



ground**Work**

PEOPLE'S HEARING



Stories from the frontlines

Cover: Ntombifuthi Ngwenya
from Sukumani Environmental
Justice in Newcastle gives
testimony at the Human Rights
Defenders People's Hearing.
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Transition Network

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Established in 1999, groundWork Friends of the Earth South Africa is a principles driven non-profit environmental justice organisation working towards a just transition and open democracy in South Africa and beyond. Its vision is that **people live well with each other and with the earth**. To realise this vision, groundWork partners with affected communities to resist dirty energy and toxic production, building solidarity and local alliances that advocate for open debate and democratic control over resources such as energy, waste and health towards a viable future.

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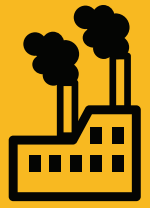
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From the Smoke Stack

by groundWork Executive Director, Bobby Peek



November marked the 30th Anniversary of the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa – along with his eight colleagues Baribor Bera, Saturday Dobe, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbokoo, Barinem Kiobel, John Kpuinen, Paul Levura and Felix Nuate – by the state of Nigeria for campaigning against the devastation of the Niger Delta by oil companies, especially Shell. They represented the “Movement for Survival of the Ogoni Peoples”. They paid the ultimate price for their fight for climate justice and a transition away from the devastation brought upon their neighbourhoods by multinational corporations that collude with the political elite for the extraction of fossil fuels.

The pain of people having to die for their stand against corporates and the political elite was all so evident on the 5th anniversary of the assassination of [Fikile Ntshangase](#), when the Life after Coal (LAC) campaign, a coalition of Earthlife Africa, groundWork and Centre for Environmental Rights (CER), held the [People’s Hearing for Human Rights Defenders](#) on 22 October 2025 at the Women’s Jail, Constitution Hill, Johannesburg.

The hearings provided a platform for community leaders and activists to share testimony on their lived experiences and expose the growing climate of violence they face when they stand up to mining corporations and state interests that violate their rights. The pain of the Ogoni is found in many places across the world, and indeed on our doorstep.

Across the Atlantic, just a few degrees latitude south of the equator, lies a town called Belem. Six degrees separates Belem from Ogoniland and the Niger Delta. In Belem governments gathered – with corporate lobbyists – to negotiate ongoing climate destruction. No, people, you have read me right: not

climate justice. During the 30 years since the murder of the Ogoni Nine, who were demanding climate action by challenging Shell’s practices of fossil fuel extraction, extraction increased and with it climate destruction. Talking about degrees, Africa is destined to be 6°C warmer by 2100.

Sir David King, a prominent climate scientist and former UK government chief scientific adviser, warns that the world has already failed to stay within the 1.5°C global warming limit and is currently on a trajectory to overshoot this target significantly. He stresses that the consequences of this overshoot will be dire and potentially irreversible. “We passed the 1.5°C climate threshold. We must now explore extreme options.” He warns that we must reduce, repair, remove and build resilience.

But how can we do this when governments give corporates free reign? When corporates such as Sasol, the SA apartheid state oil company, seeks to not meet the law that was democratically created to protect people from pollution? When Shell is allowed to sell its rotting refinery that has polluted children for a mere \$0.06 – yes 6 US cents? Who cleans it up? Who deals with the toxic pollution? Who deals with the polluted underground water? We, the very same people who paid for Shell’s profits with our health. Shell benefited from the apartheid system to pollute us, resulting in illnesses and death, and now our democracy says we have to pay with tax payers’ money for the clean-up of Shell’s toxic mess. Thanks, Minister Mantashe!

The power of corporates is immense. As Sasol shows when they spin words (some people will call it lying) so that “public record” means hiding behind the painful process of the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), which has been used by nearly all corporates in South Africa to hide information from



the public. In Belem, corporates like Sasol rule inside the negotiations.

But resistance, despite the immense counter-power, continues. And people are victorious – from Coverden in Guyana, where a judge **quashed** an oil and gas waste facility permit, to the Supreme Court of Appeal in South Africa, where Eskom’s environmental authorisation for a 3 000MW gas power plant in Richards Bay was **overturned**, in a ruling that public consultation was inadequate and climate impacts were not properly assessed. Critically, climate impacts are now common parlance in judgments. Thanks to Earthlife Africa and the Centre for Environmental Rights’ challenge against **Thabametsi**.

In Belem, there is a counterforce. A challenge that presents solutions to the climate challenges. The solutions lie not only on a technological fix – corporates and government will want us to think so – but in people mobilising on the solutions such as the organic waste management in cities such as Durban, Accra and Dar es Salaam. This, according to Sir King, has the potential to drop temperatures by 0.3°C should methane emissions be managed and stopped.

