

# GROUNDWORK

## COVID-19 UNMASKING SOCIAL ILLS

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

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

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# From the Smoke Stack

by groundWork director, **Bobby Peek**



**B**y the time you read this, you will be *gatvol* with reading about Covid-19. Yes, I know this is a harsh and politically incorrect thing to say, but it is the reality for many of us. Having said that, it is difficult not to reflect on the crisis, because the climate change future – a system severely disrupted because of our insatiable appetite for consumption and pollution, which we have warned about – is already upon us, thanks to Covid-19.

We are bombarded every day with visuals, webinars, news and positions on Covid-19. Many of us have come to accept these without questioning the reality. There are opposing views about how our president has responded. Some of us are proud that he has taken a decisive step – something he seems unlikely to do with the corruption and the corrupt within the ANC. Some of us feel he is nothing more than a benevolent dictator at this time and are concerned about the long-term implications of this approach.

We know of Paul Kagame and Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, of Rwanda and Uganda respectively, who thrive on being benevolent dictators – some would say outright dictators. A WhatsApp circular has been doing the rounds – not 100% sure whether this was fake news or not – in which Museveni likens the present reality to war. And, he says, in war “you stay indoors by choice”. Fear dictates your actions, something that sociologist Ashwin Desai eloquently warns us about in his musings about the situation of our time. We have come to fear, and probably to accept our fear – and with the acceptance we accept also the accompanying authoritarianism. We must never accept fear. We must know it and understand it, but we must always challenge it. Are we doing enough of this challenging and resisting now to be able to build resilience and learn for the future that is already with us – a future we fear but must never come to accept?

In this newsletter, we attempt to share our reflections on Covid-19 and our work. We also have stories of how the organisations on the ground with whom we work are responding to and supporting people directly, from the challenges of hostel dwellers and subsistence fishers in Durban, to the rural poor in Newcastle and Ermelo. What Covid-19 has done, once and for all, is to highlight the plight of the more than thirty million people in South Africa who live below the poverty line, and another quarter of our population who are on the fringes of poverty and are being pushed deeper into poverty every day.

No one can now say that they do not know we are in a deep systemic crisis. We cannot return to the past ‘development’ model, for that has made us poor. We need a future that is just. I don’t care what you call the road to this future – and whether you use the words ‘green’ or ‘economy’ when describing this future. What is critical is that it must be an equitable and just world, where there is gender justice and the dismantling of the present patriarchy that abounds in South Africa.

The *groundWork Report 2020: The politics of just transition* clearly maps out what needs to be done to create a more just society. We cannot accept corporates making a profit out of this crisis and filing for business rescue, as Comair, which has around R536 million Rand in cash, is attempting to do. They want a rescue package and public bail-out in order not to have to spend their cash. This is sick.

It has been a bumpy ride for democracy and environmental justice during this period. Besides the urgency to ensure people’s health and to get food to people, government continues to chip away at the commitments in our constitution and to make it easier for the fossil fuel industry to operate. On the first day of South Africa’s national lockdown, Minister of the



Department of the Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF), Barbara Creecy, gazetted air pollution standards for sulphur dioxide ( $\text{SO}_2$ ) twice as weak as the previous standards. It felt like an early April Fool's joke. At the same time, Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy, Gwede Mantashe, has decided to push the Upstream Petroleum Resources Development Bill, 2019, which was released as a Christmas present – for whom, may I ask? – on Christmas Eve 2019.

Over the last months we have engaged with the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) and made it clear that we do not need this Bill, considering the potential climate change impacts it will unlock. But they have ignored us and continued to push this Bill, undemocratically, during our lockdown – speaking with corporates and ignoring those who will be affected on the ground. Every government leader is talking about the economic recovery – so they want to make it easier to extract! We had to stage a virtual walkout of the meeting with the DMRE when they refused to recognise that the Bill process needs to be halted.

The way that the air has cleaned up in some places during our Covid-19 lockdown is a remarkable testament to the depth of the unsustainability of our 'normal' economy and 'normal' development. In many places around the world, young people are seeing a clear blue sky for the first time – and millions of people with asthma are breathing more easily. But the government says it has plans for an economic recovery. What does this mean? Going back to normal? Or supercharged normal, which guarantees that the air will become even filthier with time?

The corona virus has profoundly disrupted interconnected and fragile global systems. However, it gives us an opportunity to make our world more equitable and to test our just transition to a society with decent jobs for all, universal health care and energy systems that benefit people and the biosphere. We have to change systems that place profit before health and well-being. We have to recognise and address the political, social and economic factors that govern how health and illness move through our communities. For example, many people living in informal settlements have no access to running water, which makes frequent hand washing very difficult. In addition, their

crowded living conditions make physical distancing almost impossible.

These are tough times, but they are also times which are nothing new for poor people in South Africa, as we hear from many of the people on the ground, with whom we work and talk. These people are always hustling – they have to, it's how they survive. Our challenges as groundWork have been: How do we support people on the ground directly? How do we support them in building their resilience? We have worked with government, funders, and corporates – and may I add, our friends – to find money and resources and get these to people, urgently. The resources have included food parcels and money put into cell phone accounts, so people can access it themselves. To do this we have had to work with our funders to reallocate budgets in order to build resilience for improved communications going forward.

We understand that we are a privileged NGO and that many of our community partners do not have the ability to take the necessary drastic action we have taken – to close the office and work from home. Our meetings with partners were called off, and we have urged them not to hold any of the local community gatherings that had been planned. However, it was and is important for people to organise at the neighbourhood level, to ensure that everyone is informed of the crisis, to explain what they need to do, and to organise mutual support. groundWork continues its work via e-mail, the phone and other communication platforms and will support community organising where appropriate.

Finally, a reflection from an environmental justice campaigner on the ground in the Highveld: "Lots of things are changing. Some things are getting worse on a daily basis. In the Highveld, most people are not working. Most importantly, shops have raised prices because of the crisis. In our area we have not seen evidence of the pandemic although we have it in our hearts to take care of ourselves. But people are moving around just as usual. There are no officials from any departments checking on us." Mr President, we implore you: we do not need the army or police. We need health services!

We hope that the next time we write we will be out from under lockdown. ☀





# Good air quality just a passing phase

by Rico Euripidou

**T**he way that the air has cleaned up in some places during the Covid-19 lockdown is a remarkable testament to just how unsustainable the ‘normal’ economy – and ‘normal’ development – is. All over the world, young people are seeing a clear blue sky for the first time, and millions of people with asthma are breathing easier.

The lockdown has reduced the number of vehicles on the road and some factories have shut down. So there has been a major reduction in burning fossil fuels, which is the primary driver of air pollution globally and of the climate crisis. But this benefit is partial and short term.

In South Africa, it is partial because many of our dirtiest plants, including Eskom’s big power stations, Sasol’s synfuels and chemical plants and Sapref, the country’s biggest oil refinery, are still pumping out pollution.

Everywhere it is short term because governments and big corporations want the ‘normal’ world back again. Unless people bring about a big change in the way the world works, the virus will make little difference. It is not a magical agent and will not address the massive issue of global air pollution in the long run and nor will it put a brake on climate



change, which is still happening at an unprecedented pace.

