# A Gender Just Climate Transition:

Report

case studies from South Africa

Swedish Society for Nature Conservation

groundWork

Centre for Environmental Rights

EMG Environmental Monitoring Group

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# Introduction

# 1

This report explores the role gender justice can play in the Just Transition by looking at four different case studies from South Africa. It is a joint publication by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC) and four South African organisations; groundWork, the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG), Earthlife Africa (ELA) and the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER).

The aim is to provide concrete examples of how gender justice and climate justice are interdependent, through sharing the lived experience of women affected by climate change. Our hope is that this will contribute to the conversation about what a Gender Just Transition can look like in practice and serve as an inspiration to stakeholders and civil society organisations in the climate and environmental space, as well as decision makers at all levels.

The report covers issues and solutions related to at least 8 of the SDGs, emphasizing the magnitude of the systemic change required for a truly Just Transition. The first section provides an overview of climate change and gender justice, along with a thematic overview of energy access, water access, agroecology, and air pollution in South Africa. The second section presents the four case studies, followed by a summary and key recommendations for civil society organisations and policy makers.

# Climate justice

Climate and environmental justice is at its essence about the disparity between the actors responsible for climate change and environmental degradation, and those who suffer the consequences. Climate change is already impacting every part of the world, and its effects are more severe than anticipated.[1] However, the severity, magnitude, and lived experiences of these effects vary significantly based on geographic location and group. The countries largely responsible for historical greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) have developed their industries, infrastructure, and economies, in part, by exploiting resources from the Global South. This has in many cases enabled these nations to develop institutional capacity and readiness to address, among other issues, the effects of climate change. Paradoxically, those who bear the least responsibility for the emissions, including marginalized groups and low-income countries, endure the most severe consequences of climate change. Given this unjust reality, it is evident that climate change constitutes a human rights issue.

# The gender and climate change nexus

Climate change and environmental degradation amplifies existing inequalities such as poverty, hunger, and gender inequality, posing particular threats to the livelihoods, health, and safety of women and girls, affecting their ability to build resilience. Across the world, women and girls depend more on, yet have less access to, natural resources and simultaneously bear a disproportionate responsibility for securing food, water and fuel as a result of patriarchal power structures and socially constructed gender roles. Climate change escalates conflict and as a result, women and girls face increased vulnerabilities to all forms of gender-based violence. Women's unequal participation in deci-

1. Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (ipcc.ch), Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change (ipcc.ch)

sion-making processes and access to climate finance exacerbate inequalities and limit women from contributing to climate-related planning, policy making and implementation. For these reasons, gender equality is key in the efforts to address climate change and a prerequisite for sustainable climate action.

# The South African context

South Africa is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change[2] due to a combination of geographic, historical, political and social factors. The country is also the most unequal country[3] in the world, where 10 percent of the population owns over 80 percent of the wealth and 34 percent of the population is unemployed or lack formal employment. Inequality manifest across various dimensions, including race, gender, and the urban-rural divide, highlighting the complex power dynamics at play in addressing widespread inequalities. South Africa is also struggling with Gender Based Violence (GBV), with femicide five times higher than the global average[4]. GBV is widespread and ingrained in most spheres of society, underpinned by inequality between genders, and reinforced by broader socioeconomic inequalities like unemployment. In such an unequal society, there are many nuances of gender inequality, power, and privilege. Climate change is expected to further exacerbate existing inequalities in South Africa[5].

South Africa is one of the 20 largest emitters of greenhouse gas emissions mostly due to the power sector's dependence on coal, which accounts for approximately 80 percent of the national energy supply. Despite the high levels of greenhouse gas emissions, only 43 percent of the population has security of supply. With current policies in place, the country is far from reaching its NDC targets, as well as its obligations in terms of the national Constitution to safeguard numerous constitutional rights that are known to be limited by an inadequate climate change response. South Africa's coal dependence contributes to carbon dioxide emissions, water abstraction, air and water pollution, and adverse health effects.

The four cases presented in this report shed light on some of the gendered effects of climate change in South Africa. The cases also showcase individual women and groups of women as active agents of change in the strife towards a Gender Just Transition. Below, we outline some of the thematic areas addressed in the case studies.

### Air pollution in South Africa

Air pollution, also referred to as the silent killer, is a global issue that claims around seven million lives annually, causing cancer, respiratory illnesses, and heart diseases. Air pollution from coal-fired power plants is especially harmful to human health and affects water, soil and air quality, land degradation and acid mine drainage. Fence line communities that live close to the coal mines are especially affected and must deal with the daily struggles for survival along with broader climate and environmental issues. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by indoor air pollution due to traditional gender roles where they are typically the ones responsible for household chores such as cooking.

2. ND-GAIN Country Index rankings | ND-GAIN Index
3. South Africa's Inequality Levels | 2024 | Economic Data | World Economics
4. World Bank Brief. Gender-based violence (Violence against women and girls) [homepage on the Internet]. 2019. [cited 2023 Feb 02]. Available from https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialsustainability/brief/violence-against-women-and-girls
5. Climate Risk Country Profile - South Africa - South Africa | ReliefWeb

## Water access in South Africa

Climate change causes floods, droughts, unpredictable weather patterns and increasing temperatures. This has severe implications for water resources and access to water which affects poor and vulnerable communities the hardest. South Africa is a water scarce country and Southern Africa is as a global hot spot with temperature increases higher than the predicted global mean temperature increase. Furthermore, mining operations use large amounts of fresh water, which endangers clean water supplies for humans and livestock that live around these sites. The energy sector is one of the biggest users and polluters of water resources in South Africa. Despite the constitutionally enshrined right to water, the ongoing failures in access to water and sanitation by poor households indicates the need for a fundamental change in approaches to water governance and community engagement.

