



HIGHLIGHTS 2023

groundWork



We lived well with each other
and
with the earth.



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Community planning for Energy Democracy

A. FOREWORD

December rounds off a remarkably busy and demanding year for groundWork. From the humble beginnings of three people, we are now 31 staff across South Africa and in Ghana. We want to thank our Trustees (old and new), staff (old and new), contract people we work with, our partners on various campaigns and projects and the community people we work with daily, for trusting groundWork as their home. We have ended the year with secure funding, potential new funders in the pipeline, new staff, and new Trustees, and we are consistently sought out to partner with organisations across South Africa, Africa and globally. Early next year we will bring a few more groundWorkers on board to finalise our staff complement and then consolidate. Below are a few highlights of 2023, enjoy. Have a good rest with friends and family.

See you in 2024.

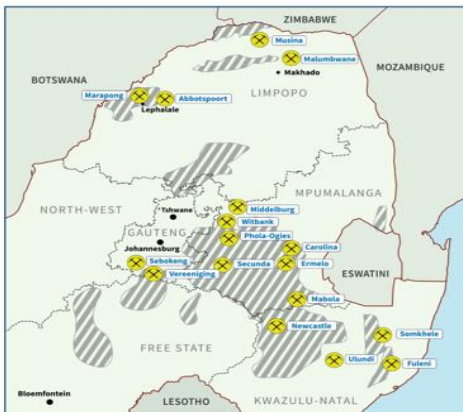
Avena and Bobby



B. CLIMATE JUSTICE

Climate Action Group: Monitoring the Just Transition Yegeshni

Below: 18 research sites where community activist researchers were reporting from.



The Climate Action Group kicked off in May this year with discussions on developments in climate politics and policy. This seeded an exciting journey into community monitoring and evaluation of the Just Transition (JT); community activists from 18 sites across South Africa documented and reviewed government JT actions within their own communities, locally and nationally. They monitored people's health; air, water and soil quality; projects to build education and knowledge for the just transition; traditional authorities; jobs, mining forums and community-based organisations; and the readiness of government departments including DMRE, DFFE, Health, COGTA and Transport, to support the Just Transition.

We learned some valuable lessons from the process, including that: There is a lack of awareness and readiness; Communities' want to build JT from the ground up; Governance needs strengthening at all levels; The political economy must change; The practice of open democracy will prepare communities and government at all levels.

Taking matters into our own hands: Energy Democracy Siphesihle

Working with Abahlali baseMjondolo, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance and Vukani Environmental Movement, groundWork is part of a movement to challenge for Energy Democracy. Our technical support partner is the 23-year-old Sustainable Energy Africa, who works with municipalities across the country to support their understanding of electricity and energy. The Energy Democracy Campaign was invited to be a part of the Climate Justice Coalition's gathering on Socially Owned Renewable Energy pathways in Summerstrand, Gqeberha from 12 -14 July 2023. The dialogue was attended by a range of actors in the just transition space in the country and focused on advancing social ownership for a just energy transition. The Energy Democracy project team (gW, SEA, SDCEA, ABM and VEM) made a moving presentation on the work they were doing which, to a degree, informed findings of the study by a team of researchers from the Nelson Mandela University to the Presidential Climate Commission on Socially Owned Renewable Energy. The link to the discussion which was live streamed can be found on <https://www.youtube.com/live/gCugw-wQB34?si=DRG8yAnzXJ4oDFsw>.



Energy democracy community engagement sessions with Abahlali Basemjondolo (left) and VEM (right).

C. COAL

Witnessing Injustice First Hand: UN Special Rapporteur's Highveld Visit Robby, Thomas, Ngobile



Above: Mpumalanga Delegation from left to right: Nonhle Mashinini-Nkosi, Noura AlZaid, Marcos Orellana (UN Special Rapporteur, MEC: DARDLEA, Busisiswe Shoba, Nomfundo Shabalala DG DFFE, Zekhethelo Ndlovu, Community relations Eskom and Frank Khumalo, CoGta.

On 3 August, groundWork hosted the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights on a tour of the Komati Power Station followed by a visit to and discussion with VEM at their Witbank offices. The visit allowed the delegation to build an understanding of how we (communities, government and industry in SA) respond to toxics, air pollution and the rights of people as per the Constitution. Later, they met with VEM to understand what VEM does, but most importantly to talk about the Deadly Air Case and what the judgement means.

At Komati Power Station, we had two sessions: the first focused on visiting the plant, which is old, and the discussions covered current developments. This was followed by a meeting with the Provincial government delegation.

#Defend our Defenders: Calling for justice! Robby



Robby Mokgalaka addresses the gathering outside SAPS HQ ahead of handing over a Memorandum to the President and Ministers.