- The poor and most vulnerable suffer most from the health impacts of air pollution and climate change, and they will suffer most from Covid-19 and the economic crisis.
- These man-made socioeconomic problems which existed pre-Covid-19 will not change even post the pandemic and will be used to justify a return to normal.
- It is precisely the normal economy that made people poor and vulnerable in the first place.

Cleaner air in some parts of South Africa for a few months may be a tiny silver lining in advance of the anticipated Covid-19 epidemic, but it will do little in the long run to solve the problem of outdoor air pollution that, according to the World Health Organisation, kills more than four million people every year.

- To make meaningful progress to address air pollution as a whole, we need to kick our habit of burning coal, oil and gas.
- Air pollution increases the risk of many pre-existing conditions that make Covid-19 more severe and deadly.
- People who have already been living with poor air quality are more likely to have compromised respiratory, cardiac and other health systems – and are therefore more vulnerable to Covid-19’s impacts.
- Some scientific studies have even found indications that airborne particulate matter may help to spread the virus.



During the SARS outbreak in China, a study by researchers at UCLA's School of Public Health showed that patients with SARS were more than twice as likely to die from the disease if they came from areas of high pollution. The same seems true of Covid-19: the more air pollution you are exposed to, the sicker you are likely to get. A Harvard study has just found the first correlation between air pollution and Covid-19 deaths in the USA. Additionally, air pollution is a key risk factor for deaths from lower respiratory infections. Globally, one death in six related to these infections is attributed to PM<sub>2.5</sub> air pollution, amounting to approximately 400 000 deaths per year, according to the Global Burden of Disease study.

Worryingly, the response of governments to this pandemic also threatens to make air pollution's health impacts worse in the longer-term. In South Africa, in response to the demands of Eskom and Sasol, air pollution standards for SO<sub>2</sub> have been significantly weakened during lockdown by the DEFF (Department of Environment Forestry and Fisheries).



## A different path

Instead of following this path, we have an opportunity to make our world more equitable and to test our Just Transition to a society with decent jobs for all, universal healthcare and energy systems that benefit people and the biosphere. We have to change systems that place profit over health and well-being. We have to recognise and address the political, social and economic factors that govern how health or illnesses move through our communities. For example, many people living in informal settlements have no access to running water, making frequent hand washing very difficult, and crowded living conditions make physical distancing almost impossible.

What we have learnt so far about this pandemic is the very high level of inequality that it is revealing. Lockdown in suburban South Africa is not the same as lockdown if you are living in an informal settlement or a township and this pretty much determines whether you can adequately protect yourself from Covid-19 risk factors.

In this time of crisis, we must be vigilant and find ways of ensuring that democratic practice is strengthened rather than weakened, and that we find sustainable solutions to protecting vulnerable communities. ☀



# Waste pickers are starving and still sidelined

by Musa Chamane



**D**ue to the escalation of numbers of infections in the wake of the corona virus, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March the national lockdown in South Africa kicked in. Minister Barbara Creecy from the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF) ordered all waste pickers to remain at home because of the danger posed by the virus. Since waste pickers handle waste from different households, most of the waste associated with Covid-19 would pass through their hands, exposing them to infection.

It is well understood and recognised that the work of the waste pickers is vital for the environment and climate change impacts mitigation. They prevent waste ending up on rubbish dumpsites where it rots and releases methane gas, a potent greenhouse gas pollutant, and the recycling of waste means less mining and reduced damage to land and water.

While we often face each other in court, Minister Creecy did reach out to groundWork and partners on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March to get names and contacts of worker so that relief could be provided. The database was provided from all nine South African provinces. The department then collaborated with various industries in trying to ameliorate the loss of income for the waste

Waste pickers are also known as reclaimers and they work in the informal sector.

South African waste pickers are spread across the country, working on the streets as well as in landfills and dumpsites.

The informal recycling sector is a way of making a living for 19 million to 24 million people in the global South.

pickers by distributing food parcels and vouchers in various provinces, but the relief was far too little to accommodate every waste picker.

The first run of relief came with a lot of challenges as well as lessons. We witnessed waste pickers being deprived of food due to the fact that they are not South African. This is a shame, because hunger affects everybody whether you are a citizen or not. In some instances, we have seen councillors and municipal officials taking advantage by distributing food parcels to their allies. Relief challenges were dealt with by the department and industry, as well as a local waste picker leader. To this day, the majority have not received any form of assistance due to budget constraints.

A month later, Level 5 lockdown was about to be relaxed to Level 4. The new regulations excluded informal recyclers from working. After detailed negotiations about the regulations, groundWork, the South African Waste Picker Association (SAWPA), the African Reclaimers Organisation and Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising (WIEGO) wrote a letter to Ministers Dlamini-Zuma (Cooperative Governance Traditional Affairs), Creecy (Environment, Forestry and Fisheries) and Patel (Trade and Industry), citing the need for waste pickers to be allowed to go back to their work unrestricted.

The reason for this appeal was that the speedy relief – food parcels and vouchers – which was organised by the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF) and which totalled about 4 000 food parcels in Gauteng and 2 000 cell phone transfers, was just not enough. The relief shortage provided a sound motivation for waste pickers to get back to work to sustain their livelihood, not only for themselves but also their families. As a result of the letter, waste pickers were granted essential service status. Minister Nkosazane Dlamini-Zuma made it clear to everyone that they are allowed to go back to work. It is important to note that the outcry from informal recyclers exerted

pressure on government to relax regulations when it comes to this form of livelihoods.

Municipal waste collection has been declared essential work since the beginning of the lockdown, therefore, it made sense for waste pickers to be considered on Level 4.

However, some municipalities have decided to ignore the Level 4 regulations and municipalities such as Drakenstein (Wellington) and Msunduzi (Pietermaritzburg) are adamant that waste pickers will only be allowed to go back to work at Level 2 lockdown. I wonder where they got such information, because it was made clear by Minister Dlamini-Zuma that waste pickers are allowed to work under Level 4. Why are some municipalities being so arrogant as to ignore the regulations? On reflection, this is no real surprise, as we are well aware of our mismanaged municipalities. Municipalities are the main vehicle for service delivery and, if they are allowed to ignore the leadership of the country, it will result in chaos. Government cannot allow municipalities to rule

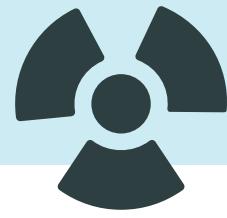


themselves in conflict with national regulations. They need to make sure that all municipalities are aligned with and adhere to national regulations to avoid confusion.

In response to a lockout-out of waste pickers in Pietermaritzburg, groundWork communicated the municipality's disregard for waste pickers to the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries. The ministry facilitated a meeting between the municipality and the waste pickers to iron out differences, as well as facilitate interpretation of the Level 4 regulations. Now, hopefully the municipality will come to the party and do the right thing. One cannot stress further the urgency and the importance of this for the sake of many families who depend on waste as a source of livelihood.