These solutions – proposed by people, worked out by people on the ground – can and will save us. In Belem, people gather outside at the **People’s Summit** towards CoP 30 with solutions and are building democratic praxis. On this journey, people are fighting and calling for a just transition to a world there is a “just, popular and inclusive transition, with dignified and decent work, where the economy is not for the few, but for all peoples”. Just transition is a process of building power from below.

Talking about building, 2025 has been a year of building towards consolidation for groundWork. It has been a tough year, as global funding has shrunk for reasons of the politics of right-wing populism and increased military spending by many countries, limiting money to support work on restorative justice.

This is something the **Just Transition Open Agenda** has picked up on its second edition of the agenda, which went live in October before the CoP jamboree. Here we posit that a just transition needs a society built on peace, safety and demilitarisation.

In this crisis we have learnt that, as movements and civil society organisations, we have to work closer to ensure that the critical work we are doing continues, even in these tough global times. It is exactly now that we need each other. It is through long-term relationships – such as we have with the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), which celebrated 30 years of mobilising for environmental justice in November, and Abahlali, which celebrated 20 years of movement-building in October – that change has its roots. Congratulations to the very many people who are part of these movements.

In the last three months (and a bit) we hosted South Africa’s first Socially Owned Renewable Energy (SORE) gathering, a just transition learning exchange that pulled together organisations to remind ourselves that hazardous waste is still a crisis in South Africa, and held our Global Green and Healthy Hospital learning exchange. As always, we have been busy.

Before I say goodbye, a big shout out to our first partners in crime, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, which celebrated 30 years of mobilising in November, Abahlali baseMjondolo 20 years in October, and Green Connection, which celebrates 25 years in November. *A luta continua!*

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our board for supporting us. To the many new staffers who have joined groundWork, I hope that this is your home and family for a while. Please do not pass through too rapidly. And finally, thank you to the very many community people and organisations who trust us.

Have a peaceful break and enjoy family and friends. ☺



People's Hearing on Human Rights Defenders

by Sifiso Dladla

On 22 October 2025, community delegations from across South Africa gathered to give testimony, bear witness and seek justice at the People's Hearing for Human Rights Defenders. The hearing was hosted by Life After Coal's Defend our Defenders Campaign in the Women's Jail at Constitution Hill. The event brought together movements from mining-affected and marginalised communities – including Abahlali baseMjondolo, the Amadiba Crisis Committee, Sukumani Environmental Justice, the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation (MCEJO) and the Melmoth community – to share harrowing testimonies of intimidation, violence and systemic neglect. The purpose of the hearing was not only to document these violations but also to shape the foundation of a model law for the protection of human rights defenders, which will be submitted to parliament for consideration.

Voices from the frontlines

The testimonies painted a vivid picture of the ongoing struggles faced by community activists who defend their land, homes, livelihoods, health and environment against powerful interests. Members of Abahlali baseMjondolo, the shack dwellers' movement, spoke of continuous threats, arrests and assassinations, targeting those who organise for housing rights and dignity. Their testimony underscored that democracy remains incomplete when the poor are punished for demanding basic rights and justice.

From the Amadiba Crisis Committee in the Eastern Cape, activists described a long battle against mining projects that threaten the Wild Coast's fragile environment and communal land systems. They recalled the 2016 assassination of their chairperson, Sikhosiphi "Bazooka" Radebe, whose killers have yet to be brought to justice. The community's testimony highlighted the failure of state institutions to protect defenders and the need for a legal framework that compels accountability.

Sukumani Environmental Justice and MCEJO, both from KwaZulu-Natal, presented evidence of how mining and industrial pollution continue to harm rural livelihoods and women-led households. Community representatives described how those who speak out against environmental destruction face harassment, surveillance and exclusion from public consultation processes. They called for legal mechanisms ensuring free, prior and informed consent and stronger protection against corporate retaliation.

The Melmoth community in the north of KwaZulu-Natal was represented by Rev Mbekiseni Mavuso, who has been in and out of hiding due to threats to his life. He painted a clear picture of how difficult life has been for those who stand up for their right to say no to mining in their area.



Mary de Haas - Jurist at the People's Hearing for HRDs. Photo Credit: Chris Louw



People spoke of how companies exploit poverty and unemployment to buy support, while activists opposing mining face smear campaigns and threats. Their testimony emphasised the urgent need for government to recognise environmental defenders as essential partners in achieving sustainable development, not as adversaries. Both Mavuso and Sibusiso Zikode, the president of Abahlali baseMjondolo, were recently honoured in citations from the South African Human Rights Commission for their role in the protection and promotion of human rights.

