



# GROUND**WORK**

## UPL Chemical Catastrophe

### Who will pay the cost?



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Cover picture by Shiraaz Mohamed



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*groundWork is a non-profit environmental justice organization working primarily in South Africa, but increasingly in Southern Africa. groundWork seeks to improve the quality of life of vulnerable people in Southern Africa through assisting civil society to have a greater impact on environmental governance. groundWork places particular emphasis on assisting vulnerable and previously disadvantaged people who are most affected by environmental injustices. groundWork's current campaign areas are: Climate Justice and Energy, Coal, Waste and Environmental Health. These campaigns are supported by the Media, Information and Publications Campaign and the*

*Environmental Justice Education Campaign.*

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*groundWork is affiliated to the following international organizations: Health Care Without Harm; International POPs Elimination Network; Basel Action Network; Oilwatch International; Global Anti-Incineration Alliance; groundWork is the South African member of Friends of the Earth International*

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groundWork

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# From the Smoke Stack

by groundWork director, Bobby Peek



**W**hat a last quarter we have had. I feel as if I have been in and out of a washing machine. I get out, settle down and adjust, then I am shoved right back in. Despite this, groundWork continues to build a strong foundation for a long-term future in challenging for environmental justice, in South Africa and across the continent.

I must start off with reflecting on our positive external evaluation recently completed. It was extensive and there is much to take from it to strengthen our future work. I was comforted by recognition of groundWork's effort and the time we give to "supporting the ability of communities to self-organise and share their own agendas," despite various forms of marginalisation by the system.

Internally, we are strengthening our systems to ensure that we are more effective in our solidarity and support of people's struggle for an open democracy and just transition. There has been a slight restructuring and addition of new staff. Rico Euripidou, who has been with us since 2005, has stepped up to strengthen the groundWork management team. His new role is as Campaigns Coordinator, working with senior campaigners in groundWork to support the integration of our work.

Over the last months we have brought on Asiphile Khanyile to work as a Zero Waste Project Coordinator for groundWork in an exciting new project creating a zero waste to landfill case study in the Durban Warwick Triangle Early Morning Market, through which more than 400 000 people commute daily. She was recently awarded the Albert T Modi Ubuntu Award for her interdisciplinary research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Mary-Joy Masetlane has joined us as the Energy Democracy Project Coordinator to work with movements in the Durban Metro and Emalahleni (Witbank) to strengthen and enable engagement in all tiers of government to realise renewable energy

community solutions that can be implemented at scale. She is presently completing her masters at the Wits Business School in Energy Leadership.

Finally, Vuyiseka Dosi has joined groundWork for six months as an intern for her work experience in completing her journalism diploma at the Durban University of Technology. The gender balance in groundWork has shifted.

Other good news is that, together with our partners, we are on the last stretch of setting up the Environmental Justice Fund, a new grant-making body to provide funding and support to community-based organisations working for environmental and climate justice in South Africa. We have commitments from funders, we have more than 60 applicants seeking to participate on the board and the Fund is due to hire staff by the end of 2021 and to go live in January 2022.

While we live in troubled times, movements and community organisations working with NGOs on justice issues must take note that the power of collective campaigning, pulling in many voices, has managed to ensure that the president and government continues with the Covid-19 grant, despite it being insufficient at R350. But it is a first step to a long-term victory for a universal basic income grant.

It is, however, more than just a grant that is needed as the Medical Research Council warned in 2020 that "if government is serious about the poor receiving social grants ... a multi-sectoral response that ensures an increase in cash and non-cash resources to poor households and children; continuity of access to routine healthcare services so that the flattening of the curve is not at the expense of gains made in survival of children through preventive health services including immunisation; and improved access to basic services, including adequate shelter, water and sanitation services" is needed. It sounds very much like our Life After Coal's call on an open agenda for a just transition.



A just transition is more than just energy and saving the ‘corporate bacon’. It is about people first; it is about what our constitution promised us. It is what we have heard people asking for from groundWork’s first community meetings way back in the 90s.

It is this just transition that keeps me up late at night as I battle with the insomnia caused by the urgency of the crisis we face. For decades we have known of the climate change reality that was going to hit us, but governments – in elite undemocratic partnership with corporates – failed to take meaningful action. Now, after another report by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – which was launched in 1989 – government and corporates for a moment pause and consider the gravity of the situation. But do they change course? No. They just spurt rhetoric. They continue to rather place their energy on working around the crisis with false solutions such as Net Zero, Carbon Capture and Storage, offsets and other false solutions – all supported by the very IPCC endorsing something that it cannot back up: Anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> removal. They claim that there is high confidence that this unfinanced, untested technology, not yet budgeted (for it is impossible to budget) will be the silver bullet. That scientists can arrive at this conclusion is alarming. Where is their evidence? But then we must remember that this is a report that is finally vetted by government leadership before being released. When are we going to wake up to the fact that there is no silver bullet to the crisis of climate change?

It is a battle of the narratives. Governments and corporates want to make you feel that they are doing something but action, I have come to learn, is when people say no to mal-development because of the injustices they experience and not because of some report or narrative. How can you trust big business and their associates, such as Business Unity South Africa and the National Business Institute, spouting narratives on a just transition when these very same

industries are closing shop without a just transition plan for communities around the Engen oil refinery (owned by Petronas) and Total and Sasol oil refineries? There was no discussion with workers and community people who are dependent upon these industries about the plans for closure. It was a financial decision taken in boardrooms, then forced down the throats of workers and communities. All done in a ‘democratic’ manner, Engen will claim, for they sit around a table with some of us trying to set up a structure to speak to community, but not wanting to first talk about what the talks should be about.

In the early 2000s, Joel Bakan warned us that the corporation is “self-interested, manipulative, avowedly asocial, self-aggrandising, unable to accept responsibility for its own actions or feel remorse – as a person, the corporation would probably qualify as a full-blown psychopath”. And this can be clearly seen by how the pesticide multinational United Phosphorus Limited, with a dismal track record in India, operated a warehouse in North Durban with toxic agro-chemicals that went up in fire and polluted the river, the estuary and people’s bodies during the looting and chaos of early July. As people are trying to get an understanding of what they were exposed to, it was discovered that UPL and its owners are just like Engen, like Shell, like Sasol: “full-blown psychopaths”. They seek to make profit and damn the rest.

Finally, the future we warned about for decades is now here. The coal and oil industry are imploding – as we warned – and still we are considered the villains in the debate. We asked of government not to build Medupi because it would be a failure and you will read in this newsletter that, as Medupi was completed in August, seven years behind schedule, an explosion ripped through it and now it is ‘decompleted’. By the way, we have also warned about gas and still do today, but government does not want to hear us.