Some municipalities have, however, been proactive and supportive. Municipalities such as Mangaung Metro (Bloemfontein), Port St Johns and Tzaneen have issued permits to landfill, street and community-based waste pickers. Those who are in protective gear have returned to work and physical distancing is being observed and maintained by waste pickers. Such strict measures must be implemented instead of simply dismissing waste pickers. Municipalities should not hide behind a lack of personal protective equipment, as some waste pickers have PPE and thus should be allowed to work. The municipality should assist those that do not have PPE to acquire some. There is also confusion around permits and the interpretation of Level 4 regarding waste pickers and government needs urgently to clear this up.

The urgency of the Covid-19 situation for waste pickers has been picked up by the Waste Management Response Committee, led by United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), which has participation from the Department of Health, the DEFF, academics and civil society organisations. The committee intends to create a platform in responding to Covid-19 through waste management and demonstration projects at five municipalities. The personal protective equipment (PPE) is being sourced by the Committee from UNIDO funds. Municipalities and the recycling industry should build upon this and ensure that waste pickers – who are officially essential workers – have PPE, rather than use the lack thereof to side-line workers. 



# What about medical waste?

by Luqman Yesufu

## GGHH Members in Action – Corona Virus Healthcare Waste Management

We are currently living in unprecedented times as the Corona Virus pandemic sweeps across the world. One thing is for sure, there has been an increase in the procurement of medical supplies and the use of medical products during this period, which has resulted in a corresponding increase in the amount of waste generated from healthcare facilities. For example, according to the South China Morning Post, the Wuhan healthcare waste tonnage grew from a typical 40-ton per day volume to over 240 tons, which is an astonishing six-fold increase. This is a similar story for all healthcare facilities worldwide and there is an increasing concern about how to deal with waste arising from potentially infectious patients, the staff caring for them and medical laboratories.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, groundWork's international partner, Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), released a fact sheet that addresses the sustainable management of waste material and equipment contaminated with the corona virus. This factsheet emphasised the need to treat the waste generated from corona virus treatment no differently from other infectious waste.



## Segregation at the point of generation

These are the major facts we must consider when managing corona virus waste;

- Treatment of the corona virus waste according to national guidelines
- Collection of waste on a daily basis and transportation to storage areas in leak-proof, puncture-proof containers that are clearly labelled with the bio-hazard symbol
- Storage of waste should be in a clean, secure and protected area – out of the elements, and free from pests and disease vectors
- Treatment of corona virus waste should adopt the best management approach of disinfection using autoclaves or microwaving rather than incinerators
- After disinfection, waste can be sent for disposal or recycling. Any material that could potentially be reused should be mutilated.

Following the release of this fact sheet, groundWork hosted a series of webinars to showcase the work that the Global Green and Healthy Hospital (GGHH) members are doing in the region to address the waste management issue and respond to the ongoing crisis. These webinars were hosted on an online platform called WebEx and were open to existing, new and potential members from across the world.

The first webinar had presentations from groundWork consultant on waste management issues, Ms. Judy Bell, and GGHH member representative, Mr Tshepo Mokhadi, who is a practising environmental health practitioner at Bongani Regional Hospital in the Free State. This webinar was hosted on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April and brought together twenty-two participants from around the continent. Two very important presentations were made that provided information



on the key issues to consider in healthcare waste management during this pandemic and waste management preparedness, working us through the waste management process from point of generation to disposal at Bongani Regional Hospital.

The key learning from this webinar was the constant need for training and retraining of staff responsible for healthcare waste management. Judy Bell mentioned that, *“training of waste handlers is not a once-off event and not even a tick-box session. Rather, it is a constant effort to ensure that people understand, are inspired, motivated and challenged daily to do better.”* It is important to note that it is not just the job of the cleaners and nursing aides to manage waste, but is the responsibility of everyone who is a generator – from doctors, matrons, nurses, administrators and maintenance – all the way through to visitors and patients.

The second webinar, hosted on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, was a lot more diverse in the presentations, as we had information shared from the public, private and academic sector. There were thirty-five people in attendance from Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, India, United States, United Kingdom and Philippines. This webinar showcased the Gauteng provincial strategy to deal with corona virus waste as well as the Netcare waste management strategy during the pandemic. It was interesting to see the similarities in waste management strategy between the private

and public healthcare sectors, as both emphasised the need for monitoring and the use of personal protective equipment.

Ms. Rudo Samudzi – who is the Assistant Director, Research Policy and Capacity Building, Gauteng Health – stated that, *“All who handle health care waste should wear appropriate PPE (boots, apron, long-sleeved gown, thick gloves, mask, and goggles or a face shield) and perform hand hygiene after removing”*. It was also emphasised that outside the hospital environment masks, PPE, tissues and any non-biodegradable corona virus-related waste should be collected separately, double bagged and labelled with the date. There is no need to treat these materials with disinfectant first.

Finally, as we continue to deal with waste products from corona virus, we have to note some very important points. Firstly is that this virus is very susceptible to most normal disinfectants. The World Health Organisation recommends 70% ethyl alcohol to disinfect reusable dedicated equipment (like thermometers) between uses and 0.5% sodium hypochlorite (equivalent to 5 000 parts per million) for disinfection of frequently-touched surfaces in homes and healthcare facilities. Secondly, soap and water is also important. Anything visibly dirty should be washed with soap and water. Dirt or organic materials can inactivate disinfectants by reacting with them, so the general rule is to first clean, then disinfect. ☺



*Webinar I & II Presenters on Corona Virus Healthcare Waste Management from left to right:*

**Tshepo Mokhadi:** Environmental Health Officer, Bongani Regional Hospital, Free State.

**Dimakatso Nhlapo:** Lead, Integrated Waste Management, Netcare Limited

**Richard Amfo-Otu:** Senior Lecturer, Department of Environmental and Natural Resources Management, Presbyterian University College, Ghana.

**Rudo Samudzi:** Assistant Director, Research Policy and Capacity Building, Gauteng Health





# Sengwa – more dirty energy

by Lorraine Chiponda

**T**he Industrial and Commercial Bank of China expressed interest in the Sengwa project and is negotiating with Sinosure – also known as the China Export and Credit Insurance Corp – to cover country risk insurance costs. They are looking at constructing a 2100 MW coal-fired power plant even though coal is no longer an economically and environmentally viable source of energy the world over. In Zimbabwe, the coal industry has failed to address energy poverty, especially for vulnerable populations, has caused massive environmental degradation, bears redundant infrastructure and continues to make its workers redundant.

The project proposed to build a 250-kilometre water pipeline to draw water from Lake Kariba to Sengwa and a 420-kilovolt-ampere power line to be built by PowerChina. The Lake already hosts a hydro-power renewable energy project, which will be affected. Furthermore, in January 2020, the Lake was at only 30% capacity because of the drought caused by climate change – a drought that is said to be the worst drought in a century. The Gokwe area, where the project will be hosted, is a dry area and does not have sufficient water reserves to cater for this massive industrial project, given that the local rivers, including Sengwa River, are already used for agricultural livelihood and domestic purposes.