Not only do women and men have different relationships with water due to traditional gender roles and their roles in social reproduction[6]; it is also harder for women to access water in a society where there is a substantial gender pay gap and women have a higher unemployment rate. Women also bear the burden of caregiving of family members when they contract illnesses from contaminated and polluted water. Limited access to water impacts women's ability to grow food for their households.

Collecting water is labour intensive, increases women's reproductive burden and decreases opportunities for education and paid labour. Women and young girls often travel long distances to collect water and firewood in areas with poor or no roads and lighting, increasing the risk of being subjected to GBV.

## Agroecology in South Africa

Agriculture is a major employer of women globally and constitutes a more important source of livelihood for women than for men in many countries[7]. Despite the importance of women in the food system, they suffer discrimination in terms of access to and control over land. In South Africa, less than 5 percent of Black women own land[8].

Agroecology is an innovative and gender-responsive approach to farming that has the potential to contribute to the transition of agricultural practices towards sustainable food systems[9]. Agroecology is based on the 13 principles as described by FAO and relates to recycling; reducing the use of inputs; soil health; animal health and welfare; biodiversity; synergy; economic diversification; co-creation of knowledge; social values and diets; fairness; connectivity; land and natural resource governance; and participation. Agroecology focuses on safeguarding and enhancing the rights of women, by prioritizing women's participation in production and access to land, which contributes to strengthening women's livelihoods and agency. Applying the principles of Agroecology will strengthen women's participation in the food system transformation, by providing learning and sharing opportunities.

The centrality of women in agroecology is further seen in how they apply Indigenous Knowledge Systems to their agroecology practise. Historically, within

6. For example, including responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening, water collections, childcare and other care responsibilities.

7. FAO (2023). The status of women in agrifood systems. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc5343en

8. Thaba-Nkadimene, K. L., Molotja, W., and Mafumo, T. N. (2019). The scourge of poverty among south African rural women: in defence of social justice. J. Gender, Inform. Dev. Africa (JGIDA) 8, 69–89. doi: 10.31920/2050-4284/2019/8n3a4

9. HLPE. 2019. Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition. A report by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome.

South Africa, women have been seen as custodians of Indigenous Knowledge and their environmental knowledge contributes to promoting healthy, diversified, and culturally appropriate diets, retaining culture and food traditions. This is seen in seed management and preservation practices where South African women hold the knowledge around protecting indigenous seed. In this way, women's practise of agroecology is crucial to maintaining healthy food systems.

## Energy access in South Africa

Although South Africa has a well-developed electricity network, many South Africans, especially in townships and low-income areas, lack secure access to electricity. The country struggles with security of supply and affordability with load shedding that can last up to seven hours a day. Around 80 percent of the population has access to electricity but only 43 percent has secure access, and even these are impacted by regular loadshedding.

The unreliable energy supply brings severe consequences to groups that cannot afford alternative sources, such as diesel generators. This results for example in cold dinners and medication requiring refrigeration going off, making it impossible for students to do homework or work in the evenings. Moreover, it is impossible to charge phones or indulge in leisure or educative activities such as watching the television. The lack of electricity also increases gender-based violence and insecurity in communities and disrupts economic and business activities. Energy poverty disproportionally affects women and girls because they are often the ones responsible for household chores such as cooking. Many households in South Africa depend on firewood for cooking and space heating, and it typically falls upon women and girls to fetch this from the forest. This is time consuming and cooking with firewood causes indoor air pollution, with severe health impacts.

# Case studies

# 2

# Air pollution – The Women who fought the "Deadly Air"

**SDGs:** 3, 11 and 5
**Organization:** groundWork
**Location:** The Highveld

This case is situated in the Highveld, which is called the energy generation heartland of South Africa, with numerous coal-fired power plants and highlights a landmark court case known as the "Deadly Air" case. Brave women from the Highveld communities, provided testimonies on how the dirty air has impacted their health, but mostly their children's health.

Judgement was handed down in favour of community complainants on 18 March 2022. The Minister of Forestry and Fisheries and Environmental Affairs was ordered to pass regulations that would enforce the conditions of the priority area plan to realise the constitutional right to an environment that is not harmful to health and well-being.

## Background

The Highveld includes Mpumalanga and Gauteng provinces in South Africa and is the energy generation heartland of the country. Eskom, the country's energy generation utility, hosts 12 coal-fired power plants, and Sasol, the former state enterprise, houses the massive Secunda coal-to-liquids facility. The cruel legacy of apartheid planning is the juxtaposition of human settlements, so-called townships or low-income areas, adjacent to these heavy industries to function as labour-sending areas. These communities are faced with the triple threat of poverty, environmental impacts, and health burden. In 2007, an air quality priority area was declared, intending to identify the sources of poor air quality and intervene until compliance with national ambient air quality standards was achieved.

## Project context

In 2019, after many years of advocacy, groundWork and the Vukani Environmental Movement (VEM), represented by the Centre for Environmental Rights, launched a constitutional court case suing the government over its failure to promulgate regulations to enforce the Highveld Priority Area Air Quality Management Plan, arguing that this violates the peoples' Constitutional right to "an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being". It was brought before the Pretoria High Court in 2021 in a landmark case, now known as the "Deadly Air" case, litigation about the toxic air pollution on the Mpumalanga Highveld.

