

An Imbalance of Power

The Just Transition, the Life After Coal campaign and the Presidential Climate Commission, 2020 to 2025

The groundWork Report 2025

An Imbalance of Power: The Just Transition, the Life After Coal campaign and the Presidential Climate Commission, 2020 to 2025

Written by Victor Munnik and David Hallows, with Zaakiyah Rabbaney

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P O Box 2375, Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, 3200

Tel: +27 (0)33 342 5662


e-mail: media@groundwork.org.za

Web: www.groundwork.org.za

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Acronyms

AEW	Africa Energy Week
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ANC	African National Congress
ASMR	Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response
BUSA	Business Unity South Africa
CCS	Carbon Capture and Storage
CO₂	Carbon Dioxide
CoP	Conference of the Parties
DBSA	Development Bank of Southern Africa
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
DFFE	Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DMR	Department of Mineral Resources
DMRE	Department of Mineral Resource and Energy
DMPR	Department of Mineral and Petroleum Resources
DNS	Debt for Nature Swaps
DoE	Department of Energy
DPME	Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
EJ	Environmental Justice
ESKOM	Electricity Supply Commission
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GISS	Global Institute for Space Studies
GFANZ	Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
Gt/y	One billion tonnes per year
GtCO₂	One billion tonnes of carbon dioxide
G20	Group of 20
ICE U.S.	Immigration and Customs Enforcement



Acronyms

IEA	Institute of Economic Affairs
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IRP	Integrated Resource Plan
JAG	Judge Advocates General
JETP	Just Energy Transition Partnerships
JT	Just Transition
JTF	Just Transition Framework
LAC	Life After Coal
LNG	Liquified Natural Gas
MAGA	Make America Great Again
MEC	Minerals Energy Complex
MW	Megawatts
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NBI	National Business Initiative
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions
NECOM	National Energy Crisis Committee
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NEV	New Energy Vehicle
OCI Oil	Change International
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PCC	Presidential Climate Commission
PIC	Public Investment Corporation
PST	Political Settlement Theory
RE	Renewable Energy
SAREM	South African Renewable Energy Masterplan
SCORE!	Socially and community owned renewables
TFFF	Tropical Forests Forever Fund
UN	United Nations
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
USAid	U.S. Agency for International Development



Foreword

On 15 December 2020 I learnt about the Presidential Climate Change Coordinating Committee¹ that was established to “advise on South Africa’s climate change response to ensure realisation of the vision for an effective climate change response and the long-term just transition to a climate resilient and low carbon economy and society”.

This was in a letter from the President stating that groundWork had been identified to participate in the Commission. I immediately called groundWork’s longtime partners to understand this better, and then realised that groundWork, Earthlife Africa and the Centre for Environmental Rights had all been invited. We – the organisations that have been in the streets protesting, in the courts challenging and in the global sphere criticising South Africa’s tardy response to climate change and failure of the just transition – were now being asked to advise the President.

We agreed to participate. Some said it was an honour to be called to do this work. Others said we were sell-outs. It was a difficult juggling act. The first few meetings were online as we were in the middle of Covid. We could not read the room, but we made it clear that while within the Commission we would bring our positions forcefully. The Commission was a ‘stakeholder’ body, composed of government, business, labour and civil society. We understood that the final Commission position would always be one of collective compromise, but within our organising, legal and advocacy space, we were clear that our positions would hold. And indeed, we did hold our positions.

This was not the first time in our 30 years of democratic history that we were called to engage within a governmental advisory forum. groundWork

¹ The name was later changed to Presidential Climate Commission, perhaps implying a less forceful role than “co-ordination” would suggest.



Acronyms

participated in South Africa's first National Environmental Advisory Committee to the Minister of the Environment. Over the 27 years of groundWork's existence we have always had to engage in legislative, policy and ad hoc negotiating spaces to make sure environmental justice is the outcome. At times the engagement is fruitful, at other times not. At times it is cordial, at other times combative. It is in this context of environmental justice that we must review our participation within the Commission.

The outgoing deputy chair of the Commission has made it clear that it is not about merely participating, but that society – those impacted the most – must “fight for the just transition”. In this battle ground of values and principles to steer the South African transition, we are guided by the following intentions: that democratic practice and justice prevails; resources are equitably shared; and society and the world are protected and nurtured.

We are on a journey, which started in the battles for a better life for all in the townships of South Africa during apartheid, in the struggles of workers who were poisoned in the toxic workplaces of corporate South Africa with the collusion of the apartheid state regulators, and in working with a democratic government to promote people-centred policy, laws and implementation via good governance. The Freedom Charter and our Constitution are clear that the people shall govern. But we must fight for this. The just transition is not a once-off event. It is, and will continue to be, a journey that takes our democracy forward – we pray. There will be a series of “settlements” along this journey, and not all of these will be just.

The Commission's early days were like a honeymoon. We visited various spaces of struggle, hearing people speak passionately about what they wanted in order to ensure they could live well with each other. People asked for better roads, education, health services, democratic local government – and yes, we also spoke about climate change. Many asked for clarity on the term ‘just transition’, which was being bandied about. Many said the Commission would be another talk shop.

And indeed, it did feel like this at times. We failed to revisit the spaces we had been allowed to enter. Like Xolobeni, where we sat in the tall grass hearing



the elders and people speak. We failed to address the health concerns of the people of Mpumalanga and we failed to stop the loss of jobs as the oil refineries in south Durban collapsed under the impact of poor management, which locals had warned about for years. Durban's air is less polluted, but the communities and workers still suffer the health impacts today. Hearing people's stories did give the Commission the foundation of restorative, procedural and distributive justice principles on which to build the just transition.

There has been a failure to meaningfully respond to restorative justice. This is highlighted by the ongoing lack of services, the loss of jobs and failure to protect workers in the transition, as well as the ongoing deaths caused by environmental mismanagement without sanction by and with the active facilitation of the State. This is seen in decisions that allow Sasol, Eskom and others to break the law and pollute people's environments and bodies. I hope that these failures will make us realise the need for system change. We are not going to have a just transition without system change.

Over the years, our review of the Commission was not only through the lens of a team of desk bound researchers – which we are not – but through a participatory model of working with community activists and researchers who live the reality of the unjust transition daily. What they understand and call for on the ground is the reversal of the rot of local government. And they insist on inclusive and transparent planning. The failure to act on just transition at a local level is picked up by the Commission's own research.

The journey of the first five years of the Commission has strengthened the environmental justice voice in South Africa. It has made climate change and the need for a transition visible to the public. And it has brought to the fore the need for an inclusive just transition that seeks an economy that responds to people's needs. It has done this via its very public display of some, although not all, of its processes. The Commission's vulnerability to vested interests and undemocratic process was exposed when it failed to get to an agreed upon position on the most recent Nationally Determined Contribution to the UN's Climate Change Convention. Despite being well supported by evidence, its advice was ignored by decision makers in government.



The Commission made me grapple with governance issues at a complex and broad level and this made me realise the challenge we face. But it also made me realise, when considering the work we were doing in parallel – from responding to the floods in KwaZulu-Natal to working with local government and waste pickers – that at the end of the day every single one of us must be part of the democratic South African governance system, starting at government closest to you.

I am saddened that we did not get to deal with the human rights defenders' reality. The deaths of Bazooka Radebe and MaFikile Ntshangase are still not solved, and people still face danger because of their resistance to fossil fuels and poor governance. Health is still on the margins. And climate and just transition finance is about saving capital rather than saving people or the climate.

Going forward, I urge the Commission to keep the public debate open and public. Revisit the people we did not get to see again. Allow for more participation rather than only relying on technical reports. Democracy is about ongoing participation. Technocrats do not know more than the people on the fenceline. They have a different knowledge, not a better one or more correct one. Remember that the mandate is to work on the transition, which we have called for and written about for decades now. We need not reinvent the debate. Our first meaningful just transition is to ensure that the constitutional commitments to the people are delivered.

The Commission, and indeed government, must not be a space to serve and reinforce the wealth and power of the richest one percent at the expense of people and the planet. We have to move beyond the fossil fuel economy to a people's economy based upon an energy system that is less harmful and more democratic. Finally, it is alarming to see that even conservative measures such as the carbon tax are now up for scrapping – no doubt a result of collusion by Sasol, Eskom and those in political power.

We have a battle on our hands. A luta continua!

Bobby Peek

Director of Executive groundWork



Introduction

This report reviews and evaluates the first five years of South Africa's initiative for a purposive Just Transition, from a highly polluting and unequal economy running on fossil fuels to a healthy and more equal society powered by renewables, and the participation of groundWork and the Life After Coal (LAC) coalition in the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC). Its objective is to understand the dynamics of this period, and to recognise an emerging agenda for the next five years, which could inform civil society participation in and responses to the PCC.

It does so in the context of the aggressive fascism of Trump's second presidency, as he dismantles not only US global soft power, but also the environmental justice, climate change and human rights architecture in the richest country in the world, and at the behest of his big electoral campaign funders, big oil, gas and coal.

This megalomaniacal spectacle may seem far removed from both international climate politics and those of the South African Just Transition, but it is not. In both these arenas there is stubborn resistance to a climate agenda for a fighting chance to keep planet Earth a reasonably safe space for people to live in, and a resistance to accepting that the phase out of fossil fuels is necessary to achieve this. There is push back against a climate agenda in all these processes and its aims are the same: to remove all regulation from corporates and allow them to escape responsibility for any externalities they have historically imposed, or are currently imposing on people and their environments.



Introduction

The PCC and push back against it

The first five years of the PCC, from 2021 to 2025, can be seen as a creative and foundational period for the PCC and South Africa's climate response. It produced a normative foundation in the form of the Just Transition Framework¹ (adopted by cabinet), international funding agreements, plans and programmes. In this time, the Climate Change Act was adopted, institutionalising the PCC and creating obligations on local governments, and laying the ground for sectoral emission targets. However, towards the end of this period there was a concerted push back from actors associated with the Minerals Energy Complex, both corporate and state, as well as trade unions, which weakened the climate consensus. Nevertheless, the PCC has made solid advances in terms of South Africa's climate response.

The next five years, to 2030, will be crucial as they will – or should – contain the efforts to put the frameworks, ideas, commitments and plans from this foundational period into action.

This report follows on a long series of groundWork Reports on coal and the just transition, starting with three reports on coal which gave an overview of the realities and environmental injustices of the coal industry, its impacts and resistance against it². These were: *The Destruction of the Highveld Part 1: Mining coal* [2016], and *Part 2: Burning coal* [2017], followed by the history of the two Eskom power stations in Lephalale, namely *Boom and Bust in the Waterberg – A history of coal mega projects* [2018].

In 2019 the word Just Transition appeared in the report title for the first time: *Down to Zero: the politics of just transition*. However, the organisations out of which groundWork emerged – Earthlife Africa and the Environmental Justice Network (EJNF) – had been calling for a just transition from fossil fuels from at least 1994, the year in which the EJNF held its founding conference [see Hallowes 1994]. The 2019 report recognised that a chaotic and often violent transition was already taking place on the coalfields. It also reported the first version of an *Open Agenda for a Just Transition*, formulated in an exchange

1 As the title implies, the framework has a broader scope than an energy transition.

2 All the groundWork reports are available on the website groundwork.org.za.



meeting in Middelburg, which is located in the heart of South Africa's coal belt, by environmental justice organisations from coal-affected communities.

A consistent focus on the transition followed in the next four reports. *The Elites Don't Care: People on the frontline of coal, Covid and the climate crisis* [2020] presented an up close analysis of realities on the ground as seen by a network of community activist researchers along the intersection of coal, Covid and climate. Using the Covid experience to anticipate struggles for a just transition, it concluded that

Activists know what is happening... we can see that many people are suffering and cannot grow food because it is too hot and there is no water. As for the elites, they don't care that people are suffering from climate change impacts, for what they do or want is to make money because they don't feel the impact the same way as poor people. [Hallowes and Munnik 2019: 210]

The 2022 *Contested Transition: State and Capital against Community* [2022] described the work of the PCC, introduced applicable transition theory, explained the Just Transition initiatives at the time, including the formulation of the Just Transition Framework, the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) and the Just Energy Transition Implementation Plan (JET IP), and tracked the actions of coal companies as the corporate landscape changed. It was particularly critical of the politics of climate funding, a theme that has been pursued in subsequent reporting on climate negotiations at the conferences of the parties to the UNFCCC's or CoPs. And it sounded the first alarm about how the decommissioning of the Komati power station, and the broader socio-economic process accompanying it, did not live up to the Just Transition Framework.

In 2023 we published *Into the Climate Fire – harsh realities and fossil fantasies in South Africa's conflicted transition*, identifying competing political agendas in the transition. By then we could report that the PCC had catalysed an almost complete turning of the policy wheel – from agenda setting, to policy formulation, legislation, and either creating new institutions, such as climate



Introduction

forums and national working groups, or assigning such tasks. Implementation was lacking on the ground, as was awareness and knowledge at local level, in the view of community activist researchers who closely observed developments in their own communities. We tracked the worsening climate as options to avoid a 1.5°C overshoot closed, climate impacts got worse and global climate negotiations faltered, again. We reported on South Durban’s unjust shutdown, absent any signs of a just transition in this polluted oil refinery hotspot, South Africa’s continuing petrostate ambitions and the lessons that were being painfully learnt in Komati.

In the 2024 report *Systems Change for a Just Transition: Living well with each other and the Earth*, we argued for systems change, as groundWork has done for decades, also noting that climate was only one of nine planetary boundaries being crossed and endangering people on the planet. We have long identified capitalism as the ultimate driver of climate change. We noted new trends, particularly the start of coalition politics on a national level after the 2024 electoral defeat of the ANC, and how civil society broadly was stepping into vacuums left by an increasingly corrupt and dysfunctional government. The PCC deployed increasing resources in the Komati ward of Steve Tshwete on the Mpumalanga coalfields, which we described in the context of nine further coal-fired power stations to be decommissioned, albeit on an ever-changing Eskom schedule. We detailed the ecological debt created by coal mining and burning in the bodies of people on the Highveld, and the eco-systems, particularly the catchments they live in.

In these reports we also consistently drew attention to the worsening and earlier than expected impacts of climate change, as well as the bad politics of governments and fossil corporates who are blocking effective responses in favour of aggressive expansion of their business. We therefore build on an expansive and ongoing analysis of coal, other fossil fuels and Just Transition. In the current report we attempt to understand the broader dynamics of the transition and focus in on civil society participation in the PCC, its impact and the priorities for civil society broadly in the next five years.



Overview

Chapter 1 engages, from an environmental justice perspective, with a prominent narrative, originating from within the PCC secretariat, about the first five years of the PCC. It holds that the will for climate action peaked in this period with a number of achievements: the Just Transition Framework, a result of consultation that “set the architecture” for a progressive just transition that could show, according to outgoing deputy chairperson Crispian Olver, that South Africa could achieve decarbonisation, attract green investment and deliver social justice at the same time [Olver 2025]. The narrative identifies the Komati decommissioning experiences as a turning point in the Just Transition “experiment”. Komati became a handy political football for opponents of the Just Transition – together with broader implementation challenges, including the general weakness and absence of government departments, tardy action by funders and other factors. According to this analysis, the “climate settlement” then moved to a lower level of ambition under pressure of the incumbents or power holders in our political economy, which it identifies as essentially actors in the Minerals Energy Complex. However, there is still potential for a more progressive deal if constituencies like civil society, trade unions, emerging green firms and scientists fight for it.

Chapter 2 focuses in on absences in the work of the PCC and the broader transition and explores what the environmental justice movement needs to do in the next five years. To answer this question, this chapter covers LAC responses to the work of the PCC over the first five years, exploring the LAC experience of the commission and the broader transition. The chapter is based on interviews with LAC commissioners and others who were closely involved in the PCC.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus onto the global politics by examining the decrees of US president Donald Trump. Behind the crazy is a serious agenda to attack human rights, environmental protection and environmental justice in particular, and to destroy the institutional base for climate science. We observe that this agenda, although shrill in style, is not very different from the push back by South African fossil fuel lobbies.



Introduction

Trump's election campaign was heavily backed by big oil. Once elected, Trump proclaimed that his administration aimed for energy dominance. Not only would it promote the expansion of fossil fuels in the USA, it would also impose fossil fuel expansion led by Big Oil USA on the rest of world. This report looks at the global politics of energy and climate in the time of Trump.

Chapter 4 draws conclusions for an emerging agenda for the next five years, and the opportunities and challenges for civil society in building a just transition from the ground up.

On civil society

This report refers to civil society, the Life After Coal campaign and environmental justice activists. The terms overlap to a large degree, but are also separate and specific. 'Civil society' is used by the PCC as the umbrella term for commissioners from NGOs, social movements and communities broadly. Labour, business, academia, faith-based groups, gender constituencies and youth are seen as separate from civil society. This accords largely with the stakeholder classification into 'major groups' used in the 1992 Agenda 21,³ with the exception of 'indigenous peoples', which is very contentious in South Africa, as well as 'farmers', among others. The only other NGO commissioner in addition to the three LAC commissioners was from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). But 'civil society' also includes organisations without commissioners in the PCC, but who followed developments in the PCC, for example though participating in the PCC Watch meetings.

Environmental justice activists is a specific description of individual actors, including those in the PCC Watch and those interested in but not close to the PCC process. This description includes members of the Life After Coal campaign: the NGOs groundWork, Earthlife Africa and the Centre for Environmental Rights, and community based partner organisations, including the members of the Highveld Environmental Justice Network (HEJN) and the Climate Action Group (CAG), acknowledged below.

3 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>



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The Climate Action Group's community research cohort for this year gave us a detailed window into the readiness and political will – or rather lack thereof – of local governments serving fossil fuel fenceline communities to implement the requirements of the Climate Change Act. They also engaged with corporate greenhouse gas emitters but had little response. On the other hand, there is a high level of awareness of the Climate Change Act and readiness for democratic engagement among community researchers. The community researchers this year were Basetsana Mgcina (Phola Environmental Justice Alliance), Israel Nkosi (Mfolozi Community Environment Justice Organisation), Ronald Mhlakaza (Vukani Environmental Movement), Thami Jeffry Sibaya (Khuthala Environmental Movement), Dineo Hoffman (Highveld Environmental Development Networking Alliance), Magoro Matodzi (Dzomolamupo), Ronesa Mtshweni (Womxndla Community Development NPC), Desiree Bishop (South Durban Community Environmental Alliance), Rochida Elias (Shashemane Backyard Food Garden), Astone Chaole (Mining Affected Communities United in Action), Tshepo Ratshomo (Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance), Happy Skosana (Middelburg Social and Environmental Justice Alliance), Merriam Mabula (Matjoba Organisation), Thoko Nkosi (Sukumani Environmental



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1

A PCC narrative

Chapter 1 engages with the PCC narrative about its first five years, which states that the PCC process peaked in this period with a number of achievements: in particular, the Just Transition Framework, a result of public consultations and endorsed by cabinet, that “set the architecture” for a progressive just transition that could show that South Africa “could achieve decarbonisation, attract green investment and deliver social justice at the same time” [Olver 2025].

According to this narrative, the decommissioning of the Komati Power Station then marked a turning point, as it became a convenient political football for opponents of the Just Transition, as a traumatic transition out of coal mining and electricity generation took place on the ground. Beyond Komati, there were broader implementation challenges, including the weakness or absence of government departments, tardy action by funders and a changing international mood, more in favour of fossil fuels due to a concerted and sustained campaign by big oil, both private and state owned, and the election of Trump in the United States [see Chapter 3]. In this narrative, the political “climate settlement” then moved to a lower ambition under pressure of the incumbent power holders in our political economy, which it identifies as essentially actors in the Minerals Energy Complex (MEC). The narrative is open ended and holds open opportunities for progressive change enshrined in the PCC’s Just Transition Framework.

This report critically explores this narrative, focusing on the role of civil society in it, and noting different perspectives and interpretations from environmental justice actors. It places the narrative against the evolving political context in South Africa, and ends with a reflection on the types of



A PCC narrative

power that the PCC used in its first five years of existence. As we indicated in groundWork Report 2023, we make a differentiation between a Just Transition (capital letters) as the official project for a purposive transition in SA, and just transition (lower case) as the generic term.

The PCC

With the establishment and work of the PCC in 2020,⁴ the South African Just Transition process finally got going, after more than 30 years⁵ in which the junior department of environment and associated policy circles and academics built a country climate response in considerable detail, while the coal economy continued in full swing as a central part of the Minerals Energy Complex, with the support of the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE). In these decades a sign of the dominant power of coal was that officials in the environmental department were not allowed to refer to “the end of coal” in their documentation [Lukey 2020, Burton et al 2018, groundWork Report 2022].

This changed radically as the PCC commissioned research on pathways out of coal [Makgetla and Patel 2021; Hermanus and Montmasson-Clair 2021] as discussed in groundWork Report 2022, Chapter 6. These pathways became part of the PCC’s evidence base. Moreover, senior activists who were once branded by Pravin Gordan, Dipuo Peters and Barbara Hogan as enemies of the people for opposing the ill-advised – and finally ruinous – construction of Medupi and Kusile, were invited into the commission and became active and high-profile commissioners. The PCC was an opportunity for a dramatic restart in an old, stuck process.

In 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa, the official chairperson of the PCC, which was situated in the Presidency (and not the environment department), tasked the PCC with advising him on South Africa’s climate response and

4 Olver dates the peak period of the PCC from its origin in the 2018 Jobs Summit – it appears as a seemingly independent piece in the minutes – and traces its origins to a “conceptual shift” in the DFFE climate response paper of 2011 (Olver 2025).

5 Taking the signing of the UNFCCC by South Africa in 1993 as an early prompt for the development of a South African climate response. The protocol was signed in 1997.



facilitating a national consensus on a just transition. The PCC declared on its website⁶ that it would build a social partnership around the just transition, on a solid foundation of science and research, and was committed to “improving the lives and livelihoods of all South Africans... particularly those who have been historically marginalised, or those who will be most affected by the transition in the years ahead”. They also committed to working in an open and transparent way with all stakeholders.

The narrative

This section presents the narrative as heard from officials within the PCC: that the first five years of the PCC were characterised by ‘government unusual’, marked by consultation, transparency, evidence-based policy making and vigorous participation, particularly by civil society. They saw this against the background, as we observed in groundWork Report 2024, of an expansion of civil society actors working into a wide range of spaces left vacant by a dysfunctional government [see detailed discussion in groundWork Report 2024, Chapter 1]. Officials frankly attribute much of the success of the PCC to civil society, and civil society commissioners were prominent in its work.

Conversely, throughout the process, the absence of relevant government departments was noticeable, for example the absence of the Department of Health (DoH), custodian of the health externalities of coal and other fossil fuel use, leaving a large hole in the public and political understanding of the costs of the fossil fuel economy and with it undermining restorative justice. The Department of Mineral Resources was missing in action on the ground in Komati (see below) but its minister, Gwede Mantashe, was active in both PCC and public debates, slowing down the transition. The DMR made a passing claim to a just transition mandate in a discussion paper in 2021,⁷ including

6 <https://www.climatecommission.org.za/our-work>

7 See DMRE’s discussion paper *Towards a Just Energy Transition Framework in the Minerals and Energy Sectors* https://cdn.ymaws.com/southafricanenergyassociation.site-ym.com/resource/collection/604B4B63-5AC4-42BC-9C4E-E7599014C1A5/DMRE_Towards_a_JET_Framework_Discussion_Document_Nov_2021.pdf



A PCC narrative

establishing a Just Energy Transition (JET) unit, which was established and staffed but then disappeared from view.

Corporates, especially in the mining sector, narrowed their participation to exploring new mining opportunities and focused on avoiding engagements in order to dodge environmental and socio-economic liabilities that could arise from their vast ecological debts.

In November 2025, Crispian Olver, the PCC's first executive director and now deputy chairperson (effectively the chair, since the official chairperson is the president himself), released a working paper under the auspices of the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies called "Climate governance and a just transition, a case study of South Africa's experiment with inclusive governance".⁸ Coming from a central and strategic vantage point, it set down a credible history of the achievements of the PCC, the push back against what it termed a progressive settlement, and the dynamics behind it.

The paper was framed in terms of political settlement theory (PST) [see Khan 2010; Van Doesburgh and Winkler 2025] and framed the work of the PCC within the original (1994–1996) South African post-apartheid settlement which, according to the paper,

...produced a broad political settlement that formally incorporated the majority of citizens and key organised actors – the ANC and its tripartite allies, community organisations in the mass democratic movement, but also large corporates and former homeland bureaucracies that had accommodated themselves to the new regime. An impersonal institutional architecture protected property rights, the rule of law, judicial independence and a capable central bureaucracy, and preserved core economic structures such as the MEC-intensive production system. Redistribution focused on the extension of free basic services, social protection, affirmative action and preferential procurement, but the deeper patterns of ownership, concentration and capital intensity shifted slowly if at all.