Decision-makers appear to be pedalling competing energy narratives, shaped largely by the hunger for investment, despite recognising the impacts of the climate crisis in the country. Zimbabwe has a vibrant National Renewable Energy Policy adopted in 2019 that facilitates increased local participation, decentralised energy systems and community involvement in RE projects which it could operationalise. Plans by RioZim and the nod by the government to press on with developing a coal power plant directly contradict the policy on renewable energy.

Zimbabwe's new administration is focused on investment and economic recovery and has made this

clear through its “Zimbabwe is open for business” mantra. China has acted as the last resort funder and investor for Zimbabwe and has its fingers in a number of Zimbabwe's projects, which include mining projects, tobacco projects and the energy sector, and uses extractive and exploitative mechanisms of doing business. Thus the expressed interest by the ICBC to finance the construction of a dirty energy project, notwithstanding issues to do with sustainability, comes as a relief to a country faced with the task of reviving the economy.

However, an interrogation of the nature of Chinese investment shows that China still maintains the extractivist and exploitative model maintained



*The Sengwa area is hot and dry, with a very low rainfall.*  
*Credit: Centre for Alternative Development*



by other global capitalist investors. As already set out in the proposed project, China will have Chinese companies carrying out the construction. For example, Power China is in this project set to construct the 420 kilovolt-ampere power line. The project may not see much benefit for Zimbabwean locals, creating opportunities only for Chinese firms.

In Botswana, the China National Electric Equipment Corporation (CNEEC) constructed the Morupule B plant commissioned in 2012 and this plant has had several breakdowns that so troubled Botswana that at one point it decided to sell the troubled power plant to a Chinese firm, though it later decided against it. Thus, in addition to the lack of transference of skills and involvement of local firms, China is dumping redundant technology.

Given that the project will be hosted by RioZim, a private entity that is profit-driven and looks forward to receiving a return on their investment, the project may result in an increase in energy costs and maintain the already existing energy poverty amongst marginalised groups. There are chances that the government may again assume the energy debt borrowed by RioZim if it fails to pay back the debt, thus burdening citizens with debt payment. It is too soon to forget SI 2018-205, which was used to introduce a 2% tax used to widen the tax base. Additional debt will have fiscal implications such as these, which ordinary citizens cannot bear at this point.

The proposed coal power plant frustrates the global, regional and national energy trajectory towards slowing carbon economies. In addition to the proposed Sengwa coal plant, coal projects continue to expand in

the country. In Hwange, the Chinese firm Sinohydro did expansion works to add 600 MW to the Hwange Thermal Power Station. Zimbabwe should rather focus on transitioning towards clean energy. The country's growth agenda should be reflective of the global fight against climate change. Coal combustion cannot thrive in the era of climate crisis and Zimbabwe should be working towards greening its economy.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected community and Civil Society Organisations' abilities to sufficiently state their concerns against such projects. Plans to develop the Sengwa coal plant could commence and, aware of this, CSOs in Zimbabwe have taken on the task of finding ways of pushing the Sengwa project back, through distinctive measures to push back on coal given the impacts on water, ecology, environment, climate, local livelihoods, the health of locals as well as the implications of accumulation debt. ☺



*Sengwa is a rural area, the village has been marginalised and coal-mining over the past two decades has not helped the situation. Credit: CAD*



# Somkhele coal mine sows division in the Somkhele community



by Robby Mokgalaka

**I**n the Somkhele area, pro-mining people are taking advantage of the lockdown and starting to attack families who are opposed to the proposed relocation by the Somkhele coal mine. The fact that people are confined to their houses, owing to the lockdown regulations, makes them sitting ducks and susceptible to attacks from the pro-mining groups.

The Somkhele community in North KZN is experiencing more frequent attacks and intimidation in the Ophondweni area, where Somkhele coal mine is working on expanding its operation. The mine has offered half the payment for relocation to families who are willing to move, and has promised to pay the balance on condition that the families that are refusing to relocate accept the offer. The coal mine is negligently or intentionally sowing division within a once-united community. Since the mine came with this approach, there has been serious division within the community and incidents of intimidation and threats directed at the families who are unwilling to relocate are escalating. In one way or the other, the mine is committing the crime of inciting violence within the community.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, Mr. Mdletshe, who stays at Ophondweni, received a message from another man coming from another village that it was rumoured that some families who are refusing to relocate were going to be shot at by the mining employees who are being retrenched. The news induced a sense of fear in families who are opposing the mine's expansion into their area.

Subsequent to the news, on the night of the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, the Mthethwa family (a neighbour to Mr. Mdletshe) was attacked with guns and bullets were fired through the window of their house by unknown men and the family members were forced to hide under the bed for cover. On the following morning, about twenty-three gun cartridges were discovered outside the house. Now the family lives in constant fear, thinking that the assailants will come back to attack again. Although a case was opened and arrangements were made for the police to frequently patrol the area, the family indicates that the patrol has been done very sporadically at night, leaving the family exposed to another attack.

In the same month, Sabelo Dladla in Somkhele was attacked by two unknown men with guns asking for Sabelo Dladla. He defended himself by denying that he was Sabelo. They tied him up and threw him onto the floor in front of his mother and siblings. Sabelo's family has since relocated to stay with relatives outside their area. Unfortunately, the Mthethwa family fear that if they choose to go elsewhere, this would give assailants an opportunity to burn their house down. Both families are being assisted by the Frontline Defender with an upgraded security system and relocation where needed.



Ever since the mine moved into the area in 2011, the Somkhele community has experienced suffering in various forms, ranging from intimidation, threats, physical attacks and water scarcity.

Between 2015 and 2016, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) conducted a national hearing on the underlying socio-economic challenges in the mining-affected communities in South Africa, more particularly coal mining, around the country including in the Somkhele area. One of the findings of the hearing was that, “many communities lose access to land vital to their livelihood, including land used for grazing and farming”.

In 2018, Human Rights Watch, Earthjustice, joined with the Centre for Environmental rights

and groundWork, and conducted research around South Africa about threats and intimidation directed at community environmental activists in mining communities. It was discovered that members of communities that are pushing back against a mining company were on the receiving end of intimidation and threats by people who seem to be supporting the mines. They also receive no protection from the police service as almost all cases opened by these activists are not heard in a court of law.

Unfortunately, the situation is still the same and getting worse as we are facing lockdown in response to the pandemic. The government is failing to enforce the law with the coal mining companies to protect the people on the ground against the impacts of coal. ☺



*The home of the Mthethwa family in Somkhele, which was attacked by pro-mining groups.*

*Credit: groundWork*



# Sustaining poverty, resisting change



by Thomas Mnguni

## Relief in the time of poverty and COVID-19

**O**n the 27<sup>th</sup> of March, South Africa entered into uncharted territory when the president declared a lockdown for twenty-one days in terms of the National Disaster Management Act. This was to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus and to ensure that our health system had time to get ready to cope with high volumes of people who potentially could be infected.

The lockdown meant that people were stuck in their houses with nowhere to go, no work, and no social or religious gatherings. Because of the virus, the country was brought to a complete standstill. People were trapped inside their own places and it became a crime to move out.

When the president announced the lockdown, he quickly followed with some interventions to provide relief. Some of these are a clear indication that our government is aware that they are failing people.