Aluta continua. 🌀







# Who bears the costs?

by Rico Euripidou

**A**t the time of writing, more than a full month has passed since the agro-chemicals warehouse inferno, sparked by the unrest of the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, razed a warehouse owned by Mumbai-based chemicals multinational United Phosphorous Limited (UPL) to the ground. Since then, gripped by the fear of litigation and blame sharing, transparency and openness of information has effectively been snuffed out in the handling of the disaster by the national, eThekweni and provincial authorities and the management of UPL.

The (UPL) warehouse effectively burned and smouldered for nine full days, liberating chemical mixtures in billowing black smoke, and spilling hazardous chemical waste into the surrounding aquatic systems as a consequence of the fire department dousing the fire with water. The devastating impact to aquatic life from deadly pesticides and herbicides in the acute phase was almost immediate. Approximately five tonnes of aquatic and marine life was collected by the specialist chemical spill response teams. However, the threat to the health of nearby communities is likely to last for many years.



*Smoke from the burning UPL warehouse in Cornubia.*

*Credit: SDCEA*

- The UPL warehouse billowed black smoke for over a week before it was fully extinguished.
- UPL did not require specific authorisation, nor any special permits, to store highly hazardous chemicals. It was licensed under a special fast tracked integrated authorisation by national government.
- The warehouse contained over 5 000 tons of chemicals.
- The inventory included approximately 1 600 pesticides, agri-chemicals and agri-products, some of which are classified as highly hazardous and are banned in the EU.
- The conditions under which some of the chemicals were released into the environment are known to lead to the formation of persistent organic chemicals which are known to cause cancers in humans and animals.

The fundamental tenet to effective and safe chemicals and waste management is through multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral participation enshrined in the UN's strategic approach to international chemicals management, underpinned by open and transparent information flows. This includes civil society stakeholders who are not fearful and limited by bureaucratic structural factors that sometimes render emergency response limited.

In the immediate aftermath of the chemicals incident, UPL issued a statement on its website, saying that there was “minimal risk of any long-term effects to the health of people exposed to smoke from the warehouse” and that people should take Covid-19-like public health precautions against exposure from smoke.

By the end of the first week, community-based legal and scientific experts acting in the interest of





*Contaminated water from the Ohlanga River.*

*Credit: SDCEA*

the public's health continued to be frustrated by what appeared to clearly be a political position adopted by the eThekweni Department of Health and the Joint Operations Committee (JOC) appointed by the authorities not to disclose any information about the chemicals and the volumes to the public. Alarmed by this delay by the authorities to announce precautionary health advice, our civil society group was compelled to release to the press an "unofficial public health warning" on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July to affected communities.

## What is UPL?

Mumbai-based multinational agro-chemicals UPL project themselves as a company "focused on emerging as a premier global provider of total crop solutions designed to secure the world's long-term food supply". On their website they project an image of sustainability and openness for global food security. What is not disclosed on the UPL website are the environmental fines of tens of millions of Rand for accidents that resulted in worker deaths, which have been issued by the Indian Supreme court against UPL. This track record of taking environmental short

cuts is compounded by a history of gag orders against journalists who have exposed their environmental crimes in India – hardly the image that is projected to the global public and clearly an outward image that hoodwinked our South African politicians pursuing direct foreign investment.

We still do not have the following fundamental information necessary to protect the health of recreational beach users, traditional healers, subsistence fisher-folks, informal community residents, school children and formal household residents:

- A full list of the pesticides, herbicides, agricultural remedies and other chemicals that were stored in the warehouse. We do, however, have knowledge that at least five highly hazardous chemicals that are commonly globally associated with adverse human health and environmental impacts were on the list. They include carbofuran, paraquat, chlorpyrifos and atrazine formulations.
- The volume of the inventory is now commonly understood to have been in excess of 1 600 substances and tonnes of agrochemicals. To date, no information has been disclosed on the quantity released into the receiving environment.
- No environmental sampling (air, water or soil) information or results have been made available, notwithstanding that the disclosure of such information, in the public interest, is provided for under information legislation.
- Neither the volume nor the specifications of the water spilled and containment system at the warehouse have been made public.
- To date, no site characterisation quantifying risks to the public has been undertaken and made available. Yet, the company has seemingly received exemptions from normal legislative requirements in dealing with the incident and authorities' own administrative decisions remain hidden from the public eye.
- Nor have the JOC released substantive information on the nature of the risks that underlie the closure of Durban's beaches north of the uMgeni estuary





- To date, belated and insufficient warnings not to collect or consume the dead fish and birds, to ‘wear double Covid-19-type surgical or soft cotton masks’ kept ‘slightly moist’ to trap particles and fumes, and use ‘extra virgin olive oil’ (UPL company statement, issued on 19 July 2021) are insufficient.
- Limited notices, regarding beach closures, have proven to be ineffective over the long-weekends, and more should have been done to alert the public of the potential risks and to ensure exposure of the public is limited.
- Most importantly, the biggest failure to date has been an adequate public awareness effort to inform the public of the ongoing health risks following the fire.

These practices do not honour our constitutional values of openness, accountability, transparency and environmental protection.

We should have learnt from the history of similar environmental and public health disasters. Notably, in July 1976, following a fire at a agro-chemical manufacturing facility just north of Milan in Italy, an agro-chemicals fire resulted in a release

of 2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (‘TCDD’ or ‘dioxin’), a highly toxic by-product which had profound human and environmental impacts on the small nearby town of Seveso. In the immediate aftermath, domestic and farm animals were particularly impacted and even though the human population was evacuated many adverse human health outcomes such as cancers were registered in the exposed populations decades after the incident.

Following the catastrophe, the EU adopted legislation on the prevention and control of such accidents. The aptly named Seveso Directives (most recently Directive 2012/18/EU) were adopted, taking into account the classification of chemicals and increased rights for citizens to access information and justice. The benchmark Directive applies to more than 12 000 industrial establishments in the European Union where dangerous substances are used or stored in large quantities.

The public will ultimately judge the authorities on the continued fudging and buck-passing of its responsibility for the harm flowing from the fire. This is a classic example of the lack of an open democracy in South Africa, which facilitates corporate impunity through political links. ☀

*Smoke billows over the burning UPL warehouse. Credit: SDCEA*







# Karpowership's NERSA Public Hearings



By Avena Jacklin

**O**n the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2021, the National Energy Regulator (NERSA) held an online public hearing on the Karpowership's electricity generation license application for Saldanha, Ngqura and Richard's Bay. The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) submitted written comments on behalf of groundWork ahead of the hearing.

The NERSA chair, Mr Nhlanhla Gumede, said that NERSA is obliged to promote energy diversity and that decisions had to be based on a balance between economic development, the environment and livelihoods. groundWork, along with other civil society groups, emphasised that the Karpowerships electricity generation license should be denied on the grounds that it will not be able to meet the environmental law requirements, a prerequisite for granting any electricity generation license, and because of its high costs, climate change impacts and lack of demonstrated ability to comply with environmental laws delivering energy justice for the poor. Concerns over a twenty-year contract were also echoed, as renewable energy and storage could generate three times more energy and at a lower cost over the same period.