8 Olver also gave an interview along similar lines to The groundWork Report research team before the publication.



This broad-concentrated configuration stabilised the first post-apartheid period. It anchored policy continuity, enabled technocratic competence and sustained industrial incumbents while extending welfare gains to millions. Big business remained influential in economic decision-making; organised labour significantly expanded worker protections; but poorer constituencies and the unemployed lacked the organisational capacity to drive deeper structural reforms... [Olver 2025: 8]

This description shows how crucial power structures – and consequently people’s life chances – were left unchanged in the South African political transition of the 1990s, a theme often echoed by civil society, including in its approach to the PCC and the Just Transition project. It explains why expectations left unfulfilled over 30 years play into the politics of the Just Transition. As groundWork director and PCC commissioner Bobby Peek recently put it:

South Africans... are asking for the delivery of a better life for all that our transition from apartheid to democracy promised [and] which was recorded in our Constitution, adopted on 8 May 1996. The basics of life that have not been delivered constitute the just transition people need first. [groundWork Report 2024: 15]

In this broadly conservative trajectory, coal’s dominance was entrenched until the work of the PCC started:

Path dependence deepened: coal-based generation formed the technological and economic core of the system, while institutional guardianship of coal interests within Eskom and the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) constrained diversification and slowed renewable-energy uptake despite improving cost curves. [Olver 2025: 8]



A PCC narrative

Olver's use of PST, when applied to the climate transition, points to the tension between power holders, left largely undisturbed, and the frustrated majority. The theory suggests that

... the durability of any climate compact depends on whether the economic and social costs of decarbonisation and adaptation are distributed in ways that align with existing power relations. Transitions that undermine the rents or authority of powerful incumbents without offering commensurate new opportunities will generate potentially insurmountable resistance. Conversely, transitions that fail to deliver meaningful voice or visible benefits to marginalised constituencies lack legitimacy and social support. In both cases, the likely result is instability, policy drift, or partial implementation. [6]

This sounds conservative. However, Olver pushes against the PST tendency to over-estimate the power of the status quo, and argues that the power balances and the settlements can change with the creation of

... opportunities for new actors to organise, marshal resources, and enter decision-making arenas. Inclusive governance mechanisms – if effectively designed – can serve as stepping stones for coalition formation, enabling emerging sectors and communities to develop the organisational capability needed to press for more far-reaching reforms [based on] their ability to impose costs on others and demand change. [6]

The core argument is that the PCC provided just such an opportunity for a power shift – hence it is called a political experiment. In particular, the Just Transition Framework is claimed to be progressive and “...sketches the institutional architecture needed to anchor a broad-based coalition around a low-carbon developmental path” [21]. Olver concludes that

... new constituencies – green industrial players, unions which organise in low-carbon sectors, municipalities investing in distributed



generation, community energy cooperatives, small producers and informal workers – must organise, acquire lasting capabilities, and assert claims over investment, ownership and employment in the transition. In other words, constituencies must fight for the just transition, not merely participate in it. [21]

In this narrative the PCC succeeded in, at a minimum, creating a new strategic terrain for future climate struggles. The Just Transition Framework – with its three dimensions of justice – is not the only achievement in this five year period, argues Olver. Highlights from this period of “peak climate ambition and consensus” [12], which are not all direct achievements of the PCC (see the discussion of powers of the PCC below), include:

- Establishment and functioning of the PCC (its inclusiveness, transparency, evidence based approach);
- The Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) for international funding was negotiated with the US, the EU, Britain, France and Germany, and the Just Energy Transition Implementation Plan (JET IP) was developed;
- The PCC recommendations on South Africa’s Nationally Determined Contribution, 2021, were adopted;
- The Climate Change Act was passed and “enshrined principles of inclusion, equity and justice; established national mitigation and adaptation planning systems; created statutory mechanisms for an emissions trajectory, carbon budgets and sectoral targets; and mandated local climate forums” [Olver 2025: 14];
- The PCC commissioned research on economic opportunities, skills, social protection, new partnership models and social ownership models for renewable energy;
- The PCC intervened in the Komati decommissioning process.

Olver argues that:



A PCC narrative

The period from 2018 to 2024 thus marked a high point for South Africa's climate transition. The PCC institutionalised inclusive dialogue; the NDC update achieved ambitious, evidence-based target-setting; the Just Transition Framework codified justice as a core principle; the JETP mobilised unprecedented levels of international finance; and the Climate Change Act translated these gains into law. For a brief moment, the interests of state, labour, business and civil society seemed aligned around a developmental vision of a fair, managed transition. [14]

The narrative then identifies experiences on the ground in Komati as a turning point. The DMRE did not play any role, despite its obvious mandate. Eskom limited itself to the Komati power station and its workers, while contract workers lost jobs, the informal economy went down and, according to a 2023 PCC report entitled *Early lessons and recommendations from Komati's decommissioning*, funding for social protection was “grossly inadequate and poorly coordinated” [PCC 2023: 15]. Both the National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) expressed extreme unhappiness with the process. The main message reaching the South African public was one of Komati turning into a ghost town as a result of the Just Transition – even if the decommissioning of the power station by Eskom, and not the PCC, was actually based on reaching the end of its design lifespan and it had become increasingly expensive to maintain.

Other factors also played into the mood of disappointment with the Just Transition: funders grappled with complex approval processes and raised doubts about the ability of the South African government to absorb funding; decision-making responsibilities about energy became more fragmented and contested; firms like Sasol and Eskom retreated from earlier net-zero strategies; business influence over climate and energy grew, notably through its role in the National Energy Crisis Committee (Necom), which gained increasing de facto influence over energy policy; and rising right wing populism in Europe and the US weakened the push for global climate action (see Chapter 3).



The waning influence of the PCC on Nationally Determined Contributions

The extent of the MEC's push back against the PCC agenda described above can be seen in the difference in process and content between the two Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) during the PCC's first five years: the 2021 NDC Update (for the period from 2025 to 2030) on which the PCC was asked to advise; and the 2025 NDC (which covers the period 2030-2035). While the 2021 NDC could be claimed as a high point for the PCC's influence, in 2025 the extensive and carefully prepared comments of the PCC and environmental justice organisations were ignored.

The Paris Agreement mandates a 'pledge and review' climate regime in place of the failed Kyoto Protocol's cap and trade regime. Cap and trade is based on the rather dubious neoliberal theory that, if a universal and declining limit to emissions (the cap) is agreed and pollution rights are allocated, market trading will then efficiently distribute those rights between companies (or countries). In fact, however, there never was a cap and the trade was littered with scams. The parties to Kyoto happily lived with the scams, but would not accept a global cap which would then require the 'top down' allocation of pollution rights between them.

Paris is a 'bottom up' process. Each country must decide its own "Nationally Determined Contribution" (NDC) – they purposely avoided the word "commitment" – which must be revised every five years with each successive NDC showing increased climate 'ambition'. A 'global stocktake' then provides the review to show if the combined 'contributions' are aligned with the Paris temperature goals. Predictably, they are not, as the first stocktake in 2023 showed. Nor are there any mechanisms beyond exhortation to ensure that:

- the combined pledges are adequate;
- countries actually make good on their pledges;
- each country 'contributes' its fair share to the necessary emissions reductions;



A PCC narrative

- rich countries responsible for the bulk of historical emissions contribute adequate climate finance to poor countries that are most vulnerable to climate impacts.

Ten years after Paris, the Civil Society Equity Review concludes that

... the international climate regime is failing catastrophically, not due to a lack of technical solutions, but because of systemic pathologies rooted in long historical injustices, grotesque levels of inequality, and the entrenched power of fossil fuel interests. Current policies are steering the world far beyond the 1.5°C warming limit, with devastating consequences already being borne disproportionately by the poor, especially in the Global South.⁹

The first NDCs were submitted in time for the Paris CoP in 2015. South Africa's mitigation pledge was based on a 'peak, plateau and decline' (PPD) trajectory, which gave a very wide range with upper and lower limits. Emissions would peak in 2025 at between 614 and 398 MtCO₂e and plateau at that level through to 2035 before declining. This 614-398 range was based on a mathematical cheat.¹⁰ The lower limit was decorative while government treated the upper limit as the target and allowed emissions to grow without constraint.

As it happened, the failure of economic and energy policy meant that emissions peaked in 2008 around 530 MtCO₂e (including land use), slumped in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and have declined since. In 2015, emissions were 511 Mt and by 2019 they were 476 Mt. Emissions declined to 436 Mt in the Covid year of 2020, bounced up in 2021 but declined again to 435 Mt in 2022.¹¹ It should be said that South Africa gives itself a large

9 The 2025 Civil Society Equity Review, *Inequity, Inequality, Inaction: A civil society equity review of the post-Paris climate regime and the new NDCs, with a focus on mitigation, the role of climate finance, and equity and fair shares across and within countries*, November 2025. P.1

10 In 2011, the Department of Environmental Affairs took a 'growth without constraint' projection made by the Long Term Mitigation Scenarios in 2007, called it 'business-as-usual', and arbitrarily introduced an error bar to create a range in place of the single line projection provided by the LTMS. It then claimed the PPD range reduced emissions by 40% of business as usual.

11 DFFE, *National GHG inventory report*, November 2024. This is the latest inventory and goes up to 2022. We've used the numbers including LULUCF because that's what government uses in its NDCs.



allowance of greenhouse gases (GHGs) absorbed by “land use and land use change and forestry” (LULUCF). Thus, 40 Mt is subtracted from energy and other emissions in 2022. The NDC pledge uses the number including land use, which obviously looks better on paper. Nevertheless, emissions excluding land use are also declining and have never come close to the 614 Mt allowed by the PPD. Climate policy has made no impact on emissions so this is the real business-as-usual trajectory stripped of the fairy tale of never-ending growth.

In 2021, Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) published its NDC ‘update’, which would determine South Africa’s ‘contribution’ for the period from 2025 to 2030. It retained the lower limit of 398 MtCO₂e for the whole period but reduced the upper limit to 510 Mt in 2025 and 440 Mt in 2030. It said this represented a reduction of 17% in 2025 and 28% in 2030 against the earlier NDC upper limit of 614 Mt. However, the actual emissions shown above were trending lower than the new target. As previously, the NDC claimed that this was South Africa’s highest possible ambition as its priority was to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality.

In its first year, notes Olver, the PCC’s “first major test” was to advise on this update. It recommended a lower 2030 target range of 350 to 420 MtCO₂e and argued that modelling by business and academics “demonstrated that a net-zero-by-2050 pathway was technically feasible, fiscally manageable and compatible with greater economic competitiveness and job creation”. This prospect, combined with measures for a just transition to “ameliorate any negative effects on labour and communities ... expanded the coalition in favour of higher ambition”. This was approved by cabinet and, says Olver, represented a peak for climate ambition and consensus [2025: 15ff].

The environmental justice commissioners and Life After Coal fell outside this consensus.¹² They argued that the relevant Paris temperature target must be 1.5°C as climate impacts escalate beyond that mark. Based on the Climate Equity Reference Calculator (CERC) fair share calculations, which government itself invokes, South Africa’s 2030 emissions target should be between 274 to

12 groundWork and Earthlife Africa’s comments on South Africa’s new Nationally Determined Contribution, 30 April 2021; CER letter to PCC, 17 June 2021



A PCC narrative

352 MtCO₂e (including LULUCF). Even for 2°C, CERC gave 350 to 401 MtCO₂e but noted that this is higher than the “well below 2°C” Paris target.

Further, they observed, ‘net-zero’ is actually not zero. It depends on a false equivalence of the biological or living carbon cycle – carbon exchanged between living organisms and the atmosphere, land and ocean – and dead (fossil) carbon emitted by burning fossil fuels. And it invites carbon trading based on that false equivalence. They called for zero fossil fuels in the electric power system by 2040, and preferably earlier, and a zero fossil fuel economy by 2050. Government, however, was promoting new oil and gas extraction and carbon intensive energy projects.

More broadly, while the PCC talked of the “developmental gains made since democracy”, environmental justice critics commented that government policies did not prioritise eliminating poverty and reducing inequality. Poverty and inequality had increased since 1994: 55% of people were officially counted poor and levels of hunger, malnutrition and childhood stunting were rising; education and health remained unequal; services were highly uneven and mostly failing, new housing was miserly and thermally inefficient. The real priority was for corporate and investor profit. And while all stakeholders acknowledge that poor people are hit first and worst by climate impacts, the NDC’s treatment of adaptation was primarily concerned with ‘economic sectors’. For people’s settlements, adaptation was stalled before it started. And on the coal fields adaptation could not be separated from mitigation: it can only begin when mining and the pollution stops. Finally, without serious mitigation, adaptation would be overwhelmed by climate impacts.

Thus, the PCC’s consensus seemed somewhat partial.

Five years later, and at the end of its first term, the PCC published draft recommendations for the 2025 NDC – which covers the period 2030-2035 – before DFFE published its own first draft. In 2024, the PCC put together a formidable evidence base and, from September, it started a series of stakeholder briefings and consultations. It published draft recommendations for comment in June 2025. It claimed “broad consensus” on adaptation,



resilience and the ‘means of implementation’ – primarily money and technology transfers from the North – but not on mitigation.

Notably, the PCC acknowledged that the 2030 “target range [350 to 420 MtCO₂e] is higher than the country’s fair share contribution” for 1.5°C [28]. Adopting this temperature target followed from the findings of the global stocktake endorsed at CoP28. And, just as the PCC published its draft recommendations, the International Court of Justice found that 1.5°C is the primary Paris temperature target and that countries must aim for it when developing their NDCs. The PCC suggested South Africa should reduce emissions to “well below” the 420 MtCO₂e upper limit in 2030.

For 2035, the PCC recommended a target range of 248 to 329 MtCO₂e.

DFFE, by contrast, published a draft NDC on 30 July 2025 with just 30 days for comment. It then hastily organised a consultation roadshow in August. Officials emphasised that this was not a ‘tick box’ exercise, but the very short notice for the consultations, the location of most venues in elite spaces and the use of English without translation into local languages, limited in-person participation. DFFE said the final version would be submitted to the UNFCCC in mid-September but in fact delayed that to the end of October just before the Belem CoP opened. The timing of the process seemed calculated to minimise the political space for challenge and in the end neither the PCC recommendations nor the August consultation made much difference from the draft to the final.

The NDC ignored the PCC recommendations as well as the comments of climate justice organisations. It affirms the 1.5°C target and says it takes account of the global stocktake, but it claims a good chunk as its fair share of the little that is left in the global carbon budget. It says South Africa can tip another 4.5 billion tonnes of CO₂ into the atmosphere in the next 10 years and gives a 2035 target range of 320 to 380 MtCO₂e.

Also in October, the Department of Electricity and Energy (DoEE) published the final version of the Integrated Resource Plan for electricity (IRP 2025). Both departments said they consulted each other to ensure alignment of the



A PCC narrative

energy plan and the climate plan. Clearly, the latter was made to align with the former.

Alongside renewables and nuclear power (assumed to be 'clean'), the IRP shows 15 250 megawatts (MW) of new gas power plants to be built between now and 2042. The better part of this appears to be combined cycle gas turbines (CCGT) designed to run at high load factors rather than 'peaking' plants that run only during peak demand periods. This is as much about creating the demand for gas and securing investor returns as it is about power supply: running for longer means they sell more electricity to the grid and so pay off the new power plants together with the new gas infrastructure needed to import "liquefied natural gas" (LNG). The power sector is then also intended to subsidise the infrastructure costs for industrial gas users.¹³

The IRP also keeps the door open to extending the life of coal power stations beyond 50 years in case the gas build out is delayed. It says, "One of the enablers of this, is when a successful demonstration of cleaner coal technologies that will drastically reduce emissions is proven before 2030" [37].¹⁴

It should be recalled that Eskom says flue gas desulphurisation (FGD) – standard and well proven pollution abatement equipment – is too expensive to install.¹⁵ Carbon capture and storage (CCS) on coal plants is unproven and unlikely to be proven by 2030. It is a lot more expensive than FGD, consumes about a third of the energy produced by the power plant and also uses a lot of water.

In a section on how it relates to the NDC, the IRP takes the top of the NDC range as the real target and ignores the lower limit. Hence, it shows national emissions declining from 478 MtCO₂e in 2022, to 420 in 2030 and 380 in 2035, while the power sector declines from 197 MtCO₂e (41% share) in 2022, to 168 (40%) in 2030 and 142 (37%) in 2035. Applying the same share of

13 Terence Creamer, *Ramokgopa announces big increase in gas-to-power load factor to 50%-plus*, Engineering News, 5 May 2025

14 DoEE, Integrated Resource Plan 2025, 28 October 2025

15 FGD is installed only at Kusile. It is required to be installed at Medupi by the money lenders – but Eskom has so far managed successive delays. It has no intention of installing FGD anywhere else.



emissions to the NDC lower limits would allow the power sector 140 MtCO₂e in 2030 and 118 in 2035. For the PCC 2035 lower limit of 248 MtCO₂e, the power sector share would be 92 Mt. However, since it is easiest and cheapest to reduce power sector emissions, its share of emissions should be in steep decline by 2035, with absolute emissions on the way to zero around 2040. As PCC puts it:

The electricity sector is well positioned to offer the greatest potential for early decarbonisation while providing low-cost electricity supply with a host of co-benefits beyond mitigation, including local air pollution reduction, protection of water resources and enabling economy-wide decarbonisation due to electricity being an input to most economic activity. [36]

It goes on to recommend “urgent analysis” of the gas and coal components of IRP and the corresponding emissions, and “to establish an emissions envelope for the power sector aligned with the [PCC] proposed NDC target range” [37].

As with the NDC, the PCC’s recommendations relating to the IRP were ignored.

In August, the PCC hosted a final colloquium on the NDC before finalising and submitting its recommendations. By then, as Olver puts it, “the compact that had briefly united government, labour, business and civil society had devolved into competing narratives and divergent interests” [19] while the “lower-ambition equilibrium ... more accurately reflected the prevailing balance of power between state, business, labour and civil society” [23].

The moment of unity evidently had crumbling foundations. The fragmentation that Olver dates to 2022 was already in the making. Corporate South Africa’s climate and just transition commitments were always short on credibility. Shareholder resolutions put forward by activist organisation Just Share and some minority investors were routinely opposed or kept off the agendas at annual general meetings. And that ‘management’ of the issue was evidently endorsed by majority shareholders. Sasol’s climate response was more about its diminishing feedstock than about climate. Eskom was already shutting



A PCC narrative

down units at various power stations when it found World Bank funding and guidance under the label of a just transition. Komati is the result.

Labour's just transition project, on the other hand, actually peaked around 2009 to 2012. Cosatu adopted a radical policy that saw the just transition as the leading edge of a broader social transformation. The National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa) took that further with its concept of socially owned renewables. And it put in place a programme for researching and debating climate and a just transition from the shop floor up. That programme was abandoned as Cosatu itself fragmented, in part over questions of loyalty to the alliance with the ANC under Jacob Zuma's presidency, and Numsa was expelled in 2014. The unions have since invoked the just transition but focused on defending jobs in a context of growing unemployment.

The differences were sharply on display at the PCC's colloquium. Environmental justice organisations called for greater ambition and a just transition as the transformation of relations of power. Labour and business found common cause in opposing – if not denouncing – what they saw as the PCC's overly ambitious reduction targets. This view is clearly backed by the energy and minerals departments of government and, indeed, by DFFE. For some participants, the defence of competitiveness on the one side and jobs on the other looked more like a defence of the established Minerals Energy Complex that has given rise to South Africa's highly concentrated, unequal and pollution intensive economy.

Theory

There is much in Olver's analysis that we can agree with from a civil society perspective, but there are also aspects of the narrative that need to be questioned. The first is the theoretical framing, which raises questions about the adequacy of the overall perspective. The environmental justice movement sees not only an urgent need for a political settlement on the Just Transition pushing against the confines of the current configuration of power in the political economy, but the need for nothing less than a civilisational change



in our societies. By this we mean a deep running systems change in terms of thinking, institutions and practices.

What is missing from the theoretical approach in Olver's paper is a strong sense of the pressures for change towards sustainability, if not a systems change, that goes beyond the current power holders in South Africa. Most transition theory allows for this. For example, the multiple level perspective on sustainability transitions [Geels 2011] works from the basic assumption that pressures for transition arise from the context or 'landscape', while socio-technical transition theory also takes the need for change as a given.

Political settlement theory misses this perspective and the result is a conservative perspective that does not take into account the influence of international pressures to move in this direction, even if these pressures are contested and at times contradictory or ineffectual. It then misses the dimension of the ongoing and intensifying pressure of this global change on actors – particularly the MEC actors – who have to respond to multiple developments that threaten their incumbency and are likely to eventually overthrow it. The just transition is not a settlement, but an ongoing process that needs to respond to ever strengthening pressures – climate change, pollution, social injustices – even if it takes the form of successive settlements.

A further implication – missed by PST – is that measures to respond to climate change, starting with decarbonisation, need to be adequate to the challenge in the real world. This is often captured in the phrase "required by science". The same question of the adequacy of the understanding of the need for change returns in the socio-economic dimension when the question is asked, "What is the underlying cause of climate change?" For the environmental justice movement, there is a clear understanding that the root cause of the climate crisis is capitalism. PST does not engage with this.

Dynamics in the transition

We now turn to dynamics in the first five years of the PCC (2020-2025), starting with the behaviour of the different groups of actors. Civil society



A PCC narrative

actors were prominent and active in the work of the commission. They were careful not to talk for communities, but worked to create spaces and opportunities for community voices to be heard. They presented evidence from independent research, from experiences on the ground and analysis of arguments.

Civil society commissioners said that the PCC facilitation made it easy for them, inviting them to speak out on specific issues, for example on the level of climate ambition, and the pace of decarbonisation, but also the need to move at a pace that would allow plans for alternative economies to be made and executed – insisting that any delays be used for preparation. Civil society commissioners were crucial in demanding and then maintaining the PCC’s transparency approach, and pushed hard for the PCC to consult directly with affected communities through community visits.

Olver’s paper describes civil society as both potentially disruptive and legitimating. In reality, civil society was both, inside and outside the PCC. Inside, its disruptive power extended to questioning corporate actors’ plans made with the government behind closed doors, on the big-ticket items like privatised renewables, green hydrogen and electric vehicles, that ended up as the core of the JETP and the JET IP. They questioned the persistent refusal of Eskom to release its studies into the nine further power stations on the Highveld that are to be decommissioned – thereby impeding communities’ preparations for these processes. They persistently questioned the absence of the health department and health debates. They kept alive the issue of threats against human rights defenders. They brought some oxygen into the room. Outside the PCC, LAC is going further along the policy cycle [see groundWork Report 2022] to implementation by establishing a Community Just Transition Fund and Just Transition Centres to support communities working to shape the transition [see Chapter 4].

Corporate actors were at first focused on new opportunities, particularly in renewables and mining for critical minerals. They saw an opportunity for ecological modernisation (where technologies change but power relationships don’t) in the form of a reindustrialisation of South Africa driven



by renewables [see groundWork Report 2022, Chapter 2]. Two of the three current big coal miners – Exxaro and Seriti – have expanded into renewables, both to supply the grid and to serve private markets by wheeling through the grid. However, commissioners representing corporates overwhelmingly shunned public meetings, as they preferred discrete spaces where civil society and labour were not present and, in the observation of one official, studiously avoided responsibility for any socio-economic issues. It may be that, as the Just Transition Framework took shape, corporates realised the potential liabilities arising from restorative justice demands.

The nature of a country's decarbonisation challenge determines much of the politics of a transition. In the case of South Africa, the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid history of the MEC [Fine and Rustomjee 1996] explains why and how South Africa's economy became so carbon intensive and unequal: cheap and dirty coal, along with 'cheap' labour via the infamous migrant labour system, provided the energy for mining South Africa's gold and other minerals.

At its core, the MEC involves a close symbiosis between state and corporate capital. From an environmental justice perspective, that explains the state's tolerance or indeed active support of MEC businesses' large-scale externalisation of costs – in terms of environments but also human rights. Coal is responsible for 77% of South Africa's primary energy. The enduring power of the MEC is seen not only as central by Olver; it also returns, behind closed doors, in the de facto decision making power of energy intensive business, notably through the participation of the Energy Council, the Minerals Council and the Energy Intensive Users Group in Necom.

Government departments were frequently missing in action in the work of the commission. Some observers thought they were already overwhelmed and struggling to carry out their existing mandates. But for the Just Transition the problem goes deeper: most government departments do not have any indicators in their plans for achieving Just Transition goals, as an internal PCC study revealed [Olver 2025]. They are simply not planning for it.



A PCC narrative

‘Missing in action’ was particularly acute in the case of the DMR in Komati. Much of the tension at Komati concerned the closure of local coal mines, some of which did not supply the power station. Having issued mining rights, the Department of Mineral and Petroleum Resources (DMPR) avoids responsibility for closure and rehabilitation, both of individual mines and the severely impacted catchment. Nor does it seem concerned at the fate of ex-mineworkers in villages such as Lesedi.