### The government interventions and some key concerns

The President called for physical distancing to minimise the spread of the virus. How do you achieve physical distancing when you live in an overcrowded informal settlement? And how do we practise physical distancing when we still rely on poorly-resourced and managed taxis and trains to take us from point A to point B.

There is the call for people to wash hands frequently. With what? People do not have access to water and the little they have will be used for cooking, drinking and washing. In Mpumalanga, most of our water goes to Eskom's twelve coal-fired power stations rather than to the people who need water. We cannot afford to

waste the little water there is washing our hands all the time. Minister Sisulu indicated that she would ensure that water is delivered, a clear sign that government knows that people are without water but have done nothing about it.

Our president indicated that part of the reason for the lockdown is to slow the pandemic down – flatten the curve – and allow the public health sector time to prepare itself. Our health system cannot cope with disasters, and there is nothing coming from the private sector to assist the population. Testing has been exorbitantly priced by the private labs and clinics. But our government also missed the opportunity to introduce the national health system and use all available expertise to address the inequality of our health sector.

The relief for workers and the introduction of grants for the unemployed are welcome initiatives, but then we are stuck in administrative backlogs that leave most people without an income and livelihood. Current relief measures to aid workers are directed more at saving industry than providing workers with an income. The unemployment rate has always been high in the coal areas of South Africa and is getting higher as many industries close shop even after the relief. The introduction of the grant is welcome but more still needs to be done by introducing a basic income grant for all.

The provision of food parcels by both government and big retailers still shows how the system is being corporatised. Small-scale and subsistence farmers and informal traders have not been provided with relief or declared essential services, yet commercial agriculture and big retail shops continue to operate as usual. The



provision of food also highlights how ordinary people cannot participate in this economy and produce what they want to consume. They have lost the know-how to produce food, something our grandparents knew well.



Instead of relying on relief during a disaster, we should make use of the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to make our world more equitable, and start to plan and work on a Just Transition to a society that provides decent jobs, national healthcare, an energy system that benefits people and access to water for the people. We have to change the system that puts profits ahead of health and well-being of the people. And we have to start this Just Transition here, in the coal areas, where for decades our land, our water, our health, our air and our bodies have borne the burden, while those invested in coal have made a profit.

What one learns from this is that we need to prepare much better for a climate impacted world. We need to transition away from our reliance on fossil fuels and capital markets and begin to decide on and produce things that we consume. We need to transition away from the corporate-controlled world to a people-centred world.

We need real democracy.

**This whole pandemic thing was pretty new to all and hit us overnight, except for the following:**

- According official statistics, 60% of the people are poor, with the next 20% one misfortune away from poverty. Thirteen million people out of fifty-three million suffer hunger regularly, despite spending 50% of their income on food. This indicates that poverty has become a normal thing for almost the majority of people in the country.
- High unemployment rate – officially 28% but, according to the expanded unemployment rate and what activists and communities are saying on the ground, it is more likely about 40+%.
- The health service is divided between private and public, with the public being under-resourced and failing to provide adequate health care for poor people.
- A great many people do not have access to water and proper sanitation, and there have been a number of protests from different communities demanding consistent water supply. But our reliance on coal has meant that much of our water ends up being polluted, therefore forcing people to spend money on bottled water for their own safety.
- Our transport system has always been an issue of contention, from trains to taxis. People have always complained about the inadequate transport system and the need to overhaul it.
- Lastly, even during the Covid-19 lockdown, people continued to protest over proper settlements as they live in overcrowded areas – and some people's dwellings were even demolished by the state in the first few weeks of the Covid-19 lockdown.



# News from the interns



## Working across Africa from my bedroom

By Carissa Marnce

**I**began my journey with groundWork a few weeks into Level 5 of the South African national lockdown. The Corona virus pandemic sent the world into a spin of panic and it seemed like an unusual way to start a job against this backdrop. However, I received a hearty welcome from the groundWork team and quickly felt enough at ease to continue my journey ahead. Working remotely from home has come with the advantage of staying in my PJs all day, the downside being that I haven't physically met some of the members of groundWork, which I look forward to doing when there are fewer restrictions in place.

I joined the team to work within the waste campaign and specifically as the communications officer for the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) within Africa. My work in GAIA involves social media planning for global days of action, forming communications around the work of our member organisations in Africa, as well as collaborating with the Global GAIA communications team. I have been able to smoothly transition into the organisation with the help of my new colleagues. Some of the outputs that I have produced thus far are some social media posts for Earth Day and a factsheet on waste pickers, which can be found on the GAIA Africa Facebook and Instagram page.

Before working at groundWork, I worked for the Durban University of Technology's Communications Department and a local community newspaper. I have a National Diploma in Journalism, which I obtained from DUT, and I am currently pursuing a postgraduate degree in Journalism. I am also a Speech and Drama teacher and received my qualification from the Speech and Drama College of South Africa.

I have a keen interest in storytelling and its many forms, which may have stemmed from listening to



my grandmother's many colourful tales about her childhood. I believe that through storytelling we can promote understanding, respect, activism and appreciation for each other. In my career, I aspire to tell the stories of many people by using different tools to shed light on their challenges and experiences.

My hobbies include reading, creative writing and watching series. I try to adopt an environmentally conscious lifestyle and I believe in the ethical treatment of animals.

I look forward to the rest of the year with groundWork and hope to contribute to the growth of the organisation.



# An unforgettable experience

By Siyabonga Macu

**C**oming across groundWork for the first time, it was hard to understand the great work done by the team, but I am beginning to learn what moves this group of strong activists. On my first meeting with our fearless leader, Bobby Peek, we were in a workshop in Johannesburg and we were in different groups. Our outcomes on the Just Transition thinking were totally different, but after joining groundWork and gaining more knowledge about the Just Transition, we have ended up on the same page. My experience with the groundWork team has grown my knowledge.

Working with groundWork and the community organisations groundWork works with has been an overwhelming and motivating experience, and I have seen the great wisdom in empowering and changing people's lives. I myself went into the social science field with the hope of making a difference in people's lives, and groundWork is the perfect platform, staffed by people who understand and are for people in need.

We face a lot of challenges as communities of the world, and day-by-day our environmental issues are placing dear costs on people's lives and livelihoods. Therefore, as we live and face the burden placed on poor people by large industries, we need strong organisations with loud and strong voices such as groundWork's.

Being part of such a huge movement is an unforgettable experience. And I don't forget the amazing team of well-informed management and campaigners (core staff) who have kept groundWork running for all these years and going for more. They have welcomed me with "warm hands" and have made this journey educational, informed and strong. ☀



# Voices on the ground



**D**uring the Covid-19 epidemic facing the world and our beloved South Africa, mining-affected communities are being further pushed into the unbearable poverty that results from the huge inequality, unemployment and historical poverty dating back to the past century.

In Ermelo, situated in Mpumalanga, half of our community is the youth, who are unemployed. This means we must create work for ourselves, meaning we are self-reliant (waste pickers, artisans and entrepreneurs / street vendors) in all the affairs of life. We try to make a living by any means possible. The country's decision on a lockdown didn't cater for us as the majority – in short, they intentionally side-lined us while those who are classified as "formal" got all the benefits.