A space to be heard

The objective of the hearing was to provide a platform for voices from directly affected communities, and raise public awareness about shrinking civic space and the human cost of environmental and social justice activism. It sought to strengthen advocacy to push policymakers, Chapter 9 institutions and relevant state bodies for stronger legislative safeguards and more responsive protection measures that will:

- Put into the public discourse the negative impact of gross violations of human rights of activists, and of the threats being made against them by private, state and public groups and individuals, and to confront them.
- Demonstrate how widespread this issue is and how it has impacted families, communities and society at large.
- Build alliances with Chapter 9 institutions and relevant government departments to ensure legislative safeguards for human rights activists to be protected as they continue with their activism.
- Agitate for more responsive police protection, speedy prosecution of suspects connected to threats and killings of human rights defenders.

The hearing will produce a report that will be used as an advocating and mobilising tool to agitate for better safeguards for human rights defenders and advocate for model law that will ensure the protection of human rights defenders.

Presiding over the hearing were three distinguished jurists: Louisa Zondo, a human rights lawyer and advocate for social transformation; Commissioner Tsepo Madlingozi of the South African Human

Rights Commission; and Dr. Mary de Haas, renowned anthropologist and long-time defender of community rights and safety. Together, they listened to and reflected on the deep structural failures that allow human rights violations to persist in South Africa's extractive and developmental sectors.

In their closing remarks, Louisa Zondo emphasised that the courage of grassroots defenders "is the moral backbone of our democracy". She urged parliament to adopt legislation that offers tangible protection for those who challenge exploitation and corruption.

Commissioner Madlingozi highlighted the need for a people-centred approach to human rights law that bridges the gap between formal legal guarantees and the lived realities of marginalised citizens.

Dr. de Haas stressed the importance of accountability within law enforcement, noting that police complicity in intimidation and violence against defenders must be confronted through independent oversight.

Towards a Model Law

The People's Hearing concluded with a collective commitment to develop model law on the protection of human rights defenders in South Africa. The proposed law will aim to:

- Recognise and legally define human rights defenders in line with international standards.
- Establish preventive and protective mechanisms, including rapid response units and safe reporting channels.
- Ensure accountability for threats, attacks and killings of defenders.
- Mandate state institutions to engage meaningfully with communities on development and environmental decisions.
- Guarantee access to justice and legal aid for defenders facing criminalisation.

As the day closed, participants reflected on the enduring power of solidarity. Despite the grief, fear and loss carried by many defenders, their voices resonated with determination. The People's Hearing marked a significant step toward transforming pain into policy, ensuring that those who defend life, land and liberty are themselves defended by the law. 🌞



No to Corporate Impunity!

by Jabulani Sithole

Human rights defenders speak out

The recently held **People's Hearing** for Human Rights Defenders exposed the painful and horrific realities confronting environmental and human rights defenders across South Africa's extractive mining and fossil fuel frontlines.

Activists described how they continue to live in fear – harassed, threatened and in some cases killed for resisting the expansion of destructive mining and fossil fuel projects that threaten their land, heritage and environment.

Representatives from the Melmoth Community, Amadiba Crisis Committee, Abahlali baseMjondolo, Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation (MCEJO), and Sukumani Environmental Justice (SEJ) shared stories of their lived experiences and called for an end to corporate impunity, the culture of lawlessness that shields mining corporations and their allies from accountability for human rights violations.

The hearing, hosted by the Life After Coal Campaign, a joint initiative of Earthlife Africa, the Centre for Environmental Rights and groundWork, marked five years since the murder of anti-mining activist Fikile Ntshangase. Ntshangase, a respected community leader and member of MCEJO, was gunned down in her home on 22 October 2020, after opposing the expansion of the Tendele Coal Mine in KwaZulu-Natal.

Five years later, no one has been arrested for her murder, despite public outcry and sustained calls from her family, civil society organisations and environmental justice networks demanding answers through protests, and the delivery of memoranda to the police station in Mtubatuba, SAPs Headquarters in Pretoria and to the Presidency at the Union Buildings.

The lack of justice for Ntshangase reflects a broader pattern of impunity that allows the intimidation, criminalisation and killing of activists to continue unchecked.

“Murders of human rights defenders are often preceded by threats, direct or indirect, which are meant to intimidate activists and silence them,” said Bobby Peek, Executive Director of groundWork. “These threats are part of a deliberate strategy to suppress those who dare to protect their environment.”

The People's Hearing jury, chaired by Louisa Zondo, joined by Mary de Haas and Tshepo Madlingozi, listened to testimonies that revealed a deeply entrenched system of collusion between mining corporations, local authorities and state institutions.

“Across the board, the right to dignity and life, to social, economic, environmental and cultural rights and communities' rights are violated with impunity,” said Zondo. “Mining companies, police, municipalities and even some traditional leaders are complicit in dispossessing people of their land in the name of profit.”