But the Komati process also showed up the absence of local government. An example was Steve Tshwete Local Municipality’s refusal to take over responsibility and services for the mining village of Lesedi – leaving its residents in limbo. There were also smaller frustrations for teams working in Komati as municipal sign-off for minor developments like bus shelters proved difficult to secure.

This does not bode well for the transition. In terms of the policy cycle approach (explored in groundWork Report 2022), we can observe that policy agendas may be set and policies approved, but that the real action is dependent on government-wide implementation through adequate institutions, programmes and projects. A purposive transition depends on a capable state. To deepen this analysis, we turn to the requirements of a purposive transition.

A purposive transition

The work of the PCC can be described as catalysing a purposive transition. It is an attempt to respond to climate change primarily through an intentional political process, as opposed to

1. random processes (a chaotic transition responding to shocks), or
2. an emerging transition, driven largely by market forces, or
3. a transition managed by the incumbents (a smooth transition), in which the transition is shaped by the fossil fuel companies, including coal mines, intensive energy users and government departments (particularly the DMPR and the Department of Electricity and Energy (DoEE)) and parastatals like Eskom – the present day members of the



MEC that shaped South Africa's carbon intensive, extractive economy through the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid eras.

Theoretically, a purposive transition consists of a loss of power for the incumbent technology regime, as society assumes political authority over the technology regimes that serve them. They are “transitions... which have been deliberately intended and pursued from the outset to reflect an explicit set of societal expectations or interests” [Smith et al 2005: 1502]. In this case, the word “regime” refers to both the technology (such as coal-fired electricity) and its institutional or social support system.

However, a just transition makes more demands of a purposive transition than merely agreeing on a change in technology and its supporting institutions. In terms of the PCC's Just Transition Framework, an inclusive and people-centred transition is needed, which engages with poverty, unemployment and inequality in a just and inclusive way. In other words, it must make good on the 30-year-old *political* transition agenda which, as government and the PCC acknowledge, has yet to be realised. In terms of environmental justice thinking – and, we would argue, for the transition to work at all – a fundamental transformation, namely a system and systems change – is needed.

Changing political context and political culture

Climate transitions in any country are complicated, multi-dimensional processes. Their raw materials are taken from the surrounding political culture, and they are inevitably entangled in its dynamics. A purposive transition, because it is a political process, ultimately needs a functional political apparatus, including a capable state. A political process like that of the PCC is aimed at producing a consensus, on the basis of which an agenda for a climate response can be articulated, enshrined in government policy and implemented by government departments, taking along with them other actors in society. An example of such a process would be sectoral departments setting greenhouse gas emission budgets in consultation with emitters and other stakeholders, as required by the new Climate Change Act.



A PCC narrative

One way or another, the climate agenda needs to be translated into the work of government. Two problems are immediately apparent:

- (1) Hardly any government departments (the exception is Treasury, and to some extent DFFE and agriculture) are including Just Transition outcomes in their planning for the next five years up to 2030, the period covered by the 2021 NDC, and therefore do not plan to give effect to the targets written into its international climate pledge;
- (2) Many government structures, including water, health and policing, are being revealed as corrupt and in service to criminal networks via corrupt police, judicial officers and politicians.

Not planning for a Just Transition

A recent investigation into the planning of government departments for the next five years – up to 2030, which is an important date for the NDC to reduce emissions – showed that government departments were not taking the Just Transition into their strategic plans. The research looked at 19 government departments. Alarming, the DoEE did not respond to queries from the PCC. Most departments mentioned the transition in their broad, strategic analysis, but very few had integrated just transition objectives as indicators into their operational plans. Some departments had a single just transition indicator. This is a serious issue, for example housing being developed now should be healthy, thermally efficient and climate resilient.

Why is this the case? A general explanation is that government departments are overwhelmed by the demands placed on them, that there is not enough guidance to develop such indicators, and that there is a lack of trust between departments, hindering their ability to plan together. The PCC is planning to deal with this by offering planning support to the departments, but so far the response has not been enthusiastic. The consequences of this could be far reaching.



Corrupt state

There are also issues at a deeper level, as the result of corruption and the criminalisation of governance [Bhorat et al 2017; Chipkin and Swilling 2018, Cowan 2025, Wicks 2025]. Corruption is now part of all South African political calculations. Statements by Lieutenant General Nhlanhla Mkwazi alleging intertwined police, judicial and political corruption are now being tested in the Madlanga Commission, which has heard evidence about the connections between the police and political assassinations. Outside of what is being aired at this commission, there are also assassinations of environmental activists. There is little to show that the killing of Bazooka Radebe of the Amadiba Crisis Committee, or Fikile Ntshangase of the Mfolosi Community Environmental Justice Organisation, amongst others, have been seriously investigated. Meanwhile, activists are plagued by threats, attacks and surveillance by mining companies.

The coal and electricity sectors were implicated in corruption early on [groundWork Report 2016 and Cowan 2022]. In 2007, the boiler contract for Medupi and Kusile was rigged to the benefit of Hitachi Power Africa and its BEE partner, Chancellor House, which is an ANC funding vehicle. The corruption escalated under President Jacob Zuma and centred on his relationship with the Gupta family. Amongst other things, it involved coal mines and coal supply, as was aired in the Zondo commission. But there has been a steady growth in corruption in almost all sectors in South Africa. In a recent book entitled *Mafia Land*, investigative journalist Kyle Cowan [2025] describes the operation of criminal cartels in 13 areas of South African life, remarking that this is only a sample. The sample of active mafias includes construction, cash-in-transit, taxis, cigarettes, water tankers, bouncers, kidnapping, hospitals and the police.

While not officially mentioned in PCC proceedings, there are clear signs of concern about corruption on the ground. While preparing for a just transition, the Komati Steering Committee expressed the fear that “mafias” from outside Komati (or Steve Tshwete Ward 4) will swoop in and hijack their projects.



Komati as a turning point

Olver describes Komati – the processes around the decommissioning of the Komati power station in 2022 – as a turning point and the start of the push back. He writes:

Presented as a model¹⁶ for “repurposing, repowering and reskilling”, Komati was meant to demonstrate that decarbonisation could be socially managed.¹⁷ Instead, it revealed the absence of a coherent transition plan, and a government missing in action. The DMRE, whose responsibility it was, played no role at all in managing the decommissioning, while Eskom saw its responsibilities as limited to inside the perimeter of the power station. While Eskom workers were deployed elsewhere, coal mines closed, contractors lost their jobs, the informal economy in the area deflated and the settlement around Komati deteriorated. A PCC review found that workers and surrounding communities received limited consultation, diversification projects lagged behind the shutdown timeline, and funding for social protection was grossly inadequate and poorly coordinated.

For organised labour, Komati signalled that just-transition commitments were more rhetorical than real... The episode undermined trust in the state’s capacity and willingness to uphold the principles of the *Just Transition Framework* and marked the first major rupture in the climate compact.

Beyond Komati, limited follow-through on just-transition commitments deepened scepticism. A 2024 PCC–DPME¹⁸ review of national and provincial Strategic Plans found that few departments had integrated measurable just-transition targets or associated budget

16 Komati was declared to be a model by the World Bank, and not the PCC.

17 The Eskom decision to close the Komati power station in 2017 was not due to decarbonisation objectives but rather because the power station had reached the end of its economic life. Nevertheless, as the first decommissioning of a power station in the current era, it was viewed as indicative of how future decommissioning processes could be managed.

18 The DPME is the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation located in the Presidency.



lines... Social protection, reskilling for coal workers and local economic development in declining regions – central elements of the JTF – were largely absent from core government programming [2025: 15].

Certainly, the Komati experience brought the challenges, if not failings, of the Just Transition process to the attention of politicians and the public and became a political football. But it was also set up as an own goal with really bad timing. In no way did the decommissioning exercise at Komati fit into the Just Transition Framework. Instead, it was a banker's (the World Bank) and an engineer's (Eskom) response. There was no consultation and no community planning. Nor was information shared with people and their organisations in the area. At final decommissioning in late 2022 (in a process that had already started with the retiring of the first unit in 2017) plans for alternative economies had not been made. The impact was to scare and outrage people in the area [see groundWork Report 2022, Chapter 2].

The PCC then decided to intervene, of its own accord and at the request of Ramaphosa. In mid-2024, the PCC appointed a manager for Komati – Notiswa Libala – who worked to pull together eight streams of work by a number of consortia in Komati [see a detailed description in groundWork Report 2024], regular monthly report backs online and in Komati and, together with groundWork, strengthened the role of the local community steering committee, organised around the local councillor and his ward committee, which also had the support of the Mpumalanga provincial climate change coordinator. According to Libala, the top three lessons learnt through the work in Komati were that

1. plans for decommissioning should be available five to ten years before the process starts, to give enough time for planning and mobilising finances;
2. diverse financing, including public, private, national and international, is needed;
3. multistakeholder collaboration is crucial. This was in fact set out in “Getting from good intentions to effective action”, that set out a realistic



A PCC narrative

approach to such collaboration [Libala et al 2023], but was not, in the end, widely used.

It remains to be seen whether the lessons learnt in Komati will be applied in the other nine Mpumalanga coal-fired power stations to be decommissioned next – as well as for decommissioning processes outside Mpumalanga, for example Matimba and eventually Medupi in Limpopo. An important aspect will be to ensure that community agendas are carried by modified, inclusive ward committees (or aggregated ward committee structures from more than one ward) who are identified and supported to work in a democratic manner. Another issue is that to this day Eskom refuses to release the social impact reports for the next nine power stations, even when these have long been completed and leaked for limited circulation inside energy and transition policy communities.

The justness of the Just Transition in Komati

But there are deeper issues. For civil society, the Komati experience also raised the question of whether the three justice dimensions in the JTF were strong enough to lead to a successful transition, as well as whether these types of justice could be achieved within the PCC's approach. The South African transition has been celebrated internationally for its bold innovation of the three justices, developed to describe the justice aspect of the just transition. However, the three justices are conceptually limited when compared to the core groundWork analysis of the three main mechanisms through which environmental injustice is imposed: exclusion from decision making, enclosure of common resources for private profit, and imposition of externalities.

Procedural justice means empowering workers and communities to define their own development. In groundWork's terms, this would be achieved when the exclusion of the vast majority from decision making is reversed. While proceedings of the PCC have been remarkably transparent in mainstream terms, and deserve to be applauded, there have not been decision making processes in which communities actually succeed in defining their own



development. The PCC was sidelined in the allocation of international funds to different aspects of development, such as the electricity system, new electric vehicles, green hydrogen and municipalities [see Chapter 4 in groundWork Report 2022 for a detailed analysis], without comparable allocations to community agendas. At the local level, in Komati the community steering committee had to fight for recognition, which it succeeded in, but ultimately did not have the resources for community consultation and broad decision making.

The groundWork Reports up to now have found that the procedural justice aspect – that of fair process, participation and transparency – has come closest to being achieved, not only because of the PCC attitude but also as a result of the vigorous participation of community activists in places affected by the coal and other fossil fuel industries, and of many civil society actors, and the insistence of civil society commissioners that the work of the PCC be transparent and should reach out to communities.

In the JTF, distributive justice means that “the risks and opportunities resulting from the transition must be distributed fairly, cognisant of gender, race and class inequalities”. The ‘risks and opportunities’ are mostly about jobs and skills, including “opportunities to participate in the industries of the future”. For all the importance of jobs, this seems like a narrow vision of the just transition, compared to what is expressed in the Life After Coal Open Agenda [see Chapter 2 below]. Capital does not appear to share risks but corporates do have the opportunity “to support a green and inclusive economy” [PCC 2022: 8].

On the ground in Komati, distributive justice hangs in the balance and efforts to establish alternative economies to replace coal economies – in the formal and informal sectors – are faltering. The fears of post-coal ghost towns and regions are echoed by many, including at Komati. The experience in Komati shows that it is difficult to achieve distributive justice in the face of ongoing, forceful accumulation projects – the large-scale projects of the MEC, and smaller, local accumulation projects.



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Restorative justice takes things much further. It concerns both enclosure and externalisation: “Historical damages against individuals, communities and the environment must be addressed, with a particular focus on rectifying or ameliorating the situations of harmed or disenfranchised communities. It is about redress: healing people and the land, which was an immediate need echoed by all communities that the PCC has consulted with” [PCC 2022: 8]. This suggests a deep reckoning with our history. And it points to the contradiction at the heart of the stakeholder enterprise. As *Contested Transition* concluded:

Corporate South Africa looks for a just transition to bail it out of dirty, dead end businesses and fix capital in bright new ‘green’ megaprojects, but without disturbing the underlying logic of the system. Against that, communities want to see a just transition for all, one that upends unequal relations of power to transform the lives of ordinary people and make for a society founded on justice. [Hallowes and Munnik 2022: back cover]

Restorative justice has been the most difficult to achieve. Three aspects stand out:

1. The DoH has no coherent health programme to deal with the fall-out of decades of poorly controlled mining and burning of coal for electricity, petrochemicals and metal smelting. And it remains absent from PCC deliberations, even though LAC has worked very hard to get the issue of a health programme on the national agenda, both through court cases and work on the ground.
2. The DMPR’s failure to manage the rehabilitation of mines, soils, ecosystems and river catchments that have been ruined by coal mining [see groundWork Reports 2024, 2016 and 2017].
3. In Komati, there has been no successful land or water reform, nor any projects based on this principle. It has even been difficult for the community steering committee to access assets that Eskom no longer



needs for its power station. And Steve Tshwete local municipality has refused to take responsibility for the ex-mining village of Lesedi. It is an active refusal of responsibility that threatens the loss of the assets of these residents.

The lack of restorative justice signals that systems change is not at the heart of the South African climate transition.

The powers of the PCC

A crucial question that many interviewees engaged with, and an ongoing question for participants in and observers of the work of the PCC, was what powers exactly the PPC has exercised. There are many opinions on this, so we approach the question from evidence in practice. Our interest is in evaluating the actions of the PCC as well as its influence on the broader transition processes.

It is true that the PCC is an advisory body, but its influence reaches beyond its formal powers, and its actions have proved to be based on broader powers, whether these were explicitly given to it or not, or were given to it by implication, or developed in the course of its first five years of operation, or are logically necessary for the task it has been set.

At the core of the PCC's power is discursive power: policy power, policy shaping and framing, creating concepts, pathways, narratives. So, many phases in the policy cycle are not within its power – legislation, institutions, programmes, projects and budgeting – while the monitoring and evaluation function is. This implies that it has influence, rather than power in these phases, and it is in this grey zone that the PCC has tried to exert influence.

But it is not a singular influence. As PCC Commissioner and Earthlife Africa director Makoma Lekalakala points out, there is no single PCC voice, but a variety of voices, sometimes opposed to each other. There is not only a fight for the Just Transition to take place at all, but also how it should take place.



Box 1: Discursive, institutional and material power

We can recognise three types of interrelated but distinct powers here according to their mode of working.¹⁹ Discursive power formulates and contests ideas, and happens in the realm of words and other symbols. It includes narratives, agendas, visions, politicians' speeches, publications, meetings and minutes, plans and so on. While it may seem devoid of power, as is sometimes expressed in the phrase "empty rhetoric", it has a real influence on the two other types of power, which can hardly function without this layer.

Institutional power consists of rules – sometimes legal rules, other times bureaucratic – determining what government officials can and can't do within the roles they occupy, what their mandates are, the resources they control, and the actions they are allowed to take.

Material power is the power to create, modify, maintain and control material aspects of reality, such as infrastructure, dams and water systems, housing, roads and power systems. Material power directly intervenes in ecosystems. Material power – like other powers – is both enabling and constraining. For example, the electricity grid can be used to transmit new renewable power, but the limitations of a grid historically designed to take power one way from centralised generators to demand centres are now being felt. South Africa is a minerals rich country, as well as a water scarce one, and both the opportunity and the constraint have led to the development of management knowledge and engineering ability. Material power can settle into the landscape and determine future developments and life chances – for example the apartheid geographies of settlements and transport that have entrenched apartheid policies in physical infrastructure.

These ideas assist us in looking at the policy cycle in more depth. As we move along the policy cycle, we can observe that the steps start with discursive power. The agenda setting phase is almost purely discursive,

19 The division of powers in this context between discursive, institutional and material power is a simplification of David Harvey's theorisation of discursive power [Harvey 1996, Chapter 4].



consisting of visions, counter-visions, debates and proposals. As agendas are translated into policies, they start to refer to descriptions of people's realities and available resources. Policy formulation must take into account relevant institutions and their fitness for purpose, as well as resources such as finance (a source of institutional power), human capacity, and material resources and infrastructure such as water, energy and road systems. Legislation establishes roles, mandates, standards and the like, and opens decisions to litigation, also a form of institutional power.

Once adopted, these policies are translated into projects and programmes and assigned to institutions (often government institutions) which, when they carry out the projects and plans, physically or materially change the world. For example, as remote renewable energy installations are built, the grid must be extended to carry that electricity.

And then monitoring and evaluation engage in the institutional sphere (who did what, who was responsible for what?) and the material (what were the outcomes, what is the level of pollution now) and leads into a new policy cycle with shifts in agendas.

From this analysis we can see that different actors have different powers, according to what material resources they control or can marshal. For example, white commercial farmers control large expanses of land in Komati and can limit what (other) projects are possible. Mining rights, however, trump the farmer's land rights, so mine owners also control land and buildings.

The PCC, in its role as catalyst, is at the heart of, but not in control of, a broader set of processes in the Just Transition. These processes are not only discursive – as advice and policy shaping are – but also have elements of institutional (forming new institutions, repurposing or adding new responsibilities to existing institutions) and material (shutting down coal-using activities) implications.



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Some of the processes where the PCC has some influence but no control are very material, such as the shutdown of power stations. So far, this has been shown at Komati, but another nine power stations are waiting in line for decommissioning and that will have very material consequences for the power station, the coal mines that feed them and the areas around them. These processes are largely under Eskom control, but other actors can influence them. The interpretation of these processes also has, as we have seen above, symbolic power in the contestations about the Just Transition trajectory. Other such processes outside the remit of the PCC are:

- Planning decisions – also planning for very material outcomes about power generating technology choices in the IRP, or GHG releases in the NDC;
- Funding institutions and their rules (like a climate taxonomy which determines what can be funded as ‘clean’ or ‘sustainable’);
- Institutions such as climate forums at local and provincial levels mandated by the Climate Change Act;
- Just Energy Transition Investment Plan and Just Energy Transition Implementation Plan.

These processes are clearly influenced by the PCC, but not controlled by it. These can be described as part of a purposive transition. Beyond this, there are processes that are part of an emergent transition, which may support or contradict a purposive just transition.

- Privatised expansion of renewables, which does not take into account the South African Renewable Energy Masterplan (SAREM) strategy for job creation through local production along the RE value chain;
- Contracts from the department of electricity for a massive grid expansion seem to favour global companies, although there is a promise to include South Africans in later rounds²⁰;
- Continued and intensified RE expansion;

20 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dL6-bvBVFp4> for electricity minister Ramakgopa's explanation.



- Ongoing fossil fuel exploration (contradicts the purpose transition);
- Coal continuance and expansion;
- False solutions like carbon markets and offsets, CCS, net zero, nukes. The PCC, like the rest of the mainstream, but based on questionable science, has accepted the concept of 'net zero'. And in its NDC recommendations, the PCC explicitly endorses carbon trading.

Powers the PCC has used

The powers that the PCC has used can be understood in two broad categories. The first category is around its mandate to advise, and remains within the confines of discursive power.

1. It has indeed made recommendations on various documents or proposals including the NDC and the IRP, exercising its direct policy advisory function.
2. The PCC took on the role of actively encouraging and supporting, that is commissioning, collating and propagating, the growth of an evidence base for the Just Transition, as can be seen on their website, and as part of their discursive culture. This meant that it was involved in shaping policy (in a stronger way than only via recommendations), by framing the debates through the evidence base.
3. It has actively supported the creation of evidence based policy frameworks, based on best science, consultation processes and analysis of evidence.

A second category of powers it has exercised flows from its role as catalyst for what should be understood as a national policy change process. Here it has reached into institutional power. Its declared objective to “build a social partnership around the just transition” implies a convening power to get all the necessary partners together. It did not fully succeed in this, and in the next chapter we will note important absences from this national consensus. Nevertheless, the commission proceeded to work on the principle



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of ‘sufficient consensus’ – initially deployed at the multiparty negotiations to end apartheid, the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa) that took place in 1991 and 1992 and which cleared the way for a new, non-racial constitution.²¹

The output and outcome that the PCC is after here – both as a product and as a working culture for a Just Transition that would take at least the next 25 years – is the creation of a national consensus on climate change.

1. The PCC directly (through recommendations) and indirectly (through research it encouraged and promoted) used its convening power and articulation of evidence to assign roles to actors like government departments.
2. The PCC intervened in the Komati decommissioning process, to establish transparency and accountability, limiting Eskom’s role and supporting community voice in accordance with procedural justice principles.
3. The PCC challenged participants, or potential participants, to step forward, participate or take fuller responsibility. Thus, coal miner Seriti CEO Mike Teke was challenged, but not the DoH (see discussion in the next chapter).
4. Recently, it has been a particular challenge to “hand over” responsibilities to government departments, or rather persuade them to accept and act on these responsibilities, maybe because this function really sits on the edge of its recommending, convening and catalysing powers.
5. And finally, it has also played a role in direct contestations about South Africa’s climate change response, becoming at times a target for groups opposing the transition.

What emerges from this discussion is a sense that the PCC, and maybe particularly under Olver, its first executive director, has ‘stretched’ its powers

21 <https://sahistory.org.za/article/convention-democratic-south-africa-codesa>



to suit the tasks it is required to do. It would seem that for its catalytic role to move the transition forward, it would need more and different powers.



2 Notes for a civil society just transition agenda

Chapter 2 explores the gaps in the work of the PCC and draws the outlines of a possible civil society just transition agenda for the next five years. We start by exploring the alignment between LAC and the PCC around the Just Transition, before considering points of divergence and contestation. We then explore the absences or major gaps in the work of the PCC and what agendas these absences could prompt for civil society. This outline is neither final nor complete but, like the Open Agenda to which we return at the end of this chapter, it intends to be useful to activists and allies.

This chapter is based on interviews with PCC officials, LAC commissioners and staff of LAC non-governmental organisations, and on contributions from community research.

Civil society's role in the PCC

Civil society actors played an important role in the PCC, as reflected in both civil society and officials' accounts. They engaged very actively in the work of the commission and its working groups. They enjoyed high visibility, especially in the first year when the PCC visited fossil fuel affected communities, and the PCC organised 'town hall' meetings in the consultation period for the Just Transition Framework. They purposely and continually made space for community voices, while refraining from speaking for them. The procedural justice aspects 'protected' the CS commissioners, by constantly revealing to the rest of civil society and the public what the PCC was doing. They won important concessions in terms of transparency, like broadcasting quarterly PCC meetings, which gave these meetings the drama



of public performances at times, and an initial round of visits to selected fossil fuel affected communities.

Several LAC participants shared the impression that civil society was specifically being given space, at times directly prompted to respond to issues or make their point. This points to an understanding, at least in the PCC secretariat, that civil society had an important role to play. This has to do with:

1. The nature of the issues and civil society's long run familiarity with and commitment to climate justice and a just transition to renewable energy, and therefore the understandings, resources and networks they could bring to the transition;
2. The type of discursive energy, ideas and arguments that civil society brings into the room, in the public interest, and for environmental and social justice;
3. The context of a private sector more interested in business opportunities while dodging any responsibilities for their legacies of environmental and other externalities;
4. The context of government departments that are "overwhelmed" – as PCC officials put it – and unwilling or unready to take their just transition mandates into their plans and actions;
5. The context of politicians distracted by factional fights, corruption and the unfamiliar and shifting terrain of coalition politics;
6. A sense, illustrated in Olver's narrative, that the old divides between climate and fossil fuel constituencies had not really been bridged, and that the 'national consensus' was fragile.

These factors add up to an unusual terrain for civil society in the transition, one that is constituted as much by the work of the PCC, discussed in the previous chapter, as it is by a series of absences, such as the absences of service delivery or regulation, but also absences of whole sectors in the work of the PCC, such as health and the mining industry. Absences is a useful term here: the critical realist philosopher Roy Bhaskar speaks of "determinate



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absences”, that is absences that are constructed by the dynamics of a situation and not just neglect or chance. We explore these absences as meaningful, as signs and prompts for our strategic thinking [see Norrie 2010].

The role of civil society was to bring into the room the oxygen of debating issues in the public interest, or in the interest of the majority of South Africans, ideas, connections to worldwide thinking, and an energy that was appropriate after a long period in which the MEC dominated the climate response while the department of environment²² developed positions on paper, a divide that the PCC did not overcome, even though power shifted away from the coal industry.