Brave women from the Highveld communities, provided testimonies on how the dirty air has impacted their health, but mostly their children's health. These har-

rowing accounts formed part of the affidavits submitted as evidence by the Centre for Environmental Rights. The women, and mothers, of the Highveld are the champions of the Just Transition. They are demanding the constitutional right for all. In addition, the constitution enshrines the rights of children. These two rights are immediately realisable – they are not subject to 'progressive realisation' dependent on whether the state has the requisite resources. We salute them, who, similar to the women of 9 August 1956, resilient in the face of injustice, hold South Africa's hopes for the future in their arms.

## Accounts from women in affected communities

Below some of the accounts that were submitted as part of the evidence are presented.

*"A lot of people think the chest problems are family illnesses, but it is because we are all breathing the same polluted air... Jonas* has had asthma since he was a few months old. As you can hear, he breathes loudly and sometimes you can see he is struggling. I don't have money to take him to doctors because they ask for R700 per session, and he gets sick often. I just want him to be like other children."*

**Jonas* and his mum, Phola, Ogies**

*"...I am 37 years old and I have two children who were born without asthma. The first-born, as time went on, was admitted to hospital at 4 months old and diagnosed with asthma. The doctor confirmed that the problem is the area where we stay that affected the child. After 8 months he developed an eye problem – a yellow substance would come out of them. I took him to a doctor, these were different doctors, and I was told that it is the air we live under. I was not aware that it was polluted to the point where it could affect the child.*

*After 2 years, I fell pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl who, after 4 months was also admitted and diagnosed with asthma. As time went on, from January last year, I also started not feeling well. I found out I had kidney problems, which I did not have before, and now I know it is the air and water pollution as our area is surrounded by many open cast mines. When they blast, they don't let the community know so* that they can keep the children indoors – we just see the dust and have to run and find the children and take them inside the house. My children's (health) issues are so serious that sometimes they both get sick on the same day, so I have to be with them for 24 hours - even at night I have to sleep with them because they are not well."

**Sibongile*, Vosman, Emalahleni**

Coal power stations in close proximity to settlements. Photo: groundWork

*"I'm an activist! I joined this case because it was too hard looking at my son suffering with his coughing. Must we now relocate from our area because of air pollution? No. We must do something. When we did a door-to-door campaign, that's when we realised that people were suffering. Some parents were hiding their children, thinking that maybe they were cursed. We must explain to parents that it's not their fault to have their children becoming sick like this.*

*When they are visiting their home areas, they are not suffering the same as when they are around Emalahleni. It's so sad to see children using nebulizers. The saddest part out of all of this is that, when they go to the clinics or to seek help, they don't find the care they need. Sometimes when you go to the clinic, they will say they don't have oxygen. It is very hard. Living in Emalahleni is painful. Because many people think maybe it's normal. It was made to be like that. This is real. This is true. To those industries that are contributing to the air quality around this area, what I will say is that it is better to have life, than counting money without having a healthy environment.*

*People are dying. And it's very sad to watch people dying slowly, without any help. But more and more money is coming out of these industries that are around this area, and the people living around this area are only getting the impacts. And no one cares about their health. We are suffering a lot."*

Palesa*, Empumelelweni, Emalahleni

Living in the shadow of a large coal discard stockpile. Photo: groundWork

## Results

Judgement was handed down in favour of community complainants on 18 March 2022. The Minister of Forestry and Fisheries and Environmental Affairs was ordered to pass regulations that would enforce the conditions of the priority area plan to realise the constitutional right to an environment that is not harmful to health and well-being. To make the victory practical to affected communities, amongst other departments implicated in the judgement, the Department of Health needs to find ways of resolving the health burden that is borne by communities living in the Highveld. Communities require immediate access to health services, such as mobile clinics for diagnosis, and first-line treatment that ensures targeted critical respiratory-related care and services.

People have yet to see tangible results from this victory in more determined enforcement or better air quality. But communities in Emalahleni are doing it for themselves through the Urban Movement Incubator Energy Democracy project. In April 2022, a solar and battery demonstration unit was installed at VEM offices in Vosman. This was seminal, giving hope and creating an aspiration in the community for a future with clean energy. The energy democracy campaign encourages dialogue on renewable energy options for communities, providing a look and feel experience of the technology, and supports critical needs during power cuts, such as boiled water for infant formula and safe learning spaces. Local organisation, Vukani Environmental Movement, is a community partner and has been engaging local and provincial government on renewable energy provision. An air quality monitor was also recently installed at the office to further address the issues head-on through scientific measurement to counter technocratic arguments.

Celebrations following the court victory. Photo: groundWork

Renewable energy installation at VEM offices. Photo: groundWork

## What lies ahead?

As the energy transition of the Highveld unfolds, these communities, and children, will face an uncertain but very different tomorrow. International tides are turning but in contradictory ways. Europe's appetite for coal is waning but, in the short term, is replaced by fossil gas. Gas is then promoted as the transitional bridging fuel across Africa. The fortunes of Mpumalanga have been inextricably tied to coal and energy for over 60 years, and a Just Transition has been promised. Yet management of the process at Komati, the first Eskom coal power station to be decommissioned, has instilled little faith that it will deliver economic, social, and environmental justice. The Minister of Forestry and Fisheries and Environmental Affairs has also drafted the priority area regulations and circulated these for comment. Deadlines for industry interventions, emission reduction targets, and offences are included. Mpumalanga means dawn in Zulu. There is the promise of light on the horizon, but it is not yet a new dawn for the Highveld, and the priority areas in the Vaal and Waterberg.

# Water access and food security – Empowering Women for Sustainable Development: A Women-led Resolution-Oriented Approach

**SDGs:** 3, 11 and 5
**Organisation:** Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG)
**Location:** Burundi, South Africa

At the heart of this case lies the belief that sustainable development can only be achieved when driven by local communities. It therefore emphasizes local-level leadership and aims to empower women within vulnerable communities. The journey of the case follows three women in Burundi who initiated and established a thriving garden to enhance access to healthy food in their community. This women-led initiative has shown success both in empowering women participants and in growing the project by attracting more participants, including men, as they witnessed the progress and development achieved by the project.

