

INTERNATIONAL COAL EXCHANGE STATEMENT- JANUARY 2018

Background to Exchanges

groundWork has always believed that community people learn best from sharing their struggles with each other. The 2018 International Coal Exchange took between 29 and 31 January 2018. It aimed to enable share learnings and a broader understanding of coal, energy poverty and the making of environmental injustice.

groundWork believes that exchanges build a connections and unity between groups with similar concerns. It is one of the ways in which groundWork supports community-based organizations to build solidarity and links with each other, and to build a shared response to the common environmental injustices people face on the ground.

Why exchanges

We can learn from the experience of others and build solidarity through this. We can see how broad forces, often global forces, play out at a local level.

Exchanges facilitate the meeting of activists and their style of learning. For many activists, education is unattainable because of the structural oppression that limits poor black people's ability to access structures like the economy, education and many other things. The exchanges therefore become important tools for learning through conversation and demonstration.

Exchanges strengthen knowledge, motivation and skills to support broader strategies. An exchange can shift and motivate an individual's capacity for action. It is critical that people take action (individual and community) after the exchange.

Exchanges also aim to contribute to individuals taking action through increased knowledge, motivation and skills. They show how communities across Africa are faced by similar environmental justice struggles. They also facilitate the sharing of ideas and successful strategies between communities, as well as encourage joint action. They also aim to capacity individuals to lead and build strong communities in their communities.

Focus

The focus of this exchange is to "share our collective struggles on coal and to consider these in how we collectively respond to coal developments and impacts on people in South Africa and Africa." The exchange was held in Ermelo, located in the Highveld, Mpumalanga Province in South Africa. It has been declared a priority area. In November 2007, the Minister of Environmental Affairs declared 31,000 km² of the heavily-polluted Mpumalanga Highveld, then home to about 3.6 million people, a "priority area" in terms of the Air Quality Act. The Highveld Priority Area (HPA) was declared because, as the DEA said at the time, "people living and working in these areas do not enjoy air quality that is not harmful to their health and well-being", as required by section 24 of the Constitution. This decision meant the start of new coal and smelting industry would be limited, and existing industries would be forced to comply to environmental laws. Sadly, 10 years after it being declared, very little has changed, and the

place is still a pollution hotspot and government has allowed the expansion of coal fired power stations and mines. The area shows us the brutal evidence of how the coal legacy, inherited from the apartheid government, currently operates. Profit is the only goal, and a trail of poverty, health challenges from the emissions and environmental destruction is left behind for the community to deal with.

Communities like Witbank, Middelburg and Ermelo have polluted water supplies and can't drink tap water. Communities facing many economic challenges, now have the added burden of having to buy water in shops, something which is a basic human right and should be easily accessible in their homes. Communities where coal infrastructures exist seldom benefit from such development.

groundWork is working with Khuthala Environmental Care Group, an Ermelo based community organization, under the umbrella network – High Environmental Justice Network (HEJN). The exchange was hosted by Khuthala and HEJN.

Impacts of coal and the economy of coal in South Africa

Government praises the virtues of coal and tells a story of coal mining and coal-fired power stations benefitting the poor and the economy. From speaking to people on the ground and the evidence witnessed, people do not benefit. Rather, their experiences are negative, and they are made poorer because of coal extraction.

Due to an ill-conceived belief by government that coal development will assist our country's economy, the importance of environmental and health impacts from coal receives little priority and attention. People's voices highlighting the negative impacts are disregarded, for the sake of the economic development which benefits only the elite. In the process of this coal development, the impacted community are left frustrated, with hopes of job creation remaining unfulfilled. These are some of the broad political impacts of the economy of coal on the people of the Ermelo.

Ermelo is home of agriculture. Due to the large amount coal reserves historically located in the area, many coal corporates targeted the area with the aim of digging out thermal coal and feed it into the nearby Eskom-owned Camden power station. Unfortunately, the operations disregarded environmental regulations, mines such as Golfview underground coal operated underground on a wetland, destroying the ecosystem and polluting water resources. The mine is still left unrehabilitated and produces toxic smoke mixed with continuous underground coal combustion and pollutes the water from the wetland.

The Mbabane open cast coal mine has also been left unrehabilitated and endangers the lives of the community and kills the artisanal coal miners and those living next to the open hole. Both mines are currently used by artisanal coal miners excavating the remnants to sell to their community in order to make a living. Most of the artisanal miners lost their lives to the collapsing upper crust and develop respiratory diseases as they continuously breathe the toxic coal dust and smoke.

Community based organizations representing mining affected areas during the coal exchange: **Kenya, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, Free State, Mpumalanga (Ermelo, Witbank, Ogies and**

Hawerklip), Mozambique, Senegal, Botswana, Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Zimbabwe and Nigeria.

The objective of the community exchange was to show the visitors the types and amount of pollutions experienced by the Ermelo community. And for the communities to share information and ideas, and to build solidarity. This exchange was supported by groundWork (Friends of the Earth South Africa), and hosted by Khuthala, the community-based organization in Ermelo.

This statement has been constructed and agreed upon by the following community-based organizations present during the three-day exchange:

- Young Volunteer for Environment – Benin.
- Highveld Environmental Justice Network – Highveld, Mpumalanga Province of South Africa.
- Justicia Ambiental – Mozambique.
- Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organization – Fuleni, KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa.
- 350 Kenya – Kenya.
- Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance – Vaal, Free State Provinces of South Africa.
- Botswana Climate Change Network – Botswana.
- 350.org – Gauteng Province of South Africa.
- Action Solidarite International – Senegal.
- Womin – South Africa.
- 350 Ghana Reducing Our Carbon – Ghana.
- M.N.D.T – Zimbabwe.
- groundWork – South Africa.
- Khuthala Environmental Care Group – Ermelo, Mpumalanga Province of South Africa.

The following demands were made by the organizations;

We demand that:

- Government must ensure that communities are part of discussions and are aware of environmental laws or legislation.
- Communities should be consulted to give free prior informed consent before allowing any coal infrastructure to begin.
- All African countries to be pushed to be members of Extractives Industries Transparency Initiatives (EITI) and other statutory bodies that uphold human rights.
- Information must be public and easily accessible, namely; EIA's, mining licenses, compliance reports. This information should also be translated into local languages.
- There should be monitoring and compliance enforcement by all African government.
- African governments should make it compulsory for companies to include indigenous and world heritage sites within the social environmental impact assessment study.
- Artisanal coal miners in South Africa should be protected and absorb in the formal economic sector.
- Community people should be involved in rehabilitation of abandoned coal mines and land.
- African governments should prioritize land for agriculture and not mineral extraction.

- African governments should implement small scale renewable energy systems which are community owned.
- African governments, especially, South Africa, should respect the Paris Agreement and reduce greenhouse gases.
- African governments, community-based organizations and activists should be able to work freely without fear, intimidation, violent and state repression
- We demand transparency in all mining application processes before final decisions are made.
- Local and international financial institutions must stop the financing of coal developments.
- People should not be removed or relocated to areas that they have not seen and approved. The areas they are moved to should be of the same or better standard than their old homes.
- Industries and coal mines must be held accountable for health impacts caused by their operations.
- African governments and international tribunals must protect heritage sites and protected areas.
- Strong punitive measures should be put in place for environmental transgressors.

Photos of the exchange.



The participants visiting Camden Coal-Fired Power Station in Ermelo (Highveld) on 30 January 2018.



Participants taking a group photo on the last of the meeting, 31 January 2018.



Participants taking a group photo at the Khuthala Environmental Group offices (Community Based Organization in Ermelo).