The main reason for the organisations constituting LAC’s participation in the commission was straightforward: LAC members, especially groundWork and Earthlife Africa, had been asking for a just transition process for years and could hardly say no to invitations to serve on the commission. According to Earthlife’s director Makoma Lekalakala:

The reason that I accepted the PCC nomination, was based on what we had been complaining about, saying ordinary people are not part of decision making processes. On the Earthlife side, it has been a principle to take people from communities into decision making spaces. If we are able to go to parliament, we take community members along. We were deliberate, I wanted to open a way for other ordinary people to be considered as commissioners. I feel that I have played my role and you could see the consistency of those activists, attending many webinars. They have been interacting with climate issues. They have not lost interest, which tells me that this is an issue that people are interested in, they feel heard and respected. They enjoyed being part of the meetings. On the group chat people raise issues, they go beyond, raising issues that one may not otherwise be focused on.

22 South Africa’s department of environment has gone through a number of name changes. It is currently called the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE).



In addition, having watched Eskom and the MEC fragmenting over the last decade, groundWork had a sense that the PCC represented an opportunity in that power was shifting away from both the MEC and the coal lobby.

Alignment with the PCC

While the PCC needed civil society in the room, LAC could support the intention of the PCC to create the space for a national debate on South Africa's climate response. The invitation to serve as commissioners also marked a shift in the position of civil society in energy politics: after having been accused of treason by the late minister Pravin Gordhan for opposing the disastrous Medupi and Kusile builds, activists were now invited to help steer the process.

More recently, environmental activists had registered a series of court and procedural wins: against Zuma's nuclear plans, successfully challenging two proposed private coal-fired power stations, Thabametsi then Khanyisa, after which the rest of the coal independent power producers (IPP) proposals collapsed. The Deadly Air case²³ seriously embarrassed government, and the DEAT in particular. The environmental justice activists retained their independence and their own power outside of the PCC.

Another reason for the vigorous participation of LAC and other civil society commissioners is the close alignment – in some respects although not in all, as will become clearer in the next section below – between the objectives of the PCC and these organisations, even if a great deal of disagreement remained between how far the PCC would go and whether its rhetoric would translate into real changes. To list them:

1. Two of the three LAC objectives are to resist the expansion of fossil fuels and to encourage closure of coal power. These objectives are, in

23 In June 2019, groundWork and the Vukani Environmental Movement, represented by the Centre for Environmental Rights, launched constitutional litigation to request the Court to acknowledge that the poor ambient air quality in the Highveld Priority Area constitutes a violation of the right to an environment not harmful to health or well-being, and to order the government to promulgate regulations to give effect to the Highveld Air Quality Management Plan. In March 2022, the High Court ruled in favour of groundWork and the Vukani Environmental Movement. See <https://cer.org.za/programmes/pollution-climate-change/litigation/legal-challenges-in-relation-to-the-air-pollution-and-the-minimum-emission-standards/litigation-in-relation-to-the-highveld-priority-area-hpa>



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practice, shared by the PCC as necessary for the Just Transition. But how this is done and at what pace is a matter of controversy. Nevertheless, a commissioner remarked on the commitment of members of the secretariat – the PCC staff – “to do the right thing”. At times it felt as if civil society could say what secretariat members were thinking but could not express.

2. The PCC also shares the third objective of the LAC, namely to support a move to renewable energy. But the devil is in the details. For example, how does the PCC support the SAREM, the programme for localisation of the renewables production chain, in view of the importance of creating jobs? Is the PCC looking for a large-scale RE reindustrialisation and signalling to such a nascent industry that there will be demand for RE components to encourage RE industry? How much support does the PCC offer for smaller scale socially owned or community owned RE projects?
3. The PCC continuously expressed support for community voice, participation and empowerment, as enshrined in the Just Transition Framework. The LAC could work with the PCC because its process allowed for transparency and community participation, although they were displeased at the lack of follow-ups, particularly return visits to the places visited in the first round. This was explained by Olver as a result of ‘austerity’ or lack of funding.
4. The PCC responded to criticisms and concerns about events on the ground in Komati, expressed in both independent and the PCC’s own monitoring and evaluation reports. The PCC made several interventions in support of the community. That included appointing a dedicated Komati manager and recognising and encouraging the community and ward committee based Komati Steerco to have its say. The PCC secretariat worked closely with groundWork and LAC in Komati, for example in drawing up a facilitators’ protocol to ensure that decision-making processes would support community participation – at Komati and elsewhere.



5. The PCC showed a readiness to confront other government bodies, including both DMPR and DFFE, which were challenged on the IRP and NDC respectively. It did not, however, challenge the DoH on its indifference. The PCC also challenged strong private actors like the coal industry, as when Olver confronted Seriti CEO Mike Teke in July 2022 about the industry's climate denialism and refusal to plan for a transition, making it difficult to hold a conversation with them about Just Transition processes.

LAC commissioners and activists had difficulties with the PCC positions on other issues:

1. The PCC's approach to climate finance was difficult for LAC to follow and support, as it was for other commissioners as well. In the climate finance working group, the use of technical jargon obscured understanding, and there were obstacles to bringing in civil society advisors. The financial deals were decided outside of the PCC, and changed priorities, for example to finance green hydrogen, which is seen by LAC as a neo-colonial extractivist project.
2. Fudging the NDC 2021 trajectory for 2025 to 2030 by declaring it to be consistent with 1.5°C when it is not really – and accepting the mainstream but scientifically untenable target formulation of 'net zero' and endorsing the disreputable practice of carbon trading.
3. Dealing with business stakeholders separately and excluding LAC and others from those meetings. So, whereas community agendas and perspectives are visible to other actors (if they bother to pay attention), business and industry agendas are not within view of civil society. This signalled a pragmatic acceptance of the power of corporates, but also closed the door on more democratic decision making.

Absences in the work of the PCC

LAC activists also noted very specific absences in the work of the PCC and the official Just Transition process, which are listed here and discussed below:



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1. The absence of a national awareness raising communications campaign, despite a clear need and numerous requests.
2. Important Eskom planning documents and planning in general for the decommissioning of the nine other power stations have been continuously withheld from the public, affected communities and activists.
3. The coal industry was glaringly absent from discussion and action for mine and catchment rehabilitation and social responsibility.
4. Health was a big absence and an indication of how the huge externalities imposed by coal are not accounted for, dealt with, or even part of the conversation.²⁴
5. Waste was also absent from discussions, and also an externality that is denied attention by government and corporates. We argue that climate, environmental and jobs gains are relatively easily available in the waste sector.
6. There is a refusal of responsibility by government departments in general, and the mining and energy departments in particular, as became clear in the case of Komati power station decommissioning processes.
7. The refusal to properly decommission the shuttered oil refineries in south Durban did not appear on the PCC agenda, showing a narrow focus on coal and specifically coal producing areas. Nor is there any discussion about decommissioning Sasol's plants and a just transition in Sasolburg and Secunda.

²⁴ Towards the end of 2025, the PCC hosted a seminar "to launch the Climate and Health in South Africa: Pathways Toward Resilience and Equity scoping study," which forms part of the PCC's work in developing the Just Adaptation and Resilience Investment Platform (JARIP) – an initiative that seeks to strengthen South Africa's climate adaptation response through multi-stakeholder collaboration and investment mobilisation. While we clearly welcome this development, it does not, as yet, remove the absence of the Department of Health and health concerns from the first five years of the official Just Transition process. See <https://www.climatecommission.org.za/events/pcc-afd-adaptation-webinar-positioning-health-at-the-heart-of-south-africas-just-transition>.



The absence of a national awareness raising communications campaign, despite a clear need and numerous requests, raised many questions within the LAC. What we should have had, argued both LAC NGO staff and community researchers repeatedly, was a campaign on the scale of the 1994 election campaign, with voter education, or the HIV and Aids or Covid campaigns. Decarbonising South African society and adapting to climate change impacts like the floods in Durban will require major changes in people's thinking and understanding, and will need their co-operation. Understanding of climate change realities and priorities are also prerequisites for responsible and inclusive political decision making about South Africa's climate responses, as promised in the Just Transition Framework.

Similarly, LAC interviewees questioned whether the PCC's consultation was really good enough. Where it consisted of a tedious download (sharing) of information and staged events, little participation was evident. And there is no evidence of real, from the ground up, participatory planning, although it was shown to be possible in the Durban Coalition planning and interactions with eThekweni Metro [see discussion of this process in groundWork Report 2024].

With procedural justice now part of the discourse, the challenge is to set high democratic standards for it, and show that people's decision making and planning processes are possible and productive. Planning via local government Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) will be an important terrain of struggle in the immediate future.

The enduring absence of important Eskom planning documents and planning in general for the decommissioning of the nine other power stations in Mpumalanga, which have been withheld from the public despite many requests for their release, affected communities and activists. It shows a disregard for procedural justice and points to the dangers awaiting in an Eskom-led decommissioning of nine more coal-fired power stations in the near future. That it happens shows either that the PCC is not powerful enough to force the issue, or does not see the radical way in which Eskom is undermining procedural justice.



Mining and the Minerals Energy Complex

The coal industry lies at the heart of climate change in South Africa. The MEC has shaped the long run dynamics of the SA political economy. While not monolithic, the actors within the MEC have variously watered down, diverted, blocked or delayed climate policy and action. They still are. The mining industry is not in any way engaging with restorative justice – even in the narrow sense of mine rehabilitation, which is an existing legal duty on them – as measured by the slow progress of the new closure strategy. On the ground in Komati, the Minerals Council of South Africa, individual mines and the DMPR were all missing in action – not taking part and not taking any responsibility – as mines closed and coal miners lost their jobs.

South Africans have built up a powerful critique of the mining sector and its legacy, rooted in the theoretical understanding of the MEC [Fine and Rustomjee 1996] and the history of migrant labour, whose effects are with us to this day. Migrant labour was at the centre of the two major atrocities of the post-apartheid period – Marikana and Stilfontein [see groundWork Report 2024: 163 for more detail]. We also note that the sending communities are hardly mentioned in the Just Transition discussion. That includes communities that are still sending areas and those that are not, but were made dependent on remittances that are no longer there. This knowledge should be used in the politics of the transition. It is imperative that the transition be also seen as a transition from an extractive, colonial economy to a generative economy in a democracy.

Health

The verdict of health activists within the LAC was that health issues have been almost completely absent from the PCC. The DoH has not participated in transition discussions; there is as yet no plan to deal with the health impacts of coal-fired power stations and the mines that supply them; the environment department has exempted Eskom from minimum emission standards



governing pollution; and communities on the coal fencelines continue to live in environments harmful to their health.²⁵

This has had massive consequences, the first being that the transition fails to take into account the externalised costs of air quality – even though the World Health Organisation²⁶ argues that the health co-benefits from climate responses like moving away from polluting fossil fuels are so huge that these savings could fund the transition. This is wilful neglect because, already since the 1990s, air pollution science has been solid and clear about the direct association between air pollution and health outcomes, such as low birth weight and respiratory disease. This is a missed opportunity for the PCC.

It is also out of sync with international health institutions, which consider health central to climate change responses. Air pollution from the burning of fossil fuels is the leading global cause of climate change and among the world's greatest present risks to good health [Fuller et al 2022]. Coal, the dirtiest of the fossil fuels, is now recognised as even more harmful to health. A recent study found that coal emissions are associated with double the mortality risk compared with fine airborne particles from other sources [Henneman et al 2023]. The climate response also provides a significant opportunity to achieve meaningful co-benefits for climate, health and wellbeing, through reducing emissions and adapting societies to the multiple impacts of climate change [Watts et al 2018; Whitmee et al 2015].

Health services are overwhelmed in having to deal with the triple crisis of HIV and Aids, TB and malaria. But it is not the only reason. The health department has also been missing from air quality standards discussions, although these directly impact on health. It is as if they can't see the link!

Over the past decade, change in the sector has been driven by civil society. Medical practitioners are joining the Climate Energy and Health Special Interest Group (SIG) of the Public Health Association of South Africa (PHASA), which was formed in 2017 to advocate for healthy energy policy and to

25 These arguments are taken from groundWork Report 2023, in addition to more recent interview material.

26 See https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/health#:~:text=The%20World%20Health%20Organization%20estimates%20that%20climate,harmful%20cooking%20fuels%20with%20clean%20cooking%20solutions**



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promote approaches for healthy living. Since 2019, PHASA as a whole has called for strong leadership from the health sector to address the challenges of climate and environmental health impacts and injustice in South Africa.

The environmental justice movement needs to keep up the pressure, while providing support to progressive health professionals. The Deadly Air case, brought by LAC members groundWork and the Vukani Environmental Justice Movement (VEM), has been an important source of pressure leading to this change. In other countries, such as Canada and the European Union, the health departments are the air quality regulators – as was the case in South Africa until the early 2000s.

There is a deeper point to be made. Keeping the health costs, as an externality imposed on households and the DoH, out of sight and outside climate negotiations is very useful to corporates and government agencies within the MEC. It allows them to calculate costs and make plans – following an elite agenda – without taking these externalities into account.

More attention on public health within the Just Transition Framework would begin to provide some measure of restorative justice for the communities most affected by coal-related pollution. This should start with comprehensive public health plans for the people living in the sacrifice zones of the fossil fuel economy, in the heavily polluted Highveld, Vaal and Waterberg areas, in south Durban and Richards Bay, guided by the principles of communication, collaboration and active participation. The plans should include effective health surveillance and air pollution early warning systems, community outreach programmes, and well-resourced and accessible public health facilities prepared to deal with respiratory emergencies.

Active and accountable leadership is needed in South Africa to place health firmly on the agenda of the just transition, to redress the injustices of pollution from fossil fuels and climate change impacts on already vulnerable communities, and to develop the capacity of health workers and healthcare institutions to move to a low-carbon and climate-resilient healthcare system.

As this report was being finalised, the PCC and the Agence Francais de Developpement (AFD) held a webinar entitled “Climate and Health in South



Africa: Pathways Toward Resilience and Equity”, to discuss the first phase of this research commissioned by the AFD. This is a welcome development, but it does not take away the fact that, in the formative phase of the Just Transition, health issues were not central to the work of the PCC. The AFD press release²⁷ confirms our arguments here when it says, “health remains peripheral in climate and transition strategies and there is an urgent need to advance on this crucial agenda”.

Waste

Waste as a sector has been ignored by the PCC. It is also a system full of negative externalities, but one in which climate, environmental and jobs gains are relatively easily available. Waste is one of three big sectors with high methane emissions. This could be a quick climate win if attention is paid to it, using approaches like minimising waste, sorting at source and better landfill management. It is one sector in which rapid mitigation action results in more jobs, rather than fewer. Recycling waste supports better livelihoods for waste pickers and diverting and composting organic waste creates new jobs. Composting can lead to reductions in fertilizer use and associated greenhouse gas emissions.

By addressing waste issues, one can also address pollution caused by waste, particularly unmanaged waste, not serviced by local government. This is the waste that lands up in waterways and the ocean. Waste in the ocean is a massive risk. It adds to ocean acidification, has a large impact on population levels of marine species because it affects their fertility, and it ends up as a toxic seasoning in the seafood we eat. Plastic is also a very harmful air pollutant and releases carbon when burnt.

Waste can have secondary impacts where there is poor waste management. For example, during floods caused by climate change, or just heavy rain, waste blocks drains, contaminates water and is spread across the land. This interferes with resilience building.

²⁷ <https://www.afd.fr/en/news/positioning-health-heart-just-transition>



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Why would waste then not be taken up by the PCC? LAC staff sought the answer in the fact that the argument about waste and climate change is layered, and takes some time to think through. It questions industrial assumptions. In general, people don't think about waste. Municipal systems work on a linear system, in which externalities are made invisible.

But there is opportunity in the fact that the waste system can no longer continue as it is. Not a single municipality is doing a halfway adequate job. And waste is increasing, while costs are rising for landfilling, including waste transport as landfill spaces are located further and further from population centres. Industry actors promote incineration as an alternative, but that leads to extreme air pollution, adds to climate change and concentrates toxics in the ash that must still be disposed of. The moment to restructure waste management, start a new sector around composting and improving food security in cities, and to reduce the production of materials, notably plastic, destined for dumping, is now. What cannot be recycled, or is not recycled, should be eliminated from production. We need to create a circular economy.

Waste pickers are a critical part of the recycling chain, yet they are exploited. There is no social protection, they are informal workers who are ripped off by buyback centres unless they are well organised. For most people, waste pickers are invisible, or otherwise viewed with prejudice. But they are the only people who are systematically diverting waste from landfills.

The PCC needs to engage with waste issues. They could support a consultative process with all involved to envision a new, climate-wise waste management system. To change a highly dysfunctional system, which is a centralised model transporting waste over long distances, to one that is decentralised and contributes to the regeneration of the soil. Attention to the waste sector, organising and strengthening waste pickers and their rights, and promoting decentralised, sort-at-source waste management systems need to be part of a climate response.



Not taking the transition seriously

There is a refusal of responsibility by government departments in general, as became clear in the case of Komati power station decommissioning processes. The DMPR in particular has failed to proactively facilitate mine closure and rehabilitation to support the Just Transition. The absence of the DMPR is strategic since it is signalling to its sector that they need not take the Just Transition seriously – and they don't. As argued in Chapter 1, the transition needs capable government to succeed, and therein lies a shared challenge for the PCC and civil society.

South Durban refineries

The groundWork Reports have long argued that the neglect of a Just Transition framework for the decommissioning of fossil fuel installations – refineries – in South Durban is unjust, and shows a narrow focus on coal and specifically coal producing areas. As we wrote in The groundWork Report 2023 [189 and 190]:

The core of the local community's distress, however, is this: after dominating the area and polluting them for 66 years, the refineries closed down abruptly, without consulting them or considering their interests as a community... to be worthy of the name, a just transition must produce a transformation of everyday life in south Durban at least in this decade. It's not just about jobs but also about jobs for what and for whom. It's about the state of people's settlements and environment, about addressing the social as well as the environmental legacies, about how people live together and the values that bind them, about health care that has a care for the history of pollution, about good education that gives youth a chance and does not confine their imaginations to the near horizon, about good governance and capable government, about people's determination for democratic control of public services and amenities – that is, their determination for local sovereignty. And more.



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These absences show how the debate is skewed in favour of elite interests. Issues of waste, health and mining revolve around externalities – that is continuous costs for people and impacts on their environments – or forms of ecological debt that corporates do not want to acknowledge or take responsibility for because it would eat away their profit. The absence of government departments, starting with DMPR but including DoEE, as well as weaknesses in other departments, have to do with protection and support that people should get from the state and do not. This has included, for more than a century now, a reluctance to protect people and environments against the effects of mining and burning coal, or even to acknowledge these externalities. This is part of the original MEC culture, where the state protects industry over the rights of people. Finally, local government has prime responsibility for building resilience for climate adaptation – so its weaknesses make communities more vulnerable.

Frameworks for systems change

But a civil society agenda cannot only be reactive – its intention must be change towards environmental justice. In this final section, we turn to a broad framing for systems change, and then explore the topics in the Open Agenda.

What is required for a proper, workable, just and sustainable climate response? For groundWork and the majority of civil society it would require systems change, which would mean, as we argued in The groundWork Report 2024:

a major global transition in how we relate to each other and to nature. The environmental justice movement identifies the mechanisms that impose environmental injustices and searches for means to reverse them, including reconfiguring current ways of organising societies and the understanding of our relationships to nature. It works for systems change, challenging ways of thinking that serve the ruling elite but do not provide, or actively block, life-giving and just ways of dealing



with our challenges to safely and fairly live with each other and on the planet. [2024: 1]

Climate is one of at least nine planetary boundaries that we need to respect if the planet is not to become increasingly unsafe for people. This list includes biosphere integrity (where the challenge is species extinction and excessive human appropriation of primary production), dangerous biogeochemical flows and the release of novel entities (mostly plastics and petrochemicals), fresh water and land system change and ocean acidification [Richardson et al 2023]. And beyond the abuse of the planet there is extreme and intensifying inequality, such that “the richest 1% of the world’s people now hold more wealth than the poorest 99%, and over 700 million people live in extreme poverty” [FoEI 2023: 10]. However, this does not need to be the case.

According to Hickel and Sullivan:

Provisioning decent living standards (DLS) for 8.5 billion people would require only 30% of current global resource and energy use, leaving a substantial surplus for additional consumption, public luxury, scientific advancement, and other social investments. Such a future requires planning to provision public services, to deploy efficient technology, and to build sovereign industrial capacity in the Global South. [2024: 1]

These two arguments, taken together, imply that what is required is nothing less than a civilisational change. The PCC and the South African Just Transition must be judged on whether it moves us in the direction of, or at least opens possibilities for, such a transformational change.

The PCC has declared that its tasks include building a national consensus around South Africa’s climate response. This is, of course, a massive task that cannot be done by the PCC alone. However, a true national consensus would have to deal with current social injustices and be truly sustainable into the future. An interesting proposal has been put forward by economist Esther Dufflo, who spoke at a PCC event. She argues that if the very rich were made



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to pay proper taxes, the money could be transferred directly to poor people to help them deal with climate losses and damages.²⁸

The basic guidelines for real systems change are already available. Here is one formulation, in the form of “concrete utopian thinking”, driven by the basic human drive to happiness or, more technically, “universal free flourishing”.²⁹ Hartwig [2007: 187-189] proposes that such flourishing would require the following principles:

- a normative order informed by the values of trust, solidarity, sensitivity to suffering, nurturing and care, in universally recognised rights (freedoms) and duties;
- constitutional democracy organised around people’s councils or assemblies forged to articulate self-determination, with as much local autonomy and participatory democracy as possible;
- the massive redistribution, transformation and limitation of resource use dictated by considerations of equity and ecology, including the socialisation of knowledge;
- the co-operative organisation of production of goods and services by interlinked autonomous associations at a local and regional level;
- distributive principles along the lines of “from each in accordance with their wants, abilities and needs” and “to each according to their essential needs and innovative enterprise” such that no one is forced to sell their labour power or work for a master;
- the recognition of diversity and pluralism for political, scientific and educational creativity.

In 2011, led by the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC), forty civil society organisations, including trade unions, participated in the production of a series of technical papers that covered agriculture and food security; energy; water; health; housing and construction; transport; zero

28 See https://www.youtube.com/shorts/tSqszbOaO_8

29 Using “flourishing” as a benchmark sees human happiness and flourishing as the highest good. It opposes a politics of “minimum requirements” for life.



waste; ecological restoration; leisure and tourism; manufacturing; sanitation; trade; climate change impact assessments; financing climate jobs; and transforming local government. In broad terms, the campaign proposed that South Africans:

1. produce electricity from wind and solar power;
2. reduce energy use through energy efficiency in industries;
3. reduce energy use in homes and buildings by constructing new buildings to be energy efficient and by retrofitting existing buildings;
4. reduce the use of energy in transport by improving and expanding public transport;
5. produce food through organic small-scale agroecology; and
6. protect water, soil and biodiversity resources.

Civil society has a track record of producing and presenting alternative visions. An important document for the Life After Coal campaign is the Open Agenda, which contains an invitation to allies in the Just Transition to join in the debate and refine the agenda on the basis of shared principles: inclusivity, solidarity, open democratic debate and decision making, and class, race, gender and environmental justice.

Just Transition Open Agenda

The Open Agenda³⁰ is an agenda for the just transition from the ground up, expressing the demands of community based and civil society organisations. It was first articulated in 2019, during a community coal exchange meeting in Middelburg and expressed 11 priority demands [groundWork Report 2019]. The Open Agenda was subsequently adopted and expanded by the LAC, both in terms of reach (there are now 18 sections) and in detail.

The Open Agenda consists of solutions relevant to the just transition that have been developed over the last 30 years, some of them from the struggle against apartheid (for example, the transport choices as they are limited by apartheid

³⁰ The full Open Agenda can be accessed at <https://lifeaftercoal.org.za/about/just-transition/open-agenda>.



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geographies), others responding to empty promises made after apartheid (such as quality health care for all). The following descriptions, drawn from the Open Agenda, show the areas included in the Open Agenda and the LAC's approach to them.

