

Resisting Fossil Fuel Extractivism in South Africa - Living Ocean or Oil

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Hosken Consolidated Investment (HCI) CEO, Johnny Copelyn, declared the criticism of seismic surveys to be ‘poppycock’ in an interview with *Cape Talk* and subsequently carried by *Business Day* under the headline: HCI board blasts criticism of seismic surveys as “[poppycock](#).” Fortunately this assertion has got nothing to do with male genitalia and its size. In this case Johnny’s being bigger than everyone else’s and thus the Alpha white-male-knows-what’s-best-of-all-us kind of posing. Thank you Johnny for steering clear of the cock fight!

Nonetheless, this discursive rant has set the tone for how the HCI Board Letter published in the *Daily Maverick*, opposing resistance to seismic surveys, has been received. Something is stirring in the command centres of HCI, a certain executive arousal, probably based on a realisation that the mass resistance to their interests in off-shore oil and gas extraction is not about to disappear any time soon. Instead, it is the beginning of what they should expect in this life and death struggle to prevent climate breakdown.

The etymology of the term ‘poppycock’ goes back to Dutch usage, ‘pappekak’ or ‘soft dung’. In the course of its linguistic journey into the white supremacist colonial imaginary it became part of conquering white reason. To be reduced to animal excrement was the worst thing in the colonial imaginary based on the hierarchy of white male supremacy over women, native peoples and non-human nature (animals, plants and eco-systems).

A Beginners Guide to Poppycock

To be ‘poppycock’ or express ‘poppycock’ meant that you were at the bottom of the pile: bullshit. Valueless, idiotic, insignificant and ultimately devoid of voice. The online Cambridge dictionary defines the term to mean: old-fashion disapproving. It’s clear Johnny has a penchant for old fashioned English language usage. Smarter vocabulary could have been: bunk or garbage. Anyway, we get the message: we are worse than animal scat.

Of course HCI is not the same as the Dutch East India Company or the British East India company but there is certainly a continuity in its colonial ecological philosophy as expressed in its diction. It is stuck in a simplistic conception of the human-nature relationship; capitalist business is now at the apex of the human-nature hierarchy. It will determine what will happen to human and non-human

life, even through its vaunted 'green investments'. We beg to differ and will tell you why.

Pragmatic Opportunism and Faux Development

Another revealing aspect of the HCI world view contained in its *Daily Maverick* letter is the assumption that its business interests, particularly oil and gas extraction, converge with the national interest; its investments in oil and gas will give South Africa economic autonomy, it will enable an orderly energy transition but most importantly it represents hard headed realist thinking. But is it really that? There are echoes of this position in the derisive statements made by Minister Gwede Mantashe against resistance to seismic surveys and fossil fuel extraction. Mantashe in his defence of coal, gas (including the master plan) and oil has even suggested those who resist further extraction are '[anti-development](#)' and want to maintain 'apartheid and colonialism of a special type'. Let's be clear, this is pragmatic opportunism, which draws selectively on knowledge to make its argument seem convincing. Pragmatism is also a 'fix it' philosophy, claiming to be above 'isms' and being practical about problems.

This is a delusion given that solutions to economic problems are expressive of class interests. For instance HCI suggests it is merely working with government energy planning and trying to find a fit. HCI's investments in coal and interests in off-shore oil and gas do more than work with government priorities but actually ensure a dangerous carbon lock-in for the country. Energy planning, policy and HCI investment have become symbiotic and entrenched in reproducing the carbon based minerals-energy complex, while the climate crisis worsens. The national interest becomes HCI interest and vice-versa. This is not benign. The state's skewing of the Integrated Resource Plan toward coal (44.6%) and gas (15.7%) by 2030 expresses these vested carbon-capitalist class interests. Simply, there are profits to be made by such extractivism and not some concern for an orderly energy transition. The counter-factual shows this up even more starkly. If tomorrow the state lifted the ceiling on wind, the country could meet its energy needs eight times over through offshore wind power, according to a recent [study](#) done by Stellenbosch University. According to the [International Renewable Energy Agency](#), the costs of renewable energy systems and unit costs of renewable energy generation have come down dramatically in comparison to fossil fuels such as coal.

[Brown et al](#) have shown the feasibility and economic viability of a 100% renewable electricity system for South Africa, meeting the "energy needs of all citizens at all times" is "cost-competitive with fossil-fuel-based systems, even before externalities such as global warming, water usage and environmental pollution are taken into account." They have established this renewable system requires no 're-invention' of the power system, rather only a "directed evolution of the current system is required to guarantee affordability, reliability and sustainability." In far less than the 6 years before Total's offshore Brulpadda well comes on line there could be sufficient renewable electricity generation and storage technology to convert entirely to renewables.