## Background

Burundi is an informal settlement located within the Kuils River catchment in Cape Town, South Africa. Situated amidst the sprawling bodies of water that make up the Kuils River, the community of Burundi faces the complex interplay between human lives and the natural environment. Forced, due to the housing crisis, to settle here on the wetlands, Burundi's residents navigate their daily lives in precarious living conditions with limited infrastructure, while simultaneously engaging with the political forces at play. Political dynamics shape the allocation of resources, access to services, and decision-making processes that impact the lives of its inhabitants. The diverse range of actors involved, including community leaders, local authorities, and governmental bodies, influence the social fabric and power dynamics. These political dynamics within Burundi are entwined with broader socio-economic considerations, reflecting the challenges and opportunities that arise and are dominated by men.

The demand for water and land is continuously increasing due to population growth, urbanization, and changes in consumption and land-use patterns. This places significant strain on access to resources like land, water, and food. Climate change also poses substantial threats to sustainable and equitable access to these resources, impacting on both ecosystems

and human well-being. Women and girls in Burundi face the strenuous daily task of journeying long distances to fetch water from standpipes. When the taps run dry, they must rely on the goodwill of nearby formal houses for water. Sanitation facilities are virtually non-existent, forcing people to find alternative ways to relieve themselves, with some using their workplaces or schools as options. Unemployed individuals resort to a bucket system, depositing their waste into a stagnant and heavily contaminated river. Inadequate waste management by the municipality leads to some community members to discard their trash into the same polluted river. Moreover, conflicting community leadership adds confusion and division, hindering progress in addressing these challenges.

In the winter rainy season, because of where the settlement is situated, the entire community is often flooded forcing people to wear gum boots or waders in their homes which are little more than tin shacks constructed directly on the ground. The river and wetlands have significant environmental value as they support important ecosystems and form a natural flood plain. As a result, the area has become a contested space between human activity and the health of the natural environment. Creating spaces where there is harmony between the two is therefore critical for the healthy existence of both.

## Project context

EMG conducted an Agroecology workshop in April 2022, where community leaders in a small informal settlement were inspired to establish their own food garden. The workshop encouraged participants to identify assets within their community, fostering a sense of positivity and empowerment. This exercise enabled the participants to recognize the resources, skills, and talents available in their communities, serving as a foundation for future development. It also tapped into the traditional farming knowledge of the community reinforcing regenerative farming techniques inherent in the Agroecology approach.

The project in Burundi was initiated by three women: Ncebakazi Janda, Ziyanda Binase and Nosicelo Mabona after attending the Agroecology workshop conducted by EMG. It aims to promote sustainable practices and empower women within vulnerable communities. The project started with three women, but it has grown to include both men and women in a project

The Burundi agroecology planning workshop. Photo: EMG

consisting of 40 people, 60 percent of whom are women. This is testament to the leadership of these three women, to their innovation, and to the skills they have acquired through the project.

By collaborating with available allies within the community, the women were able to establish a thriving garden that has benefited not only themselves, but forty other individuals in the community directly involved in the project and even more who now have access to healthy food. The three women who spearheaded the initiative have become influential figures in the community, actively engaging in community leadership and effectively addressing local issues. Their ability to practically address the challenges they face in their area without relying solely on external support is commendable. They took the opportunity presented by the project and ran with it, displaying resilience and resourcefulness in utilizing the resources at their disposal to bring their ideas to life.

The project in Burundi utilizes a resolution-oriented approach, focusing on tangible and impactful solutions to challenges faced by the community. Moreover, resolution-oriented processes are not only empowering but also effective in addressing the practical needs of communities. In the case of the Burundi project, after establishing their community garden, the participants identified the need for improved access to fertile soil, healthy seeds, and resources such as manure and fencing. By identifying and actively working to address these challenges, the project not only enhanced food security in the community but also created economic opportunities for the community members involved.

Burundi at Igaleli Labafazi workshop in July 2022. Photo: EMG

Burundi at Igaleli Labafazi workshop in July 2022. Photo: EMG

*"We grow different crops throughout the seasons, including spring onions, lettuce, spinach, cabbages, potatoes, beetroot, carrots, green peppers and much more. We have already harvested and planted many more times. It has made a great difference in our community and impacted more lives. We sell in the community and generate profit from that, and we also give to those who do not have food. We also have soup kitchens on Wednesdays to feed the community. From the same profit generated we buy melie-meel and rice to add to the vegetables we feed the community with. Specifically, children without mothers are the ones who benefit most.*

*It makes us feel like we can stand as women without any dependency on men and it makes us feel proud of ourselves. Most of the time we feel men undermine the power of women, implementing our project made us know for sure that we can do anything a man can do.*

*No man wanted to join our project initially but once they saw our progress they started to join us. Most of the people in our project are women and when we initially approached men to join us they dismissed us. We didn't expand and go to other areas, we have kept our project in our community working with south African and foreign nationals living in our area, we did not want to work with people who have to commute."*

- Ncebakazi Janda

## Theory of change

At the heart of the project's theory of change is the belief that sustainable development can only be achieved by actively involving and empowering local communities. The project recognizes that addressing gender inequality and promoting sustainable development requires a theory of change that operates at the local level. While existing research acknowledges the importance of combined action to support vulnerable communities in adapting to climate change, many programs focus on a national level, overlooking local vulnerabilities and gender issues.

