Green economy recovery: Women leading their emancipation

By Bonani Madikizela

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On the 9th of August 1956, courageous women of South Africa decided they had experienced enough oppression and exclusion in the economy, which subjected them to living in abject poverty. Seeing how the dignity of their fathers, husbands and sons was undermined through the forced carrying of passes through the discriminatory laws of the then undemocratic legal systems, they took it upon themselves to march and face the daily challenge upfront, led by struggle heroines and activists such as Sophie de Bruyn, Gertrude Shope, and many others.

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This was a struggle for women's emancipation which continues even today, 26 years into our democracy. Currently, unemployment estimated at hovering above 30% and is only getting worse since the country was in recession before the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in even more job losses and job insecurity. Globally, it appears that women and the youth are bearing the brunt of job losses. Small women-owned businesses are extremely vulnerable to restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus. The knock-on effect is worst in communities, particularly in peri-urban and rural areas. The chances that these businesses will be resurrected post Covid-19 are limited without undergoing expensive transformation to adapt to the new normal. It is indeed encouraging that South Africa and other countries across the globe have renewed their commitments towards a green economic recovery which, amongst others, targets youth and women.

Socio-economic infrastructure development

The economic recovery and reconstruction plan puts emphasis on socio-economic infrastructure development, which includes water. South Africa has already allocated about 98% of its water supply and is moving towards surpassing the available water supply by an estimated 17% in 2030. Noting that there is no economic development that can flourish without relying on the guaranteed supply of water and of acceptable quality fit for use, job creation efforts are facing a huge challenge, perhaps worse than the energy crisis we currently experience! It is for this reason that the economies around the world are looking for opportunities within the green economy - characterised by resource recovery or circular economy principles. This is sometimes called a regenerative economy which is based on zero waste generation by design. Zero waste indirectly means cleaner water will be left in the environment that continues to support, directly and indirectly, business and society. The mainstreaming of a green economy in the country's economic development, legislation and politics must become more urgent than ever before. In fact, the UNEP, through the World Economic Forum Webinar (July 2020), states that "if we have discovered anything from the Covid-19 crisis, it is the pertinence and importance of understanding what it is that we humans have done to nature, let's take this crisis as an opportunity to recover the economy in a sustainable way".

Understanding the green economy

So, what is this green economy concept and how is it different from sustainable development that is commonly quoted in literature? The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) defines the green economy "as an economy that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities" or, simply put, one that is low in carbon footprints, resource efficient and socially inclusive (UNEP, 2011). This is regarded as a sustainable and equitable economy that:

- provides social and economic benefits for current and future generations, by contributing to food security, poverty eradication, livelihoods, income, employment, health, safety, wellbeing, equity, and political stability;
- restores, protects, and maintains the biodiversity, productivity, resilience, core functions, and intrinsic value of ecosystems – the natural capital upon which the economic prosperity depends; and
- is based on circular material flows, clean technologies, and renewable energy, to secure economic and social stability over time, while keeping within the limits of one planet.

Balanced approach

Our National Water Act (NWA) was founded on the basis of sustainable development and monitoring of the nation's water resources quality. This includes all water resources, from high-lying source areas to the estuaries, including groundwater. The NWA was the first Act to recognise the environment not only as the source of water, but gave a right to it to be allocated a share of the water budget or simply an ecological reserve along with that of human needs. It also gave protection to strategic priority water needs, such as for power generation and water in country-shared catchments.

Sustainable development demanded that developments are not executed at the expense of the water needs of humans and the environment, therefore a balanced approach that ensures no degradation of water resources beyond the agreed threshold. There are many other legislations, such as National Environmental Management Act that provides overall protection to the environment, as per Department of Environment Forestry and Fisheries' mandate. Above these laws, is the Constitution which provides for a clean environment as a human right. All these principles are against ecosystem degradation. There is no universal green economy approach, but rather based on the philosophy that prioritises the environment and implementation of environmental sensitive developments that do not compromise our natural capital or healthy ecosystems.

Environmental health is critical

Currently, there are several new concepts, such as circular and donut economics and many others, including ecological infrastructure, nature-based solutions and ecosystem-based adaptation among others that can assist us in achieving these sustainability goals. The Water Research Commission has developed tools and know-how in almost all of these domains to ensure a greener future where nature and society can co-exist. While sustainable development is not a new call, Covid-19 seems to have reminded the global community about water security and reasons why environmental health is critical and must be central to developmental efforts, hence a focus on economic recovery that includes the untapped opportunities associated with green economic principles. In recognition of the economic developments and societal dependence on nature, the UN in 2019 called for a decade to be dedicated to Restoration of Ecosystems (2021-2030). This supports several Sustainable Development Goals that call for restoration of the landscapes (specifically SDGs: 6, 13, 14 and 15). Healthy ecosystems are the foundation on which the economy and society depend.

Green job creation

In South Africa, the limited water resources (from mountain areas to the ocean), on which the economy depends are all degraded well beyond 65% and the situation is worsened by climate change and the uncontrollable spread of highly thirsty alien and invasive plants as well as uncoordinated settlements. Again, as in 1956, brave women and youth are taking it upon themselves to start small businesses where they convert water pollution challenges (be it water hyacinth, siltation, salt harvesting, plastics, etc.) into green job creation opportunities. These small businesses are on their growth path with a great future as they also provide nature-based solutions – they require all the support that they can get. SMMEs are critical employers and flexible, therefore can drive a viable green economy, but need to be initially resourced. It is critical that detailed investigations, development and demonstration of viable business propositions are done.

The Water Research Commission, in partnership with other green innovative organisations, has and continues to produce guiding tools on how to generate green jobs in water management, sanitation and agriculture. The degradation is certainly centred more around anthropogenic activities within natural planetary cycles, which means the solutions must be founded around people's appreciation and recognition of the value of the natural resources or capital. When this natural capital is

degraded to the tipping point or beyond the threshold, the services it used to provide decline or even stop. While it is accepted by policy-makers, the private sector and society that “water is life”, in a socio-ecological systems complex these stakeholders very often do not adequately invest in the sustainable management of these resources until disastrous crises, such as droughts and floods, strike. Prevention of further degradation of our water resources is in our hands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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