1. A driving force in the just transition – but only one component of it – is the need for a new energy system to replace the dirty, unhealthy, wasteful and elite energy system based on coal, oil and gas. While this change has its roots in pressure to move away from fossil fuels, and relies on fast developing renewable energy technologies, it is equally concerned with social ownership of energy resources, decentralised energy systems and people's access to clean electrical energy.
2. Public money as well as private capital continue to sustain the energy system driven by fossil fuels that has led to the climate crisis. This is unjust, unsustainable and – in the case of public finance – misaligned with global and national commitments. Instead, the focus should be on financing the transition and doing so in a transparent manner.
3. At the end of coal, and towards the end of coal, the landscapes of the coal regions need to be rehabilitated. Resources like water and soil need to be returned to a healthy state, in the process providing jobs and becoming available as “new” resources. We also need to attend to the end of petroleum refining and the decontamination of polluted land, including power station ash heaps and industrial slag heaps.
4. Climate change mitigation and adaptation are not separate. For example, agro-ecology produces food, restores the soil and absorbs carbon from the atmosphere (as opposed to industrial agriculture, which is a major source of greenhouse gases). Continued coal mining, on the other hand, destroys land and water and so undermines adaptation. But regardless of the success of the Just Transition, and of climate change mitigation measures, it is inevitable that we will have to live with and adapt to increasingly dangerous climate change impacts.
5. The climate crisis is an acute health emergency with far-reaching effects on both human health and the environments that sustain that health.



The climate crisis and the crisis of people's health are interlinked and have many of the same solutions. The burning of fossil fuels in the production of energy, and the air pollution that it produces, is the leading cause of climate change and one of the world's greatest health risks. Providing clean energy to everyone who needs it will dramatically improve the climate, as well as human health and economy. Health is at the core of the wellbeing of a society. Our health has been injured by our society's reliance on fossil fuels. It is also compromised by unequal care afforded by the public and private systems. The health system is already in crisis and needs radical proactive change to be able to cope with current public health challenges, as well as the current and anticipated damages induced by slow onset and rapid climate change events.

6. Mobility underlies many aspects of wellbeing and resilience, and is a key energy using sector currently reliant on fossil fuels. Transport is needed to get to work, to school and to access medical care, keep ties with friends and family and explore the world around us. Transport choices are currently severely limited and expensive for most South Africans. What we need is a transport sector that supports a wellbeing economy, which is accessible, reliable, safe, affordable, sustainable and environmentally friendly.
7. Accessible and affordable communication and internet access enables people to learn, relax and participate in public life and public debate. It can provide access to job opportunities and support small-scale and other businesses. It should provide access to knowledge, culture, learning and entertainment. Free connectivity can provide access to information and opportunities that help establish a more equal society and support economic interaction.
8. Food is a form of energy. It is basic to human life and a human right. Food availability is the result of systems of land ownership, access to water, seeds, skills, knowledge and market opportunities, as well as opportunities for autonomous food production. It is crucial for people's



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wellbeing. The current dominant food system is largely directed by the big supermarkets on the one hand and agricultural input industries on the other, with farmers sandwiched between. It is profit driven and relies heavily on the need for fossil fuels. This creates opportunities for a new food system.

9. Local government is the level of government closest to the people and their immediate concerns. It has a crucial role to play in building and supporting the resilience of infrastructure as well as people in its area and is the first line of defence in terms of disaster management. Proper local services should build people's resilience, reconstruct and climate-proof settlements, and fix broken roads, storm water drains, water and sewage pipes and street lighting. Local government should provide proper municipal services, including drinking water, wastewater treatment and waste management. It should use renewables such as solar water heaters. Privatised services have provided opportunities for corruption. They should be returned to public control.
10. The just transition process deals with complex and interlinked issues. This requires dialogue, open debate and democratic decision making about the future. The information at the basis of all plans and decisions should be transparent. The people most affected, particularly on the coalfields or next to the petrochemical plants, must from the beginning be part of information gathering, analysis and decision making. The South African constitution gives us the rights that can make the just transition possible. Community activists have committed themselves to engaging with local government in a democratic manner.
11. South Africa needs land reform to reverse the injustices of land dispossession under colonialism, apartheid and the MEC. People need land to build houses, to have a place to retire to, have security, thrive and flourish, practise their cultural traditions and live in stable communities. Land is also the basis of the economy, and it should be redistributed to make the economy viable for all. Land and water reform are crucial to make the Just Transition possible.



12. Water is a basic human need and a human right. No-one can live without water. Our oceans provide us with food, jobs, climate regulation, recreational activities, beauty, clean air and economic opportunity. Water is the source of life and food. It is crucial for people's health and dignity and plays an essential role in our economies. But it is a scarce resource, especially in South Africa, which is a water scarce country, and which will become more so as a result of climate change. Water quality – clean water – is as important as the quantity and needs to be assured through the protection of rivers, wetlands, other water bodies and the catchments where the water originates. Water is a commons, and we oppose the privatisation of water. A lack of water can lead to unfair competition by the strongest actor and result in water scarcity for other users. This will lead to water conflict. Water is a gender justice issue, as the burdens resulting from lack of water in the home are disproportionately borne by women who, in most cases, collect water and are responsible for hygiene, health and food preparation. Water justice demands water security for all in order to fulfil the basic human right to water.
13. The creation and disposal of waste imposes a major externality cost on those who have to live with waste, in most cases poor black communities, which are deliberately excluded from decision making about waste. It was this environmental injustice that spurred the creation of the environmental justice movement. Only since the industrial revolution has waste become non-biodegradable, toxic and a threat to life. In South Africa, the biggest category of waste is mining waste, including dumps with uranium, arsenic and mercury, and coal dumps. These have been left by the mining industry to contaminate soil, air and water, and the people who live nearby. Waste, especially municipal waste, still contains value, which can be a source of livelihood for people and a contribution to reducing pollution and cost of waste management. Waste pickers generally work in difficult and dangerous conditions, and their contribution to waste management is not recognised or rewarded.



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14. The core dynamic behind climate change and other planetary destruction and environmental injustices is the profit-driven economy, particularly in its neoliberal, austerity form. 'The economy', which is merely a set of institutions within society, has subordinated both society and nature to its narrow and elitist needs. A new economic system is necessary, and the Just Transition provides a space in which to deal with this. A wellbeing economy is based on the idea that economic decision making should start by asking what the needs of people are, and how to fulfil them, rather than to have an economy that serves profit. In such an economy, it will be possible to do socially necessary work and reward it, rather than leave it to the owners of capital to decide what work should and should not be done. More immediately, the campaign for a universal basic income grant (UBIG) must be central to the campaign for a just transition, to end poverty and hunger and to let people take a more active part in making their local economies.
15. The path to a just transition must be one rooted in the principles of gender justice. This will mean taking into consideration the legacy of gender discrimination and its effects in society, as well as the realities of the care burdens on women in society and the ongoing, pervasive nature of gender-based violence. A just transition will be one that has women leaders at the forefront of decision-making, as well as implementation.
16. The youth will inherit a planet heavily impacted by climate change and fossil fuel pollution. This will include not only disasters in the natural realm, but also very serious social challenges like economic breakdown, with government breakdown impacting on safety, health, services provision and disaster management. The Just Transition should promise and deliver a better future for our young people and prepare the youth for coming difficulties. Many youth activists are fighting for a liveable future and they must be heard and supported to take the lead in the movement.



17. Living in peace and safety should be protected by the law, as a basic human right. This is based on social justice, healthy communities and democratic policing. Political assassinations, including assassinations of activists and whistleblowers, are a threat to people and our democracy. War is the suspension of the rule of law that plunges us all into chaos, violence and undemocratic spaces. We condemn all genocides, military invasions and the use of militaries against the people. The military are big polluters without responsibility for their pollution, including massive fossil fuel use and contamination from munitions, landmines and nuclear devices. The military uses scarce resources that could be used to improve people's lives. A just transition is only possible if open, democratic spaces exist for robust debate and accountability. Restorative justice demands that we address South African history based on the violent conquest of people, their land and other resources.
18. The transformation that will result from a just transition depends on new and rediscovered knowledge and perspectives that are available in indigenous, local and people's knowledge, as opposed to colonial, elite and narrowly focused expert knowledge that does not serve the people but constructs and legitimises our oppression.



3 **Bad weather and the decline of the American empire**

As the climate and interrelated ecological and social crises intensify, big oil has entrenched itself in defence of the fossil fuel economy that brought us to this point. It has won a major victory with the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the USA, and that victory is the product of decades of well-funded organising. This chapter opens with a brief account of the state of the climate. We then take a hard look at Trump’s climate and energy politics as it is mixed in with a politics of aggression and cruelty, of a will to dominate which is, in our view, more a sign of weakness than of strength and all the more dangerous for that. Trump’s injunction to “drill, baby drill” surrenders the lead on ‘electrotech’ to China, which nevertheless continues to burn more coal, oil and gas than anyone else. We then move to Belem, Brazil, where the climate negotiations, taking place for the first time without an official US presence, remain deeply compromised. This is what the empire of capital has organised for over the last five decades, as we describe in the last section.

Bad weather

2023 was the hottest year in the last 120 000 odd years. 2024 was hotter still. In both cases, the heat was driven up by an El Niño, which brings warm water to the surface of the Pacific Ocean along the tropics. 2025 is a mild La Niña year. La Niña brings cold water to the tropical Pacific and so cools the whole world. Nevertheless, 2025 has come in as the third or second hottest year ever, more or less equal with 2023.³¹

31 Zeke Hausfather, *State of the climate: 2025 in top-three hottest years on record as ocean heat surges*, Carbon Brief, 14 January 2026



Bad weather and the decline of the American empire

Since 2015, when the Paris Agreement was signed, the rate of heating has increased. It was then projected that warming of 1.5°C above preindustrial temperatures, the lower temperature target agreed in Paris, would be exceeded in 2045. It is now projected that it will be exceeded by 2029. Already, the average temperature over the last three years – 2023, 2024 and 2025 – exceeds 1.5°C. “We are now in the decade where the 1.5°C limit is likely to be exceeded, highlighting the accelerating pace of climate change and the urgent need for action,” says Samantha Burgess of the European Copernicus Climate Change Service.³² Ocean heat is also at record levels, bringing on the first ‘tipping point’.

The concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere – the driver of global heating – is also rising faster. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from burning fossil fuels in 2025 are at 38.1 billion tonnes a year (Gt/y), up from 37.25 in 2023, with another 4 Gt/y from ‘land use change’ – clearing forests, draining wetlands and ploughing up grasslands. The remaining carbon budget for a 50% chance of limiting the temperature rise to 1.5°C will be about 88 GtCO₂ or about two years from the beginning of 2026. And it is being squeezed to more or less nothing by rising emissions of other GHGs, particularly methane; a decline in the capacity of land and ocean sinks to absorb surplus CO₂; and feedbacks from the heating world including growing emissions from wildfires, tropical wetlands and melting polar permafrost. The 2°C budget is also closing fast: for a two in three chance of limiting warming to 2°C, the remaining budget is under 830 GtCO₂, or less than 20 years. For “well below 2°C” – the Paris target – there’s less than 10 years [Forster et al 2025].

Between 1.5 and 2°C, the risk of tripping over tipping points increases. “Biosphere tipping points” are coming on faster than anticipated. Already tropical corals have tipped into long term decline, affecting about a quarter of marine life and the livelihoods dependent on fishing, with no coming back without a rapid reduction in temperatures. That can only follow from – but will lag behind – a rapid reduction in carbon emissions, which isn’t happening.

32 Copernicus, *The rapid approach of the 1.5°C global warming threshold since the Paris Agreement*, 5 November 2025; and *Third-warmest October on record, 2025 to finish among the three warmest years*, 10 November 2025



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Next in line is the Amazon rainforest. The hottest two years ever brought drought and intensified wildfires started by cattle ranchers stealing indigenous people's lands as well as by increasing lightning strikes. The loss of the rainforest would result in massive emissions of carbon. The Amazon, along with the other major South American rivers, is showing reduced flow despite somewhat better rains this year.

More tipping points follow, and some may already have been crossed, including 'cryosphere tipping points' – the melting of glaciers, ice sheets and permafrost. Major ocean currents and atmospheric weather systems are also weakening and are at risk of collapse. Most tipping points create climate feedbacks that amplify global warming, so leading to runaway climate change. There is much uncertainty about the timing of tipping points and in most cases certainty comes only after the fact.

La Niña tends to reverse El Niño weather patterns. Thus, Southern Africa hopes for good rains and good crops following the terrible droughts of the El Niño years. But extreme weather continues to batter the world. This is but a sample:³³

- Drought: The Amazon drought has not been broken by slightly better rainfall; Iran is suffering severe drought with Tehran close to 'day zero'.
- Heatwaves, drought and wildfires tend to go together: Large parts of Los Angeles, California, burnt down in January; Europe and the Mediterranean experienced record heat for July, with temperatures in Turkiye topping 50°C – the wildfires followed and tens of thousands were evacuated in Portugal, Spain and Turkiye; Fire ripped through South Korea in March and large parts of eastern Russia in April; Japan experienced record high temperatures in August.
- Cyclones: Three category 5 storms formed in the Atlantic, but tracked north to avoid the US mainland. In October, however, Hurricane Melissa tore into Jamaica with winds of 295 km/h and destroyed towns in the western half of the island. It then weakened to Cat 3 before blowing

33 World Meteorological Organisation, *State of the Climate*, Update for CoP 30, (31 October); WMO media release, *Devastating rainfall in Asia claims hundreds of lives*, 2 December 2025; various press reports.



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into Cuba. In Africa, Madagascar and Mozambique were pummelled by Dikeledi and Jude. In the Pacific, five 'super typhoons' formed. In October, Matmo brought extreme flooding to the Philippines, China, Vietnam and Thailand. In November, Kalmaegi hit the Philippines and was immediately followed by Fung-wong.

- Floods: In April, floods in the Congo inundated Kinshasa and tens of thousands were displaced across DRC; In May, Nigeria experienced major floods with 200 dead; In June, the Mthatha floods in South Africa took over 100 lives; From June, intensified monsoon rains supplemented by glacial lake outbursts³⁴ brought floods to Pakistan and north-east India, affecting millions of people. The monsoon brings life giving rain to the region, but every year it is becoming "more and more aggressive", says a local disaster management chief;³⁵ In July, flash floods in Texas, USA, swept 135 people away; In November, La Niña brought floods, amped up by three simultaneous cyclones, to an enormous area from the Philippines, across Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia and all the way to Sri Lanka. At Hue City, Vietnam, over 1.7 metres of rain fell in 24 hours. Thousands were killed and many millions affected; In December, Storm Byron brought floods to Greece, Cyprus and Israel/Palestine. In Gaza, Israel's relentless bombardment has left most people homeless and destroyed water systems, stormwater drains, sewerage works and waste systems. People's tents were flooded, including with sewage and rubbish.

Bad Politics

Donald Trump assumed the presidency of the USA in January 2025. He immediately set out to impose himself internationally, putting arbitrary tariffs on imports from other countries, threatening to annex Canada and Greenland and 'take back' the Panama Canal. As economic policy, the tariffs are incoherent and are mixed up with equally incoherent geopolitical posturing.

34 Melting glaciers create dams of loose rock and ice, which collapse with more heat or heavy rains.

35 Azadeh Moshiri, *Devastation on repeat: How climate change is worsening Pakistan's deadly floods*, BBC, 2 November 2025



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At one moment, the tariffs are intended to bring industry back to the USA. At the next, they are punishment for offending Trump. As much as anything, the purpose seems to be to strut over the world stage, to punish the weak and praise the strong.

As expected, he trumpeted the US exit from the Paris Agreement and ditched the Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETP) with South Africa, Indonesia and Vietnam. The US contribution to the South African JETP was mostly debt finance at commercial rates channelled through an institution meant to “advance American foreign policy ... [and] help American businesses gain footholds” in growing markets.³⁶ So, no great loss.

He also shut down the US Agency for International Development (USAid). Residual aid programmes were moved to the State Department (foreign affairs) but with budgets slashed. Millions of people will likely die as a result of the abrupt termination of various programmes such as for malaria control, HIV and Aids treatment, and reproductive health. USAid also ran hearts and minds programmes alongside US military operations. Various commentators noted that USAid is a key instrument of US ‘soft power’. As Reuters reported, it “is instrumental in Washington’s effort to build alliances around the world, reinforce its diplomacy and counter the influence of adversaries such as China and Russia in the developing world”.³⁷

Zhang Yongle of Peking University argues that “Trump’s policies – however crude – respond to a real problem of hegemonic overextension. Trump’s attacks on ‘globalism’... may reflect the fact that the US no longer has the economic capacity to sustain a global hegemonic system at any price.” US debt is at 125% of GDP (\$34.5 trillion) while the ‘real economy’ that might sustain the debt is faltering. His “tariff-based strategy to coerce trade-deficit reductions and manufacturing repatriation ... is predicated on three assumptions: first, that exporting nations cannot overcome their dependence on US markets; second, that American consumers will tolerate inflationary

36 <https://www.dfc.gov/who-we-are/overview>. The US contribution was \$1 billion in commercial loans and just \$21 million in grant funding – much of it directed to US consultants.

37 Reuters, *USAID contractors fire staff, face cash crunch as Trump causes chaos in aid world*, Daily Maverick, 4 February 2025



pressure; third, that domestic capacities – not least, skilled engineers – will be able to sustain manufacturing resurgence and supply-chain reintegration” [Zhang 2025].

These bets do not look good. Rather, Trump in office signals an acceleration in the ongoing decline of the American empire.

The politics of cruelty

Trump puts cruelty on display. It is a spectacle for the pleasure of his core MAGA (Make America Great Again) constituency. A White House X post shows migrants being shackled as they board a plane to an unspecified destination. It is headed “ASMR: Illegal Alien Deportation Flight”.³⁸ ASMR means something like “for your spine-tingling pleasure”.

Kristi Noem, Secretary for Homeland Security,³⁹ likes to post pictures of herself in military camouflage, cradling an automatic rifle. In March, she had 300 people deported – without due legal process – and incarcerated in a notorious high security prison in El Salvador. She then visited the prison for a photo op in front of an overcrowded cage holding half naked men.⁴⁰

Kilmar Abrego Garcia, deported ‘in error’, was amongst those held at the prison. The Trump administration first refused to facilitate his return then, following multiple court rulings, reluctantly took him back and immediately arrested him on a charge of ‘people smuggling’. In September, ahead of the court trial, it was organising to deport him to eSwatini – a country with which he has no connection whatever. Others deported to eSwatini come from Cuba, Jamaica, Yemen and Laos, It is not known what eSwatini gets for taking ‘criminal illegal aliens’ deported from the US. It is speculated it may be trying to avoid harsh US tariffs. Other immigrants have been deported to South Sudan, Uganda and Rwanda, also under secret deals.⁴¹

38 <https://x.com/WhiteHouse/status/1891922058415603980>, ASMR: Illegal Alien Deportation Flight;

39 A secretary in the US is the same as a minister elsewhere.

40 Jon Allsop, *The Real Audience for Trump's Anti-Immigrant Spectacles*, The New Yorker, 16 May 2025

41 Nick Turse, *Trump Administration Depports Five Men to Eswatini, Expanding Global Gulag in Africa*, The Intercept, 16 July 2025



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A Homeland Security post, titled “Coming Soon!”, advertises the ‘Alligator Alcatraz’ detention centre. It was thrown up in just eight days in a remote part of the Florida Everglades, a vast and ecologically sensitive wetland famous for its wildlife and particularly its alligators. The post shows a lineup of alligators wearing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) caps. It is heavily fenced, surrounded by security cameras and staffed by 400 security guards. Not cheap. The guards are hired by a private security company and are apparently well paid but not necessarily qualified. Conditions for the imprisoned people are reportedly appalling. They are crowded into metal mesh cages within large marquee tents. There is no daylight, the lights are always on and they get just one meal a day.⁴²

The war on immigrants ties to the agenda to eliminate DEI – diversity, equity and inclusion – in government agencies and in private business. And DEI links to ESG – environment, social and governance – criteria in business investment. Alligator Alcatraz makes a show of the Trump administration’s hostility to nature and disdain for the law or any other impediment to its action. Environmental groups sued to stop the project. Friends of the Everglades said, “The scheme is not only cruel, it threatens the Everglades ecosystem ...” Amongst other things, it will bring in up to 5 000 people, with attendant waste and sewage outfall, high intensity lighting and a lot of road and air traffic. The State of Florida simply skipped the required environmental review.⁴³

In early September, Trump posted a video showing a small speed boat vaporised by a drone strike. He said the strike killed 11 ‘narco-terrorists’. The boat was in international waters in the Gulf of Mexico (renamed the Gulf of America by Trump) off Venezuela. The US had seven warships in the area at the time – apparently intended to intimidate the regime of Nicolas Maduro. Foreign Secretary Marc Rubio said they could have stopped the boat: “Instead of interdicting it, on the president’s orders, we blew it up – and it’ll happen again.” The administration has not produced evidence that the boat was

42 Marycarmen Lara Villanueva, *‘Alligator Alcatraz’ showcases Donald Trump’s penchant for visual cruelty*, The Conversation, 16 July 2025

43 Mitch Perry and Jay Waagmeester, *Environmental groups sue to stop ‘Alligator Alcatraz’ from operating in the Everglades*, Florida Pheonix, 27 June 2025



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running drugs and, obviously, blew up any such evidence. Critics of the action called it “flat-out murder”. Such actions must be signed off by the Pentagon’s top lawyers, the judge advocates general (JAGs). In February, Pete Hegseth, the newly appointed Secretary of Defence, now renamed Secretary of War, fired the top JAGs to avoid “roadblocks to orders that are given by a commander in chief”.⁴⁴ By November, 21 such boats had been blown up.

In December, the US seized two oil tankers laden with Venezuelan crude. “Large tanker,” said Trump of the first one. “Very large, largest one ever seized actually.” The marines then seized the second tanker and Trump announced a blockade of ‘sanctioned’ ships which carry oil to China and Turkey, amongst others. He complained about “the theft of our assets ... We’re getting [back] land, oil rights, whatever we had ... They took our oil rights, we had a lot of oil there ... they threw our companies out. And we want it back.”⁴⁵

Venezuela was a founding member of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) set up to end the wholesale appropriation of oil resources by the oil majors. It first nationalised its oil fields in 1976, creating Petroleos de Venezuela (PdVSA) to take over the operations of Shell, Exxon, Chevron and Mobil, amongst others, who were fully compensated. The oil majors returned in the 1990s but, in 2007 under President Hugo Chavez, Venezuela required a majority stake for PdVSA in all oil operations. Chevron and the European majors agreed. Exxon and ConocoPhillips refused and were expropriated. Chavez died in 2013 and relations went from bad to worse under his successor Nicolas Maduro, who was accused, with some justice, of political repression and election rigging.

Successive US administrations, starting with Barak Obama, have imposed sanctions on Venezuela. In 2022, Chevron obtained a waiver to sanctions from the Biden administration and entered into various joint ventures with PdVSA and now pumps and transports – in non-sanctioned ships – most of the oil

44 Nick Turse, *Pentagon Official: Trump Boat Strike Was a Criminal Attack on Civilians*, The Intercept, 5 September 2025

45 *Trump says US is ‘getting land, oil rights, whatever we had’ back from Venezuela*, Al Jazeera, 18 December 2025; Idrees Ali, Phil Stewart, Steve Holland and Marianna Parraga, *US seizes sanctioned oil tanker off coast of Venezuela*, Reuters, 11 December 2025; *We want it back’: Trump demands Venezuela return ‘land, oil rights’ to U.S.*, PBS News, 17 December 2025



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that goes to the US itself. This followed an agreement with Maduro that he would release political prisoners and permit free elections in 2024. Instead, he doubled down on repression and prevented the opposition candidate, Maria Corina Machado, from running. The stand-in opposition candidate, Edmundo González, evidently won the election by a landslide, but Maduro refused to cede power and was declared the winner. The regime then issued an arrest warrant for Gonzales, who was given asylum in Spain. Biden then again tightened sanctions but allowed Chevron to carry on trading.

In a further twist to the story, Machado was awarded the 2025 Nobel peace prize for “her tireless work ... [for] a just and peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy in Venezuela”. Maduro declared her a terrorist. She declared his government a criminal enterprise and expressed support for Trump. Trump denounced the Venezuelan regime as “a foreign terrorist organisation”.⁴⁶

Following the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, the Bush administration launched its ‘war on terror’, “a war without end and with no defined enemy, a declaration that any political group or organisation or any country may be defined as outlaws at any time convenient to the US” [Hallowes 2011: 22]. Trump has now found it convenient to designate criminal cartels as terrorist organisations and has threatened to send US troops across borders in pursuit of them. This blurs the distinction between policing and war and is intended to reassert US dominance in the Americas. In December, the White House announced the “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, proclaiming US “leadership in the Western Hemisphere”.⁴⁷

On 3 January 2026, Trump announced that US special forces had attacked Venezuela’s capital city Caracas, bombed and apparently paralysed its major military bases and captured Maduro and his wife. Trump said they would be charged and tried as “international narco-terrorists” in a New York court.

46 Yashraj Sharma, *US slaps sanctions on Maduro family, Venezuelan tankers: What we know*, Al Jazeera, 12 December 2025; Kayla Epstein, Tiffany Wertheimerand, Yang Tian, *Venezuelan Nobel winner tells BBC she knows ‘risks’ of Oslo trip after months in hiding*, BBC, 11 December 2025

47 The White House, *America 250: Presidential Message on the Anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine*, 2 December 2025



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According to the charge sheet, Maduro was running a “corrupt, illegitimate government” funded by drug-trafficking that flooded the US with cocaine. An armed incursion into a sovereign state was thus represented as a policing operation.