The project's theory of change emphasizes local-level leadership, strategies and engagement, gender-responsive approaches, and partnerships for resource mobilization and knowledge sharing. By working closely with community leaders, the project seeks to build trust, foster collaboration, and ensure that community members are active participants in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. It also facilitates access to sustainable techniques like Agroecology, builds on indigenous knowledge and makes use of indigenous flora and fauna in the farming process. Agroecology is also an important approach for water conservation and soil regeneration. This approach recognizes the agency and knowledge that local communities possess and leverages these strengths to create sustainable solutions.

Through partnerships with organizations such as the Mfuleni Informal Settlement Network and the Community Organization Resource Centre (CORC), the project mobilizes resources and expertise to support the community's initiatives. These partnerships not only provide access to essential resources like funding and technical support but also facilitate knowledge sharing and capacity building. By empowering local communities and fostering collaboration, the project aims to create lasting change that is owned and driven by the community itself and in harmony with the natural environment.

## Results

By challenging patriarchal norms, promoting inclusive participation, and fostering critical analysis and decision-making, this women-led project provides a safe and supportive environment for women's active engagement and leadership in Agroecology.

The project's resolution-oriented approach directly contributes to gender equality by actively involving women, youth, migrants, and LGBTIQA+ people within Burundi informal settlement. The project recognizes that gender inequality is deeply rooted in societal structures and norms, and it seeks to challenge and break these patterns. By promoting the active participation, engagement, and leadership of women, the project creates opportunities for them to exercise agency, build skills, and influence decision-making processes.

The project goes beyond minimum effort and aims to create meaningful, tangible change by providing a safe and supportive context where women can undertake critical analysis, exercise, and decision-making through implementing concrete actions. By enabling women to take on leadership roles, the project challenges traditional power dynamics and fosters a more equitable distribution of power and resources. Moreover, the project's inclusive approach ensures that the experiences and perspectives of diverse groups are recognized and valued, contributing to a more inclusive and just society.

## Key take aways

The project challenges existing power imbalances and ensures that diverse voices are heard and valued. Through its focus on tangible, environmentally sustainable solutions and partnerships, the project

addresses practical challenges faced by the community, such as unemployment, food security, access to resources and markets, degradation of the natural environment. However, ongoing efforts are needed to overcome remaining challenges, such as attaining manure, improving water access, and finding food markets for distribution.

The project in Burundi serves as an inspiring example of how a resolution-oriented approach can contribute to gender equality and sustainable development. By empowering women and engaging local communities, the project lays the foundation for long-term positive change, fostering resilience, enhancing the well-being of vulnerable communities and building a harmonious relationship between themselves and nature. As similar initiatives continue to evolve and expand, they have the potential to create a more inclusive and sustainable future for all.

# Renewable energy access – The Sustainable Energy Livelihood Project

**SDG:** 7 and SDG 5
**Organisation:** Earthlife Africa (ELA)
**Location:** Johannesburg

This case highlights the Sustainable Energy Livelihood Project (SELP) run by Earthlife. Within SELP, pilot projects were carried out in different communities to showcase the many benefits of solar home systems and to educate, engage and create bottom-up demand for renewable energy. This has resulted in a positive attitude towards solar energy and a deeper understanding for energy and climate change in communities. Furthermore, it creates increased pressure towards politicians to tackle the energy and climate crises and means that citizens to a higher degree utilise their democratic rights.

## Background

Since 2009, ELA is facilitating a Women Energy and Climate Change forum (WECCF). The platform provides a space for women to discuss the issues of energy generation, energy access, energy poverty, climate change and its impact and effects on women. It focuses on mobilisation and advocacy for a Just Transition to a low carbon economy.

The forum comprises of women from different community-based organisations (CBOs) in Gauteng Johannesburg from different townships and informal settlements. The county's climate and energy context reflect and perpetuates South Africa's persistent poverty and growing inequality. The poorest households in South Africa live on small-scale farms or manage small household gardens to be able to eat with their families. The people living in poverty are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Many women, especially in rural areas, are dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods, to which climate change is a constant threat. Therefore, it is important that women become key players in the climate adaptation activities of the communities.

The Just Transition and its 'green' jobs are often gender-blind, mainly focuses on male-dominated sectors and women are often excluded from initiatives related to renewable energy. ELA has taken steps to make sure that women are not left behind in the Just Transition, and that they receive capacity training to be able to work in the renewable energy sector and meaningfully participate in relevant decision-making processes related to renewable energy.

## Project context

The Sustainable Energy Livelihood Project (SELP) was launched in March 2014. The aim of the project is to showcase the many benefits of renewable energy and especially to empower women with knowledge and the skills to tackle the effects of climate

change. During the project formation, women received capacity building in various fields including the installation of the solar technology and its functionalities; other women were trained on how to run and maintain biogas digesters to produce clean gas for schools to use for cooking and some women were trained in sustainable agriculture, using water saving methods. Since the project is based in schools and environmental issues is compulsory to include in all learning areas, women were also skilled on how to link the project into the school curriculum to encourage climate change learning in schools. Women are the largest and the most affected group in the population of South Africa, yet they are lagging behind on energy and climate change learning and are also excluded in most decision-making spaces. The project was spearheaded by a group of women selected from a Women in Energy and Climate Change forum, which consist of women activists coming from various grass roots CBOs in Gauteng. This approach created a space which enabled women to be at the centre of decision-making process to eradicate energy poverty, climate mitigation and adaptation.

The project included a food garden, rainwater harvesting and plant and animal waste into energy (natural gas) for space heating, cooking, and lighting. This provided the female-led households with safe and clean energy supply and improved resilience towards the effects of climate change. The project brought together different stakeholders from community members, local schools, and government officials around issues of renewable energy and food security. It was launched in four Metro Municipalities: Ekurhuleni, Mogale City, City of Johannesburg, and Emfuleni District around Gauteng.