So why is there a ceiling on renewable energy in the national energy mix? Who benefits from this failure to exploit limitless wind and sunshine? Certainly the time has come for an orderly energy transition driven by the technical and economic advantages offered by renewable energy, including socially owned renewable energy in households, communities and local government?

Mantashe is also hiding behind a pragmatic opportunism, both as Energy Minister and Chair of the ANC. He understands South Africa's mineral reserves are worth about R147.91-trillion and significantly half of this value is in coal. Defending coal is crucial for greasing the wheels of political support from the National Union of Mineworkers, for the ANC and business aligned to the ANC invested in coal. In the case of labour he is exploiting the failure of the ANC state to provide a serious just transition plan to the country (a point we will return to below). His fervour for defending

offshore oil and gas extraction is also probably linked to ensuring Shell, a partner of Thebe Investment (which owns 28% of Shell's downstream business), ultimately benefits the ANC. In news reports over the past two months it has been revealed that Batho Batho Trust, which owns 46% of Thebe gave a R15-million loan to the ANC to deal with its various financial problems. The logic is simple: Shell secures its interests in oil and gas, Thebe benefits, Batho Batho Trust gains and ultimately ANC interests are realised. So who is really pursuing the national interest and 'development' in this context?

Moreover, according to the Alternative Information and Development Centre's climate jobs research, if socially owned renewable energy is scaled up, 250,000 climate jobs can be created in electricity and renewable energy alone, way more than what exists in coal mining. Current estimates sit at about [113,000 coal jobs](#) in South Africa. This also stands in contrast to oil and gas jobs, with international research affirming fewer, more technical jobs, are created in off-shore oil and gas than projected.

But Mantashe's rant about resistance to oil and gas entrenches 'colonialism of a special type' rather than development, deserves a 'special type response'. The ANC has ruled South Africa for over 25 years and the economic crisis we are living through is simply a matter of its own doing. A horrendous 46% unemployment rate, in the midst of COVID 19. African women, amongst women more generally, continue to be the most vulnerable with a 41% unemployment rate, about 30 million food insecure, 10% of income earners receive 65% of national income and 80% of wealth is in the hands of 10% of the population. Then there is the staggering scale of corruption with billions looted from parastatals, state departments and local government. A crucial consequence in this regard is the theft of the future of millions of desperate and unemployed youth in South Africa. So who has really been reinforcing and reproducing colonialism of a special type? Mantashe's disingenuous declarations need to be measured against the record of the ANC in power. He stands for a faux development which benefits him and his insider ANC cronies, certainly not the country. HCI is clearly on this bandwagon.

License Over the Whale

So why bother demonising small scale fisherfolk and a few hundred thousand ocean activists? Zuma-era Operation Phakisa offshore oil and gas stream's founding documents highlighted the greatest threat to commodifying the ocean commons as being social opposition to it. Offshore Phakisa (hurry-up) has accelerated seismic survey permitting since public push-back began to heat up after the Schlumberger survey of 2016 saw the [highest recorded animal stranding numbers](#) along the east coast, including KZN's first mass stranding. A number of these strandings were unusual - a dolphin with its top and bottom jaw broken outwards and a deep water Cuviers Beaked whale had washed up with its innards in its mouth, likely having suffered barotrauma (the bends). Fisherfolk, scientists, activists, sea users and journalists sensed foul play.

This seismic survey had been extended into the whale migration season, without the requisite public participation. Yes, there's a pattern here. The lubrication of the entry of oil majors onto South Africa's coastline for Zuma's offshore oil and gas development program involved certain reversals in environmental regulation, since environmental authorisation for seismic surveys reconnaissance is onerous. Dropping protective legislation out of law simultaneous to the launch of offshore Phakisa in 2014 was an attempt to remove barriers to extending the minerals energy complex to oceans. That these animals were perceived to be acceptable collateral damage struck a chord with the South Durban community, who live with the real-life impacts of toxic air pollution from two of the country's biggest oil refineries. An Oceans Not Oil, citizen-led marine environmental justice coalition, supported by academia and scientists, was formed.