Further, such exclusion forced our people to scrape for food on a daily basis and the only option was to file for assistance from government via SASSA, which pitted communities against each other, from the old needing food, people living with disabilities and child-headed families in their hundreds.

Our councillors are not meant to distribute food parcels and wrong information landed in the communities' ears and everyone flooded the councillors' places of residence, resulting in police intervention being needed.

What happened in the end was that people intentionally left their homes to go hustle for food, since nothing was coming their way and they literally give up any hope of getting any support, since petty political points were being scored using food as a bargaining chip.

*Zethu Hlatshwayo*

*Spokesperson of Khuthala and founder and facilitator of Reasoma Academy of Learning*

**T**he pandemic has hit the marginalised communities hard. Many are in rural areas with very few resources to cope with any unusual situation that comes their way. We were all caught napping by the Corona-19 virus, as no one saw it coming, but it came and wiped away all normality and life as we know it, indeed. And, as may be expected, the less fortunate are the hardest hit. We have, as an organisation on the ground, tried to restore hope in desperate families, but our efforts in sourcing funds to assist in terms of grocery packet provisions have thus far not been successful.

No funder has helped us yet we've already identified very needy families in terms of their social standing. Our search to assist needy families has been fruitless so far, while the rumours of Dannhauser Municipality officials who corruptly spend R10 000 that was meant for social relief in the form of food parcels are proving to be true. The source about these corrupt activities has the letter. It is stamped by the mayor's office and was sent to a company that donated R10 000, which money never arrived with the intended beneficiaries.

Our involvement with other community organisations continues as we try to identify strategies we might employ in better assisting during this time while staying relevant in our course of duty. It is tough and trying, but the situation is less intense now than it was two or three weeks ago. Also, the fear has subsided enormously.

*Nkanyiso Mthombeni*

*NEJA*





**T**here are over 12 000 subsistence fishermen and -women in Durban who are currently struggling to survive lockdown. They are recreationally licensed subsistence fisherfolk – who are unrecognised in law – whose families' livelihood has been fishing for decades and even back into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. But, because they are not registered under the small-scale cooperative by the Department of Environmental Affairs, Fisheries and Forestry, they are not allowed to fish under lockdown. Currently, small-scale fishers can fish, as they fall under the food sector. However, subsistence fishers have been marginalised because they don't fall under that banner.

The KZN Subsistence Fisherfolk Forum chose not to register their fishers as a small-scale cooperative because that only allows them to fish within a certain vicinity, and they felt this was not feasible because fish move around. Fishing is the only source of income for the majority of these fishers in Durban and they should be classed as informal traders because they sell most of their catch. Therefore, they should be allowed to fish just as informal traders are allowed to trade.

*Sherelee Odayar*

**Ubunye Bama Hostela** is an organisation that was formed in 2005, which means the organisation is fifteen years old, to work on the struggle of the poor hostel dwellers in KZN, but mostly in Durban. The issues that Ubunye is raising to the municipality are the issues of overcrowding and maintenance of the old buildings – and they have been winning some of the battles although some of these issues have been left unattended by the government, which causes the organisation to protest now and again because we are here for the people.

A lot of developments have been left unattended since this pandemic disease started, like T-Section at uMlazi and in kwaMakhutha, where the municipality was building tuck shops for people to sell their stuff from and rent from the municipality. The municipality has shown hostel dwellers in different ways that it sees hostel dwellers as a money-making opportunity, but it doesn't care about the conditions people are living in at the hostels. Food parcels came, but came through councillors and most of the hostel dwellers never received a food parcel. In kwaMashu hostel, a van that was full of rice was supposed to go to the hostel. People stood there for hours, but the van went missing and is still missing today. Corruption is taking its course in South Africa and it seems as if some government officials are making sure that they fill up their homes even as they are tasked to help people who are in need of food parcels.

*Mvuzo Ntombela*  
CSO 

*Hostel developments came to a stop*





# A virtual walkout

by Avena Jacklin

## Undemocratic push for expansion of petroleum oil and gas during lockdown triggers a virtual walk out

**O**n the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, groundWork – together with the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), EnviroS, Earthlife Africa, Support Centre for Land Change (SCLC), Oceans Not Oil (ONO) and FrackFree SA – raised objections to the exclusionary consultative processes of the Draft Upstream Petroleum Bill conducted by the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE)'s Planning Committee. A virtual walkout took place on the grounds that such process leaves behind communities across the country that are complying with lockdown restrictions, many without the privileges of the telecommunications proposed by the DMRE for consultation. People's struggle during this time of Covid-19 is a matter of survival to access food and healthcare, particularly for those also living under dire pollution conditions in the Highveld as a result of the fossil fuel industries impacting on their health. They are the ones excluded from this process, as well as many rural, coastal and farming communities throughout South Africa, whose lives will be further impacted by this Bill and whose voices need to be heard in the consultation process. It is critical that whatever consultation happens reaches the affected people as well.

The DMRE needs to notify all affected South Africans of national legislation through a comprehensive notification process and allow sufficient time and fair process for consultation. People cannot afford to travel across the country or use expensive technology. Legislation that enables prospecting, extraction, supply, distribution and storage of fossil fuels will have dire impacts on people's lives and precious water catchments on a national scale, leaving our country with stranded assets that will push future generations into further debt. Any public participation around such a Bill should therefore allow for adequate and meaningful consultation with sufficient time and process to engage with the affected people in order for the process to be transparent, just and fair.

groundWork has reiterated the need for inclusive and meaningful consultative process to the DMRE on many occasions since the release of the Bill on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December. In the groundWork letter to the Director General, Advocate Thabo Mokoena, objections to online consultative processes were raised. A request was made for a national public participation schedule on the Bill to be made public and for all consultations to only proceed after the State of Disaster has been lifted. 



## BOX: WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY ABOUT PARTICIPATION?

**THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA:** The South African Constitution asserts the need for the realisation of a participatory democracy which calls for the active involvement and participation of the citizenry as well as more defined interest groups. Sections 59(1)(a), 72(1) (a) and 118(1)(a)9 of the Constitution established public participation in the legislative process. When the public can participate in the legislative process, individually or as a collective, it signifies that everyone is regarded as significant and that their opinions are taken into consideration by the government.

**THE DIRECTIONS ISSUED IN TERMS OF REGULATION 10(8) OF THE REGULATIONS MADE UNDER SECTION 27(2) OF THE DISASTER MANAGEMENT ACT, 2002 (ACT NO. 57 OF 2002): MEASURES TO PREVENT AND COMBAT THE SPREAD OF COVID – 19** by the Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy, namely that timeframes applicable to renewal of permissions, rights and permits which fall either within the duration of the lockdown period of the national state of disaster or within a period of 60 days from the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 must be extended, or deemed to be extended, by the number of days of the duration of the lockdown period of the national state of disaster declared for the Covid-19 pandemic in order **to ensure fair processes, relating to** licensing, **consultation**, appeals and compliance processes and reporting requirements during the lockdown period.