One part of the project focused on energy access in schools. Schools in Johannesburg receive high electricity and water bills and spend a lot of money on LPG to meet the fuel needs for cooking. Women from the WECCF assisted in choosing schools where solar panels and a biogas digester should be installed and were given the responsibility to monitor the projects in their respective communities.

The main risk identified for this project is related to theft of the solar panels and the organisation is reviewing how to mitigate this risk. Another important aspect of the viability of the projects is access to a garden or green spaces, which are often limited in townships.

Training on the methods used for gardening at Mphethuto Primary school, Magaliesburg. Photo: Earthlife Africa

Solar panels at Khangezile Primary School, KwaThema Springs. Photo: Earthlife Africa

## Results

The project has had a positive impact on the communities and has mitigated issues around energy poverty and climate change, hunger and nutrition while fostering small businesses and cooperative income.

The schools are saving money on electricity and water bills and now have reliable and sustainable energy supply. The project gave the schools an opportunity to become environmentally friendly by integrating the action projects with the everyday learning of the school curriculum. It has made students conscious of the environment and to even celebrate the environmental days in their school calendar. Renewable energy and reducing water consumption was included in classes on natural sciences, physical sciences, and geography. This has helped students to learn about clean and reliable energy sources that does not negatively affect the environment as well as sustainable use of resources and the water cycle and its role in the ecosystem for human survival.

The communities can see that renewable energy works. There was skills development and community members were trained to install solar panels, allowing for a transition to green jobs that will be essential for the low carbon economy.

Communities managed to establish the environmental cooperatives where there was income generation from selling the vegetables from the gardens and the school. The food garden also helped the feeding schemes from the communities. The project is essential in building climate resilience and strong networks in the communities.

In setting up these renewable energy technologies women were trained to manage and maintain the renewable energy technologies and eventually take ownership of the sites. The project was meant to be a pilot project that provides the communities the basis from which to feed their climate change adaptation experience into governments long term adaptation strategies and policies. Women are a central point of contact for this project, as they are currently in charge in ensuring that the project continue to benefit the school and is used as a learning and practical tool to empower the society.

Training of new champions to manage and maintain the biogas digester at Khangezile Primary School, KwaThema Springs. Photo: Earthlife Africa

## What lies ahead?

ELA is continuing the installation of solar panels in other areas outside of Gauteng. The identified sites are Musina Makhado and Lephalale in Limpopo Province and the Eastern Cape Province. The project has now evolved from the installations at schools to households after ELA strategically reviewed how the project can continue its impacts while lowering risks (especially related to the security of the renewable energy technologies). Another reason why the project is now focusing on implementation at household level is to showcase how families and households can access energy through renewable technologies.

# Climate action and activism support – The Rights and Remedies School

**Overarching SDG:** 16
**Organization:** The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER)

The annual Rights and Remedies School hosted by the CER capacitates activists from around South Africa with legal tools that they can use to address some of the environmental grievances that they experience in their own communities. The school has since extended the scope of the training to go beyond legal teachings, now incorporating gender sessions to encourage an enabling and inclusive environmental justice space. The course also prioritizes the participation of women by applying affirmative action. This is to address the issue of representation and suppression of women's voices.

This case presents the stories of three women who have undergone the Rights and Remedies training and the work they are doing in their communities. These women are making strides in their communities, against environmental and societal conditions that are very unkind to women. In different ways, their work highlights intricate connections between gender justice and climate justice as well as obstacles women face when engaging in climate action.

## Nomfundo Mkhaba – Waste for Change

**SDG:** 12
**Thematic area:** Waste management
**Location:** Durban, South Africa

### Background

Nomfundo Mkhaba is the co-founder of a non-profit organisation, Waste for Change, a women-led organisation that advocates for the realization of environmental rights through the collection of waste, in Durban, South Africa. After attending the Rights and Remedies course, Nomfundo decided to register Waste for Change as a way of trying to assist her community with the unregulated dumping of waste within her neighbourhood.

### Project context and results

According to a 2018 report by the South African Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, only 10 percent of waste is recycled. The remaining estimated 98 million tons is deposited into landfill sites each year.[10] The volume of waste is expected to reach unsustainable levels in the

10. Department of Environmental Affairs (2018). South Africa State of Waste – a report on the state of the environment. Department of Environmental Affairs, South Africa. https://soer.environment.gov.za/soer/UploadLibraryImages/UploadDocuments/141119143510_state%20of%20Waste%20Report_2018.pdf

near future, with landfills for the country's large municipalities being projected to be full before 2025.

Photo: LAC

The objective of Waste for Change is to identify illegal dumping sites, collect waste, sort it into different categories, and sell it to various outlets to create revenue. Not only does this initiative keep the environment clean, it also creates job opportunities for a majority of the women who participate in the pick-ups. Additionally, Waste for Change aims to minimize the waste that goes into the Durban land-fill sites. There is a concerning waste problem in South Africa and it is organisations like Waste for Change that contribute to providing solutions to the imminent danger.

Waste for Change specifically targets working with unemployed women for the collection of the waste from illegal dump sites. During COVID19 many women lost their jobs and Nomfundo's organisation was able to work with some of these women, providing them with some income that enabled them to continue providing for their families. With the high unemployment rate in South Africa, Waste for Change is helping to feed some families. In addition to collecting waste, Nomfundo's organisation has grown and also offers environmental and climate education and awareness programmes for communities. These programmes capacitate communities with knowledge about the preservation of the environment and their environmental rights. The climate awareness programme aims to develop the communities understanding about climate change and the current crisis. Climate awareness is particularly important as most vulnerable communities are usually excluded from the climate discussions, with language that is often too technical and inaccessible to ordinary individuals.