This culture of impunity has devastating effects on rural communities where mining projects are expanding. Many defenders live under constant surveillance and intimidation, with companies often deploying private security, local enforcers or legal tactics to silence dissent.

For members of MCEJO, the pain remains raw. Their struggle to protect their land and environment from the Tendele Coal Mine continues amid threats, intimidation and attempts on their lives.

“We continue to fight for our land and our rights against powerful mining interests that prioritise profit over people's lives and the environment,” said Israel Nkosi of MCEJO. “The intimidation is meant to break our spirit, but we refuse to surrender.”

From the Eastern Cape, Cromwell Sonjika of the Amadiba Crisis Committee (ACC) echoed similar concerns. His community, too, has faced relentless harassment for opposing titanium mining in Xolobeni.

“Those who harass and kill us walk free. The people who planned and carried out the murder of our leader, Sikhosiphi ‘Bazooka’ Rhadebe, are still free.



No arrests have ever been made,” said Sonjika. “We live with the pain of knowing that our lives don’t seem to matter to the state.”

A new and disturbing trend in corporate repression is the weaponisation of the law. Instead of bullets, mining companies are increasingly turning to court interdicts and SLAPP (Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation) suits to silence activists and drain their resources.

Communities from MCEJO, Melmoth, Amadiba and Abahlali baseMjondolo have all faced legal intimidation for speaking out. In one recent case, MSI Empire Group’s Gardinial Coal (Pty) Ltd took Sukumani Environmental Justice (SEJ) to court after a peaceful community protest in Newcastle on 1 September 2025.

Despite SEJ’s repeated efforts to engage the company on environmental and livelihood concerns, Gardinial Coal responded with a court interdict, naming Thoko Nkosi and several community members as respondents, along with the provincial and district police commissioners and the local station commander.

“We protested peacefully because our land and water are being destroyed,” said a member of SEJ. “Instead of listening, they dragged us to court. It’s another way to silence us.”

This use of the courts as a tool of intimidation, commonly referred to as lawfare, through SLAPP suits and interdicts has become a powerful weapon in the hands of corporations seeking to suppress public participation and dissent.

Professor Tshepo Madlingozi, Human Rights Commissioner, described corporate impunity as being rooted in a distorted concept of development that values extraction of minerals for profit over people and the planet.

“The idea of development in this country is built on extraction of minerals, of land, of people’s dignity,” said Madlingozi. “True development should be about restoring balance, living in harmony with nature, and ensuring communities thrive alongside the environment, not against it.”

Madlingozi added that the state’s complicity in corporate violence is often visible through government and traditional leaders who enable destructive projects

by granting licenses and turning a blind eye to human rights abuses.

“Municipalities, government departments and traditional authorities often side with corporations, granting them the freedom to act violently against anyone who resists,” he said.

The struggle of South African defenders echoes a global pattern of threats and attacks on those who protect land, water and communities. Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, has repeatedly warned of this global crisis.

In her 2021 report, Lawlor noted: “Human rights defenders working on environmental issues appear to be particularly vulnerable to attack. They include those protesting land grabs or opposing government-backed business projects imposed without free, prior and informed consent.”

She urged states and corporations alike to take responsibility. “Human rights defenders are calling for the change; we need a shift towards respect, protection and the realisation of all human rights for all.”

As the People’s Hearing concluded, one message was clear: enough is enough. Communities on the frontlines of extractive industries are demanding justice, accountability and genuine protection from violence.

The activists called on the South African government to end the culture of impunity by ensuring independent investigations and prosecutions for attacks on human rights defenders and environmental justice activists.

They called for specific law that protects human rights defenders: for putting a stop to the abuse of courts to silence activists and communities while enforcing corporate accountability in line with international human rights standards.

Despite the fear and trauma, South Africa’s defenders remain resolute. Their courage and persistence continue to inspire movements across the country and beyond. “They may threaten us, sue us, or even kill us,” said activist Israel Nkosi quietly, as the hearing ended, “but they will never silence our love for the land and our people.” ☺

Jabulani Sithole is the Communications Coordinator for the Life After Coal Campaign.





HRD People's Hearing jurists, Tshepo Madlingozi, Lousa Zondo, Mary de Haas, and their support person Nqobile Ranela. Photo: Chris Louw



Community members make hand prints with HRD solidarity messages on a banner at the people's hearing at Constitution Hill. Photo: Chris Louw.





