billion in investment in over eight years](#), according to statistics from the Minerals Council of South Africa.

With financial institutions pulling their funding of coal projects, and the pressure on governments to take carbon emissions seriously, this is part of a global trend.

Locally, this has serious implications for jobs all along the coal value chain, with the government failing to properly shift people into new jobs, a process known as the “just transition”.

This is according to a [report](#) released by the environmental justice organisation [groundWork](#), showing how [Covid-19](#) has affected community activists in South Africa’s coal fields.

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The report, *Elites Don’t Care: People on the frontlines of Coal, Covid, and the Climate Crisis*, was released last week.

Decades of burning coal has caused large amounts of air and water pollution, threatening the health of people in the [Mpumalanga Highveld](#). Many South Africans are still forced to live with [the burning of fossil fuels and air pollution](#), whereas, according to the Climate Reality Project, [neighboring countries are swiftly moving to renewable energy solutions](#).

But litigation and pressure from environmental lobbying organisations, such as the [Center for Environmental Rights](#) (CER) and [groundWork](#), have affected any future investment into coal-related projects in South Africa.

Groups such as this are consistently winning court cases, forcing change.

On Tuesday, the Pretoria high court issued an interdict to prevent a coal-mining company from commencing mining and other related activities in a water-source area, near Wakkerstroom in Mpumalanga.

In its new report, groundWork also criticises how the government has created room for the ongoing dangerous emissions from companies such as Eskom and Sasol.

“The environmental authority has proved adaptable to the requirements of the fossil economy. It has relaxed the minimum emission standards for sulphur dioxide to accommodate Eskom and Sasol,” the report says.

“The call for a just transition in spreading to fossil-fuel hotspots other than Eskom. Two of South Africa’s rusting and poorly maintained oil refineries [exploded in 2020](#), resulting in the death of workers and severe pollution and trauma visited on their neighbours.

“Anticipated public processes have also not happened. In 2019, the National Planning Commission (NPC) planned a national summit on a just transition and also proposed that the Highveld be taken as a focus area for social dialogue and action. The NPC process, however, has stalled,” the report continues.

The report, though, notes that changes are going ahead without the government taking the active role that it is meant to. These include Eskom’s “recently announced but unformed plans for repurposing three Eskom power stations and an industry-led renewable master plan process”, and Sasol reducing its carbon emission, although by a number much lower than is required by science.

Chris Gilili is an Adamela Trust climate and economic justice reporting fellow, funded by the Open Society Foundation for South Africa.

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