Being a women-led organisation, Nomfundo says that one of the challenges they experience is not being taken seriously when engaging with traditional leadership because in most rural communities, serious matters are only discussed by the men. Women are expected to listen and take direction from the men. Nomfundo has to navigate these dynamics all the time. Furthermore, the picking and sorting of waste sometimes includes operating heavy machinery, it is therefore quite a male dominated space. Waste for Change challenges this narrative by ensuring that they provide women with opportunities that go beyond the usual expectations. The waste programme being promoted by Nomfundo's organisation is a progressive project that prioritises women and that creates some form of income.

The project is creating economic opportunities while also preserving the environment and providing some relief on the filling up of landfill sites. Gender equality is one of the organisation's core values and there is a very intentional women focus in the implementation of the project. Nomfundo hopes that the organisation can one day have sufficient resources to create more sustainable job opportunities for vulnerable community members. The organisation also hopes to establish childcare facilities for women working with waste. This is another challenge that the organisation has identified – women are forced to work with their children since they have no one else to help with looking after them while they go to work. This obviously poses a risk to the children and inevitably limits the women's ability to fully focus at work.

Photo: LAC

## Nelly Nkosi, Khuthala Environmental Care Group Mpumalanga

**SDG:** 11 Thematic area: Redeveloping of an abandoned mine
**Location:** Wesselton

### Background

Nelly Nkosi is an environmental activist from an organisation called the Khuthala Environmental Care Group (Khuthala) in Mpumalanga, South Africa. Nelly's community, Wesselton, is surrounded by abandoned mines which have devastating impacts on the environment and the people of Wesselton. As a result of the abandoned mines, there are a number of dangerous open-pits that have caused the loss of many lives and livestock over the years. Other impacts include contaminated water, air pollution and the mine area is also increasingly becoming a crime hotspot, with people being robbed and women being raped.

### Project context and results

Khuthala's main function is to facilitate the rehabilitation of the abandoned mines in the community of Wesselton. They are doing this by engaging with all the relevant stakeholders, particularly the department of Mineral Resources and Energy. They have also taken it upon themselves to repurpose some of the degraded land into something usable and that serves the community. The organisation decided to establish the Khuthala Women's Movement, led by Nelly.

The purpose of the Women's Movement is to address some of the issues that are faced by women as a result of the abandoned mines and to create job creation opportunities for women by creating programmes that empower and capacitate them with different skills. Khuthala and the Women's Movement were able to transform an area that was once a dumping site into a park (Khuthala park) that is appreciated by many members of the community, especially children, as it serves as a recreational space. Khuthala also uses the space as their office and for food gardening operated

by the Women's Movement. The harvest from the garden is either sold or used in the catering business run by the women. The Women's Movement also started a soap making project, which includes making the soap from scratch, wrapping and designing of the packaging. Although this project is still very new and requiring resources and financial support, it shows the women's innovation and determination to develop and harness skills that can give them an income for themselves.

Khuthala and the Women's Movement recognise that there is a high unemployment rate in South Africa and that it is the women who often carry the burden that comes with poverty in their households. The organisation is therefore trying to alleviate reliance on government for job opportunities. They are also using their environment, as degraded as it might be, to create these opportunities instead of waiting for the government to finally fulfil their duties towards the community of Wesselton. Khuthala wants to ensure that they do not leave women behind in their push for social and economic relief.

Lastly, the Women's Movement started an initiative called "operation start them young". This initiative is focused on empowering young people with knowledge on the environment, including climate change. Nelly and other members of Khuthala educate school children every Friday on the environment, basic environmental rights, and climate change. The school children are also then encouraged to participate in the food gardening activities to allow them to appreciate the different ways in which they can utilise the environment. Operation starts them young was initiated based on the reality that many people, especially from disadvantaged and rural areas do not have the necessary knowledge on the environment and what they can do if their rights are violated hence corporations are able to take advantage of these communities. Khuthala understands that young people will have to live and raise their children in the environment that they are trying to protect and therefore it is important to pass on the knowledge and skills onto these young people for the benefit of present and future generations of Khuthala.

Photo: CER

## Christina Mdau, Defenders for Environment and Human Rights Violations

**SDGs:** 11
**Thematic area:** Mining
**Location:** North West, South Africa

### Background

Christina Mdau is an environmental activist from a community called Maditlokwe in Northwest, South Africa. Christina and her community, have, for many years had to endure unconducive and sometimes life-threatening conditions caused by a neighbouring mine. Ten years ago, Christina was moved from her home that she lived in her whole life, to make way for the mine. The mine moved Christina and many other people into small tin houses, with no basic services. People's graves were excavated by the mine and moved into a wetland, resulting in some of the graves sinking.

In addition to this intrusive act by the mine, the mine is continuously encroaching on the land they moved Christina and many others into, resulting in some households lying just about one hundred meters away from the mining operations. The mine carries out blasting operations that are so strong they can easily collapse people's houses. Many houses in Maditlokwe are cracked and therefore pose a significant risk for families. The dust from the blasting operations can be found in every corner of people's houses, making it a domestic nightmare for many of the women in the community. The health issues caused by the dust and constant trembles are a sad reality for the community of Maditlokwe. People suffer from respiratory illnesses, epileptic seizures, miscarriages, and many other health issues caused by the mining and blasting operations.