Top Left: Participants receive publications at registration for the people's hearings.
 Top Right: Trumpeter Mandla Mlangeni performs at the end of the People's Hearing for HRDs
 Bottom: Community participants sing struggle songs in solidarity. Photos: Chris Louw



Mobile Storytelling Workshop

by Sithobile Madiba

Communities telling their own stories

Storytelling is a powerful art form that allows people to communicate experiences, struggles and hopes through different forms of expression. In this case, the focus was on visual storytelling, using video to convey compelling narratives.

The Climate Works Communications Storytelling Workshop, facilitated by Imani Dlamini of Makhezulu Media, took place on 12 November 2025 at the Diakonia Centre in Durban. Participants represented a range of community-based organisations, including SDCEA, Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Durban Coalition.

The aim of the workshop was to equip participants with practical skills to capture, edit and share short videos on social media, using just their smartphones. These tools enable community members to document their struggles, gather evidence of violations and expose the environmental challenges they face daily. The workshop supported participants to craft their stories and amplify their voices using social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to reach broader audiences, including the media and decision-makers.

For many participants, especially those from rural areas, access to formal journalism channels is limited. This hands-on practical workshop created an important bridge, offering participants some basic tools, building their confidence to tell stories of lived experience and to spread messages effectively and independently.

Through interactive discussions and practical exercises, participants were introduced to the fundamentals of storytelling and mobile journalism. They explored how to structure a narrative, identify key messages, frame visual content and use basic editing tools.

By the end of the day, each participant had produced a short video reflecting their personal experiences and

the climate impacts affecting their communities. These videos showcased not only their new technical skills but also their resilience and determination to advocate for environmental justice.

The workshop reinforced the idea that powerful stories don't require expensive equipment, just authentic voices and the willingness to share them. By supporting community members with mobile storytelling skills, the groundWork Comms team continues to support grassroots advocacy, ensuring that community stories are told in their own voices, from their own perspectives and are heard locally and beyond. 🌍



Durban community participants story boarding their video projects. Photo: Dorothy Brislin



Learning Festival

by Taryn Pereira Kaplan and Kira Erwin

What we gain from sharing with each other!

Real change comes from the ground up, but on-the-ground activists and those working in solidarity with them must respond to the immediacy of multiple environmental injustices. This means they seldom get the time and space to reflect and to step back from their day-to-day organising and struggles long enough to recognise and appreciate the depth of their own knowledge. The community-led Just Transition Learning Festival held in Durban on 9 and 10 October 2025 aimed to give community activists and their partners across five case studies the time and space to do exactly this!

The two-day programme was designed as a “market place of ideas”, combining dialogue, presentation, performance, practical workshops and creative role play. It brought together activists, campaigners, informal workers and other partners from across community-led initiatives on Zero Waste, Energy Democracy, People’s Planning for the Right to Housing, Community Activist Research and community-led Health and Air Quality monitoring. These case studies represent diverse but interconnected struggles that hold many important lessons for community-led just transitions. The festival followed an earlier series of reflective knowledge-mapping workshops with each case study, in preparation for sharing lessons, processes and practices.

The intention of a Learning Festival is not only to exchange knowledge but to build solidarity and collective imagination around what a community-led just transition looks like in practice. Ours was intended as a “reflective and safe space” within civil society, intentionally crafted to allow candid and honest conversations about organising, strategy and power in our environmental justice struggles.

This process enabled activists to see how their work connects: for example, how waste pickers’ knowledge links with energy democracy struggles; how Zero Waste composting approaches intersect with air-quality campaigns; how community-led research strengthens every aspect of the just transition; and

so on. Throughout the festival, participants explored their own lessons and those of others, deepening their understanding not only of their own campaign but of the broader movement.

As with all festivals, it was also a time to celebrate! It celebrated the work already happening in communities, and the incredible people putting their time, love and energy into this work. It was a gathering filled with joy, music, creativity and the everyday forms of hopeful resistance that shape grassroots movements.

Importantly, this first Learning Festival also served as a catalyst for a collective articulation of a community-led just transition: a shared set of ideas to inform future activism and movement-building efforts, strengthen connections and grow the shared political imagination needed for the road ahead. Above all, it helped translate our shared [Open Agenda for a Just Transition](#) into real, grounded practice.

What this Learning Festival affirmed is that communities are not waiting for an invitation from government or the private sector to contribute to the just transition: they are already doing it! As the [Daily Maverick article](#) written on the event articulated, these two days showed “how ordinary South Africans are already leading innovative efforts toward a just transition”.

Next year, we are hosting a second learning festival, at which representatives of government, industry and other role players in the Just Transition space will join case study partners to deepen the learnings.

Real change certainly comes from the ground up – and at the next Learning Festival we look forward to growing the recognition of and solidarity with those already imagining and practising alternatives to extractive capitalism.