The Karpowership application does not consider other alternative renewable energy systems, which provide positive impacts in terms of job creation, electricity production and economic stimuli. The negative impacts on tourism, fisheries, other livelihood options and climate change were not assessed.

The most recent IPCC report, affirms that each 1 000GtCO<sub>2</sub> will cause 0.45°C warming and that the planet is currently heading towards 1.5 degrees Celsius warming by 2030. The report states that beyond this threshold there will be catastrophic consequences for the Southern African region, including food insecurity,

an increase in the poverty gap, as well as negative health and economic consequences.

The relative sea level has increased at a higher rate than global mean sea level around Africa over the last three decades and is likely to increase further, contributing to the frequency and severity of coastal flooding and coastal erosion. The rate of surface temperature increase has been more rapid in Africa than the global average. The climate crisis will deepen our socio-economic challenges and will weigh most heavily on poor and vulnerable communities and their livelihoods.

Electricity generation from Karpowership specifics surrounding the license applications, including where and how electricity will be produced, whether this will impact on the electricity price and whether this will have long term implications for the public (and knock on effects on the economy) do not only impact on the people in Coega, Richards Bay or Saldanha, but on the people of South Africa as a whole. Therefore, NERSA should have published the applications more widely, including in national newspapers, together with an exact weblink, as opposed to a generic site for NERSA and Karpowerships websites for the online application documents. After notifying NERSA of this shortcoming, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2021 NERSA did provide the link to the application, but only by email. NERSA refused to re-advertise the application in the national newspapers.

The commenting period did not provide sufficient time to adequately comment and the request for thirty days per application was denied. Further challenges to evaluating and commenting meaningfully and adequately included the redaction of documents, including fuel supply agreements, power purchase



agreements and tariff structures, annual financial forecast for the next five years, details of project financing, development plans (skills, supplier and enterprise) and the transmission agreement. NERSA should make these documents available for comment in order to ensure transparency and meaningful public participation. By not allowing this, they are, as a government institution, preventing the open democracy that we have been calling for as civil society organisations.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2021, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment refused the Karpowership Environmental Authorisation for all three ports. The reasons for the refusal indicated that Karpowership will be unable to meet legislative requirements, including conducting key specialist assessments such as the Underwater Noise Impact, Avifaunal Impact Assessment and the peer review of Estuarine Impact Report. Impacts on marine life and small scale-fisheries were not considered and the minimum requirements for public participation were not met. The Environmental Assessment Practitioner (EAP) Hantie Plomp is currently under investigation by the Environmental Assessment Practitioners Association of South Africa (EAPASA) for, amongst other reported misdemeanours, failing to notify the public of new information contained in reports and to make this available for further consultation.

Karpowership does not fit into the presidential commitment to a just transition towards a low carbon, inclusive, climate-change-resilient economy and society. It is not the best technology available, but rather it is expensive, dangerous, exclusionary and will lock South Africa into gas, which will increase our carbon and greenhouse gas emissions and fast track the effects of climate change.

Karpowerships are not needed. There are better alternatives that will meet our electricity demand, which are cleaner, safer, more cost effective, inclusive and will improve our climate resilience in the just transition. These alternatives were not considered in the environmental assessment reports. 🌀

At the time of the hearing, many of the licences and key consents required by Karpowerships to comply with all the legal requirements were still outstanding, including:

- **Environmental Authorisation (EA) in terms of NEMA:** Final Environmental Impact Assessment planned to be submitted by 21 April 2021 and awaiting decision (subsequently refused);
- **Water Use Licence (WUL) in terms of the National Water Act, 1998:** application submitted in November 2020, and public participation underway;
- **Air Emission Licence (AEL) in terms of the Air Quality Act, 39 of 2004 (AQA):** application submitted in March 2021, awaiting decision;
- **Biodiversity and Conservation permits in terms of various legislations including National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act, 10 of 2004 (NEM:BA); Provincial legislations and By-Laws:** not yet applied for;
- **Protected Tree Licences, National Forests Act, 84 of 1998 (NFA):** not yet applied for;
- **Fire Safety By Law Permit and Occupational Health and Safety Act, 85 of 1993 (OHA) permits:** not yet applied; and
- **Registration in terms of Major Hazard Installation Regulations, 2001:** not yet applied for.





# Food and Health – a call to action!

By Luqman Yesufu

**A** safe and healthy variety of food is a fundamental human right, as an optimum supply of safe and nutritious food is a prerequisite for protecting and promoting health. There is strong evidence that poor nutrition and an unhealthy diet are leading risk factors for various chronic health conditions, including heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, cancer and other diet-related diseases. For example, obesity has more than doubled since 1980, with about 70% of the world's population living in countries where obesity kills more people

than starvation does. This trend of growing obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease increases the global demand for resource-intensive therapies, and therefore increases both healthcare costs and the health sector's environmental footprint as it needs more energy and resources to treat these diseases

Health institutions globally have a significant role to play in modelling and promoting healthy food choices because they are a substantial food consumer. Globally, a growing number of healthcare facilities that purchase and serve food to patients are reducing their





environmental footprint and improving patient health by changing hospital service menus and practices, and developing in-house food gardens to encourage locally-sourced healthy fruits and vegetables. This has helped foster disease prevention, reduce the health sector's environmental footprint, and create stable and growing markets for sustainable, locally grown food outside the health care sector.

There is an increasing awareness of the many benefits gained from on-site food production initiatives. Many of our GGHH members are beginning to create spaces for gardening and growing food within their facility. Recently, Pholosong hospital, a 400-bed government hospital that is located in the Gauteng province and that serves a population of 900 000 from Tsakane, Kwa-Thema and Duduza, has embraced therapeutic rehabilitation of its patients by developing its food garden within the hospital, which provides the hospital with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Through the establishment of a garden committee, the hospital engaged and partnered with the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (GDARD), which then provided them with the much-needed training, sachets of seeds (onion, cabbage, carrots and spinach) as well as gardening equipment such as spades, forks, watering cans, rakes and hoes. This has led to an average of twenty patients and families each day receiving a basket of vegetables (spinach, cabbage, carrots, onions and green pepper) and a regular supply of these vegetables to the hospital kitchen. Beyond this, Pholosong hospital sees hospital gardens and food growing as a catalyst for behavioural change, encouraging healthier lifestyles among patients and staff, and markedly increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables and physical activity.

As we continue to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, it is vital to recognise the fragility of our health and food systems. The pandemic has illustrated how the health of food ecosystems and animals can

directly impact human health and well-being. There is now a real opportunity to build forward fairer, safer, healthier, more resilient and sustainable food systems, with better public health outcomes, central to economic stimulus packages and policies that governments put in place to support recovery. For example, building relationships with local food growers could strengthen community fabric and move people away from reliance on centralised distribution chains or supermarkets, which often sell unhealthy foods.