HCI and Copelyn's elaborate discourses of denial construct an alternate reality which doesn't involve violent aftermaths to their dealings. Copelyn is practicing an appeal to ignorance – that the claim of irreparable harm caused by seismic surveys is false because it has not yet been proved true. It is more convenient to ignore the [science](#) and fantasize that an array of 32 airguns [detonating sound](#) and pressure waves so powerful as to find gas reserves 40km below the seabed 8640 times a day in an acoustic watery home, is without consequence. At an Inquiry into Media Credibility and Ethics the SA National Editors Forum's found that Copelyn's eNCA news channel (owned by HCI) failed to disclose a conflict of interest when reporting on Shell/ Impact Oil and Gas Ltd's Wild Coast seismic blasting, in which it has a material interest in success. HCI are the largest shareholder of Impact Oil and Gas, which sold a 50% working interest and operatorship of their Transkei and Algoa (Wild Coast) license to Shell. HCI's Letter to the Editor cum advertorial forgot to mention that too. That indigenous people's intangible heritage, social consensus and marine science might have begun to pull the rug from Impact Oil and Gas's empire building, shifting its sovereign claim from 'acreage' to meaningless lines on the blank blue of the 'Petroleum Exploration and Production Activities' map, must be a worry to a man used to dictating the narrative.

Living Ocean or Oil

Pipedream gas-for-development is not reparative economics. Playing itself out in Mozambique currently is the recurring syndrome of the 'resource curse' effect: increased indebtedness, corruption and instability which frequently follow major oil and gas resource finds, before extraction, during and post production. E3G, an independent European climate change think tank, [has found that](#), on average, Mozambicans are poorer than they were a decade ago with 90% under the international poverty line. Cabo Delgado, where the gas projects are based and site of an ongoing violent conflict, has been hit the worst: household spending has dropped by 38% in the last 5 years.

The accelerating effects of CO₂ absorption by the oceans is manifesting itself clearly now, so delusional forging ahead with 30 new offshore wells by 2030 shows cowboy risk tolerance. The IPCC in the [Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate](#) lists ocean deoxygenation and ocean acidification as irreversible for centuries to come and makes achieving the 1.5°C target [more difficult to achieve](#). These dual stressors are profoundly altering ecosystems – globally 40% of coral species have died and local [fisheries](#) have become vulnerable, to name only the obvious. Once rare, extreme events are likely to occur in Southern Africa now every year due to sea levels rise and increased storm intensity. In 2019 two cyclones, within the same season, battered southern Africa, killing over a thousand people and leaving over two and a half million people in need of humanitarian aid.

At the time of writing there are also devastating tropical storm impacts and cyclone build up happening on the oceans near Madagascar and Mozambique.

Bread and Increasing Systemic Risk of Fossil Fuel Extraction

In 2016 a bread march through the streets of Johannesburg led by the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (SAFSC), trade unions and community organizations made the connection between one of the worst droughts in the history of the country, high food prices and the worsening climate crisis. Hunger was being exacerbated by this climate shock. In 2018 the SAFSC, together with over 60 organizations, called on the South African President to convene an urgent sitting of parliament to debate the alarming 1.5°C UN-International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on the need to cut carbon emissions by half by 2030. The SAFSC and allies wanted parliament to mainstream the urgency of this challenge into government policy, but this went unheeded. Hence, in

solidarity with drought affected communities and progressive sectors of society (including trade unions), the SAFSC went on to pioneer the development of a Climate Justice Charter (CJC) for South Africa. The charter was handed over to parliament on World Food Day October 2020, with the demand it be adopted as per section 234 of the South African constitution, which provides for the adoption of charters. Underlying the creation and championing of the CJC was a deep concern for the urgency for climate science and the dangers it highlighted for the future of South Africa.

According to [leading South African climate scientists](#), working with the IPCC, South Africa is one of ten climate hot spots in the world and is heating at twice the global average. An overshoot of 1.5°C over the next decade would mean we are at 3°C warming. The existential risk this poses to life in the country cannot be underestimated and has to be acted on now, not in 2050. This urgency is underlined by the recent IPCC report on the *Physical Science Basis of Climate Change*, which went into the recent Glasgow COP summit, affirming that extreme weather events (floods, droughts, heatwaves, cyclones) are our new reality and scientific attribution is clear. This simply means if HCI gets its way with off-shore oil and gas extraction and Mantashe continues with supporting the use of coal, oil and gas in the national energy mix South Africa is headed for more extreme climate shocks, with disproportionate impacts on workers and poor families, and with an escalating price tag. The recent drought (2014-2021) cost the Western Cape economy R5-billion and at a national level the government had to bail out the Land Bank to the tune of R7-billion mainly because of defaulting farmer loans due to the drought. Flooding in KZN in 2019 was estimated at R1-billion and this year between December and January at R3.3-billion. South Africa's ballooning public debt will increase with more climate shocks. From this perspective, Mantashe and HCI, will bankrupt South Africa as they push for coal, oil and gas extraction which contributes to global warming and in turn feeds-back as costly and dangerous climate shocks. More coal, oil and gas is literally about making the climate crisis a systemic risk, is against a thinking climate economics and the future of South Africa. It is tantamount to unlawful endangerment and has to be stopped now.