If it is true that “wisdom is like a baobab tree, as no one individual can embrace it”, then making time to hold hands to embrace and share our knowledge is an exercise we are ready to do more often! 🌳





*Above and below: Participants engaged in diverse activities of the groundWork Just Transition learning festival.
Photos: Natasha Hosken*





Above and below: Impressions from the Just Transition learning festival.
Centre: Ingredients for the famous Zero Waste compost recipe. Photos: Natasha Hosken



A call to action: Tata maChance

by Azeeza Rangunwala

Africa health communities set a clear mandate on climate change and health

We take an average of 22 000 breaths a day, an act we don't often think about. Good health and well-being depend on clean air. Air pollution is no longer an invisible killer: the science is clear, but the air is not. Out of 365 days, Gautengers enjoy 100 days of clean air per annum on average.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, and as an affiliate of Health Care Without Harm, groundWork's environmental health campaign has engaged in a range of networking activities and convenings with public health stakeholders and healthcare professionals, linking environmental health and well-being as key impact factors of the multi-crises associated with climate change. Their work has borne fruit as our Department of Health, previously conspicuous by its absence from climate change processes, stepped up to commemorate World Environmental Health Day on 26 September.

The National Department of Health Environmental Health Directorate's annual conference took place from 25 to 26 September in Ekurhuleni district, Gauteng. It aligned with this year's theme – **Clean Air, Healthy People** – highlighting the global threat of air pollution.

The conference included collaboration with various stakeholders such as WHO, International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH), South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and the National Association of Environmental Health in South Africa, all of whom pledged to advocate for clean air policies, thereby honouring the invaluable contributions of environmental health professionals and academics.

Broader networks involved in the two-day event included the South African Medical Research Council

(SAMRC), the South African Weather Services, Environmental Health Professional Associations and NGOs.

The conference saw robust debates on opportunities to resource environmental health activities as part of primary prevention. groundWork's Environmental Health Campaign was invited to showcase our research outputs on the health impacts of air pollution in the Priority Areas and our climate mitigation and adaptation interventions through the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals (GGHH) programme.

The publication *Suffocating under fossil fuels* is our climate change guidance document, specially aimed at health professionals. Participants were excited to have copies of the guide, which expands on the role of the health sector in climate change mitigation and adaptation. Our exhibition stand drew a lot of attention from conference delegates, many of whom were existing GGHH members or potential members curious about our network, learning about our initiatives from current members.

The conference also provided an opportunity to meet with Air Quality Officials from different provinces and hear about their regional contexts and challenges regarding pollution prevention. The Department further emphasised that health threats need urgent attention through coordinated action. The health community is united in demonstrating that the climate crisis is a health crisis as a shared vision

At the regional level, in October we partnered with organisers and exhibitors at the *Pan African Conference on Environment, Climate Change and Health*, where over 500 delegates from across Africa were present in Nairobi, Kenya. This conference – a partnership between the Kenyan Ministry of Health





Health campaigners Azeeza Rangunwala and Mafoko Phomane from groundWork with Tumisang Ramodiba from Gauteng Department of Health at the National Department of Health annual conference on World Environmental Health Day, 26 September with theme - Clean Air, Healthy People. Photo: Supplied by National Department of Health

and the Kenyan Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Forestry – is a continuation of the annual **CHANCE network** conferences. Under the theme **One Africa, One Climate, One Health**, a **declaration** was signed to reaffirm our shared commitment to safeguarding human health and the environment while building climate resilient systems for our sustainable future.

Key to the pledge is the implementation of the principles of the Global Commission on Adaptation’s **Adapt Now** initiative by scaling up climate adaptation measures that directly improve human health, protect ecosystems and strengthen resilience in vulnerable communities.

Our academic networks, including research partner Africa Health Research Institute, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal and the University of Pretoria, presented their work at the conference.

The CHANCE network joins the consortium that will form part of the secretariat to action the Pan-African Environment, Climate and Health Action Network (PECHAN) emanating from this conference. The PECHAN secretariat will be rotating among Africa Union Member States. Over 40 African countries were represented, including scientists, policymakers, research institutions, health professionals, environmental managers, development partners, civil society and youth representatives.

While World Environmental Health day focused on air pollution, it was also presented at the Pan-African conference with an added focus on heat and the combined effects. Sustainable, climate resilient health care facilities were a main focus, which is aligned with our efforts towards the strengthening of health systems. ☀️



The global health crisis that G20 governments can't ignore

by Rico Euripidou, Neo Tsotetsi, Dr James Irlam and Mafoko Phomane

Air pollution is often referred to as Africa's "silent killer". It kills more people on the continent each year than HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria combined.