On 19 October 2023, more than 1500 people from different provinces gathered in Pretoria at the SAPS Head Offices to handover a memorandum to the President, Cyril Ramaphosa, the Minister of Police and Minister of Justice about the killings and ongoing intimidation of human rights defenders. The affected communities from more than 67 social and environmental justice organisations demanded that the government develop legislation that recognises and protects human rights defenders. The memorandum further demanded the government, the development of a campaign that discourages the intimidation and killings of the human rights defenders, and to urgently arrest the killers and prioritise the associated cases. The gathering coincided with the commemoration of the assassination of Mam Fikile Ntshangase who was gunned down in her own home in the same month in October 2020, in front of her 11-year-old nephew. The event also celebrated Africa Human Rights Day on 21 October.

**Africa Coal Network:
Rebuild, Revigour, Re-energise for a Just
Transition**
Marina, Michelle



The inaugural Africa Coal Network Environmental Justice School for community activists was held in April in Pietermaritzburg. This workshop focused on building activists' capacity to mobilise environmental justice and call for a Just Transition in Africa. The ACN's first cohort were from Botswana, Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. During the 2-week Anglophone school, participants shared the challenges that they face, learned about environmental justice and identified projects that they intend to carry forward in their communities upon graduation. For this reason, the programme of the school was conceived to gradually assist participants to develop action plans for their proposed projects.

Above: groundWork's new ACN team.



Above: ACN participants visited the Mandela Capture site monument to learn more about the history of exploitation and resistance in South Africa.

D. WASTE

Slow Wheels of Justice: Thor Chemicals Case in Cabinet Musa



Above: The Thor Chemicals Ex-workers' Task Team.

It is anticipated that the Thor Chemicals Ex-Workers Struggle will soon end. 2023 has been a very important year for this campaign; the workers were poisoned by the plant 25 years ago. The community now demands justice in the form of financial compensation from the government for the 111 workers who were directly affected. Some of these workers have since died because of poor mercury risk management. The 51 the surviving ex-workers have all tested mercury-positive from health assessments commissioned by the Department of Employment and Labour. The 60 deceased ex-workers are represented by their families who blame Thor Chemicals for their mysterious deaths.

The Task Team leading this struggle met with the State President and the Minister of Employment and Labour who believes that the issue needs to be resolved politically. The political recommendation is that all workers who have worked at Thor must be equally compensated for the ills that they suffer from having worked at the plant. No more studies are necessary, we know who was affected, we know who has died. The plant was authorised by the South African Government to operate without any monitoring. The government and Thor Chemicals are therefore liable for the damages caused to the health of the ex-workers. An ongoing cleanup may be cut short if the ex-workers' demands are not met.

Warwick Zero Waste Project Musa, Asiphile, Kira



Above: The Warwick Zero Waste team at their composting site at the Botanical gardens.

This year was the 3rd year of our Warwick Zero Waste Project (WZW) project run in partnership with the Urban Futures Centre at the Durban University of Technology and the Asiye eTafuleni. The project worked with informal workers, both waste pickers and street traders, to support their existing income generating activities, and generate new innovative, sustainable, and inclusive zero-waste practices. Rather than looking for only high-tech and capital-intensive solutions to climate change, we believe that by working with informal workers we can provide responsive, sustainable, low cost, and environmentally friendly structures and processes that support and include the majority of workers in our city. This is a triple win of creating jobs, reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), and impacting positively on city budgets. Starting small and doing the slow careful work of bringing people together around environmental justice has turned out to be the start of something big for the city of Durban!

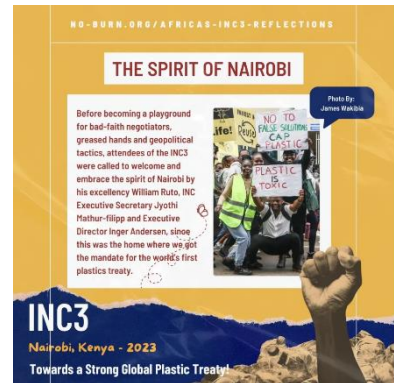
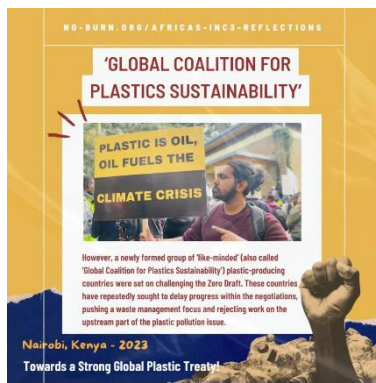
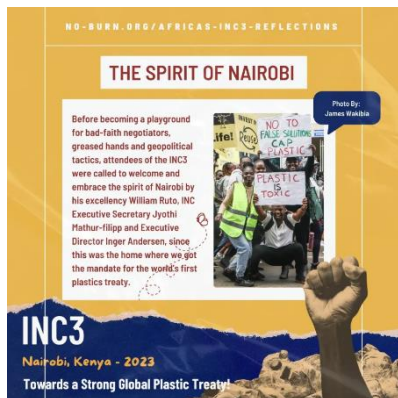
E. GAIA

2023 Regional Meeting
Niven, Carissa, Merrisa

The 2023 Africa regional Meeting was the first African-wide gathering of the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternative & Break Free from Plastic movement since 2019 and was hosted in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania by local partner, Nipe Fagio. The convening brought together 56 people (pictured below) from 17 countries across Africa to discuss and strategize around emerging regional priorities for justice towards Zero Waste and a plastic free Africa.



