

South Africa: The ANC government's 'talk left, walk right' climate policy

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Dumping on Africans. "Durban's methane-electricity conversion at three local landfills shows the futility of the CDM, not to mention the historic injustice of keeping the Bisasar Road dump (Africa's largest) open in spite of resident objections to environmental racism."

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February 2, 2011 - *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — It's worth downloading a copy of the South African government's new *National Climate Change Response Green Paper* [[1](#)] to prepare for the local deluge of technical and political debate for the next round of UN climate talks that Durban will host in eight months' time.

As the Kyoto Protocol's Conference of the Parties (also known as the Durban COP 17) draws closer, we will encounter even more frequent public relations blasts than witnessed in the same International Convention Centre district a decade ago, before the World Conference Against Racism in 2001, and again last year during the soccer World Cup.

The Pretoria government's greenwashing challenges this year include distracting its citizens from concern about:

- more imminent multibillion dollar financing decisions on Eskom (South Africa's electricity utility) coal-fired mega power plants (with more price increases for the masses);
- the conclusion of the energy ministry's multi-decade resource planning exercise, which is run by a committee dominated by electricity-guzzling corporations; and
- Pretoria's contributions to four global climate debates: President Jacob Zuma's co-chairing of a UN sustainable development commission, planning minister Trevor Manuel's role within the UN Advisory Group on Climate Finance seeking \$100 billion/year in North-South flows, the G8-G20 meetings in France and the COP 17 preparatory committee meetings.

Many recall from World Summit on Sustainable Development prep-coms how pressure rose on negotiators to be as unambitious and non-binding as possible. At that 2002 Johannesburg summit, climate change was completely ignored and the main host politicians - President Thabo Mbeki, foreign minister Nkosozana Dlamini-Zuma and environment minister Valli Moosa - were criticised for, as Martin Khor (now head of the South Centre) put it, "the utter lack of transparency and procedure of the political declaration process. Some delegates, familiar with the World Trade Organisation (WTO), remarked in frustration that the infamous WTO Green Room process had now

crossed over to the usually open and participatory UN system.”

Later this year, their successors Jacob Zuma, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane and Edna Molewa will also surrender democratic principles and let secretive Green Room deal-making sites proliferate.

Two authors of the Green Paper are environment officials Joanne Yawitch and Peter Lukey, both from struggle-era backgrounds in land and environmental NGOs and once dedicated to far-reaching social change. But people like this (yes, me too) are notoriously unreliable, and I was not at all surprised to hear last week that Yawitch is moving to the National Business Initiative, following the path through the state-capital revolving door so many before her also trod.

At the Copenhagen COP in December 2009, lead G77 negotiator Lumumba Di-Aping accused Yawitch of having “actively sought to disrupt the unity of the Africa bloc”, a charge she forced him to publicly apologise for, even though within days Zuma proved it true by signing the Africa-frying Copenhagen Accord.

Green paper

Since the public comment period expires in 10 days, let’s rapidly glance through the *Green Paper*. Right from the initial premise – “South Africa is both a contributor to, and potential victim of, global climate change given that it has an energy-intensive, fossil-fuel powered economy and is also highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate variability and change” – this document seems to fit within an all too predictable Pretoria formula: talking left, so as to more rapidly walk right. (And having drafted more than a dozen such policy papers from 1994-2002, I should know.)

This formula means the *Green Paper* can claim, with a straight face, that “South Africa, as a responsible global citizen, is committed to reducing its own greenhouse gas emissions in order to successfully facilitate the agreement and implementation of an effective and binding global agreement.”

My suggestion for a reality-based rephrasing: “South Africa, as an irresponsible global citizen, is committed to rapidly increasing its own greenhouse gas emissions by building the third- and fourth-largest coal-fired power plants in the world (Kusile and Medupi) mainly for the benefit of BHP Billiton and Anglo American, which get the world’s cheapest electricity thanks to apartheid-era, 40-year discount deals, and to successfully facilitate the agreement and implementation of an ineffective and non-binding global agreement – the Copenhagen Accord – which is receiving support from other countries only because of coercion, bullying and bribery by the US State Department, as Wikileaks has revealed.”

Consistent with Washington’s irresponsible climate agenda, Pretoria’s *Green Paper* suggests we “limit the average global temperature increase to at least below 2°C above pre-industrial levels”, yet this target is so weak that scientists predict nine out of ten African farmers will lose their ability to grow crops by the end of the century.

In contrast, the 2010 Cochabamba People’s Agreement, the document produced by the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth hosted by Bolivia’s President Evo Morales last April, demanded no more than a 1-1.5°C rise, a vast difference when it comes to emissions cuts needed to reach back to 350 parts per million of CO₂ equivalents in our atmosphere, as “science requires”.

Failing that, the *Green Paper* acknowledges (using even conservative assumptions), “After 2050,

warming is projected to reach around 3-4°C along the coast, and 6-7°C in the interior. With these kinds of temperature increases, life as we know it will change completely.” As one example, “the frequency of storm-flow events and dry spells is projected to increase over much of the country, especially in the east, over much of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, including some of the most crucial source regions of stream-flows in southern Africa such as the Lesotho highlands.”

Climate impact on South Africa

In the COP17 host city itself, Durban’s sea-level rise is anticipated to be nearly double as fast – close to 3 mm per year – as the South African south coast’s in the immediate future, but new research models suggest several more metres of seawater height are possible by the end of the century, swamping central Durban.

Another sure hit to Durban is via its port, Africa’s biggest, because of a growing “reluctance to trade in goods with a high carbon footprint”, the *Green Paper* admits. “The term ‘food miles’ is used to refer to the distance food is transported from the point of production to the point of consumption, and is increasingly being used as a carbon emission label for food products.”