Machado issued a statement saying this was the “hour of freedom”. Trump said Machado “is a very nice woman, but she doesn’t have the respect or support within the country”. He said, “We’re going to run the country until ... we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition”. That is, Rubio and Hegseth would run it. The Venezuela regime, which remains in power but minus Maduro, is to be coerced to do Trump’s bidding. “American dominance in the western hemisphere will never be questioned again,” said Trump. Some observers see that as a retreat from global dominance.⁴⁸

“We’re going to have our very large US oil companies, the biggest anywhere in the world, go in, spend billions of dollars, fix the badly broken ... oil infrastructure, and start making money for the country ...” Oil money would also cover the costs of a US occupation. It is not clear that big oil is up for this. Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world but is a minor producer. Most of the easy oil is gone and what is left is extra heavy crude. This is a thick sticky oil high in sulphur and other pollutants and requires specialist refining technologies. It sells cheap but is costly to produce and process and the oil corporations would need to rebuild the infrastructure.

Immediately following the US attack, the price of oil fell. The oil corporations appear more interested in enforcing compensation awards for previous expropriations – that is, in getting a windfall at the cost of the Venezuelan people. They have taken several cases to the World Bank’s International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes, which is overwhelmingly

48 David Smith and Tiago Rogero, *Trump says US will ‘run’ Venezuela after Nicolás Maduro captured and taken to New York*, The Guardian, 4 January 2026; Tiago Rogero, *‘Naked imperialism’: how Trump intervention in Venezuela is a return to form for the US*, The Guardian, 4 January 2026; Heather Cox Richardson, *Understanding the U.S. Strike on Venezuela*, at <https://www.youtube.com/@heathercoxrichardson> accessed 4 January; The David Frum Show, *How Is Trump Planning to ‘Run’ Venezuela?* (With Anne Applebaum), The Atlantic, 3 January 2026



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biased towards ‘investors’. Trump said they would be compensated if they reinvest in Venezuela.⁴⁹

The assault is also an intentional dismantling of the ‘rules based’ post-World War II order put in place by the US. Those rules, of course, were always upheld unevenly to benefit ‘the West’. But now there will be no rules. According to Stephen Miller, Trump’s chief of staff, “... you can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else, but we live in a world, in the real world ... that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power”. Immediately following the assault, Trump threatened military action against Colombia, Cuba and Mexico. And he repeated that America would take Greenland. Greenland is an autonomous territory of Denmark, which is a Nato ally. Miller said the US must have Greenland because the US “is the power of Nato, for the United States to secure the Arctic region, to protect and defend Nato and Nato interests”.⁵⁰ The US already has a major military base on Greenland presumably doing just that. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said that if the US attacked another Nato country militarily that would be the end of Nato and “the security that has been provided since the end of the Second World War”.

Within the US itself, immigrants – legal or not – are routinely accused of being part of the cartels to justify arbitrary action against them. Beyond that, ICE agents are sent to silence political dissent. Those targeted include activists for immigrant and immigrant worker rights and pro-Palestinian activists, particularly foreign students. The latter are routinely accused without evidence of supporting Hamas which is defined as a terrorist group. Thus, Rümeyza Öztürk, a Turkish PhD student at Tufts University in Boston, was grabbed off the street by masked ICE agents and taken to a detention centre in Louisiana in retaliation for calling on the university to acknowledge the genocide in Gaza and to divest from companies with ties to Israel. The administration laid no charges but revoked her student visa. Six weeks later,

49 Bloomberg Television, *Oil Markets Not Worried About Venezuela, McNally*, 3 January 2026; Trading Economics at <https://tradingeconomics.com/> accessed 5 January 2026; Luke Goldstein and Lucy Dean Stockton, *Corporations Invested In Lawsuits Before Venezuela Invasion*, The Lever, 3 January 2026

50 <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/cg/date/2026-01-05/segment/01>



her lawyers secured a court order for her release but, as of December, her visa status was still not resolved.⁵¹

Energy dominance and diplomatic bad manners

Trump's election campaign was heavily backed by big oil. On the stump, he pledged to "drill, baby drill". When it was shown that the industry had record production under the Biden administration, Trump upped the ante, proclaiming that his administration aimed for energy dominance. Not only would it promote the expansion of fossil fuels in the USA, it would impose fossil fuel expansion led by Big Oil USA on the rest of world. The deal making that follows the threat or imposition of tariffs invariably includes the import of oil or 'liquefied natural gas' (LNG) from the US. The European Union committed to buying \$750 billion in 'energy products' – mainly LNG – over three years. This was largely about giving Trump a triumphant headline. Neither the US nor the EU have the infrastructure to ship it. Trump's Energy Secretary, Chris Wright, has since called on the EU to cut "burdensome" methane regulations, echoing the demands of both US and EU oil and gas lobbies.⁵²

South African officials have had a hostile reception in Trump's Washington. This is partly in retaliation for South Africa taking Israel to the International Court of Justice on a well-founded charge of genocide. But it also reflects the ludicrous right wing conspiracy narrative that white people in South Africa are the victims of genocide, supposedly part of a global plot to 'replace' white people. This is an inversion of historical genocides instigated by imperial capitalist powers using newly coined racial hierarchies to justify enslaving and dispossessing black people.⁵³ Within Europe, Jews and Roma were similarly stigmatised and, in Nazi Germany, subject to genocide. In flight from

51 Wikipedia, *Activist deportations in the second Trump presidency*, accessed 16 September 2025; Maya Yang and Noa Yachot, *Rümeysa Öztürk, Tufts student held by ICE, released from Louisiana jail*, The Guardian, 10 May 2025; *Tufts student can resume research after Trump officials revoked her visa*, judge rules, The Guardian, 9 December 2025

52 Michael Barnard, *Europe's \$750 Billion Energy Pledge To Trump Is Pure Political Theater*, CleanTechnica, 30 July 2025; Stella Levantesi, *Oil and Gas Lobby Behind 'Concerted' Attempt to Weaken EU Methane Policy, Research Finds*, DeSmog, 10 June 2025

53 In earlier periods of European history, race was more about rank and lineage than ethnicity – being of noble blood or not.



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that holocaust, Zionism's genocidal assault on Palestinians reproduces the script of white settler colonial violence and does so with extreme brutality.

The Trump administration is offended by the rhetoric of justice – even if it is mere piety. On assuming the presidency of the G20 in December 2024, South Africa announced that it would be held under theme of “solidarity, equality and sustainability”. In February, Foreign Secretary Marco Rubio boycotted the G20 foreign ministers' summit:

I will NOT attend the G20 Summit in Johannesburg. South Africa is doing very bad things. Expropriating private property. Using G20 to promote “solidarity, equality & sustainability”. In other words: DEI and climate change.

DEI stands for some sort of minimal justice – promising to include people within a system built on their exclusion. This and climate change is self-evidently “anti-American” for Rubio. As to the expropriation of private property, it is a fantasy. Following the colonial and apartheid dispossessions, a timid land reform programme has made scant restitution.⁵⁴

In March, Rubio expelled South Africa's ambassador for saying that the Trump administration represented a “supremacist insurgency” (implicitly white) against the “incumbent” hegemonic order. Rubio called him a “race-baiting politician who hates America and hates @Potus” [aka President Trump].⁵⁵ Then in May, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa visited Trump in the White House, taking with him a delegation including white golfers and politicians, to “reset” the relationship. There, he was ambushed with a video meant to prove the white genocide story. Except it was misdirection and outright fakery. For misdirection, the video showed Julius Malema singing “kill the boer” while Trump described him as a government official. For fakery, a long row of white crosses erected in protest against farm murders was claimed to mark the graves of white people while pictures of body bags,

54 Patrick Bond, *U.S. Rulers Versus South African Rulers – Versus Both Their Peoples and Ecologies*, ZNet, 17 February 2025

55 Peter Fabricius and Victoria O'Regan, '*Persona non grata*' – US expels SA ambassador Ebrahim Rasool from Washington, Daily Maverick, 15 March 2025



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claimed to prove the genocide, were actually taken in Goma, DRC, following the M23 assault on that city.⁵⁶ In November, Trump announced that no US officials would attend the G20 summit (for heads of state) and repeated the lies about a white genocide.

The real atrocity at the abandoned Buffelsfontein gold mine in Stilfontein was not mentioned by Trump. In August 2024, in an operation against 'illegal miners', police closed all entrances to the mine and refused to let in food and water. Some 2 000 zama zama (informal mineworkers) were trapped up to two kilometres underground. In November, as media coverage intensified, the Minister in the Presidency Khumbudzo Ntshavheni said they were criminals and the police should "smoke them out". In January, Mining Affected Communities United in Action (Macua) won a court order forcing government to mount a rescue operation for those remaining in the mine. About 250 visibly emaciated people were rescued and 84 bodies were brought to the surface. Altogether, from August over 1 500 workers came up from the mine and were immediately arrested. About 100 died, although the final number will not be known as the humanity of those workers is not recognised by the South African government.

Minerals Minister Gwede Mantashe continued to insist that they were criminals and 'undocumented migrants'. "It's an attack on our economy by foreign nationals ..." Most were indeed from Mozambique, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. Under the colonial and apartheid migrant worker regime, the workers who built the mines came from across southern Africa and "were press-ganged into the mines through taxation, land deprivation and engineered underdevelopment in their countries of origin".⁵⁷ Many of the zama zama are retrenched workers and many were not paid out their pensions. Others are young men who were forced at gunpoint to go down the mine. Trump might have applauded such tough and cruel action against black

56 Rebecca Davis, *Trump's Oval Office drama: Unpacking the misleading claims about South Africa's 'white genocide'*, Daily Maverick, 22 May 2025; Guardian staff, *Trump's evidence of South Africa 'white genocide' contains images from Democratic Republic of Congo*, The Guardian, 23 May 2025;

57 Nteboheng Phakisi-Portas, David van Wyk, Esther Makhetha and Eric Mokuoa, *Stilfontein massacre: when the state violates the Constitution*, Amandla, 25 February 2025; Ferial Haffajee, *Stilfontein must not be another Marikana*, President Ramaphosa, Daily Maverick, 15 January 2025



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migrants. Ramaphosa and Mantashe are both former general secretaries of the National Union of Mineworkers. They would know the history.

In the closed door meeting following the Oval Office ambush, Ramaphosa said they discussed the 'real' issues like trade. Amongst other things, he offered to buy US LNG.⁵⁸ Most other countries have done likewise as Trump uses the tariff negotiations to force the expansion of US oil and gas exports. This is now a matter of survival for the US industry and Trump is trying to make the rest of the world pay it. There is a glut of gas in the US and, globally, a new wave of LNG projects is producing a glut on global markets.⁵⁹ So the US industry needs the forced entry into new export markets.

In the US, the price of the West Texas Intermediate (WTI) benchmark oil has been at or below \$60 a barrel – the breakeven price for most fracking operations – since early October. Reduced regulation has reduced costs, but only by \$2 a barrel or less for most operators.⁶⁰

In November, South Africa hosted the G20 leaders' summit without the US present. It then handed the G20 presidency to the US at a non-ceremonial event in a bureaucrat's office. Trump immediately said he would exclude South Africa from the next summit. Rubio said: "The politics of grievance carried over to South Africa's Presidency of the G20 this month, which was an exercise in spite, division, and radical agendas that have nothing to do with economic growth". He announced "three key themes" for the US presidency: "removing regulatory burdens, unlocking affordable and secure energy supply chains, and pioneering new technologies and innovation".⁶¹

Word magic

A legendary story from the 11th Century tells of King Canute of England setting his throne down on the sea shore and ordering the tide to turn back. The tide

58 Reuters, *South Africa proposes buying US LNG as [it] seeks trade deal*, Engineering News, 27 May 2025; Thando Maeko, *SA submits trade package to US*, Business Live, 22 May 2025.

59 IEA, *World Energy Outlook 2025*, p.69 ff.

60 Ben Geman and Amy Harder, *Charting the limits of "drill, baby, drill"*, Axios, 25 September 2025

61 U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, *America Welcomes a New G20*, 3 December 2025. <https://statedept.substack.com/p/america-welcomes-a-new-g20>



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came in as always. Canute thus demonstrated the limits of earthly power to his sycophantic courtiers. In the 21st Century, no such modesty attends Trump's MAGA World. Things are and are not as Trump's word has it: if we erase knowledge of climate change, it isn't happening.

Along with diversity, equity, inclusion and climate, there is a list of over 350 words that various US government agencies have tagged. Impermissible words are deleted from the agency's website. Environmental justice is out across government. On day one, Trump's anathema against DEI tied it with environmental justice. It ordered the termination of "all DEI ... and 'environmental justice' offices and positions" and all related "equity action plans", programmes and grants or contracts. The White House's own environmental justice page was immediately deleted. The new boss of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Lee Zeldin, denounced environmental justice as a leftist buzzword and set about dismantling the agency's environmental justice programme.

In a typical inversion, DEI and environmental justice are called discriminatory, whereas the administration is actually reinstating discriminatory actions. Thus, the Department of Justice has terminated an investigation into a Louisiana petrochemical plant accused of polluting a black community with very high emissions of cancer-causing chloroprene. It also terminated a settlement ordering the state of Alabama to provide basic sewerage to a black area. The settlement followed an investigation that found that the service was denied because of environmental racism.⁶²

The National Science Foundation, which funds academic research, put up a list of over 110 red flag words that trigger a review to check for politically incorrect thought. They include: women, disabled, black, latinx, trauma, historically, LGBT, race, ethnicity, gender, bias, prejudice, activist, social justice Men and white do not appear on the list – the straight white man is the patriarchal subject of MAGA family values. On the election trail, Trump hailed

62 Marianne Lavelle and Peter Aldhous, *EPA Funding Cuts Target Disadvantaged Communities, Analysis Shows*, 1 May 2025; Gabrielle Canon, Nina Lakhani, Oliver Milman and Dharna Noor, *'A ruthless agenda': charting 100 days of Trump's onslaught on the environment*, The Guardian, 1 May 2025



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himself as the top patriarch, the protector of women: “I’m going to protect them ... whether the women like it or not”.⁶³

Golden age for fossil fuel

Also on day one, Trump withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement, declared a national energy emergency and issued an order titled “Unleashing American Energy” to boost fossil fuel production, terminate tighter vehicle emission limits and cancel the ‘EV mandate’ – although there was no such mandate. Following the script of ExxonMobil and the American Petroleum Institute (API), analysed in The groundWork Report 2024 [66 ff], this was framed in terms of reliable energy, cheaper energy and consumer choice. At the same time, he reversed a freeze on building new LNG export terminals. That may increase the price for American consumers but gas company bosses looked forward to a new golden age. Trump also ordered a halt to new offshore wind projects.⁶⁴ Wind is evidently not an ‘American energy’.

At the Department of Homeland Security, Noem has ordered that “all climate change activities and the use of climate change terminology” must cease. The ban extends to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which falls under DHS. The agency responds to extreme weather events amongst other things. Its programme for Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities, “which allocates grants for projects like flood control, wildfire management and infrastructure maintenance that reduce disaster risk”, has been terminated.⁶⁵

63 AJ Connelly, *Federal Government’s Growing Banned Words List Is Chilling Act of Censorship*, PEN America, 28 May 2025; Matt Novak, *The List of Trump’s Forbidden Words That Will Get Your Paper Flagged at NSF*, Gizmodo, 5 February 2025; Edward Helmore, *Donald Trump vows to be protector of women ‘whether they like it or not’*, The Guardian, 31 October 2024

64 Dan Gearino, Aman Azhar, Amy Green, Dylan Baddour, Jake Bolster, Keerti Gopal, Kiley Bense, Lauren Dalban, Lisa Sorg, Liza Gross, Marianne Lavelle, Nicholas Kusnetz, Phil McKenna, *Executive Orders on Energy and Climate Have Advocates Across the Nation on Edge*, Inside Climate News, 22 January 2025

65 Kiley Bense, Bob Berwyn, Dennis Pillion, Georgina Gustin, Jake Bolster, Marianne Lavelle, Wyatt Myskow, *In His First 100 Days, Trump Launched an ‘All-Out Assault’ on the Environment*, Inside Climate News, 30 April 2025. Jonathan Mingle, *It’s a ‘Golden Age’ for U.S. LNG Industry, But Climate Risks Loom*, 23 September 2025, Yale Environmental



Erasing climate research

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Noaa) is a leading climate research agency, nationally and internationally, as well as providing weather forecasts, tracking hurricanes and monitoring ocean and coastal health. It falls under Zeldin's EPA. The word 'weather' is good, but 'climate' is not – as if weather forecasting could be separated from climate science. Zeldin said, "We are driving a dagger through the heart of climate-change religion and ushering in America's Golden Age".⁶⁶ He cut about 2 000 staff – with the help of Elon Musk's DOGE⁶⁷ – and variously dismantled, defunded or under-funded critical institutions. That includes the Mauna Lao Observatory, which has monitored carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere since the 1958 and is at the heart of the global CO₂ monitoring network.

Zeldin's golden age started with shredding regulations governing coal, oil and gas and cutting the time taken for environmental approvals from years to weeks. And in response to lobbying by the American Chemistry Council, he shut down the EPA's Office of Research and Development (ORD), which provided scientific assessments of the health risks of chemicals to regulators. At the same time, the US Department of the Interior has opened up public lands and offshore areas for the oil and gas industry as promised in Trump's order "Unleashing American Energy".⁶⁸

Alongside Noaa, the Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS) at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) is the leading US climate science agency. Nasa's technical support to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the global collaboration of climate scientists, has been terminated. That includes climate modelling, pioneered at GISS, and data from satellites. In February, the US government and science delegations

66 Matthew Daly, *EPA head says he'll roll back dozens of environmental regulations, including rules on climate change*, AP News, 13 March 2025

67 DOGE stands for Department of Government Efficiency – although it is not actually a department.

68 Marianne Lavelle, *Can Bipartisan Support in Congress Save NOAA From White House Cuts?* Inside Climate News, 13 September 2025; Marianne Lavelle, *Dismantling of EPA's Scientific Research Arm Fulfills Key Chemical Industry Goal*, Inside Climate News, 21 July 2025



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were blocked from attending a major meeting of the IPCC.⁶⁹ In May, the Trump administration terminated the lease on the GISS building in New York. Staff were given a month to move out and told they must work at home or find other office space until other accommodation was arranged. Although justified as cost savings, the lease runs through to 2031 and rent will be paid till then – possibly on an empty building. The effect is to disrupt the GISS without actually closing it. The move was followed by deep cuts to Nasa's overall science budget.⁷⁰

Amongst other things, Nasa has cut funding for the US Global Change Research Programme, which has coordinated a national climate assessment every four years since 2001.⁷¹ The assessment is produced by academic and government US scientists organised in 17 working groups and with programme staff drawn from 15 different government agencies. The assessment provided the evidence for the EPA's 'endangerment finding' of 2009, on the basis of which it could regulate greenhouse gases. In place of this report, the Department of Energy under Chris Wright has published its own climate assessment, prepared in secret by a 'climate working group' of five people picked for being climate sceptics.⁷²

Wright was formerly the boss of a fracking corporation and was a key figure at Trump's big oil fundraising dinner in April 2024, where Trump asked the oil barons for \$1 billion for his election campaign fund and said they would get reduced tax and relaxed regulations in return. Wright himself donated \$228 000.⁷³

69 Maria Curi and Andrew Freedman, *Scoop: U.S. to pull delegation from UN climate science meeting*, Axios, 20 February 2025

70 Andrew Freedman, *NASA scientists describe 'absolute sh*tshow' at agency as Trump budget seeks to dismantle top US climate lab*, CNN, 5 June 2025; Christopher Cokinos, *Why Is NASA Shuttering This Iconic Institute in New York City?* Scientific American, 28 May 2025

71 Dharna Noor and Gabrielle Canon, *White House ends funding for key US climate body: 'No coming back from this'*, The Guardian, 9 April 2025

72 John Christy, Judith Curry, Steven Koonin, Ross McKittrick, Ross Spencer, *A critical review of the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions on the US climate*, US Department of Energy, July 2025,

73 Peter Stone, *Trump's \$1bn pitch to oil bosses 'the definition of corruption'; top Democrat says*, The Guardian, 3 June 2024; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Wright.



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Wright does not deny climate change outright, but says that the impacts of climate change are exaggerated and economic growth powered by reliable energy will provide the means of dealing with it. This follows the work of neoclassical economist William Nordhaus, which has been roundly criticised for concluding what it assumes [see Box 2]. Not surprisingly, the DoE's climate assessment comes to the same conclusion. In his preface to the report, Wright repeats his position: "Climate change is real, and it deserves attention. But it is not the greatest threat facing humanity. That distinction belongs to global energy poverty ... improving the human condition depends on expanding access to reliable, affordable energy" [US DoE 2025: viii]. In short, fossil fuels and nuclear power will eliminate not just energy poverty but poverty as such.

This repeats the lines rehearsed by Alex Epstein, a US climate denialist who consults on the 'moral case' for burning fossil fuels, at the 2023 Africa Energy Week conference in Cape Town. It also resonates with the arguments of Mantashe and other African energy ministers that development depends on fossil fuels.⁷⁴ The history of colonial and extractive economies does not feature in Wright's narrative as the 'human condition' blandly covers over unequal relations of power. Nor has the Trump administration shown any interest in reducing poverty.

The DoE report was published at the same time as Zeldin announced that the EPA planned to revoke the 'endangerment finding' and was intended to justify that action. In the foreword, Wright says it "faithfully represents the state of climate science today" [viii]. That view is not shared by the overwhelming majority of climate scientists. Carbon Brief contacted a wide range of scientists including those cited in the report. It identifies "at least 100 false or misleading statements", including misrepresentations of the cited work.⁷⁵ A review of the report by a group of 85 US scientists followed. They found it "not scientifically credible" but written to produce a "predetermined outcome".⁷⁶

74 See The groundWork Report 2023 [142 ff].

75 Ayesha Tandon, Leo Hickman, Cecilia Keating and Robert McSweeney, *Factcheck: Trump's climate report includes more than 100 false or misleading claims*, Carbon Brief, 14 August 2025

76 Dessler, A.E. and R.E. Kopp (Ed.). (2025). *Climate Experts' Review of the DOE Climate Working Group Report*; Press Release, 2 September 2025 at <https://tinyurl.com/DOE-comment>



Box 2: Bad economics

The claim that climate impacts will be trivial in relation to economic growth was made by neoclassical economist William Nordhaus of Yale University, who developed the first integrated assessment model (IAM) of the impact of climate on the economy. This won him the Nobel Prize for economics and his followers went on to dominate the economics working group of the IPCC, largely because of the prestige generated by large-scale modelling. Hence, the US DoE report can cite the IPCC's fifth assessment report of 2014. That then gave politicians the justification they wanted to prioritise the economy-as-usual.

In a scathing critique, Steve Keen of the University College London (UCL) shows that the inputs to the model were spurious: Nordhaus was “making up numbers to support a pre-existing belief”. Amongst other things, Nordhaus and followers assume that:

- Only outdoor activities – e.g. agriculture and forestry – reflecting just 3% of economic output in the US, are “highly sensitive” to climate change, while “moderately sensitive” sectors produce another 10% of output. So 87% of the economy is immune to climate change.
- The difference in economic output in colder or hotter parts of the USA now, would be the same as differences over time as any particular location gets hotter. It would be as if London moved to Madrid, closer to the equator. If the world were 10 degrees hotter, according to Nordhaus protégé and IPCC author Richard Tol, “we’d move indoors, much like the Saudis have”.

In short, Nordhaus's ‘data’ rests on implausible assumptions. Even if the design of his model were appropriate to “something as dynamic and far from equilibrium as climate change”, which it isn't, the rule of ‘garbage in, garbage out’ applies:

... it does not matter how good or how bad the actual model is when it is fed ‘data’ like that concocted by Nordhaus and his coterie of like-minded Neoclassical economists. The numerical estimates to which



they fitted their inappropriate models are, as shown here, utterly unrelated to the phenomenon of global warming. Even an appropriate model of the relationship between climate change and GDP would return garbage predictions if it were trained on ‘data’ like this.⁷⁷

The Environmental Defence Fund and the Union of Concerned Scientists also took the matter to court.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, the National Academies of Science responded by coordinating an independent review of the climate science, drawing on some 70 authors, for public release and submission to the EPA by its deadline for comment on its plan to revoke the ‘endangerment finding’.⁷⁹

Trump brags big for Big Oil

At the UN General Assembly meeting in September, which coincides with the UN climate week in New York, in a speech filled with vain boasts and false claims, Trump said: climate change is the “greatest con job ever”; “unmitigated immigration” and renewable energies are destroying Europe; oil, gas and “clean, beautiful coal” are powering a golden age in the US – the [economically] hottest country by far – the greatest economy ever, built by Trump.⁸⁰

I have a little standing order in the White House – never use the word “coal”, only use the words, “clean, beautiful coal”. It sounds much better, doesn’t it?