HCWH and its strategic partner in the region, groundWork, acknowledge the significant role that food plays in both human and ecological health and are therefore working with the Global Alliance for the Future of Food (GAFF), as well as the Centre for Excellence in Food Security at the University of Western Cape, to co-convene a food-health nexus roundtable in September. The target audience will include public health and healthcare professionals and food system actors from intergovernmental, businesses and civil society organisations.

In South Africa, the state is structured into multiple spheres – national, provincial and local – each composed of various departments, resulting in deep silos and a fragmented policy environment. The state frames food insecurity as a primarily agricultural function, which the national and provincial departments of agriculture drive. Departments of health often engage with nutritional issues only through remedial feeding and supplementation, or to enforce sanitation standards.

We see this as a real opportunity to address public health through cross collaboration between food systems actors – especially local – and healthcare providers, primarily as we deal with the impacts and aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. A much closer working relationship will address the gaps in policy and practice that will ultimately support the transition to a just and sustainable, healthier food system for us all and strengthen community cohesion. 🌱



# September 2021: Africa Climate Week



By Lorraine Chiponda

**A**s we are approaching the 26<sup>th</sup> meeting of governments under the banner of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow, Scotland in November, we reflect on a dismal record of inaction by governments to take bold climate justice action and to hold themselves and corporates accountable for their inaction on climate change, both in mitigation and adaptation.

Africans living on the fenceline of destructive extractive industries and on lands and in environments that are becoming more hostile because of climate change must stand up and say *no more*. Together with NGOs willing to demand justice, accountability and honesty, they must challenge African leaders to unite and start acting at a local, national and regional level by turning away from extractivism as a development model. The extractive model has failed Africa. African leaders must not only demand, but they must also act in a way that backs up their demands.

Africans in the coming months should be raising critical questions to the global community, such as climate reparations and demanding real climate action, whilst also abandoning forms of development that further entrench Africa in the dirty fossil industry, and accelerate environmental destruction and inequalities.

The Africa Climate Week (ACW), hosted by Uganda in the last week of September, is one such platform and time where African leaders and corporates can be questioned about their commitment to fighting the climate crisis. The goals of the ACW are to develop a good sense of the climate actions on the continent whilst identifying climate hindrances and opportunities.

Despite the evidence of the present catastrophe being available five decades ago in the 1980s, through the launching of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPPC), greenhouse gas emissions have increased, temperatures have increased and, based on

present emission trends, we are presently well on our way to a 3-4 degree Celsius warmer world.

The ACW is part of a build-up of three-part actions in the year leading up to the UNFCCC COP26. These are the Virtual Regional Roundtables convened earlier this year and that set the agenda for the upcoming Week, which will be succeeded by the Ministerial Sessions later this year. Priorities set to be discussed in 2021's Week are National Actions and Economy-wide Approaches, Integrated Approaches for Climate-Resilient Development and Seizing Transformation Opportunities. All noble gestures, but after 26 COPS can we expect any meaningful and urgent change to deal with our climate emergency? It is highly unlikely.

A large proportion of Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, is most vulnerable to the damaging impacts of climate change as seen by the struggle to bounce back after experiencing severe droughts, cyclones and other extreme weather. African governments have battled to recover or avert climate disasters, particularly due to the connection to the extractivist nature of the fossil and other extractive industries, capital flight, crippling debt cycles and global systems of carbon-driven businesses that are the base of the fossil industry.

The ACW should be a process that further widens democratic and deliberative political processes ensuring there is urgency in responding to the climate emergency we now face. Climate and extractive-affected peoples' voices are not going to be heard in the closed-circuit echo chambers of the ACW. As NGOs and affected peoples on the continent, we must use the ACW to provide the reality of day-to-day experiences of people on our continent and demand a just transition to a new world, a just transition that puts people's needs at the centre of actions to respond to climate change and a new economy, that is regenerative.

So, we watch with bated breath to see if African leadership comes out with both words and actions from the ACW. I do not feel positive. 🌀





# Waste to landfill diversion is the main goal for SA

By Musa Chamane

## National drive for Personal Protective Clothing for waste pickers

The struggle of waste pickers in South Africa has been a fierce one. Backtrack 15 years and waste pickers were dubbed as a problem in society. They were called pejorative names. The Director General once tried to convince parliamentarians that waste picking should be discouraged by all means because it is inhumane, dirty and undesirable for people to sort through mixed waste to recover recyclables. groundWork argued that progressive recycling projects that create jobs and mitigate climate change start like this in the developing world.

## Materials confiscation

In some municipalities, waste pickers are forcefully removed from landfills or their salvaged waste materials are confiscated. In some instances, the municipal security will lock horns with waste pickers. There have been various court cases that have become cold, where waste pickers have been shot at or abused. All these unfortunate events happened because they were not allowed to work or to salvage discarded materials that were destined for landfills.

## Recognition of waste pickers

Since the formation of the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA), the tables have turned. Through organising and the advocacy work that has been done for more than a decade, the national government eventually came to the party. One can confirm that the national government has seen the light and their first recognition was confirmed officially in 2014, when the late Minister of Environment, Edna Molewa, spoke about the importance of waste pickers.

I now want to turn to one of the most important emerging contributors to the generation of jobs in the green economy, the waste sector. The waste economy has the potential to address inequality, poverty alleviation and create jobs. Dignifying the plight of waste pickers is furthermore a moral responsibility that we have to address.

Edna Molewa

## Recycling projects

Progressive municipalities have started recycling projects that have been driven by waste pickers. Industry bodies such as Packaging SA have also played a role in making sure that waste pickers are not displaced from the roles that they are involved in. We have seen the emergence of recycling projects in places like Mooi River, Sasolburg, Vereeniging and Paarl, to name a few. Lessons learned from these projects led to the National Waste Pickers Guidelines, which traces back to the National Waste Management Strategy (NWMS), Waste Act 2008, which encourages **Zero Waste to landfill**.

Nonhlanhla Mhlophe (SAWPA kzn) Mbuso Hlophe (Msunduzi Municipality) Credit: groundWork





[Zero waste is] the conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse and recovery of products, packaging and materials without burning, and with no discharges to land, water, or air that threaten the environment or human health.

GAIA

## Recycling for climate

Government has slowly learned that climate change can be mitigated if waste recycling is taken seriously, because it is scientifically factual that as waste decomposes at the landfill it produces methane gas, which is one of the atmospheric gases that traps the heat, which results in changes to weather patterns through the unnatural gas produced by human activity.