**THE DIRECTIONS ISSUED BY THE MINISTER OF FORESTRY, FISHERIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN TERMS OF REGULATION 10(8) OF THE REGULATIONS ISSUED IN TERMS OF SECTION 27(2) OF THE**

**DISASTER MANAGEMENT ACT, 2002 (ACT NO. 57 OF 2002): MEASURES TO ADDRESS, PREVENT AND COMBAT THE SPREAD OF COVID-1, namely to **ensure fair processes**, especially relating to licensing processes, **public participation processes**, and the like during the lockdown period, timeframes prescribed in terms of the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations 2014, published in terms of section 24(5) of the National Environmental Management Act, 1998, or as contained in any environmental authorisation issued in terms of the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations, 2014, are extended, or deemed to be extended, by the number of days of the duration of the lockdown period of the national state of disaster declared for the COVID-19 pandemic, including any extensions to such duration, with effect from the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 until the termination of the lockdown period.**

The principles of the **NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT ACT, 1998** (Act No 107 of 1998) relating to public participation, namely:

The participation of all interested and affected parties in environmental governance must be promoted, and all persons must have the opportunity to develop the understanding, skills and capacity necessary for achieving equitable and effective participation, and participation by vulnerable and disadvantaged persons must be ensured<sup>1</sup>.

Decisions must take into account the interests, needs and values of all interested and affected parties, and this includes recognising all forms of knowledge, including traditional and ordinary knowledge<sup>2</sup>.

Decisions must be taken in an open and transparent manner and access to information must be provided in accordance with the law<sup>3</sup>.

The vital role of women and youth in environmental management and development must be recognised and their full participation therein must be promoted<sup>4</sup>.

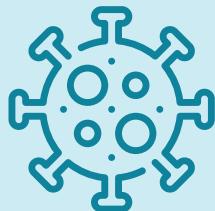
<sup>1</sup> Section 2 (4) (f)

<sup>2</sup> Section 2 (4) (g)

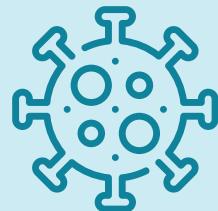
<sup>3</sup> Section 2 (4) (k)

<sup>4</sup> Section 2 (4) (q)





# COVID and industry stick to plastic



by Niven Reddy



**T**he plastics industry is forging forward with their claims – rooted in fear and misinformation – that the so-called sanitation and safety qualities afforded by single-use plastics outweigh those of reusables and using the same to speak out against plastic bans. In parts of the US, chains like Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts suspended the use of reusable cups while dining, and restaurants and cafés switched to a variety of single-use plastics (bags, containers, cups, cutlery). If left unchecked, this could reverse the gains we have secured on the narrative and policy fronts and may even cause disruptions or have long-term ramifications on our different strategies towards a future free of plastic pollution. We are already seeing companies using this opening to back out of earlier commitments to reduce their plastic footprint.

Counter to what the plastic industry wants us to believe, the corona virus survives in a transmittable form on most surfaces, including plastic. Studies have indicated that the virus could be stable on plastic surfaces for as long as two to three days.

The entire life cycle of plastic is dangerous – from its extraction to its disposal. Plastic production is a hazard for communities on the fenceline of production and, with the virus remaining on the surface of the material, it poses a risk for waste pickers, recyclers

and anyone else it comes into contact with after it's discarded. Let's remember that grocery store workers are not just selling groceries. They're taking out the trash, dealing with distributors and deliveries, and then going home to their families.

The plastic industry is doubling down on their narrative that, in the age of Covid-19, plastic is the safest and most hygienic material for delivering products to consumers. However, they continue to avoid addressing how the pandemic of pollution caused by virus-contaminated waste will be dealt with. Again, it's industry not taking responsibility for the full life cycle of their product, even though we know that plastic waste can compromise human health, especially in the vulnerable communities that are facing the brunt of the pollution to begin with.

The plastics industry has had its head in the sand for decades with regard to the global pollution crisis caused throughout its life cycle: from extraction to disposal. It's difficult to imagine that one of the most polluting industries on the planet is going to save us from a viral pandemic. The decisions we make for our families should be based on science and the advice of medical professionals, not lobbyists for the fossil fuel and plastic industries with a sordid history of doing more harm than good.

## Key things to remember:

- Goods packaged in plastic are not safer from corona virus transmission than other goods.
- Disposable products are not safer than reusable ones, as products meant for throwing away could still carry the virus on their surfaces.
- The comfort we have of using our own items, such as containers, are the basis on which to further develop a system of reuse and zero waste.



# Debt and derangement

by Greenfly



**E**skom's new build programme was in trouble from the get go. That sinking feeling started with the foundations at Medupi – fourth biggest coal-fired power station in the world, as Eskom liked to boast, and too heavy for the ground beneath it.

And it promised a dirty plant. "There is a relative lack of pollution in the Waterberg," said Eskom's then boss. With a hundred year history of solving the lack of pollution, doubling up on the dirt from the next door Matimba power plant, built in the 1980s, was a no-brainer. All the better that it is heavy-duty pollution from burning the sulphurous Waterberg coal. Together, the two plants would pump 758 thousand tonnes of SO<sub>2</sub> into the air every year.

On the Highveld, by contrast, Eskom had achieved satisfactory levels of pollution and could therefore

build Kusile with sulphur scrubbers – the first on any Eskom plant. Sulphur is one thing. Carbon is another. Medupi and Kusile together would add 60 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> to Eskom's already generous annual contribution of 225 million tonnes to global destruction.

The money also fouled up from the start. At Medupi, things went from bad to the World Bank. Just a year after Eskom bulldozed the bushveld, the Wall Street rating agencies sniffed at some bad maths: Eskom could not recover the capital costs of its new monster without a monstrous hike in tariffs. So began Eskom's journey to junk.

In a marginal demonstration of how Wall Street collapsed the global economy, the barking dogs of capital compounded the bad maths: South Africa couldn't afford the hikes they wanted. Hikes followed



Medupi power station at Lephalale, Limpopo, May 2015. Credit JMK



but never enough for Wall Street and always too much for Eskom's customers. So began the ride into the spiral of death.

That's when the World Bank stepped in with its smiley face on – never mind the whiff of corruption blowing over from the Chancellor-Luthuli House – to rescue this project of doom with a \$3.75 billion loan. That was 2009, when \$3.75 billion was about R29 billion and Medupi was to cost R79 billion. So the Bank was putting down well over a third of the price. That was 2009, before the new build price escalations, when R79 billion still sounded like a lot of money.

That was 2009, when the Copenhagen climate negotiations were supposed to 'seal the deal' but were actually heading for the rocks of coal on a flood of oil. The Big Green World Bank was there of course, punting its role in 'carbon finance' and pushing one false solution after another. Whatever it takes to save capital.

First up was carbon trading – the notion that not doing something bad in one place can be exchanged for doing it in another – so you can sell the carbon you did not emit from a project you did not do to someone who wants to subtract it from what he actually does emit and so disclaim responsibility.

Next, the Big Green World Bank amped up the volume on the song of 'clean coal', recently released by the R&R advertising agency, the US coal industry's leading peddler of fake, with backing tracks by Kool and the Gang.