77 Steve Keen, *The Appallingly Bad Neoclassical Economics of Climate Change*, Patreon, 9 June 2020

78 Then the Environmental Defence Fund and the Union of Concerned Scientists opened a court case against Wright and the DoE, Zeldin and the EPA, and the DoE’s climate working group. Wright then dissolved the working group so as to claim that the legal action was now ‘moot’ (i.e. no longer relevant) and the court should dismiss the case. This was rejected by the plaintiffs as a stratagem to avoid accountability. Further, the EPA could still use the DoE paper as justification for revoking the ‘endangerment finding’.

79 Marianne Lavelle, *National Academies Will Review Endangerment Finding Science*, Inside Climate News, 7 August 2025

80 Zachary Wolf, *Trump’s ‘your countries are going to hell’ speech, annotated*, CNN, 23 September 2025



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The next week, Wright said the DoE will ‘invest’ \$625 million “to expand and reinvigorate America’s coal industry ... beautiful, clean coal will be essential to powering America’s reindustrialisation and winning the AI [artificial intelligence] race”.⁸¹ The ‘race’ refers to technology competition with China, of which more below. A boom in building energy intensive AI data centres reflects competition between the ‘Big Tech’ corporates with seemingly unlimited ambitions for future expansion. This is used to justify building new nuclear and gas power stations as well as keeping dirty old coal stations open.

The most immediate impact on energy demand, as well as water demand, is local. Local energy utilities are offering discounts to Big Tech corporates but at the cost of household consumers – effectively forcing them to subsidise the AI data centres. (In much the same way, Eskom’s ‘negotiated pricing agreements’ subsidises energy intensive industries in South Africa at the cost of all other users.) Local people are also bearing the cost of added pollution. Musk’s xAI centre in Memphis is powered by 150MW from the local utility with another 420 MW from its own 35 gas generators. It did not wait for air quality permits before firing them up.⁸²

Big Oil has also made good on its election investments. It spent \$445m on buying the democracy it wants in the US, with \$96 million for Trump’s election and the rest going to getting Republicans into Congress and electing state governors. That does not include ‘dark money’ which is undeclared. Not quite the billion dollars Trump asked for, but enough to get more than Big Oil and the coal corporations asked for.⁸³

Annual production subsidies to fossil fuel corporates now amount to \$34.8 billion, on Oil Change International’s (OCI) calculations.⁸⁴ The oil and gas sector gets 84% of that with the rest going to prop up coal. They include \$30.8 billion in legacy subsidies – various tax breaks and accounting loopholes that

81 Jessica Corbett, *Public and Planet to ‘Pay the Price’ as Trump Props Up Coal With \$625 Million Bailout*, Common Dreams, 29 September 2025

82 James O’Donnell and Casey Crownhart, *We did the math on AI’s energy footprint. Here’s the story you haven’t heard*, MIT Technology Review, 20 May 2025; Dara Kerr, *Elon Musk’s xAI powering its facility in Memphis with ‘illegal’ generators*, The Guardian, 10 April 2025

83 Dharna Noor, *Big oil spent \$445m in last election cycle to influence Trump and Congress, report says*, The Guardian, 23 January 2025

84 Collin Rees, *Paying for Climate Chaos*, Oil Change International, September 2025



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the corporates have enjoyed for decades – and an extra \$4 billion gifted to them by Biden’s ‘Inflation Reduction Act’ and Trump’s ‘Big Beautiful Bill’. All Biden’s subsidies to renewables were instantly cancelled by Trump. A subsidy to Big Oil for ‘carbon capture, utilisation and storage’ (CCUS), however, was retained. While Big Oil has punted this as addressing climate change, most of the actual projects are for ‘enhanced oil recovery’ – the injection of liquefied CO₂ into old wells to restore pressure and so extract more oil. OCI observes that “only a handful of extremely profitable oil companies” have benefitted from this subsidy, with ExxonMobil claiming hundreds of millions [16]. Trump also retained a fossil hydrogen subsidy from the Biden era while cutting a ‘green’ hydrogen subsidy.

Big Oil was already on the offensive in 2024 – erasing previous climate pledges, punting carbon trading, working CoP29 in Baku as if it were a trade fair, organising to criminalise protest on the streets and along the pipelines – as recounted in *The groundWork Report 2024*. At CERAWEEK in March 2025, the industry’s premier global conference in Houston, Texas, they celebrated Trump’s re-election but were already nervous of falling prices.⁸⁵ In October, the America First Policy Institute held a Global Energy Summit celebrating American energy dominance one year on from Trump’s election. Participants included leading US administration and corporate figures but no-one from the rest of the world. It was marked for the inflated rhetoric of Christian fundamentalism while ‘environmentalism’ was repeatedly attacked as a left wing Trojan horse: “As we find ourselves in the midst of this darkness, the abyss of green socialism on a worldwide scale, there remains hope – for there remains the shining city upon the hill” that is America, said Oliver McPherson-Smith of the AFPI. Wright boasted that the US had torpedoed an initiative at the World Maritime Organisation to tax carbon emissions from global shipping. It did so by threatening increased tariffs, visa restrictions, sanctions and additional port fees on countries that supported the move.⁸⁶

85 Dharna Noor, *Big oil gathers in Texas – but beneath the bravado, Trump-induced anxiety*, The Guardian, 15 March 2025

86 Aidan Hughes, *One Year After Trump’s Election, This Group Is Celebrating Their Sway Over U.S. Energy Policy*, Inside Climate News, 11 November 2025. See also AFPI’s website: <https://www.americafirstpolicy.com/events/america-first-policy-institute-global-energy-summit>.



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Backed by Trump, the oil industry has also driven the reversal of the finance industry's climate commitments. The Net Zero Banking Alliance (NZBA), part of the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero (GFANZ) established in 2021, folded in October 2025. The idea behind GFANZ was that corporate capital could make more from financialising nature than from fossil fuel extraction. Nor did it exclude financing fossil fuels, as it claimed that continued combustion could be offset with nature based solutions and carbon trading. Hence, big capital could make money both ways. Indeed, just 65 leading banks have ploughed US\$7.9 trillion into fossil fuel expansions since 2016 when the Paris Agreement came into effect and scarcely eased up after 2021 [Schwartz et al 2025]. So this was a wholly destructive initiative as discussed in The groundWork Report 2022 [158 ff]. Big oil nevertheless took it as a challenge. Following Trump's election, the State of Texas sued asset manager Blackrock, amongst others, alleging that it was part of a conspiracy "in service of a destructive, politicised 'environmental' agenda" targeting fossil fuels [Hallowes & Munnik 2024: 67]. In December 2024, J.P. Morgan Chase led an exodus from GFANZ of the biggest US and Canadian banks, together with HSBC and Barclays of Britain and UBS of Switzerland.

China's pledge and the future of energy

At the UN climate summit two days after Trump's climate denial speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that China would, for the first time, reduce absolute emissions by 2035. Previous pledges have been about reducing emission intensity – GHG emissions per unit of GDP. He said China would reduce emissions by 7% to 10% from peak emissions. He did not say when emissions would peak, but it is expected in 2028. As previously, he said the country would be carbon neutral by 2060. While Trump makes Xi look good, this pallid pledge does not come close to being compatible with the 1.5°C target, nor with "well below" 2°C or even a disastrous 2°C. It is more like 3°C, according to Lauri Myllyvirta of the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA).⁸⁷

87 Anika Patel and Simon Evans, *Q&A: What does China's new Paris Agreement pledge mean for climate action?* Carbon Brief, 25 September 2025



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Xi said China would: increase non-fossil fuel share of energy consumption to over 30%; expand wind and solar capacity by six times; make ‘new energy vehicles’ (NEVs) the “mainstream” market; expand the national carbon trading market; increase forest carbon stocks; and establish a climate adaptive society.⁸⁸ The false solution of carbon trading aside, these are easy targets. On current trends, non-fossil energy is forecast to take 36% of total energy consumption by 2035 while the renewables target slows down the rate of new installations. Xi did not mention coal power, which is also expanding rapidly and creating excess capacity [Qin et al 2025].⁸⁹ NEVs, meanwhile, are part of a rapidly expanding auto industry already gripped by over production. In China, it is putting more cars on the road while bus ridership declines. Internationally, it is pushing exports into already saturated markets.

The ‘non-fossil fuel’ energy includes nukes and big hydro. In particular, China is building the world’s biggest hydro power dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo River high in the Tibetan Himalayas at a cost of \$167 billion. The dam will displace local people, drown a biodiversity hotspot and will likely stimulate earthquakes in the geologically unstable mountains – creating a significant risk of the dam failing, with catastrophic consequences downstream. Downstream, the Yarlung Tsangpo becomes the Brahmaputra, which flows through the north east Indian province of Arunachal Pradesh and on to Bangladesh. The Brahmaputra meets the Ganges to form the vast Bengal Delta where the land itself is formed from the flow of sediments carried from the mountains by these great rivers. India is also building dams on tributaries of the Brahmaputra, so much of the sediment flow will be cut off and will ultimately result in the coastal erosion. India also fears that China will manipulate the flow of water for political ends. The border has long been disputed and China now claims the whole of Arunachal Pradesh.⁹⁰

In the broader geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, technology leadership is critical. The energy system is central as it powers everything

88 *Full text: Xi Jinping’s video speech at the UN Climate Summit 2025*, CGTN, 25 September 2025

89 Anika Patel and Simon Evans, op cit

90 Tom Harper, *By building the world’s biggest dam, China hopes to control more than just its water supply*, The Conversation, 31 July 2025; *India has raised concern over China’s Yarlung Tsangpo Dam approval*, Tibetan Review, 4 January 2025



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else, according to energy thinktank Ember (Walter et al 2025). They argue that China is leading a new electrotech revolution to become the first electrostate and “deploying its technology at scale and speed into the emerging markets” [60]. So the global South need not be tied to importing vast quantities of fossil fuels. A once off purchase of solar or wind generators gives them power for the next 30 years. Electrotech is powered by renewables and harvests the innovations of digital technologies:

The magnetic centre is the electron: we are revolutionising how we generate, use, and connect electrons. Solar and wind are conquering electricity supply. EVs, heat pumps, and AI are electrifying major new uses. Batteries and digitalisation are connecting supply and demand. [2]

Trump’s attachment to fossil fuels, on the other hand, means that the US is simply ceding technology leadership to China and, in Ember’s view, that will translate into political hegemony.

This does not mean the end of oil. Global production is at record highs (105 mbpd) and petrochemicals are booming as the industry, including in China, looks to secure its future markets. Energy historian Adam Hanieh, author of *Crude Capitalism: Oil, Corporate Power, and the Making of the World Market* [2024], argues that there is no ‘green transition’. If there is a transition under capitalism it is additive and it will not phase out fossil fuels. The expansion of energy is central to capitalism and, even if renewables come to lead that expansion, fossil fuels will remain essential and will continue to expand – just as coal use continued to expand when oil became the leading source of energy. Fossil fuels will continue to supply the cheap, transportable and dense energy required by capitalism as well as the vast and expanding array of materials and chemicals produced from petrochemicals. Control of it is essential to the imperial order as it powers modern military machines.⁹¹ We would add, however, that the ‘easy oil’ is past peak production and most new sources of oil and gas are from ‘non-conventional’ sources and technologies

91 James Wilt, *The green transition is a myth: Adam Hanieh on the ongoing centrality of oil to capitalism*, Amandla, 7 March 2025; Deaglan Godwin, *A system addicted to oil: review of Adam Hanieh’s Crude Capitalism*, Red Flag, 17 November 2025



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– deep offshore, arctic, oil sands, shale fracking, enhanced oil recovery, LNG. And, whereas oil and gas extraction has always been dirty and bloody, non-conventional extraction is dirtier and bloodier still.⁹²

Big oil has targeted the plastics treaty in much the same way that it targets the climate negotiations. The basic aim is to block or delay any agreement – or wording – for the phase out of fossil fuel use or, in the case of the plastics treaty process, for a reduction or elimination of plastics.⁹³ This logic extends also to global waste and chemicals management agreements and to chemical and energy intensive agriculture. The focus is to be on consumption and management of emissions, waste and chemical impacts and so on, never on production. And costs and responsibility must always be externalised to the state, to consumers and to workers.

Whereas Ember implies a market driven transition phasing out fossil fuels, Hanieh argues that the entire regime of accumulation founded on fossil fuels must be overthrown: the oil corporations must be dismantled, wasteful industries abolished, military spending diverted and the economic power of the market taken under democratic control. That is, capitalism must be overthrown to prevent a global climate catastrophe. Science historian Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, author of *More and More and More: an all-consuming history of energy* [2024], argues similarly. In Adam Tooze’s reading, the transition “must mark a fundamental break with an otherwise irresistible logic of accumulation” and requires a “powerful coalition to impose its will, to make history in the most radical sense”. In a response to that review, Fressoz remarks that the framing of the transition debate “prevents us from asking a question that global warming forces us to confront: how can we make do with less and less and less”.⁹⁴

92 See The groundWork Report 2007, *Peak Poison*. Easy oil is the stuff that was easy to find in accessible places on land, easy to drill for, and which mostly came up the well under its own pressure. Note that the peak of easy oil does not mean the end of it but the peak of production. It is when half is gone and the other half is still to be extracted. But production is in decline, so non-conventional production must cater both for declining easy oil production and for expanding consumption.

93 Christian Downie, *Brazil is trying to stop fossil fuel interests derailing COP30 with one simple measure*, The Conversation, 19 November 2025; Fiona Harvey, Jonathan Watts and Oliver Milman, *Can Cop30 begin the process of phasing out fossil fuels?* The Guardian, 16 November 2025

94 Adam Tooze, *Trouble Transitioning*, London Review of Books, 23 January 2025; Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, letter to the London Review of Books, 6 February 2025



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However, less and less must apply to the wealthy of the world: the richest 10% of people are responsible for nearly half of global greenhouse gas emissions and the top 1% emit more than the bottom 50% of humanity [Chancel et al 2023]. In a presentation to the PCC, economist Esther Duflo proposed a set of international taxes on the global rich to be distributed to the global poor, to communities for adaptation, and to those affected by extreme weather.⁹⁵ This echoes proposals made two decades ago. As we argued in 2007, there must be enough for all:

Enough ... also promises a series of non-monetary rewards: community, time, health and a clean conscience! In the Jo'burg Memo, prepared for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, Wolfgang Sachs and his co-authors propose reducing consumption through 'wealth alleviation' instead of the inept meddling of 'poverty alleviation'. Better still would be the eradication of wealth which sustains unequal power relationships and starvation in a world of potential abundance. [Hallowes & Munnik 2007]

In Belem

The 30th Conference of the Parties (CoP30) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was held in November 2025 in Belem at the mouth of the Amazon in Brazil. The Trump administration did not send a delegation, so the US was absent from the formal proceedings. American business was very present, however. According to the Kick Big Polluters Out coalition, 1 600 fossil fuel lobbyists from all corners of the world were at Belem. They included the American Petroleum Institute and the Chamber of Commerce of the USA, alongside the International Chamber of Commerce. The Big Oil supermajors – ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, BP and Total – were there, along with several second tier 'independent oil companies'

95 Esther Duflo, Towards a Just transition: Changing paradigm for fairness and success, Presentation to the PCC, 13 June 2025



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(IOCs) such as Equinor from Norway and ENI from Italy. The major mining houses with coal interests were also there, including BHP and Anglo American.

From the Global South, the state owned oil corporations of all major producers were prominent in their national delegations: all the members and ex-members of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) – all the Arab Gulf states and the major African producers – together with OPEC itself.⁹⁶ Other state owned big oil companies include China's National Petroleum Corporation, Russia's Gazprom and Brazil's Petrobras. Notably absent from the list of companies registered for CoP30 is Saudi Aramco – by far the largest oil company in the world. However, Aramco is inseparable from the Saudi state and has several ministers on its board or in a close relationship with it. Aramco also has a close historical and ongoing relationship with ExxonMobil.

Power utilities are also prominent in country delegations and/or business associations. Eskom is part of South Africa's national delegation and is also represented through the National Business Initiative (NBI). Sasol is also part of NBI, along with the transnational oil companies, the big coal miners and the major banks. Business Unity South Africa (Busa) also had a CoP delegation. Sasol is on its board and has considerable influence in this and other business associations – including the Energy Council of South Africa, the Minerals Council of South Africa, the Energy Intensive Users Group and the Chemical and Allied Industry Association, which are also members of Busa. These business bodies give ample representation to the business side of South Africa's Minerals-Energy Complex (MEC). The government side of the MEC includes the Department of Mineral and Petroleum Resources and

96 OPEC is centred on the Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states: United Arab Emirates, Iran, Iraq and Kuwait. Qatar is an ex-member. African members are: Algeria, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Libya and Nigeria. Angola is an ex-member. Venezuela is the only Latin American member while Ecuador has lapsed. From Asia, Indonesia is an ex-member. OPEC+ includes states which cooperate with OPEC: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brunei, Brazil, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Oman, Russia, South Sudan and Sudan. OPEC's key function is to regulate the flow of oil onto global markets to stabilise prices or to exert geopolitical power. Its primary instrument is to distribute quotas to all members – but this has also been a source of conflict leading to some countries – like Angola – leaving. Russia is the third largest producer in the world after the USA and Saudi Arabia. Hence its cooperation with OPEC was critical to controlling oil flows – until Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022 and pumped as much as possible at whatever price to fund his war.



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the Department of Electricity and Energy. State funding agencies, the Public Investment Corporation (PIC), the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) and the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) are also integral to the MEC. The PIC and the DBSA were part of the South African delegation. Beyond the MEC, the delegation included members of the PCC and of local and provincial government bodies.

Belem agendas

After several CoPs repeating the slogan “keep 1.5 alive”, the talk at CoP30 was ‘limiting overshoot’. However, “less and less and less” was not contemplated in Belem. The ‘Global Mutirao’ – the main ‘decision’ text from the formal negotiations – “reaffirms that the Parties should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to sustainable economic growth and development of all parties ...” [UNFCCC 2025, para 55]. In short, they all committed themselves to “more and more and more” while competing to retain or improve their positions within the global orders of imperial capitalism. Three big issues loomed large at Belem: money, fossil fuels and forests, and a just transition.

Money

At CoP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, the Northern powers agreed – reluctantly – to ‘mobilise’ \$300 billion a year by 2035 “from a wide variety of sources” as climate finance for the global South. That’s less than a third of the US military budget. Southern countries had demanded \$1.3 trillion. So it was decided in Baku that the CoP29 and CoP30 presidencies (Azerbaijan and Brazil) would put together the “Baku to Belem roadmap to 1.3T”.⁹⁷ The roadmap presented ahead of CoP30 shows the trillions coming from the same ‘wide variety of sources’ with private capital as the biggest part of the wide variety. Magically, capital will get its return but won’t impose more debt on the global South.

97 Molly Lempriere and Josh Gabbatis, *COP30: What does the ‘Baku to Belém roadmap’ mean for climate finance?* Carbon Brief, 5 November 2025



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The roadmap also proposes that the Northern powers and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) should help “alleviate onerous debt burdens faced by developing countries”. The IMF has been ‘alleviating debt’ for decades even as the debt multiplies, largely because the IMF always puts the interest of creditors first. Whatever else happens, capital must get its return. Much of that debt is illegitimate and unpayable – which means repayments with interest stretch into forever, a permanent rent for ‘investors’. The roadmap adds ‘debt for nature swaps’ (DNS) to the ‘wide variety of sources’. Such deals were first devised in the 1980s and are supposed to fund conservation while alleviating debt. Like the IMF, however, they prioritise the return to capital and often increase the burden on the borrowing state with additional transaction costs. And typically, they sanction land grabs in the global South. As summarised in a paper for Friends of the Earth:

The resources that actually go towards effective conservation are minimal compared to the financial costs, as creditors’ profits are prioritised. Furthermore, DNS impose conditions that give foreign NGOs and private actors control over national territories, funds and policies ... Local communities are excluded, and conservation commitments are often symbolic or redundant. In some cases, there have even been evictions, limitations on food sovereignty, or militarisation of territories. [Gomez 2025]

For the Galapagos Islands, the deal included the establishment of a US military base “which openly contradicts the very environmental objectives that supposedly motivated the swap in the first place” [ibid, 24].

DNS is one way of financialising nature. At Belem, Brazil launched another. The Tropical Forests Forever Fund (TFFF) is supposed to compensate for the ‘market failure’ of not putting a monetary value on ecosystem services. It invites investors to put up money for a fund to invest in global capital markets, including in the carry trade where investors borrow cheap in the global North and invest for high returns on debt from the global South.⁹⁸ The investors are

⁹⁸ Aruna Chandrasekhar and Yanine Quiroz, *COP30: Could Brazil’s ‘Tropical Forest Forever’ fund help tackle climate change?* Carbon Brief, 5 November 2025



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to get a generous return with greenwash added, the administrator (the World Bank) is to get a generous fee with greenwash and, if anything is left over, it will be paid out to about 75 countries as compensation for not cutting and burning their forests or killing local people who live in the way of 'development'. The value put on the forest ecosystem services is a mere \$4 per hectare and is calculated as "an estimate of the potential return of a multilateral investment fund and not an attempt – however failed or impossible – to put a price on forest ecosystem services" [Malig & Solón 2025]. If the markets return less than hoped for, the payout per hectare will also be reduced. And even if \$4/ha is realised, it will not match the profits from logging, cattle ranching, soy farming and palm oil plantations – all the ways of extracting money and calling it development. And TFFF income looks highly uncertain as capital markets wobble. Should the fund fail, it seems likely that the debts will land on the forest countries. In short, the risks go South.

Within the formal negotiations, finance for adaptation was a critical issue for vulnerable Southern countries. The negotiating text "call[ed] for efforts to triple adaptation finance compared with 2025 by 2030". In the final text, the 2025 starting date is deleted and the tripling is only to happen by 2035. So it is not clear what will be tripled and the ambiguity ensures there is no real commitment from the Northern powers. It has been assumed that it will be tripled to \$120 billion a year – i.e. from a starting figure of \$40 bn – but this is nowhere stated. And Northern negotiators say that money will be a part of the \$300 bn agreed in Baku and not additional.

For the most part, the money is managed and counted in the manner of 'overseas development aid' (ODA). That is, 'donor' countries retain control of financial flows and what projects are funded. As the Demand Climate Justice (DCJ) group commented, "... the rich countries who continue to inflate their finance claims, count loans as climate support, and push private finance instead of public, grant-based, non-debt creating finance to the Global South ..."⁹⁹ Meanwhile, the UN climate funds – the Green Climate Fund, the

99 <https://demandclimatejustice.org/2025/11/22/cop30-civilsociety-reactions/>



Adaptation Fund and the Loss and Damage Fund – are all grossly underfunded if not empty.

Fossil fuels and forests

Limiting overshoot requires the rapid phase out of fossil fuels and the restoration of forests and other ecosystems. Fossil fuels were unmentionable through 27 CoPs. CoP28 in Dubai produced heated debate and a brief line on transitioning away from fossil fuels. At Baku, Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev declared oil a gift from God and the petrostates again blocked any mention of fossil fuels. Ahead of the CoP in Belem, Brazil opened up 105 oil exploration blocks, with 21 going to production in the Amazon. Several blocks require fracking. The industry in Brazil is responsible for over 2 000 pollution incidents every year and there are thousands of contaminated sites in neighbouring Amazon countries.¹⁰⁰ This contributes to continued deforestation, not to reversing deforestation.

Offshore, a line of oil blocks stretches for a thousand kilometres across the Amazon mouth. Brazil’s President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva pressured the environmental agency to permit Petrobras, the national oil company, to drill Block 59 – one of 19 blocks opened for exploration just an oil executive’s helicopter ride from Belem. It threatens one of the most intact tropical coral reefs – protected by the muddy plume of the river – and a great mangrove forest that lies along the shore. Lula said, “We have to use oil to make our energy transition, which will require a lot of money”. The CEO of Petronas said, “We see Petrobras as one of the top 10 producers in the world ... We will be having 225 000 new barrels coming online this year ... let’s drill, baby drill” [Schücking et al 2025].