## National Registration and PPE distribution for waste pickers

Since Covid-19, one wonders if there is any municipality that is not aware of the number of waste pickers that they have in their municipality. There was a drive to register waste pickers in various municipalities so that they could access waste pickers relief fund as well as the PPE. National financial relief that has been provided for waste pickers. The national relief has been received by a number of waste pickers nationally. This has led to jubilation and dignity for the work of waste pickers in the country.

## Athermal municipal waste incinerator to kill recycling jobs

The incredible work done by waste pickers in the country is being undermined by so-called innovators or scientists who prefer profits rather than people. The recycling industry in South Africa employs many people. The high numbers in recycling are a confirmation that South Africa means business when it comes to a green, circular economy. Athermal is a waste incinerator company based in Gauteng, and it treats hazardous waste from mines such as Marikana. They are now proposing to undermine the livelihoods of waste pickers by seeking to burn municipal waste in their incinerator, disregarding the fact that there are people who already work in the sector.

## Notorious Thermopower

Thermopower was notorious for being a poorly managed plant which was under scrutiny by the Green Scorpions in the past. While the investigation was still in progress, the plant went up in flames, hiding the wrongs that were taking place in the plant. After that, they resurfaced under new management as Athermal. All the contraventions were blamed on Thermopower and they now appear as if they are a different company, which is not the case.

Municipal waste incinerators are notorious for taking even recyclable waste because they have to maintain the heat for 24 hours, 365 days per year. There is never enough waste to feed such a monster and we foresee South Africa moving into incinerating recyclable materials, which is against the Waste Act 2008, and we foresee South Africa or at least Gauteng having to produce more waste so that the incinerator can be fed.

## Incineration competes with recycling

Waste incineration undermines recycling. Rather than operating in tandem – where recyclables are recycled and only non-recyclables are burned – incineration and recycling typically compete for the same waste materials, the same government funds and the same waste management contracts. This conflict is particularly clear in so-called ‘waste-to-energy’ incinerators and is also true for burners that do not recover energy.

Despite the fact that incinerators are below recycling in the waste hierarchy, they are very often prioritised above recycling at the local level, and as a result they have had a consistently negative impact on waste prevention and recycling efforts, as well as on workers who make a living from recycling. Incineration is an expensive and rigid, technology-dependent, long-term waste management strategy. Waste to energy or waste treatment is not recycling, and according to the waste hierarchy recycling is a priority before incineration.

**We say no to incinerators!** 🌞





# Ikwezi mine at it again

By Robby Mokgalaka

**A**fter the community of Mbabane, near Dannhauser in KwaZulu-Natal, and surrounding communities around the Ikwezi coal mine got shot at, beaten and arrested by the police for protesting against the impacts caused by the mine, the mine is now planning to expand its operation in another community next to Mbabane and the expansion is not welcomed by the local community people.

In March 2021, seven community people, including myself, a groundWork staffer, were shot at with rubber bullets, manhandled and arrested by the police, and were kept in jail for three nights for fighting for the environmental justice and rights enshrined in the South African Constitution. When we appeared in court, five of the eight men who had been arrested had their charges withdrawn. The three women were released on bail and had to undergo the trauma of appearing in court four times before their charges were withdrawn.

Now the Ikwezi coal mine is planning its expansion in the Shepstone Lake/Chibini community in the Dannhauser area of Newcastle. Sometime in May 2021, Bonani Ndlovu (the Director of the Ikwezi coal mine) came to the community to inform them that the expansion was going to take place. The problem was that most people in the community did not remember being consulted previously about the expansion process.

The first engagement between the mine and the community led to the formation of the Mbuso Wabantu Forum (the Forum), which was meant to represent the community on its issues related the mine. The agreement was that the mine would communicate with the community through the formed structure. Sometime in June and early July 2021, the mine cars were seen moving in and out of the community, erecting small poles, without the knowledge of the community, the Forum or the chief.

The mine also started to send SMSes to the community members about fencing skills training, without communicating with the relevant community people and structures. The forum viewed this as total disrespect and a sign that the mine was imposing itself

## Community demands in a petition sent to the DMRE and the mine

- All the mine processes in our area to stop with immediate effect until the mine provides proof that the operation was approved;
- The register signed by the community during the consultation process. Our communities say that they were not consulted;
- The proof of approval from the Department of Minerals & Energy (DMRE) for the planned expansion in the Shepstone Lake community;
- The mine officials to respect and consult with the Mbuso Wabantu Forum and the chief (Mr. Gcina Nkosi).
- Communications by the Ikwezi coal mine with both structures must be made transparent by the mine;
- Failure to comply with the demands of this petition will amount to disrespect and will require us to take necessary action against the mine.

on the people. The forum started doing door-to-door contact with the community people, advising them not to attend any meeting organised by the mine as the mine had not communicated with the Forum about any of these.

A petition was drafted and signed by community members to stop the mine from doing anything in the community until the mine engaged properly. The community leadership also sent an email to the mine, requesting all the relevant environmental authorisations, but the mine chose to ignore the email.

The Shepstone Lake community is learning from their neighbours about the impacts and arrests made as a result of the mine's arrogant behaviour and their refusal to listen to the poor communities. The mine's Kliprand operation is still causing people's houses crack due to blasting and have people breathing toxic coal dust, and the mine is still refusing to do anything to save the lives of the people. 🌀



# Open agenda: A just transition for all



By Thomas Mnguni

**I**n 2016, the first interviews with workers on a Just Transition were held at Witbank, NUMSA offices. The purpose of the interviews was to understand what workers think about job security and retrenchments, what it means for them and how things could be done differently.

In 2018, another engagement was held with mineworkers from Optimum Mine. These were the workers who lost their income as a result of the mine closure. Then it was workers in Arnot, who were not only worried about losing their jobs, but were concerned about their health.

Some of the workers we met over the years who lost their jobs were working at Highveld, Samancor Chrome and Vanchem. Their biggest worry is how and where they could find a new job as their skills are limited to the specific industry they worked in. All of these interviews pointed to a chaotic system of change (transition).

When people lose their jobs, it also brings challenges in society, but importantly at a family level. Losing a job means people will not be able to buy food, pay for municipal services like rates and taxes, cannot afford electricity, and cannot buy medication or pay their kids' school fees.

Since 2005, groundWork has been talking about the need for a Just Transition because it realised the strong need for a change in system but also how a planned transition could be beneficial to all and provide both social and economic protection. groundWork also realised that, at the centre of the planned transition, workers and communities should lead the debates and inform the decision-making process. groundWork facilitated dialogues between workers and communities on this debate, and further engaged with government in all spheres.

Fast forward to 2021, and one is inclined to say we have achieved something as both government and

industry have agreed that there is a need for a just transition. But we still need to be careful, as what industry and government mean by a just transition seems to be business as usual. They speak of the green economy, which continues to put people into deep poverty and create wealth for a few elites and corporates.