The global health and economic burden of air pollution is increasing year on year. From 2015 to 2021, international development funders committed \$46.6 billion to prolonging fossil fuel extraction and production, while allocating a mere \$1.5 billion to reducing air pollution. That's a whopping 3 000% difference in investment. Meanwhile, the World Bank estimates that \$8 trillion is spent annually on addressing the health effects of air pollution, and this figure is expected to rise. These conflicting numbers reveal a fundamental misalignment where governments and development financiers recognise the costs of air pollution but remain undeterred by its underlying causes.

Earlier this year, the World Health Assembly adopted a new target to halve global deaths from air pollution by 2040. While this signals a growing recognition of air pollution as a major public health crisis, it's important to remember that every one of these deaths is preventable if pollution is tackled at its source. Now, as South Africa hosts the G20 presidency for the first time on African soil, it is a critical moment for the world's largest economies to turn promise into action and align global financial flows with global health and climate goals on reducing air pollution.

In 2019 alone, air pollution caused people in Africa to lose 2.3 million years in which they could have lived in good health and without disability. Diseases like silicosis and other chronic conditions are emblematic of the health crisis facing frontline communities living around highly polluting extractive industries.

Exposure to air pollution has been linked to increased hospital admissions for non-communicable diseases (NCDs), particularly various respiratory diseases such as asthma, pneumonia, bronchitis, progressive lung disease, and deadly cardiovascular events including heart attacks, strokes and heart failure.

The effects of air pollution are also concerning for maternal and neonatal health. A global analysis estimates that air pollution contributes to roughly three million underweight babies each year, especially across regions like sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia.

Because air pollution threatens public health on a massive scale, the healthcare sector, including government health departments and medical institutions, has a critical role to play in addressing the climate crisis leading by example in mitigating carbon emissions, building resilience and adapting to the climate crisis.

The global healthcare supply chain is both highly susceptible to climate disruption and responsible for 5% of all global greenhouse gas emissions. Because this sector has a healing mission, it has a moral responsibility to forge our response to the climate crisis. It should use its purchasing power (estimated at about 10% of the global GDP) in driving market transformation and help lead a low-carbon transition to clean energy and circular economies. Health professionals are often among the most trusted voices in society. They can inform policymakers and help the public to understand that the climate crisis is a health crisis.

To protect public health, healthcare systems must not only reduce their own emissions but also lead on integrated health monitoring that links air quality





Eskom's Kusile Coal-Fired Power Station in Mpumalanga. Photo: groundWork

data with health outcomes, and develop early warning systems for at-risk populations.

Health systems are charged with ensuring healthcare services remain operational during extreme weather events, which are increasing due to climate change. This is essential, and investing in climate-resilient, low-carbon health systems is a now global priority. Supporting frontline communities, particularly those affected by pollution or climate disasters, is also central to healthcare's adaptation role.

Addressing air pollution offers significant benefits beyond just healthy air. It supports healthier communities, reduces health costs, lowers greenhouse gas emissions and improves societal resilience, especially for the poor countries. These co-benefits demonstrate that investing in climate-smart health systems is not only essential for human health but also a cost-effective investment for both human and environmental well-being, and contributes to broader climate action.

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En français!

by Jeanne Prinsloo

groundWork hosts the first Africa Just Transition Network Environmental Justice School in French

It was an ambitious undertaking – an Environmental Justice School in French!

By midyear 2025, groundWork, on behalf of the Africa Just Transition Network, had run three Environmental Justice Schools for neighbouring countries, where English is widely used. These drew on, and modified, the EJ schools groundWork has offered to South African activists for more than a decade. Freirean inspired Popular Education has been the approach that has driven all these schools, and we've had years now to fine tune the approach and produce a range of resources. But clearly this has not addressed those African countries that were colonised by France and Belgium, where French remains the international language in use.

It has long been our intention to run a French school, but the challenges were daunting – notably finding facilitators who embraced the same methodology, who understood the contexts, and worked in French, as well as creating and translating the appropriate resources. The translation of resources alone was an ambitious undertaking. Happily, the [EJS booklets](#) are now all available in French.

Finally the French school happened! The first African Environmental Justice School (EJS) in French was held from 3 to 20 September 2025 at Rain Farm Lodge outside Umhlali, north of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It's an ideal venue located in open, tranquil countryside, conducive surroundings with indigenous flora and small game, and a peaceful atmosphere that enables a focus on the work at hand.

We welcomed participants from organisations identified by groundWork's AJTN staff and 11th Hour human rights project. Our mini league of nations included NGO activists from nine West and Central

African countries, including Benin, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Senegal and Togo.

It was fortunate that we eventually had a full cohort of twenty participants. Securing the necessary travel documents for the participants, many of whom lived in places far from the South African embassy or consul in their countries and had to travel twice to get their documents, was an accomplishment all on its own. Three participants received their visas only once the school had begun, and the two Senegalese participants arrived two days late, after their airline cancelled their connecting flights.