Nevertheless, on opening CoP30, Lula called for “roadmaps that will enable humankind, in a fair and planned manner, to overcome its dependence on fossil fuels, halt and reverse deforestation and mobilise resources to achieve these goals”. Some 80 countries called for the CoP to initiate a roadmap to

¹⁰⁰ Renata Ribiero, *Data gap hides severity of oil accident peril in the Americas*, Zero Carbon Analytics, November 2025



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‘transition away’ from fossil fuels while another large block opposed it. Those for a roadmap included many of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, a large contingent of Latin American and Caribbean countries and the European Union. Those against were rallied by Saudi Arabia and the petrostates, reportedly with support from Brics countries.¹⁰¹

Whereas the EU used fossil fuel phase out to deflect attention from the failure of the global North to deliver on climate finance, these countries have used that failure to exclude text on fossil fuels. Thus, Saudi Arabia argued that a significant shift in climate finance flows to developing countries is needed “to help them achieve goals of sustainable development and poverty eradication”.¹⁰² We note that Saudi Arabia is scarcely interested in sustainable development or poverty eradication. Over 40% of the population are non-citizens and people of the global South are present in the country only as migrant workers without labour rights.¹⁰³

Having apparently helped exclude the roadmap or any reference to fossil fuels from the text, South Africa’s lead negotiator, Maesela Kekana, told journalists, “We can only talk about things that are in the text ... Why are you talking about something that does not exist? ... You talk too much to the rich countries.”¹⁰⁴

Colombia – not a rich country – was the most outspoken proponent of naming fossil fuels in the text. Colombian President Gustavo Petro said, “I do not accept that in the CoP 30 declaration, it is not clearly stated, as science says, that the cause of the climate crisis is the fossil fuels used by capital. If that is not said, everything else is hypocrisy.”¹⁰⁵

101 Brics started as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa and as a geopolitical block rather than a climate block. It has recently expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, United Arab Emirates and Indonesia, all of whom have substantial fossil fuel interests and/or prospects. Saudi Arabia has yet to make up its mind whether to accept an invitation to join. Another 10 countries are ‘partner states’ who may or may not become full members. Geopolitically, there is much conflict between members of the group. It is not clear if they constitute, or are emerging as, a climate negotiating block.

102 Radhika Chatterjee, *China calls for ‘implementation roadmap’ for delivery of new finance goal*, Third World Network, Belem Climate News Update #12, 20 November 2025

103 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Saudi_Arabia

104 Zia Weise, Karl Mathiesen, Sara Schonhardt and Zack Colman, *EU threatens to block ‘weak’ COP30 deal*, Politico, 21 November 2025; and *The world is fractured. The climate talks reflected that*, Politico, 22 November 2025

105 Bob Berwyn, *COP30 Backpedals on Climate Action*, Inside Climate News, 22 November 2025



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The scientists agree. Commenting on the Belem outcome and the 10 CoPs since the Paris Agreement was signed, James Dyke and Johan Rockström observe:

Warming is going to exceed 1.5°C. We are heading into “overshoot” within the next few years.... So, what comes after failure? ... Exceed 1.5°C and not only do extreme climate events, like droughts, floods, fires and heatwaves grow in number and severity, impacting billions of people, we also approach tipping points for large Earth regulating systems like the Amazon rainforest and the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets. Tropical coral reef systems, livelihood for over 200 million people, are unlikely to cope with overshoot. This translates to existential risks for billions of people. Not far in the future, but within the next few years for extreme events, and within decades for tipping points. ... Our only chance to recover back to a stable and safe climate is to accelerate the phase-out of fossil-fuels, remove carbon and invest in nature (on land and in the ocean), and do that without trading off between them.¹⁰⁶

FutureCoal, previously the World Coal Association, was delighted. “Both CoP30 and the G20 concluded without agreement on a fossil-fuel phase-out roadmap ... These outcomes confirm what the Paris Agreement intended from the outset: there is no single pathway and no mandated fossil-fuel phaseout ... Both summits reaffirmed the role of zero- and low-emission technologies, including abatement systems, carbon capture and storage (CCS), and advanced industrial applications.”¹⁰⁷

While FutureCoal may well see CoP30 as a victory, there is nothing in the formal outcomes endorsing CCS. There were, however, 531 CCS lobbyists at Belem with 44 of them included in official national delegations.¹⁰⁸ CCS was

106 James Dyke and Johan Rockström, *The world lost the climate gamble. Now it faces a dangerous new reality*, The Conversation, 22 November 2025

107 FutureCoal media statement, *FutureCoal welcomes global shift toward technology-neutral, energy-secure pathways at COP30 and G20*, 25 November 2025

108 Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL), Press Release, *531 Carbon Capture and Storage Lobbyists Gained Access to COP30 Climate Talks*, 17 November 2025



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punted at numerous side events and it does get a mention in the Global Climate Action Agenda for CoP30, which is basically a list of supposed climate solutions – many of them dubious – taken by various coalitions and partnerships.

In the final plenary, CoP president Andre do Lago said he would launch two roadmaps to phase out fossil fuels and reverse deforestation outside of the formal negotiating process. Colombia and The Netherlands announced they would host the first international conference to phase out fossil fuels. Restoring the forests – and nature in general – as well as transforming agriculture to restore soil carbon, is essential to removing carbon from the atmosphere, as well as to adapting to climate change. Removing carbon through unproven geoengineering technology fixes is not credible. For example, CCS units bolted onto coal-fired power stations don't work very well, use about a third of the power produced by the plant, are extraordinarily expensive, and the carbon is generally used for enhanced oil recovery – restoring pressure to depleted oil wells to get more oil out. As Sofia Basheer of Influencemap comments, it is promoted to “lock in fossil fuels and get governments to fund it” while obstructing “meaningful climate regulation”.¹⁰⁹

Just transition

Civil society organisations of all tendencies coalesced around a campaign for a Belem Action Mechanism for a just transition and claimed a victory when the CoP decided [25] “to develop a just transition mechanism”. The decision document includes a long list of exemplary ‘key messages’ – outlining an inclusive and participatory just transition – to be considered by all countries in designing “nationally determined just transition pathways”. It “encourages” parties to “consider just transition pathways” as they develop climate plans including NDCs, adaptation plans and “long-term low-emission development strategies” but avoids mention of reducing fossil fuels extraction and use. It “recalls that ... grant based, highly concessional finance and non-debt instruments [are] critical to supporting developing countries” but does not

109 CEIL press release.



say where it will come from. How the mechanism will be 'operationalised' is to be considered at the next CoP. As yet, there is little clarity on what it will actually bring.

Capital's campaign

Big capital and business corporations have a long history of opposing any regulation on their freedom to do as they please. Unconstrained capital, as Karl Marx said, is footloose: it is not bound by the borders of any nation or by moral norms but invests where it will get the best return, that is, where labour is cheap and environmental regulations are weak. Its ideal location is offshore. At the same time, however, it demands that national states abide by the values of capital, and particularly of property rights, and ensure investor returns.

Since the 1970s, this agenda has gathered power under the name of neo-liberalism, first in Chile, where it was imposed by the Pinochet dictatorship backed by the US CIA and the 'Chicago Boys' – the economics team led by Milton Friedman. Then, in Britain and the US, where the post World War II accommodation of capital and labour was breaking down, it was brought into the citadels of global capital with the election of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

This outcome was the result of a long and coherent campaign fought over economic ideology. Following the war, Frederich Hayek, Friedman and a small group of neoliberals established the Mont Pelerin Society to promote a free market economy in opposition to the then prevailing economics of John Keynes, who argued for full employment and a rather modest redistribution of wealth in favour of workers on the grounds that this would expand market demand and hence production. Keynesian policies, we may note, were put into effect in the imperial countries. Third World countries – the colonies and neo colonies – were made to subsidise the First World settlement with cheap labour and cheap natural resources largely controlled by transnational corporations. The US defeat in Vietnam and the nationalisation of oil resources by major Third World producers – leading to the 'oil shocks' of the



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1970s – substantially contributed to the crisis of the post-war settlement in the imperial countries. Thatcher and Reagan defeated labour at home and restored the flow of cheap resources from the Third World.

Challenging Keynes, Hayek argued for the unfettered freedom of the owners of capital and company bosses. And he saw democracy as a threat to that freedom: where people demand distributive justice from governments, governments will end up controlling them. “So long as the belief in ‘social justice’ governs political action, this process must progressively approach nearer and nearer to a totalitarian system.”¹¹⁰

This agenda was taken up by Antony Fisher who, in 1955, established the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) in the UK. This was a think tank with close links to the right wing of the Tory Party, to whom it provided intellectual arguments. It was backed by big business, notably by Shell and BP, which wanted to see apparently independent research backing their positions. In the 1970s it supported the rise of Margaret Thatcher, first to take the leadership of the Tory party and then to win the 1979 election. She credited the IEA with creating “the climate of opinion which made our victory possible” and she subsequently awarded peerages to two of its leading members and a knighthood to Fisher.¹¹¹

With support from the Koch brothers – whose business is centred on oil refining and petrochemicals – Fisher had meanwhile established several think tanks in America. They included the Fraser Institute in Canada and the Manhattan and Pacific Research Institutes in the US. With the victory in Britain, he launched the Atlas Network, linking these think tanks as well as those backed by the Koch brothers – the Cato Institute, Heartland Institute, Heritage Foundation, and the American Legislative Exchange Council. Its stated vision is for a “free, prosperous, and peaceful world where ... individual liberty, property rights, limited government, and free markets are secured

110 Quoted by Julia Steinberger, *What we are up against*, 17 June 2024. <https://jksteinberger.medium.com/what-we-are-up-against-2290ba8c4b5c>

111 John Blundell, *Lady Thatcher and the IEA*, Blog post at <https://iea.org.uk/blog/lady-thatcher-and-the-iea/>, 9 April 2013. In Britain, a peerage comes with a fancy title and a permanent seat in the House of Lords, the upper chamber of parliament.



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by the rule of law”. But it is really about corporate freedom. Hence, it targets action on climate and environment as well as gender and anti-racism – what Rubio described as “climate + DEI” – and has worked to frame activists as ‘terrorists’ and to promote legislation restricting protest. Beyond that, as Julia Steinberger argues, “a core goal ... is to replace public service expertise, the kind which is publicly funded, in universities or government research institutes, with their own corporate-friendly brand of disinformation”. And while it is highly influential, it has managed to combine “effectiveness with obscurity”.¹¹²

The Atlas Network now has 500 member think tanks around the world, including the Free Market Foundation and Institute for Race Relations in South Africa. Its Centre for African Prosperity coordinates the regional think tanks and brings them together for an annual ‘Liberty Forum’ conference. It is led by Magatte Wade, a Senegalese business woman, who says that climate activists are planning “to keep Africa poor”, as fossil fuel energy is the foundation of wealth. She particularly denounces opposition to the East Africa Oil Pipeline but does not observe that it is about taking the oil to the global market – it is about securing the flow of cheap resources from Africa, not about industrialising Africa.¹¹³

The Atlas agenda thus echoes Africa Energy Week (AEW), which promotes free markets and fossil energy as the way to prosperity. In 2023, it hosted Alex Epstein, an American climate denialist who consults to the oil industry to promote the message that burning fossil fuels is good for the world. At AEW he argued that no country got rich without burning fossil fuels and those who oppose extraction want to keep Africa from developing.¹¹⁴ He is, unsurprisingly, well networked with Atlas Network organisations in the US. Also in 2023, he was a speaker at a Heartlands Institute conference on climate – or more accurately, on climate denial – and appears to be a regular at all the leading Atlas think tanks.

112 Julia Steinberger, *What we are up against*, 17 June 2024; see also Amy Westervelt and Geoff Dembicki, *Meet the Shadowy Network Vilifying Climate Protestors*, DeSmog, 12 September 2023

113 Magatte Wade, *The COP26 Plan to Keep Africa Poor*, Wall Street Journal, 26 November 2021

114 See The groundWork Report 2023, p.143.



The Atlas agenda is now reflected in the key themes for the US G20 presidency – “removing regulatory burdens, unlocking affordable and secure [fossil] energy supply chains, and pioneering new technologies and innovation”.

On 7 January 2026, Trump announced that the US will withdraw from 66 international bodies, starting with the UNFCCC – it withdrew from the Paris Agreement at the beginning of 2025 – and associated agencies including the science bodies, the IPCC and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). Rubio said the organisations are “anti-American, useless, or wasteful international organisations”.¹¹⁵

115 Amy Harder and Chuck McCutcheon, *The stakes and future of Trump’s UN climate exit*, Axios, 8 January 2026; Matthew Lee, Farnoush Amiri, Tammy Webber, *U.S. Exits UN Climate Bodies, 66 International Organizations*, The Energy Mix, 7 January 2026



4

Building a just transition from the ground up

The new terrain

This report argues that the PCC has created a new terrain for climate politics in South Africa. It shifted power in the debate away from fossil fuel lobbies and their supporters in government, and towards decarbonisation, even if the incumbents then recovered much of their power. The PCC has made it acceptable to talk about the end of coal, the need for the end of coal and how to end coal. It has established a culture of evidence-based¹¹⁶ debates about climate change responses. It invited environmental justice activists into its deliberations, and conducted debates about a Just Transition in public. It has made available a discourse in which the justness of a Just Transition could be debated and assessed.

It has established itself as a new actor, going much further into contentious climate politics than any South African department of environment ever did. By its own reckoning, it only achieved a limited though decisive shift in the balance of power away from the MEC's dominance. However, aligned with other strong trends, this shift is likely to continue in the face of increasing climate disasters, a worldwide move to cheaper and cleaner renewables and out of coal, and into a national climate politics with growing and compelling detail on what needs to be done in various sectors.

¹¹⁶ While evidence based policy making works against random decisions in government, for example in the IRP process, it does carry the risk of putting disproportionate value on "expertise". In light of this risk, groundWork has always argued for the importance of people's knowledge based on their own knowledge of their own context and agendas.



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The private sector showed itself to be mostly interested in business opportunities created in the transition, while dodging any responsibilities for their legacies of environmental and other externalities, and steadfastly ignoring any whiff of restorative justice. In its meetings with incumbent power holders in the MEC, the PCC implicitly accommodated current incumbents, which suggests that they are not pushing for systems change. At the same time, these incumbents seem unable to integrate social and environmental concerns into their thinking, and are focused on preserving the dominance of the MEC. This brittle approach opens up these incumbents to stronger challenges and growing pressure.

The PCC, as we have argued in this report, has opened a new front within the state itself in the political fight for a just transition. This is an opportunity that coincides with creeping state failure and increased initiatives from civil society in governance and service delivery, as we argued in *The groundWork Report 2024*. However, civil society will not – and should not – replace government, but must seek to hold it accountable and insist on real participation and more productive relationships, especially between local government and the communities they are elected to serve. That is, civil society must work for open democracy and against corrupt, criminal and authoritarian governance.

Strategic priorities

What strategic priorities emerge from the analysis in the report for environmental justice actors? The following priorities are proposed for discussion and action.

1. Keep a people’s perspective on the transition

Through observation, analysis, critique and debate, keep a very clear view of the PCC and the broader politics of transition. This report has identified (through an exploration of important absences) that the official Just Transition has obscured areas of great importance for (poor) people, including health



and environmental externalities of the legacies of the fossil fuel industry, as well as ongoing injustices, the recognition of which does not suit the economic and political elite. It remains important to hold up the ideals of a fundamental transition based on systems change, and to show how the elite view is deficient, and how it is constantly constructed to serve elite interests. This means making health, waste and other externalities live issues in the Just Transition debate. It also means remaining engaged in the work of the PCC and monitoring the progress of different agendas and their financial support.

2. Learn from the first five years of the PCC about strategies and dynamics

Understand the dynamics that made it possible for civil society, specifically LAC, to make space for a people's agenda in PCC processes in the first five years, and monitor whether and how this political space changes in the next phase. It is also important to understand how the push back against climate ambition happened, what the dynamics were, and to prepare to counter these by keeping an eye on the strategies and responses of the members of the MEC.

3. Communicate a people's progressive perspective to the broad public, engaging with the need for and shape of South Africa's' climate response

Design and work with media strategies for broad awareness building and political education for the transition, drawing different groups into these debates. See the failure of the PCC communications strategy as an opportunity.

4. Reclaim and help build the capacity of the South African state for a just transition

Using the tools of open democracy, support the rebuilding, or in some cases building from scratch, of state capacity for a just transition. Start with engaging local government in terms of services, resilience building, adaptation and disaster management. Support and advance local discussions, understandings and people's agendas as part of the implementation of requirements of the Climate Change Act, and Integrated Development Plans



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or IDPs. Other actors will likely also be engaged in this process, including the PCC, political parties and residents' organisations. Strengthen governance in general in this coalition period. This could be done by looking after climate change issues at local level, rejuvenating the IDP process. Keep an eye on government departments and PCC projects to support them, and keep up the monitoring and the pressure.

5. Build the environmental justice broad social movement

Continue to build the environmental justice broad social movement and network with actors in community organisations, civil society, academia and progressive policy communities on the basis of the topics in the Open Agenda and within the framework of systems change, as argued in The groundWork Report 2024. Encourage the understanding and growth of environmental justice amongst broader society.

6. Build and support the just transition from the ground up

Identify and support projects and initiatives that build the just transition from the ground up, such as a large-scale asset and jobs creating initiative to install solar on rooftops in poor communities, projects supported by the Community Just Transition Fund, and projects identified by Climate Action Group (CAG) researchers in previous years. There is a strong imagination among community activists as to what building a just transition from the ground up could look like.

Building a just transition from the ground up

In 2022, community activists in the CAG engaged with the challenges of building a just transition from the ground up in the form of a research project. This was in the time of the PCC's consultations for the Just Transition Framework, in which the researchers participated enthusiastically. The consultancy One World, facilitating the process, reported that



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...communities have their own ideas for how the just transition, or elements thereof, can be achieved in their local context. ... They advocate for a communal context in terms of looking at livelihoods, rather than just looking at individuals. Local colleges offering skills development for fit-for-purpose skills development in such a context would be essential. Many communities have recommended that climate change and the just transition be integrated into school and tertiary education curricula.

One World added: “This should involve financial support for local actors (who) are already working with communities on climate change and the just transition across the country.”

In the 2022 CAG research, community activist researchers¹¹⁷ reported on existing projects in their areas that could build the just transition from the ground up, and also imagined new possible projects. They identified possible obstacles to their implementation, and what they want local and other levels of government to do to help [see The groundWork Report 2022, Chapter 3]. It is striking how important the framing conditions for community based just transition projects are for community activist researchers, who argue:

The just transition could only be successful though governance that is open and democratic, equal and balances opportunities between youth, men and women.

Projects need to be inclusive, not discriminate against any age group, be supported by local government and be integrated into plans such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP).

These projects must do urgent work, in the words of the researchers: “... creating cleaner transport, building renewable energy, insulating homes and restoring nature”.

117 These researchers were acknowledged in The groundWork Report 2022, where their findings are reported in more detail.



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These projects must build resilience towards global warming and climate change. What people expect from these projects is stability and sustainability. That is socio-economic stability and sustainability of resources, including the preservation and conservation of the natural world.

Just transition projects from the ground up must consist of integration plans for communities, government and other stakeholders. Consultations in all municipalities, districts, provinces and national spheres must take place. IDPs must be compulsory, must include the just transition and it must be budgeted for at local level.

Civil society organisations must be integrated in all government initiatives on just transition projects or programmes.

The biggest group of projects that researchers in 2022 saw as capable of building the just transition from the ground up consisted of information, awareness and training projects: preparing communities, school children, students and workers for the just transition. This points to an urgent need perceived by the community researchers to make communities aware and draw them into discussions about the just transition. This is a democratic vision. It also includes longer term preparation – through workers' reskilling, training for youth and adjustments to the school syllabus.

The second and third biggest groups of possible projects concerned food, agriculture, greening projects and, in equal numbers, projects aimed at reuse, recycling and developing zero waste systems. Next there was a focus on transport, mine rehabilitation and energy projects, followed by construction (municipal employment), youth employment projects and 'green mining'.

Similar projects already exist. Existing projects include food and agriculture and recycling and there were some mentions of solar geysers. There are many such projects that could contribute to the just transition, but they need proper support, especially from local government.

Ideas for new projects still emphasise food projects, but also advance plans for community based renewable energy projects and more recycling projects.



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There were proposals for new projects promoting (internet) connectivity, better road construction, as well as 'toxic tours', because "over the years we have experienced local and international interest in toxic tours" (showing extreme pollution spots to tourists, researchers, activists and the media). They also identified a need for locally based Just Transition Centres that support community capacity and are answerable to them.

Community researchers foresee many obstacles to these projects in the current environment, because of the current limitations that already affect existing projects. Prominent issues are lack of access to land, to water, to funding, and in some cases to skills (for example, the youth are seen as having lost or never learnt agricultural skills). The researchers identified "who must do what to overcome these challenges". In many cases this is local government. For example:

The municipality will have to make sure that they make land available for the betterment of our community. The lack of access to land is hindering the livelihoods of our community.

The researchers also put failures of transparent and inclusive planning in local government, lack of regulation of mines' behaviour, crime, divisions in the community, vandalism and benefits going to a privileged few in the community on the long list of obstacles. These issues reflect the underlying scarcity of resources in many communities, and the control of these resources by other actors. Communities involved in projects would also have responsibilities, for example practising water wise agriculture and overcoming the stigma of poverty attached to reuse and recycling activities.

With the correct support from actors in the Just Transition, and specifically local government, there could be many projects building a transition from the ground up. We close with some specific initiatives to build a just transition from the ground up.



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Socially and community owned renewables (Score!)

The debate on the potential of socially and community owned renewable energy (Score!) started out as a counter-politics to the privatisation of power generation starting with renewables. That began with public procurement of private power through the renewable energy independent power producers procurement programme (REIPPPP) initiated by the National Treasury in 2011. Ten years later, a cap on private procurement of private power was removed, allowing private projects of any size to be built without a license from the National Energy Regulator (Nersa). Big industrial users responded by contracting substantial capacity, with most of it 'wheeled' through the public grid. At the same time, Eskom is being 'unbundled' to separate generation, transmission and distribution. The intention is to open up access to the grid for private generators. The next step in this process is the construction of a wholesale electricity market.

However, in the past few years detailed research and experimentation with renewable community approaches have started to create a momentum that could build an energy transition from the ground up (as witnessed at a convening of actors engaged in these issues in Durban in September 2025). Score! proposals are mostly for small scale community projects, self-provision with an element of selling into the grid (if the local municipality can accommodate that). But Score! can also be at scale, according to a proposal for large-scale rooftop solar in poorer communities currently under development with LAC. There is scope here for supporting community owned projects, as well as distributing energy assets to poor people.

Community Just Transition Fund and Just Transition Centres

Planning for a Community Just Transition Fund and Just Transition Centres within the LAC campaign is at an advanced stage. The intention is to support community projects that build the transition from the ground up, either directly or through project preparation and presentation to other potential funders or support providers. The centres will be hosted and directed by community organisations or formations, and serve as information centres



about the transition, as well as access points to the CJT Fund and other opportunities. Earthlife already runs a community just transition centre in Soweto, and others are being planned.

Komati and other decommissioning projects

The PCC and other actors supporting the purposive transition have invested time and resources in the transition in the ward around Komati. Nine more power stations are to follow in Mpumalanga alone. These nine will need to be followed, critiqued and supported in a way similar to Komati. Valid projects that emerge from here will also need civil society support, in order to be part of an approach of building the just transition from the ground up.

Local government's obligations under the Climate Change Act

In 2025, the Climate Action Group, a national network of fossil fuel affected community organisations, undertook research into the readiness and political will of local governments to meet the requirements put on them by the Climate Change Act. Using the methods of open democracy, they asked questions of and explanations from local government. Early insights from this research include:

1. Most district municipalities (DMs) and local municipalities (LMs) are not prepared for the implementation of the Climate Change Act. eThekweni and Vhembe were reported by the community researchers to be exceptions as they were involving local environmental justice organisations, like the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) and Dzomolamupo. Nkangala and Gert Sibande DMs also show some interest.
2. Most LMs and DMs have some form of documentation, plans and strategies for climate change. However, it is not clear that these plans and strategies are being implemented. For example, all the documentation says that communities and environmental



organisations need to be consulted, but from the research reports this is not the case.

3. Most local government officials are, or say they are, too busy to talk about climate issues. Are they really busy or are they avoiding the engagement with activists? It seems to be difficult to ask questions and get answers from municipalities. However, in some cases, researchers have found ways to get information.
4. Municipal speakers' offices seem to be crucial in organising participation.
5. In some cases, there are friendly, helpful officials that the researchers could work with. Other reports said that many municipal officials are "clueless" about climate change.

Long road ahead

Building a just transition will be challenging and contested, in circumstances that are hard to predict. By its very nature, the Just Transition will be a process drawn out over decades. It will see major shifts in the weather as climate impacts worsen over this time. Worldwide, geopolitics are in flux, as the United States weakens as a world power and China grows in strength. In South Africa, political changes seem imminent. In May 2024, the ANC lost its majority and was forced to enter into a national ruling coalition, as well as in some provinces. In 2026, local elections are set to continue this trend and may well result in many fractious and fragile local governments.



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