What we mean by a just transition is about the change in system such that we move away from poverty and live well with the earth and each other. It is about ensuring that basic services like water, health, sanitation and electricity are easily accessible to people and not commodified. It is about people deciding how they produce goods and food, and also how they distribute and consume them. It's about working together so that we come to agreements and ensure good governance, accountability and well-deserved democratic practices.

Our understanding of the just transition has been informed by the different dialogues we have with workers, communities, government and industry. But the dialogues have also led to an agenda now called the open agenda. It is a process that seeks to build power from below to enable people to define and determine their own development and future.

groundWork has partnered with other organisations and is working with government to continue these dialogues, as they provide a platform for learning through sharing. It provides motivation for people to act and take informed decisions. But this also serves to strengthen movement building that will not only ensure that we have a Just Transition but will guard against the process of abuse of state resources which continues to be a huge problem in our country. The failures of our government to deliver on its promises and obligations is something we can no longer tolerate.







## Chasing a dream - Introducing Vuyiseka Dosi



**I** have always struggled with anxiety and it's one thing that has been standing in my way from pursuing things that I like. I knew from a young age that I wanted to pursue a career in journalism, either in radio or print. After two years of procrastination,

I decided to follow my dreams. My motto growing up was always, "All you need is a pen and a paper to create a new world," which is why I took a leap of faith by moving to Durban from Cape Town with no family whatsoever, just to chase the dream of being a journalist. That dream is slowly coming together as I am currently pursuing a National Diploma in Journalism at DUT. My mom has been my greatest inspiration. She supported my dream when I decided to go back to school. Knowing that I will be the first graduate in my family keeps me grounded.

Even while struggling with anxiety, I have also always been a risk taker and I took a risk by applying for an internship at groundWork, even though I had no experience in environmental justice. I was met with open arms and by colleagues who are willing to help me on my chosen path. It's been quite a new experience being in a work environment, as I have never had a structured work environment before, and have always worked according to my own pace. It was a struggle at first, transitioning to being a full-time employee and juggling varsity at the same time. I have, however, quickly adapted to the way groundWork works.

I joined groundWork as a Media and Communications intern in July. It was quite a nerve-racking experience meeting the groundWork team, but they were welcoming and they made me feel at home. The past month has been a great learning experience, coming to understand the groundWork

campaigners and campaigns: what each campaign does and what impact they are making in the communities they are working with.

Before joining groundwork, I worked as a freelance student writer for *The South African* and a sport writer for *Youff Magazine*. Both jobs prepared me for the cut-throat industry in some way, and I got to be versatile. Instead of boxing myself in one category, I got to be Jack of trades. I believe the skills I obtained from both will help me with my internship at groundWork.

I hope someday I will tell stories without fear or favour and shed light on stories of the marginalised. I believe that, through believing in yourself, you can achieve whatever you set your mind to: no dream is too large – or small. I'm looking forward to the rest of the year with groundWork and I hope I will make an impact in the organisation in some way.

## The new chapter - Introducing Asiphile Khanyile



**O**n the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2021, I set out on my new journey to the groundWork Durban Office. Keep in mind that I had only met my new colleagues via Zoom, and these masks do not make it easy to recognise people.

I was nervous and enthusiastic, trying to make sure that my introduction speech sounded good. I was introduced to my groundWork colleagues as well as the two organisational partners: Asiye eTafuleni (AeT) and Urban Futures Centre (UFC) from the Durban University of Technology (DUT). I had heard and read about the term Zero Waste, so I was keen to understand the direction of the project in the Warwick Market, Durban's largest market, through which more than 400 000 people move each day.

My interests have always been in sports and studying geography. Hence, I studied for a Bachelor



of Social Science and Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Geography and Environmental Management at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Studying in the field of environmental management perpetuated my passion towards learning more about human-environment relationships.

Luckily, from 2018 to 2020 I had the opportunity to join the internship programme with the EThekweni Municipality, specialising in environmental education and waste management. In addition to this, from 2018 I also started studying for a Master of Science in Environmental Science at UKZN. During this time, I worked with the Department of Geography, Chemical Engineering, community members and local EThekweni Municipal officials, to shed light on using multidisciplinary approaches towards environmental issues such as waste.

Prior to working at groundWork, I was a teacher assistant at Mariannhill Junior Primary School. Hence, over the past two and a half years, my earlier work experiences and studies have gradually shaped me into a person who is highly interested in the field of waste management.

At groundWork, I am part of the waste campaign, as Waste Project Campaigner for the Urban Movement Innovation (UMI) project titled *Waste Management, Urban Informality and Climate Change: innovative zero-waste solution from informal street markets of Warwick in Durban*.

In this project, some of my work is centred around mobilising and organising waste pickers for the project's research and learning exchanges. Furthermore, I work closely with AeT and DUT-UFC to conduct research with the informal traders and waste pickers. And then, we also work along with groundWork's partners such as the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA) and the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) in order to enhance the project's African Waste Management Learning Hub. Thus, being part of the UMI Warwick Zero Waste (WZW) means I get the opportunity to be part of the dynamic intersections of waste management and climate change in the urban informal spaces of the Markets of Warwick.

Being part of groundWork, as an organisation that works across different environmental issues, is truly inspiring. Moreover, all the campaigns at groundWork

are exciting as they advocate for both the protection of the environment and human rights. Lastly, I would say, let us wait and see what the new path has in store for me as I am prepared to give my best and learn more. ☀️

## A passion for energy -



### Introducing Mary-Joy Masetlane

**M**y name is Mary-Joy Masetlane.

I have a BSc. (Hons) Geology from Wits University. I have experience working in the Electricity Generation industry

and the mining sector, working with both Eskom and Anglo American. I am currently enrolled for a Master of Management in Energy Leadership at Wits Business School. I am passionate about the energy sector, especially renewable energy and an inclusive just transition. I am part of an exciting Energy Fellowship, Student Energy – a youth-led organisation in Canada. I aspire to be part of a force that will fast-track the energy transition in South Africa and Africa as a whole, to a just, inclusive and sustainable energy future for all. My passion for energy started from a young age, as I grew up in a disadvantaged community where most households could not afford electricity (therefore resorting to wood). This sparked my interest in renewable energy and its associated benefits.

My hopes have always been to create practical and realistic solutions for low-income communities. Joining groundWork came at the perfect time and I am looking forward to working with the groundWork team to make a difference in people's lives by facilitating meaningful engagements with policymakers and other key actors nationally and internationally. And what better place to fulfil one's dream than to be in an organisation that has justice and equality at its core? I am looking forward to learning, growing and contributing positively at groundWork. In my spare time, I enjoy reading, spending time in the garden and in nature, making healthy food (mostly from the garden) as well as baking for family and friends. ☀️





# Making strides towards youth development



By Niven Reddy

**I**t has been four years since groundWork participated in a joint project with member groups in Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) to foster an inclusive youth movement in Europe and Africa. With the memories of those fun times still fresh in mind, I reflected on those learnings and how far our organisation has come since that project. Over the past year, groundWork has grown in staff composition and part of this growth has been to bring on board young people with fresh ideas on how to shape and develop our work towards environmental and social justice.