Christina has for many years been trying to get justice for her community by engaging with the mine itself, government and other relevant stakeholders. However, her attempts have been unsuccessful. Christina has unfortunately faced threats and intimidation from some community members who have alliances with the mine. The intimidation did not stop Christina from trying to get the mine to do the right thing.

### Project context and results

After attending the Rights and Remedies School, Christina decided to register her own organisation called the Defenders for Environment and Human Rights Violations in Africa (DEHRVA). DERVHA is intended to strategically address the environmental impacts in Maditlokwe, but also create opportunities for the community of Maditlokwe that will develop their skills.

DEHRVA is still very new but they plan to make sure that they hold the mine accountable for non-compliance in a way that shows that they are willing to co-exist with the mine as long as they comply with the law and their environmental obligations. Christina realised that some members of the community work for the mine, which means that the way they engage with the mine and government needs to be cognisant of the interests of all members of the community.

The organisation does not only want to focus on compliance monitoring and enforcement of the mine, but they want to develop empowering and uplifting programmes for the community, especially for women. As a mining affected community, many people rely on the mine for jobs, however Christina's organisation wants to educate the community on alternative opportunities for the community. The organisation has identified agriculture as one of the programmes they would like to develop as many of the community members were farmers before they were moved from their homes to Maditlokwe.

Christina and her organisation are engaging the department of agriculture to find a way of collaborating with this department in the implementation of the agricultural programme. Christina's organisation also has paralegals, where they try to assist community members with human rights issues. They have assisted many community members with getting identity documentation (IDs). IDs allow members to apply for jobs and social grants to better their lives.

The organisation is looking to expand by including a programme called, 'Dream Catchers Programme' which focuses on children and includes introducing kids to non-mining related jobs, exposing the young to life outside the mine, empowers and educates boys and girls and organises environmental camps for them to experience and appreciate nature.

## What lies ahead?

The Centre for Environmental Rights intends to continue the Rights & Remedies course as it has shown effectiveness in enhancing agency in communities affected by polluting industries. Through the Rights & Remedies course, we are contributing to an activist-led network that offers continuous support and mentoring to everyone who attends the course.

Photo: Daylin Paul for CER

# Summary and recommendations

# 3

The cases presented in this report show that many societal challenges are interlinked and that a holistic approach must be applied to the struggle for a Just Transition. As demonstrated in the cases, racist and patriarchal power structures and inequalities make Black women in South Africa particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. This highlights why an intersectional gender perspective cannot be an afterthought or an add-on but must be integrated into the development and implementation of projects, and investments related to the energy and climate transition from the very start.

These cases demonstrate that women are not merely disproportionately affected by climate change but are also active agents of change in the Just Transition. We believe that through sharing lived experiences of women environmental defenders and women who are championing the Just Transition through locally led initiatives, we can amplify their voices. In groundWorks' case, women from the Highveld emerge as champions of the Just Transition, advocating for the constitutional rights of all. These cases also highlight the importance of bottom-up solutions that showcase the feasibility of climate solutions. In EMG's case, the project initiated by Ncebakazi, Ziyanda and Nosicelo show how resolutions that resonate with local communities helps build resilience and engagement over time. Earthlife's case demonstrates how support and advocacy for solar energy grows when it is initiated and managed by members in local communities, and the positive effects of women's skills development in the renewable energy space.

Furthermore, the cases show the vital role civil society plays in enabling these types of projects when governments do not live up to their responsibilities. This is highlighted in CER's case, where Waste for Change and the Khutala Women's Movement are creating green job opportunities for women, when the South African government has failed to do so. While these types of locally led initiatives have proven to create positive impact in communities affected by climate change, it is often challenging to access financing to continue or scale-up these initiatives.

The collaborative effort of writing this report provided a learning experience for the participating organisations. The process shed light on our current initiatives, inspired us by showcasing the work of other organisations, and encouraged us to adopt a more intentional approach moving forward. We believe that a crucial next step is for us as environmental organisations to collaborate closely with the gender justice movement to further advance this work. One of our main takeaways is that starting somewhere is essential; learning and understanding will unfold along the way. We hope this can serve as inspiration for other environmental and gender justice organisations to take on the nexus of climate and gender justice.

Another insight while writing the report was the discussions and precautions we had to consider regarding whether to anonymize the women and communities reflected in this report. This highlights a significant societal failure and the daily dangers faced by women, and especially women environmental defenders.

We believe that the cases presented and the process of compiling this report provides valuable insights for both civil society actors and policymakers. Drawing upon the findings presented herein, we propose the following recommendations for policy makers and Civil Society Organisations, respectively:

## Recommendations for policy makers

- Climate finance and development aid should to a larger degree be locally led. A larger share of climate finance must reach local civil society organisations and women led organisations and groups.
- Development aid, foreign policy and public and private investments focused on the energy and climate transitions should incorporate an intersectional gender perspective.
- Climate and energy policy should include a user experience and be based on marginalised groups and their needs - e.g. the incorporation of women's needs for energy.
- Environmental defenders are vulnerable to attacks and intimidation in their communities. A model law for protection of environmental defenders should be supported, as well as engagement by the Police and Justice departments when complaints are recorded. Sensitivity to gender is needed in these cases.

## Recommendations for Civil Society Organisations

- Make sure to use an intersectional gender lens when developing projects and activities so the knowledge, experience and voices of all affected groups are heard and acknowledged.
- Women are at the forefront of the climate struggle and must be provided with the support and opportunities to work as change makers and for meaningful participation in relevant decision-making spaces.
- Create opportunities to discuss, learn and collaborate across the divide between gender justice organisations and climate and environmental organisations.
- Be intentional about inclusivity and make sure trainings, spaces for debate and decision making are available to women and other groups that have historically been excluded from these.

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