Further “economic risks” include “the impacts of climate change regulation, the application of trade barriers, a shift in consumer preferences, and a shift in investor priorities”. Already, Europe’s “directive on aviation and moves to bring maritime emissions into an international emissions reduction regime could significantly impact” South African air freight and shipping.

“Tourism is not just a potential victim of climate change, it also contributes to the causes of climate change”, the *Green Paper* observes ominously. “South Africa is a carbon intensive destination, and relies extensively on long haul flights from key international tourism markets.”

New air taxes to slow climate change thus create “significant risk” to South African tourism. Yet even though they were warned of this a decade ago, transport ministers Jeff Radebe and Sbu Ndebele pushed through an unnecessary new \$1 billion airport 40 kilometres north of Durban, entirely lacking public transport access, even while all relevant authorities confirmed that South Durban’s airport could easily have managed the incremental expansion.

Durban’s maniacal pro-growth planners still exuberantly promote massively subsidised “economic development” strategies based on revived beach tourism (notwithstanding loss of coveted “Blue Flag” status); mega-sports events to fill the 2010 World Cup’s Moses Mabhida white elephant stadium; a dramatic port widening/deepening and a potential new dug-out harbour at the old airport site (or maybe instead more car manufacturing); a competing new Dube trade port next to the King Shaka Airport; new long-distance air routes; expansion of South Durban’s hated petrochemical complex; and a massive new Durban to Johannesburg oil pipeline and hence doubled refinery capacity. The shortsighted climate denialism of Durban city manager Mike Sutcliffe is breathtaking.

This is yet more serious because the *Green Paper* passes the buck: “Most of our climate adaptation and much of the mitigation efforts will take place at provincial and municipal levels.” Yet even Durban’s oft-admired climate specialist Debra Roberts cannot prevent dubious carbon market deals – such as at the controversial Bisasar Road landfill in Clare Estate – from dominating municipal policy.

False solutions

The *Green Paper* repeatedly endorses “market-based policy measures” including carbon trading and offsets, at a time that Europe’s emissions trading scheme has completely collapsed due to internal fraud, external hacking and an extremely volatile carbon price; and the main US carbon market in Chicago has all but died. At the Cancun climate summit in December 2010, Indigenous people and environmentalists protested at the idea of including forests and timber in carbon markets. Only the US state of California is moving the carbon trade forward at present, and the new governor Jerry Brown will run into sharp opposition if tries following through his predecessor’s forest-privatisation offset deals in Chiapas, Mexico.

South Africa’s *Green Paper* authors obviously weren’t paying attention to the markets, in arguing, “Limited availability of international finance for large scale fossil fuel infrastructure in developing countries is emerging as a potential risk for South Africa’s future plans for development of new coal fired power stations.” If so then why did Pretoria just borrow \$3.75 billion from the World Bank, with around \$1 billion more expected from the US Ex-Im Bank and \$1.75 billion just raised from the international bond markets? The global North’s financiers are as shortsighted about coal investments as they were about credit derivatives, real estate, dotcoms, emerging markets and the carbon markets.

The *Green Paper* is also laced with false solutions. For example, attempting to “kick start and stimulate the renewable energy industry” requires “Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects”. Yet the miniscule €14/tonne currently being paid to the Durban methane-electricity conversion at three local landfills shows the futility of the CDM, not to mention the historic injustice of keeping the Bissar Road dump (Africa’s largest) open in spite of resident objections to environmental racism.

Similarly dubious policy ideas include “a nuclear power station fleet with a potential of up to 10 GWh by 2035 with the first reactors being commissioned from 2022” and, just as dangerously, a convoluted waste incineration strategy that aims to “facilitate energy recovery” through “negotiation of appropriate carbon-offset funding”.

Talking left (with high-minded intent) to walk right (for the sake of unsustainable crony-capitalist profiteering) is a longstanding characteristic of African nationalism, as Frantz Fanon first warned of in *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961. But the *Green Paper* fibs way too far, claiming that South Africa will achieve an “emissions peak in 2020 to 2025 at 34% and 42% respectively below a business as usual baseline”.

Earthlife Africa’s Tristen Taylor already reminded Yawitch in 2009 that the “baseline” was actually called “Growth Without Constraints” (GWC) in an earlier climate policy paper: “GWC is fantasy, essentially an academic exercise to see how much carbon South Africa would produce given unlimited resources and cheap energy prices.” Officials had already conceded GWC was “neither robust nor plausible” in 2007, leading Taylor to conclude, “The SA government has pulled a public relations stunt.”

And if, realistically, we consider South Africa’s entire climate policy as a stunt, required so as to not lose face at the Conference of Polluters’ global meeting, then the antidote (short of Tunisia/Egypt-style bottom-up democracy) is louder civil society demands for genuine solutions not found in the *Green Paper*:

- turning off the aluminium smelters so as to forego more coal-fired plants, while ensuring green jobs for all affected workers (such as solar hot-water heater manufacture);

- direct regulation of the biggest point emitters starting with Sasol and Eskom, compelling annual declines until we cut 50 per cent by 2020;
- strengthening the Air Quality Act to name greenhouse gases as dangerous pollutants (as does even the US Environmental Protection Agency now); and
- dramatic, urgent increases in investments for public transport, renewable energy technology and retrofitting of buildings to lower emissions.

Those are the genuine solutions whose name cannot be spoken in South Africa's climate policy, given the adverse balance of forces here, and everywhere. Changing that power balance is the task ahead for climate justice activism.

Patrick Bond

P.S.

* From Links

<http://links.org.au/node/2137>

* Based at the Centre for Civil Society in Durban, Patrick Bond is completing a book, Politics of Climate Justice.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.climateresponse.co.za>