A big shout out to Carissa Marnce, the GAIA Communications Coordinator for her brilliant content driving engagement on social media including calls to action, debate and coverage around a wide range of global campaigns dealing with waste. See some samples below.



F. ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Air quality and Health visit to Hwange Community Rico, Mafoko

Following this year's inaugural Environmental Justice School for the Africa Coal Network (ACN), the Environmental Health Campaign and the Coal Campaign were invited to participate in a capacity building workshop on Air Quality and Health by the Greater Hwange Residents Trust (GHRT) in Zimbabwe. The goal of the workshop was to build agency among Hwange residents to hold the government, state institutions and coal mining companies accountable for the air pollution in Hwange. The focus of the workshop was to highlight obligations of the state in ensuring citizens' right to live in an environment which is not harmful to their wellbeing and on the public health impacts of air pollution, with the intention to map out ways in which the Zimbabwe Power Company can collaborate with residents on air quality monitoring activities.

Thirty community members from wards in Hwange and CBOs operating in Hwange District participated in the workshop. The plan is to support the Greater Hwange Residents Trust on their air quality monitoring and health activities in collaboration with various stakeholders in Hwange.

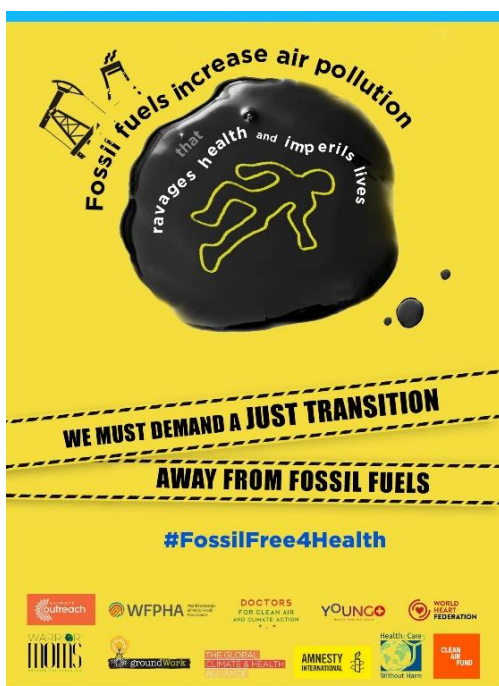


Above: (left) GHRT hosts and the groundWork team integrating Coal and Environmental Heal campaigners; (right) GHRT members attend the session in Hwange

Just Transition and Health

Azeeza

Our annual participation in the Public Health Association of South Africa (PHASA) conference as the special interest group on Climate, Energy and Health this year included placing the Just Transition on the public health agenda. We organised a plenary on 'Public Health and the Just Transition - global and local perspectives' with a powerful panel chaired by groundWork and joined by Makoma Lekalakala (Earthlife Africa), Wandisa Phama (Centre for Environmental Rights), Peter Orris (affiliated to Healthcare without Harm) and Tlamele Mothudi (author of a guidance document for Health Professionals in South Africa titled: Suffocating under fossil fuels, the climate crisis and the threat to health and well-being). By including health-based considerations in the Just Transition, an inclusive and equitable transition that prioritises the well-being of individuals and communities can be achieved. The session explored potential health benefits of transitioning to cleaner and renewable energy sources, including improved air quality, reduced pollution-related diseases, and overall well-being. The role of healthcare professionals in advocating for a Just Transition and mobilising the public is increasingly important.



G. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

2023 Environmental Activist School
Tsholofelo

On 7 May 2023, excitement, enthusiasm and a keen spirit filled the air as we began this year's groundWork Environmental Justice School for activists (EJS). Greeted by lush greenery, the Town Bush stream, a spectacular waterfall, and not forgetting the resident monkeys; the 19 activists hailing from various parts of Gauteng, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal were welcomed to the Centre for African Enterprises in Pietermaritzburg. At the end of the three weeks, participants developed environmental justice projects that they will implement in their communities.



H. MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

Launch of the groundWork Report
Tsepang, Dorothy

groundWork launched its 2022 state of environmental justice report earlier this year on the 24th of March 2023. The report titled *Contested Transition: State and Capital against Community*, incorporates the work and insights of the 2022 community activist researchers from different areas around the country. The report posits in detail the on-the-ground realities around burning topics like, climate finance, the end of coal, and a nationally determined consensus.

The launch in Johannesburg was preceded by a two-day launch and workshop in the Highveld with different communities from Mpumalanga. The launch was also broadcast live on the groundWork YouTube channel.



We went out with a bang of global climate action on the Suncoast with our local partners ...



... and the heros of Zero Waste keep composting saving our city millions annually ...



... 2024 and our 25th birthday celebrations loading; watch this space ...

