

# South Africa must end its coal habit. But it's at odds about when and how

By [Jacklyn Cock](#)

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South Africa's power utility Eskom is in [crisis](#). In recent weeks, this has been brought home to South Africa's 58 million citizens as major [power cuts](#) hit the country. The blackouts have renewed focus on the power utility's economic and technical problems. But Eskom's problems point to the much bigger issue of a country struggling to map out a new energy regime - one that reduces its very high levels of dependency on coal in a way that doesn't devastate people's lives.



Over 90% of South Africa's electricity comes from coal-fired power stations. Shutterstock

South Africa is highly dependent on coal – almost [90% of its energy](#) comes from coal-fired power stations. The urgency of change is clear on both global and local levels. Mining and burning coal is one of the most [destructive activities](#) on the planet. It represents an [immediate threat](#) to all forms of life and to scarce supplies of water, the degradation of arable land and toxic pollution of the air and water with extremely negative health impacts.

South Africa isn't the only country in the world attempting to adjust its energy mix by moving away from fossil fuels to cleaner power sources. Dozens of countries such as Germany, Austria, Canada, Ghana and the Philippines are attempting to make the change.

But, despite policy commitments, South Africa isn't doing enough to make these changes through what's become known as a ["just transition"](#). This is a contested notion with different understandings of the depth and direction of the change involved. At the very minimum it means making provision for vulnerable workers in the energy sector, to make sure that the move towards a low-carbon economy is done in a way that protects jobs as well as the environment.

## Contradictions in policy

Contradictions in the country's approach to the transition away from coal are evident in the [Draft Integrated Resource Plan](#) announced by the Minister of Energy in 2018. But it only mentions the partial decommissioning of Eskom's 16 coal-fired power plants and of reducing South Africa's reliance on coal for energy to less than 20% by 2050. The document appears oblivious to the immediate urgency of responding to climate change. Rather than being ["too ambitious"](#), the plan is not ambitious enough.

The country is also contradictory when it comes to the “just” elements of the transition. Mineral Resources Minister Gwede Mantashe has [referred](#) to “the government’s commitments to a just transition” but in the same speech he urges the mining industry to “take pride in itself and articulate a more positive image.” Specifically, he said coal producers must “wake up. You are under siege”.

In reality the people who are under siege are poor people who are the least responsible for climate change but who are carrying the heaviest costs.

Examples include the many communities living close to coal-fired power stations as well as people working in open-pit or abandoned mines. Others affected badly by mining include people dealing with dispossession, loss of land and livelihoods, threats to food security, limitations on access to water resources, health problems associated with air pollution and the desecration of ancestral graves.

There’s a desperate urgency for South Africa to take seriously its commitment to a just transition. The [South African Federation of Trade Unions](#) supports the move to renewable energy but has estimated that without a just transition that “protects the livelihoods of mining and energy workers, some 40,000 jobs will be lost.”

Powerful social forces such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions, the South African Federation of Trade Unions and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa support a transition to renewable energy. But they insist that it shouldn’t be done at the expense of ordinary South Africans. That means that it there can’t be privatisation of state assets at the expense of jobs and higher electricity prices. This is understandable given the country’s [high unemployment rate](#).

## **Eskom**

The restructuring of Eskom is obviously necessary. And there are strong economic and ecological arguments for shutting down inefficient coal-fired power stations and savings to the country would also be significant.

One [study](#) on Eskom’s financial crisis claimed that to decommission the Eskom power stations at GrootMei, Hendrina and Komati power stations and avoid the completion of Kusile units 5 and 6 would give rise to savings of around R15 billion – R17 billion.

But none of this should happen at the expense of workers. Yet there are signs that it already is.

Decommissioning is already underway. For example two units at Hendrina – one of Eskom’s five coal-fired power stations to be closed by 2020 – have already been closed. The remaining eight will be closed by April this year. Yet there’s no protection for the bulk of the workforce, 2,300 of whom are contract workers hired by labour brokers. The power utility is taking no responsibility for what happens to them.

There have been calls by activist groups for a committee driven by the presidency to coordinate a just transition. But nothing has materialised. The current “solutions” to the Eskom crisis – a reliance on overseas experts, union bashing and

backdoor privatisation – don't bode well. All suggest a familiar panic on the part of the powerful.

## **What's needed**

There is no blueprint for a just transition; it has to be built in an inclusive process of democratic debate and participation including coal mining affected communities and workers. This needs to be grounded in the recognition that coal mining and burning is a driver of environmental inequality and injustice in South Africa.

What is required is militant, class –based activism to challenge existing power relations and to mobilise for a radical just transition. This involves changing – not just Eskom – but ways of producing, consuming and relating to nature to create a more just and sustainable world.

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