But the damnedest thing about fake is that it needs a crumb of real. With its biggest ever African loan going to build a dirty coal station, the Big Green World Bank needed something to squeak clean. So it threw a couple of renewable plants into the deal – one of which Eskom has actually built – and it said that Medupi must scrub out the sulphur. But not from the

start. Eskom could install the scrubber on each unit as it came due for its first major service after six years of operating at full pollution.

Greenfly's colleagues said Eskom would use the time to wriggle out of it. Eskom has bitched and moaned ever since: it costs too much, it needs more water at more cost, it needs limestone quarried and railed in at extra cost, it adds to the waste stream at more cost. Too true. With coal, fixing one problem makes for another. If you want clean coal, don't dig it out.

And six years' wriggle-room soon became ten and R79 billion soon became R225 billion and wriggle room has indeed turned to wriggling out. Maybe Eskom and the Big Green World Bank thought the scrubbers would be forgotten with time. But Greenfly's colleagues have not forgotten.

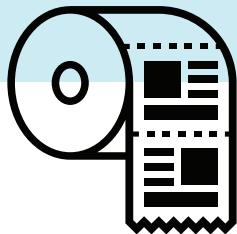
Now Eskom has dreamt up the Totally New Green Deal. How about we don't put scrubbers on Medupi but close some dirty old power stations instead. Pretty good really. A free pass to pollute the Waterberg for another sixty years, putting about 600 people into an early grave every year, in exchange for shutting down power stations where half the units are already shut down and the rest are due to shut down shortly.

Could things get more odorous? Indeed. Eskom has just let it be known that the already half shut stations will get a life extension to 2030 – never mind that they aren't worth the cost of the overhaul. But maths is magic. First, add ten years to four or five plants, then close the plants ten years early, and then subtract what they would have emitted in ten years from Medupi's pollution. A bit like carbon trading really. So a great deal to negotiate with the Big Green World Bank.

Greenfly has landed on a lot of shit in our time. But this one takes the sewerage. 



# Infodemic and miseducation



by Tsepang Molefe

*If we speak meaningfully of viruses as possessing or being possessed by a drive or instinct, it is an instinct to replicate and multiply. As they multiply they take over more and more host organisms. It can hardly be their intention (so to speak) to kill their host. What they would like, rather, is an ever-expanding population of hosts. Ultimately, what a virus wants is to take over the world, that is to say, to take up residence in every warm-blooded body. The death of any individual host is therefore a form of collateral damage, a mistake or miscalculation*

— J. M. Coetzee —

**I**n light of the recent events (still unfolding), there has been a surge of false information about the Corona virus and how we need to respond to it. As the virus spreads, it seems that more misinformation about it is shared. While the irresponsible use of social media and other digital platforms is not something new, its impacts can cause devastating outcomes as it spreads false counter-information and misleads people. The lockdown did not do this issue any favours, as people are locked inside their homes and mostly using their smartphones to access the rest of the world.

As the death toll and infections from the corona virus outbreak continue to rise, the sharing and distribution of false health advice and untested prevention measures has not in any way helped the

## COVID19 | CORONAVIRUS PREVENTION 2019 - n CoV



Wear mask



Wash hands



Boil your food



Avoid contact



Use soap & Antibacterial gel



Cough on your elbow

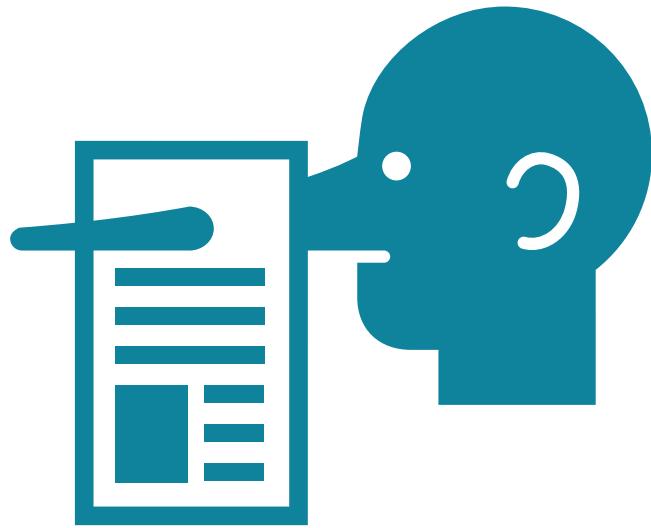


Keep your distance



Regular sleep





situation. So great is the problem that it has caught the attention of the WHO (World Health Organisation). The WHO has moved on this by engaging with the landlords of the digital space, including Facebook, Google and Twitter, on how they can curb the spread of the infodemic. Their social media teams and digital people are said to be on the clock from sunrise to sunset to track down and respond to misleading information.

The South African government declared: Anyone who creates or spreads fake news about the Corona virus COVID-19 is liable for prosecution. They encourage people to verify the information before they share it. Here in South African, the spreading of fake news or misleading information about COVID-19 is now an offence punishable by a fine, six months' imprisonment, or both. The information includes, but is not limited to, false prevention measures or cures, myths and rumours. Since the outbreak, an abundance of misinformation has been doing the rounds and it should all be refuted with evidence-based information.

As might be expected, conspiracy theorists didn't sit this one out. They also jumped on the band wagon. The conspiracies were spreading at the same pace as the virus, if not faster. They range from Corona being a biological weapon to 5G Networks links, although surprisingly they left the aliens out of it. As the Medical Futurist put it: "One person in Wuhan eats an uncooked bat, and your local Walmart runs out of toilet paper. This is such a surreal scenario, no wonder people are looking for alternative answers to how their normal lives got blown to pieces in the matter of weeks."

The main problem with misinformation is that it sometimes occupies the vacuum of science, facts and truth. This leads to valuable information being

misplaced and ignored, its place taken by false information. As the cliché goes, this is a matter of life and death. People are looking for trustworthy information that could assist them in the fight against the pandemic. People should at all times scrutinise the sources of the information they consume.

The opening paragraph by the great novelist John Maxwell Coetzee is an abstract from *Diary of a Bad Year*. While Coetzee was making reference to the 1918 influenza pandemic, his philosophical thinking makes for an interesting observation during these times. The Corona virus, in its quest to take over the world, has brought with it uncertainty, job losses, more economic instability, panic, anxiety, misinformation and many other unwelcome negatives.

### Some COVID facts

- There is currently no vaccine against the virus
- As a prevention measure, regular and thorough hand washing is advised
- As a prevention measure, cover your mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing
- As a prevention measure, avoid close contact with anyone showing symptoms of flu, such as coughing or fever

### Recommendations and Resources

WHO is making public health information and advice available on its social media channels (including via Weibo, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest) and website. 



# Corona can kill your livelihood, without even infecting you

Many of groundWork's community partners are in a desperate position. Being in lockdown has deprived them of the means to earn a living as they are dependent on hustling for piece work.

We are appealing to our friends, allies, fellow activists, funders and others to make a donation that we can pass directly to our community partners who are prevented from earning a living during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Please find details on our website: [www.groundwork.org.za](http://www.groundwork.org.za)