I started in groundWork over five years ago as a research campaigner, floating across the different campaigns and supporting others to access Environmental Impact Assessment documents from the web. I knew how to use the loopholes of the internet effectively, so it wasn't that difficult to find these documents, but I was always met with gratitude for finding them so quickly.

My work very quickly evolved into taking on more responsibility, and it was something I really enjoyed. I still maintained the unofficial tech wizard title, but my work began to grow deeper into the waste campaign as we started looking at ways to support the growth of zero waste and anti-plastic campaigns across the continent.

Over the past two decades, groundWork has worked with the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) to help support the African region in challenging incineration threats, connecting struggles of poor waste management and championing waste picker integration.

In 2017, there was an opportunity to hold a better and more focused coordination structure with GAIA in Africa, and this was an opportunity that was given to me. At the time, I don't think I fully understood what it actually meant but looking back at it now I can only think about how grateful I am to have been considered as capable of doing good things in this position.

Almost four years later, GAIA in Africa is a fully functioning program with four dedicated people to support members in the region to advance zero waste. The team is also part of coordinating the #BreakFreeFromPlastic movement.

The regional team coordinating this process is made up entirely of young people: myself and Carissa, who are embedded within groundwork, along with Desmond Alugnoa and Kenza Elazkem, who are also embedded within local member organisations of GAIA, at Green Africa Youth Organisation in Ghana and Zero Zbel in Morocco respectively. This structure means that we are based within the membership itself, which keeps us grounded.

Beyond this programme, groundWork has brought in new young people, namely Asiphile and Mary Joy, to support and lead new projects on waste and energy, and also Vuyiseka to boost our media and publications capacity. The best part of all this is not that groundWork is employing and engaging youth, but is giving them opportunities to lead processes, make decisions and allow them to be creative and shape their work to the way they think it should be shaped.

Most of the people from Africa I met during the FoEI project are people I still connect with so it leads me to believe that their organisations have also adopted this approach and have shown faith in the youth of today and are nurturing them to be the leaders of tomorrow. ☀️

*African Youth representatives at a gathering in Durban in 2017. Credit: groundWork*







# Waste Pickers critical to zero waste transition



By Carissa Marnce

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has caused dramatic loss of human life, and devastatingly impacted the livelihoods of people. In South Africa, unemployment reached a record high of 32.5% in the fourth quarter of 2020. Unemployment is not, however, a new challenge for South Africans, who faced a pandemic of insufficient secure jobs and rising retrenchment rates, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals have had to seek alternative modes of survival and the informal economy has served as a cushion for extreme poverty and contributes significantly to the country's annual GDP.

Waste pickers, who are part of the informal economy, play a critical social, environmental and economic role by recycling materials such as plastic, cardboard, paper and metals and preventing them from going to waste dumps. In South Africa, statistics show that waste pickers recover between 80 to 90% of the post-consumption packaging and paper. Through collecting and selling waste as a livelihood strategy, waste pickers work towards environmental justice and mitigate climate change.

Through the work of organisations like the South African Waste Picker Association, together with groundWork, the national government has acknowledged the critical role of waste pickers in the country and has taken notable steps to create enabling environments for waste pickers to be fully integrated, with safe working conditions across various municipalities. This includes the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and the Department of Science and Innovation's Waste Picker Integration Guideline of 2020, which serves as a road map for municipalities on how to integrate waste pickers in the country's waste economy. There is also the National Environmental Management: Waste Act of 2008, which allows for people picking materials on landfills.

Over most of the African continent, with the exception of Zabaleen Waste Pickers in Egypt, waste pickers are not well organised and still face poor working conditions. These challenges range from selling recovered recyclable materials to corrupt middlemen at low prices, discrimination from municipal officials who prevent waste pickers from accessing landfills, dangerous and unhealthy working conditions without the necessary tools and protective equipment, significant loss of income when injured or sick, the privatisation of waste from corporations and harassment from the public as a result of existing social stigmas.

Today, parts of Africa have become dilapidated wastelands, flooded with toxic and non-recyclable plastic waste, often dumped by northern countries on our shores. The toxic waste trade is alive and kicking. Yes, we consider the dumping of electronics and plastic in Africa by corporates and northern societies as the trade in toxic waste, for this waste ends up in our environment, consequently killing our environments.

The just transition to zero waste can be driven by creating partnerships with waste pickers, who are the cornerstone of recycling in the continent. Unified waste picker organisations across the African region will demonstrate that zero waste is not a distant concept, but something attainable, and that waste to energy incineration and other false solutions to the waste crisis are irrelevant in the region.

For centuries, indigenous cultures within the African continent have abided by principles of preservation and reuse, and our investment in zero waste systems will allow us to return to the traditional regenerative indigenous knowledge that illustrates understanding and respect for the unique ecosystems in our continent. 🌱

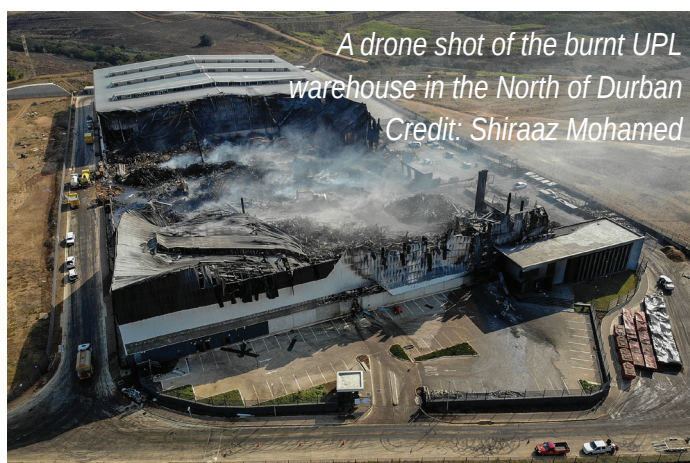




# Where are other dangerous chemicals stored?

By Tsepang Molefe

**T**he recent unrest in South Africa put the country into a tailspin and further drove the economy into a deep pit. I have no doubt that the so-called instigators had all the intentions of igniting a riot, but even they themselves must have been surprised by the unprecedented turn of events. The unrest seemed to take an organic form, unscripted and unrehearsed.



