

Analysis

South Africa - Climate change: The secrets of our collusion

Monday 21 March 2016, by [BOND Patrick](#) (Date first published: 20 August 2014).

The environment minister has cut funds to monitor climate change and contraventions, showing her tendency to collaborate with corporate power.

For members of Parliament hearing testimony in Durban on climate change on Friday August 29, the critical baby step in the direction of a sane climate policy is relatively simple: measure how much South Africa's major greenhouse gas polluters emit so they can be capped and cut.

Most countries are improving these measurements and have pretty accurate ways to assess both atmospheric greenhouse gases and extreme point sources. For example, Sasol's coal-to-oil and gas-to-oil operation in Secunda is considered the world's single greatest site of carbon dioxide emissions.

Environmental Affairs Minister Edna Molewa's new R5.6-billion budget is revealing; in recent weeks, she cut R20-million from the South African Weather Service. This means, according to Parliament's oversight committee on environment in a July 8 statement, "South Africa would be unable to meet its international obligations regarding the monitoring of greenhouse gases through the Global Atmospheric Watch station.

"As a result, there would be a limitation on monitoring the impacts of Climate Change Mitigation and Scenario Strategies for the country. The country would also be unable to formulate baselines and monitor emissions versus set targets."

Does Molewa want to keep us ignorant about our economy's reliance upon fossil fuels? She regularly bows to the durable power of the so-called minerals-energy complex. That power was unveiled when her cabinet colleagues Nathi Mthethwa and Cyril Ramaphosa assisted Lonmin by deploying the police to help maintain corporate mining profits - including those of Ramaphosa's former company, the Shanduka Group - on August 16 2012 in Marikana.

As the *Mail & Guardian* exposed in 2013 (followed by a de rigueur Molewa denial), Shanduka and similar well-connected coal corporations were pampered when Molewa allegedly instructed her staff to ignore water permit requirements for mines. At least 40 major new mines are now being dug or planned to feed Eskom's Medupi and Kusile power plants, and not to mention massive new coal digs for exports to China and India.

Mpumalanga's highveld is wheezing, yet Eskom has applied to Molewa for "rolling postponements" on the pollution reductions required at 14 power plants. According to the NGO groundWork, this would "amount to exemption".

Eskom tried this because Molewa has turned a blind eye to many greenhouse gas and other pollution violations. One poignant example is an illegal coal operation close to the border of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi

park - Africa's oldest reserve and the centre of rhino survival efforts - here in KwaZulu-Natal, where local peasant livelihoods are being wrecked by the open-cast Somkhele mine.

Even more damage is likely 12km away if Ibutho Coal opens a similar mine on the historic park's direct border - a hare-brained plan that government has already approved in principle. Ibutho refuses to disclose its corporate sponsors but, of the six principals named in its application, half are tied to Glencore and BHP Billiton, the world's largest commodity trader and mining house respectively.

Though it may finally divest some of its smelting operations here, BHP Billiton (formerly Gencor) has enjoyed an extraordinarily profitable revolving-door relationship with powerful South African officials.

This crony capitalism dates to apartheid, when it boosted the salaries of finance minister Derek Keys and Eskom treasurer Mick Davis. The door continued spinning after 1994, and through it went the first democratic energy regulator, Xolani Mkhwanazi, the first director general of trade and industry, Zav Rustomjee, and current national planning commissioner Vincent Maphai.

This helps explain why the Australian-British firm gets electricity at a fraction of the price paid by ordinary people. It consumes 6% to 10% of our national power load, and exports the profits while employing fewer than 1 500 at the main Richard Bay smelters.

The weather service was not alone in taking a hit in Molewa's new budget. Explicit climate change programming will be slashed 8.3% after adjusting for inflation. That's a R19-million cut, leaving just R228-million to address the greatest present threat to our survival. Also cut was environmental monitoring, in spite of growing attention to pollution hazards such as the South Durban toxic hotspot.

Parliament's environment committee warned on July 8: "As a country, we must be seen making our fair contribution to the global effort to mitigate climate change by ensuring that we reduce our greenhouse gas emissions below the business-as-usual by 34% by 2020 and 42% by 2025, consistent with the pledges that President Jacob Zuma made [at the December 2009 UN climate summit in Copenhagen]."

Those pledges became more important once South Africa's hosting of the same summit here in Durban in 2011 eroded the difference between rich and middle-income countries. The obvious question is how these emissions cuts can be accomplished in line with the National Development Plan (NDP).

The NDP gives multinational and local fossil fuel corporations all the subsidised infrastructure they need to rip out South Africa's coal, burn it in the two biggest coal-fired power plants currently being built on earth - Medupi and Kusile - each capable of producing 35-million tonnes of polluting carbon dioxide per year.

- The NDP helps ship massive amounts of coal from Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal to China and India through Richards Bay - the first Presidential Infrastructure Co-ordinating Commission Strategic Investment Project (SIP) - at a cost of several hundred billion rands.
- The NDP's second SIP dumps R250-billion into expanding Durban's port from throughput of 2.5-million to 20-million containers a year from now to 2040, with huge implications for the climate.
- The NDP supports carbon-intensive fracking in the Karoo and deepwater offshore oil exploration near Durban: ExxonMobil hankers for prospecting permission at depths of more than 3.5km, in spite

of sharpening community opposition. Sasol and a Burmese company are also trying their luck nearby; Zuma endorsed this through his Operation Phakisa, announced in Durban early this month.

Parliament appears asleep at the wheel, aside from the Economic Freedom Fighters, whose committee representative, Andile Mngxitama, is asking hard questions about who wins and loses. The ANC doesn't seem to have a vocal MP on the critical matter of climate change, and nor do the other parties. In January this year, when leading Durban community environmentalist Desmond D'Sa raised climate in his critique of the Infrastructure Development Bill, he was shut down after testifying for just four minutes.

Those in Parliament, Cosatu and the South African Communist Party aiming to reform the NDP should be forewarned: climate change and crony capitalism are excellent reasons to reboot the pro-corporate R850-billion infrastructure spend, and to redirect the funds to meet basic infrastructure needs. But Molewa's defunding of her climate responsibilities gives an accurate indicator of why reform is highly unlikely without a rapid increase in eco-social activism.

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P.S.

* "Climate change: The secrets of our collusion". Mail & Guardian. 29 AUG 2014 00:00:
<http://mg.co.za/article/2014-08-28-climate-change-the-secrets-of-our-collusion>

* Patrick Bond's Politics of Climate Justice was recently named as one of the Guardian's 10 leading books on the topic.