

Community-led socially owned RENEWABLE ENERGY

This project “Mobilising Social Movements for Energy Democracy and Sovereignty in South Africa: Towards socially owned renewable energy solutions” is funded by the Urban Movement Incubator (UMI) and is driven by three community-based social movements (Vukani Environmental Movement, South Durban Community Environmental Alliance and Abahlali baseMjondolo) and supported by two service NGOs (GroundWork and Sustainable Energy Africa).

The project aims to strengthen and enable social and environmental justice movements in South Africa for democratic engagement, and to partner with municipalities for a scalable and widespread installation as well as the operation of community-led, socially owned renewable energy.



ABOUT THE COMMUNITIES AND CBO'S

Emalahleni Local Municipality, is situated in the middle of South Africa's coal fields in Mpumalanga that supply nearby coal-based power generation plants. The environmental and health effects on the communities are unmistakable, yet the mines also provide employment and drive economic activity in the area. The **Vukani Environmental Movement** was established in 2016 and works to address environmental and climate change issues by engaging and educating communities and wider stakeholders and promoting democratic and inclusive decision making.

eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality is the largest city in the KwaZulu-Natal Province. Situated on the coast, the region is hilly with many gorges and ravines. eThekweni is a leading South African city in terms of its climate change response, with ambitious renewable energy targets. Nevertheless, communities in the heavily industrialised South Durban region (Wentworth and Austerville) remain affected by air pollution and related human health impacts from the emissions from local refineries and chemical plants. The **South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA)** has worked tirelessly since 1995 to achieve a healthy and safe environment and address issues of environmental and social inequalities and injustices.



Also situated in eThekweni, is the Ekhenana informal settlement. The community of just over 100 families was established in 2018 and includes a food garden, poultry farm, communal kitchen, and community hall. The CBO, **Abahlali baseMjondolo** has supported Ekhenana in their struggle for land, recognition, and basic services.

Across these communities, not all households are connected to electricity. In eThekweni, over 300,000 households are without electricity, while in Emalahleni, the lack of grid capacity is hampering efforts to connect households in new informal areas. Even if households do have access to electricity, they remain energy poor with the cost of electricity being too high (even with pro-poor subsidies). Security of tenure is another challenge faced by communities.



COMMUNITY LED SOCIALLY OWNED RENEWABLE ENERGY Case Study

TGH Think Space



WHAT WAS ACHIEVED IN YEAR 1?

Community mobilisation

A core activity of this project is movement building – ensuring that the social movements and the communities they represent have increased awareness and knowledge of renewable energy, and are able to participate meaningfully and substantially in decisions regarding the just energy transition in their communities. To this end, workshops and dialogues were held in each of the three communities and covered a variety of topics:

- understanding the current energy system, who controls it and shapes it?
- understanding what is meant by climate justice and a just energy transition and why it is important
- learning more about solar PV and unpacking practically what it looks like and how it works
- addressing concerns about what a change in energy system would mean for jobs and livelihoods, particularly for those communities close to coal mines
- thinking about what type of Renewable Energy service delivery model would be best suited to the community
- thinking about what is needed to see the change in the community and who can help

The interactions were about **shared learning** with community members having the space to share their struggles and frustrations with the current electricity system and **develop new narratives** on the possibilities of renewable energy. Having the concepts explained simply and in the language of communities was very valuable for the participants. The communities were engaged and excited at the idea of being involved in the process of realising renewable energy for their communities from the beginning to the end. This is a key finding: **People need to and want to be brought on board and be part of the process.** We need to move away from the idea of “deployment of renewable energy ” where the community must just accept and pay for what is given to them.

Solar photovoltaic (renewable energy) demonstration units were installed in two of the three communities (with the unit

in Ekhenana on its way) and these were instrumental in improving understanding and furthering the reach of the project. In Emalahleni, for example, while community members were familiar with the small solar PV units that are used to power lights and to charge a cellphone, they were intrigued by the larger system installed at the VEM offices, particularly as it continued to provide electricity during load shedding. The demonstration unit at the SDCEA offices was also a “light in the darkness” during the power outages experienced after the flooding. In both cases, community members are able to explain to others in the community how it works. Due to the nature of the dwellings in Ekhenana, there was no existing structure that could carry the weight of the PV installation. Instead, the PV panels will be installed on a container that will be used as a library for the local children, providing additional benefit to the community.



From the community movements perspective, having the opportunity to visit each other's communities and share their experiences was significantly impactful and united them not only on this project but in their broader experiences and struggles. They were also encouraged to see ordinary people being able to articulate their understanding of climate change and the need for clean energy.

Survey and feasibility study

The project surveyed the communities to understand the extent of energy poverty and their household energy demands and how these are currently met. The survey highlighted the lack of engagement from the municipality on electricity tariffs, renewable energy and even energy efficiency.

Government engagement

The feasibility study challenged the widely held belief that renewable energy in communities needs to look a certain way: with each household having their own stand-alone PV system. The study showed that it is not financially viable to have solar panels on every house. Rather, grid electricity is far cheaper and more reliable. Wheeling renewable electricity generated at a large facility either directly to the community or to the municipality using the existing electricity grid is a possible lower cost solution. This will require the community and municipality to work together. For those communities with no existing grid connection, off-grid solar home systems (albeit limited in the energy services it provides) could serve as a temporary solution while awaiting electrification. A key outcome of the feasibility study is the shared understanding of what community-led socially-owned renewable energy means.

The feasibility study showed that there isn't necessarily a one-size fits all renewable energy solution that can simply be "deployed" to every household. Municipalities and communities will need to work together to develop low cost renewable energy solutions that take into account the technical, social and practical challenges to implementation. The communities, through the social movements have already begun engaging local government on this important topic. VEM held a successful engagement with the Emalahleni municipality to build and strengthen this partnership. The demonstration units serve as a touch point to engage with local, provincial and national government. Abahlali has already reached out to government officials to invite them to the installation of their much anticipated demonstration unit.



CHALLENGES: COVID, CONFLICT AND CLIMATE

The UMI Energy democracy project kicked off in June 2021 in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Although challenging, the limitations on gatherings and other social distancing requirements did not deter the communities from coming out and participating in the workshops. This demonstrates the hunger and enthusiasm of the communities to learn about renewable energy. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted the project team's ability to meet regularly during the initial strategic planning phase. The community based social movements had further practical challenges that came with the new ways of working: having to navigate

new online meeting and document sharing platforms. This in addition to the ongoing learning curve presented by being part of a big, funded project and having to contend with new administration and reporting duties. Further capacity building should be built into the next project phase.



Local and international conflict also impacted the project. Tragically, three Ekhenana community members and Abahlali BaseMjondolo leaders Nokuthula Mabaso, Ayanda Ngila and Siyabonga Manqele were killed, casualties of ongoing conflict and contestation over the land. Conflict abroad also influenced the project due to its knock-on impacts on global supply chains, particularly those related to renewable energy technology. This delayed the installation of the solar PV demonstration units, including the one planned for Ekhenana.

Between 11-13 April 2022, severe storms hit KwaZulu-Natal, causing devastating flooding and landslides. Over 12,000 homes were destroyed or damaged and more than 40,000 people were displaced, with 448 people losing their lives. The communities involved in this project were also affected and were left without water and electricity for days after the storm. The global inaction on Climate Change means that extreme weather events are likely to occur with increasing frequency and intensity.



Moving forward

Moving forward, the community movements all expressed a desire to reach more members of their communities, in particular the youth. To be successful in partnering with government it is important that the communities speak in “one voice” and that everyone in the community understands and is part of their Just Energy Transition.



Photo credits: Chris Louw

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