*A drone shot of the burnt UPL warehouse in the North of Durban  
Credit: Shiraaz Mohamed*

In the midst of the chaos, a storage facility in the north of Durban was engulfed in flames. The storage facility belonged to United Phosphorus Limited (UPL), one of the world's largest chemical multinationals. The fire at UPL was finally defeated ten days after the day it was set alight. By that time the damage had been done: the chemically contaminated run-off from fighting the fire had found its way into the Ohlanga River, the Umhlanga Lagoon and popular beaches north of Durban. This forced the eThekweni municipality to shut northern beaches after it was reported that the Ohlanga River and the Umhlanga Lagoon had changed overnight to an eerie bright blue with dead fish littering the shore.

Civil society movements and organisations, including groundWork and SDCEA, have engaged with both local and national government to make sure environmental justice is served. There are a number of unanswered questions: What was the specific inventory and content stored in the facility? Were all

the legislative requirements met for the storage of toxic chemicals? Was the storage situated in a place designated to hold such chemicals?

UPL refused to disclose vital information on the content and quantities of its stock, which makes it impossible to measure the scale of the problem faced by affected people and communities. We are therefore left to speculate what exactly went into the rivers and the beaches, and what polluted the air during the fire at their storage.

According to amaBhungane, an investigative journalism group, the inventory includes *suspected carcinogens, neurotoxins, chemicals that “may damage the unborn child” and tons of “highly caustic” substances that burn skin on contact.*

This is not the first time Durban has had to deal with dangerous warehouse fires. The Transnet warehouse fire in 2017 and Engen explosion in 2020 are two recent examples. Why do we not learn from



*Dead fish at the contaminated Umhlanga Lagoon  
Credit: SDCEA*







*The run-off from the UPL warehouse fire turned the Ohlanga River to an eerie blue colour*  
Credit: SDCEA

our past experiences? When is governance of chemical facilities going to be a critical priority for the state?

How many other chemical storage facilities are there, not just in Durban, but in the rest of our country, which may be similarly inadequately licensed and flying under the radar of permitting and regulation? We need an urgent assessment of whether hazardous pesticides, chemical products and their quantities are being disclosed to the correct authorities. Without storage facilities being routinely inspected by the authorities, regulatory enforcement is not possible. Do companies have adequate fire and emergency procedures to prevent a catastrophe? Are measures in place to limit the spread of chemical fires to avert a health and environmental disaster?

There are terrible precedents that warn us against regulatory complacency. The 1984 Bhopal disaster at the Union Carbide India Limited (now DOW Chemicals) pesticide plant resulted in the immediate death of thousands of people and affected the long-term health of many more. Investigations found that systemic violations of the laws and standard safety procedures resulted in one of the world's worst industrial disasters.

It is the South African state's duty to keep its people safe from such potential industrial harms. Is this going to be Durban's Bhopal? How many other unregulated storage facilities like UPL are ticking time bombs? It is of critical importance that information regarding the location and compliance of all storages harbouring dangerous substances be made public by national and local authorities. This would make it much easier to deal with such disasters and also monitor their operations to safeguard public safety.

This issue, which was not given the necessary attention and the urgency it deserves by authorities from the onset, will not go away anytime soon. The warehouse had no environmental permits and had not been through a formal risk assessment, and this renders the operation illegal. It also seems there was no warning to relevant authorities about the content stored at the warehouse. If the regulatory requirements for the storage and handling of toxic chemicals were not met, this could be placed firmly at the doorstep of government. Regardless, someone needs to take responsibility. Some of the impact on the environment and the health of people may not surface now but only in the long-term. The unwelcome outcome from this disaster could take years to overcome. 🌀

### Facts

- The UPL warehouse is located in the middle of a shopping hub, 400 metres from a school and upstream from the informal settlement of Blackburn Village.
- The UPL warehouse was set alight on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, during the public violence and unrest that gripped Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. It was eventually extinguished on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July.
- The company responsible, UPL, has refused to publicly disclose what was in the warehouse and has repeatedly downplayed the seriousness of the disaster.
- In February of this year, a major blast shook Gujarat's Bharuch district in India after an explosion at United Phosphorus Limited (UPL) plant at Jhagadia unit. The explosion resulted in a massive fire. At least, 26 people were injured in the incident, with two fatalities.







# Bang goes Medupi

By Greenfly



**E**skom proudly announced that Medupi was completed in August. Fourteen years after it broke ground in the bushveld outside Lephalale and seven years late. But hey, who's counting. One week later and Unit 4 blew. A large explosion ripped through the generator, punctured a hole in the roof and injured seven workers.

So Medupi is now de-completed, so to speak, with a very expensive ruined generator. Although in fact it was never actually really completed anyway. Next to the turbines, the boilers are the other really expensive bits and they all need retrofitting to compensate for bad design.

And then there are the sulphur scrubbers, supposed to be fitted from around 2018 when the first unit was supposed to be ready for its first maintenance shutdown

– but now expected seven years late, with the last one due for completion around 2030. Except Eskom would like us not to expect them at all. Eskom runs polluting plants. That's what it is good at. And Medupi is the unrivalled champion. It emits 1 230 tonnes of sulphur dioxide every day – more than double the sulphur of even the dirtiest Highveld plants – at full steam.

At full steam, of course, is not to be expected any time soon. If ever. The boilers will function below par even after retrofitting. Before the explosion, Medupi was operating at 65% of capacity. At full steam would be about 90%. The plant is set to limp on into the future.

And the question is whether Unit 4 is a write off. Like Unit 3 at Duvha, where the boiler blew in 2014 and collapsed in a crumpled heap on the floor. After several

bungled attempts at contracting someone to replace it, Eskom finally abandoned it. That was the right decision really – it was clearly going to be money down the rabbit hole. But they haven't even fixed the hole in the roof.

Initial thumb sucks by 'energy experts' on the costs of repairing or replacing the Unit 4 generator range from R2 billion to R40 billion. In other words, no-one knows. But we can be sure of this: when Eskom gives us a figure, that will be the starting point before escalations. The cost of power from Medupi is world beating and the addition of this cost must surely make it the world leader.

And then, of course, there is 720 MW taken off the grid – enough to light up a fair-sized city. That's the thing with big coal units. They go down big and they take down a lot with them. Just like big nuke units. The bolt in the rotor at Koeberg in 2006 gave Cape Town a new word: loadshedding. The rest of the country soon caught on with wet coal and plant breakdowns beginning in late 2007. And it has never really stopped since.

That's big coal as advertised: cheap and reliable. 🌀



*The wreck of Medupi Unit 4.*





**THE AFRICA  
JUST RECOVERY  
RENEWABLE ENERGY PLAN  
COULD CREATE**

**7 MILLION  
JOBS**

Friends of the Earth Africa and Friends of the Earth International have released a new report titled *A Just Recovery Renewable Energy Plan for Africa*.

The report looks at the reality of renewable energy options in Africa and uses modelling to build a series of demands around building a just recovery based on a 100% renewable energy system for the peoples of Africa.

For more visit: [www.foeafrica.org](http://www.foeafrica.org) and [www.foei.org](http://www.foei.org).