Climate Injustice, Workers and Peoples of South Africa

When day zero impacted Cape Town the disproportionate impacts were on poor and working-class households, many being women workers in the textile industry in which the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union organizes. They had to queue up to access water from public springs and faced punitive prices for water supplied by the municipality, increasing their care burdens. When the drought made itself felt deep in the Eastern Cape, where many mineworkers come from, climate injustice was registering as hunger. When cyclones Idai and Kenneth pummelled Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi this also impacted the lives of migrant mine and other workers. HCI and Mantashe's drive for more coal, gas and oil extraction simply means more suffering, more climate shocks, for the members of SACTWU, NUM, their families, communities and the working class in general.

The trade union movement in South Africa is waking up to the urgencies of the climate crisis. COSATU is working on a just transition blue print. In a survey done by NALEDI, the overwhelming number of workers surveyed in COSATU support the Climate Justice Charter. FEDUSA has developed a position on the just transition, SAFTU is deeply committed to such and even Solidarity is engaging on these issues. All these unions shaped and informed the making of the Climate Justice Charter. How unions champion the phase out of fossil fuels, the energy transition and systemic transformation required to decarbonize and build adaptive systems will impact on the future of all in South Africa. The trade union movement has been bedeviled by the narrow interests of trade union investment companies and corruption, but the lived experiences of members in the context of intensifying climate harm is certainly going to force them to rise to the challenge of accelerating and deepening the just transition. The #OceansNotOil Campaign and the Climate Justice Charter

Movement stand in solidarity and encourage unions to step-up and lead society now. In this regard the positions of Gwede Mantashe and HCI need to be tackled head on by workers who stand to lose the most.

What do we want for South Africa?

Weighing up the systemic risks of further coal, oil and gas extractions as it relates to the climate crisis shows that it will increase climate harms, economic costs, injustice and will undermine the immediate realisation of viable alternatives. This simply means there is no case for further coal, gas and oil extraction in South Africa; it is a climate curse. Mantashe and HCI have a narrow, self-seeking agenda that is at odds with the national interest. South Africa has used coal for more than 100 years and it owes the world a climate debt. It needs to act responsibly in this regard. At least 100 million African's will be forced to be climate refugees in coming decades. South Africa cannot be a carbon pariah in this context. Instead we need to be leading by example through renewing radical Pan-Africanism by demonstrating how to accelerate and deepen the just transition now. The South African state is lagging behind and should have had a just transition plan in place that goes beyond climate modernization (with its emphasis on money, markets, technology and more growth), and shallow tinkering. Merely declaring 'net zero by 2050' is unambitious and delays decisive transformative action. Rather it should be taking the cue from the Climate Justice Charter plurivision to place the country on climate emergency footing now and enable transformative systemic change to be led from below. The charter is a compass of the many rising to advance climate justice, it is a thread of hope that reaches into the frontlines of struggles that are defending our oceans, biodiversity and the defence of life-making more generally.

Moreover, the translation of the charter into policies such as a Climate Justice Deal for South Africa will demonstrate that legacies of exploitation, dispossession, oppression and racial exclusion must be addressed as part of the deep just transition. A new society based on ending hunger through food sovereignty, socially owned renewable energy, democratising the water commons, a universal basic income, zero waste, climate jobs, eco mobility anchored by clean energy public transport systems, democratic planning, eco-housing and transition towns, ecological taxes on the rich, effective knowledge systems to assist with survival and the development of social innovation, a responsive and effective public health care system, natural climate solutions and a climate justice state are crucial to ensure we do not face societal collapse from worsening climate shocks. These emancipatory ecology, feminist and socialist commons alternatives are championed by various movements in South Africa. Maybe rather than environmentalist phobia and polarizing rants Mantashe and HCI should rather engage with these ideas so their loved ones also stand a chance of surviving in a world of worsening climate chaos. •

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P.S.

• The Bullet. February 14, 2022:

<https://socialistproject.ca/2022/02/resisting-fossil-fuel-extractivism-in-south-africa/#more>

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