Consistent with groundWork's vision, the focus of the school was towards a just transition from an extractive to a regenerative economy beyond coal, oil and gas. As with our other schools, it was fundamentally concerned with changing relations of power between people, the democratic inclusion of all, and the creation of a more equal society where everyone – women and men – can live well with each other and with the earth. Central then to working for change is the issue of power, which underpins much of the design of the programme.

Importantly, the school conceptualised *just transition* as not limited to energy or fossil fuels, but as inclusive of settlements, housing, water, land, food, transport and pretty much everything else – about the workers in fossil fuel industries, but also about communities polluted by those industries and about everyone whom the system makes poor.

The purpose of the school continued to be to strengthen and build the people's movement against fossil fuels and the extractive economy. It thus aims at



promoting a people-centred transition to a regenerative economy.

Consistent with the popular education approach, the programme used **See, Judge, Act** as a structuring device. The first week focused primarily on “Seeing your world” and then incorporated the element of reflection and thus “Judging”.

It began with the participants mapping their worlds and sharing their contexts and challenges, the first step to creating a network. It interrogated how exploitation occurs through excluding people from decision making, enclosing valuable resources and externalising the costs onto those marginalised within the system (what groundWork refers to as the three e’s of exploitation). This lens was used to examine the elements that underpin the extractive economy and the global order of the economy. It addressed stakeholders in the financing and investment of extractive industries, rights and regulations, climate change and false solutions, health and environment, gender and environmental justice, and energy sovereignty.

The second week continued the focus on seeing and judging. For example, participants constructed a wall timeline of the histories of exploitation and resistance pertinent to their own countries. In this way, the extractive fossil fuel industries were connected to the history of colonisation, the global extractive economy and the climate crisis.

The week was, however, primarily concerned with acting – **See, Judge, Act** – and thus with activism. The activist strand aimed to provide participants with an activist framework as well as to support them in planning a project to undertake on their return home, whether a new activist project or one already in process. The cohort also enjoyed their visit to the groundWork waste team’s composting and permaculture project and Durban’s wonderful aquarium.

The school was facilitated primarily by Hermine Kouam (Cameroon) and Ninon Larché (South Africa), with myself as managing co-ordinator and overseeing facilitator. Hermine, as primary facilitator, had attended the English EJ school in May 2025 to assist in planning the Francophone programme to suit the cohort from African Francophone countries. Marius Kaptouam (Cameroon) assisted in facilitating the activism sessions. We also enjoyed the input of

other consultants, along with the groundWork health campaigner, Mafoko Phomane, resident in South Africa but from Lesotho

In the final evaluation all the participants noted their satisfaction with the agenda, the facilitators, the contents, the resources shared and the logistics. Most indicated that they felt more committed, inspired and equipped for the future. The cohort has adopted the name of **Les sentinelles du climat** (the climate guardians). They continue to use the WhatsApp group for notices and discussions among themselves about their activism.

It is notable that all participants appreciated the sessions around **See and Judge**. Several mentioned that they have an improved knowledge of their world as a consequence, and are inspired to continue their activist work against extractivism and towards a just future.

We as the facilitators are delighted that this ambitious pilot EJ school met its aims and goals. There now exists, in French, a complete programme, planning records and the booklets to form a solid basis for future African schools for Francophone activists.

Vive, l'école de la justice environnementale, vive!
Long live the school of environmental justice, long live! 🌞



Participants present their mapping of mineral and fossil fuel extractives in their own local contexts.

Photo: Lunga Bhengu





Top: First ever Francophone EJS AJTN Cohort. Bottom Right: Hugs at the graduation ceremony. Bottom Left: Francophone EJS session in progress with dynamic debate. Photos: Lunga Bhengu





Top left: AJTN Francophone EJS Graduation Ceremony, with certificates presented by groundWork Operations Director - Avena Jacklin. Bottom: AJTN Francophone Top right: AJTN graduates celebrate in song and dance. Bottom: AJTN Francophone EJS Facilitation Team, Hermine Kouam, Ninon Larche, Ciza Mokabaha, and Jeanne Prinsloo Photos: Lunga Bhengu



Call for a national hazardous waste strategy

by Musa Chamane

South Africa does not have a clear waste strategy that ensures that society is protected from the scourge of toxic waste being dumped across the country, or even the import and export of toxic waste. This has resulted in numerous environmental injustices in different corners of the country.

From asbestos mining waste to Sasol's tar pits, from ArcelorMittal's unlined metallurgical waste dumpsites to Eskom unlined coal ash dumps, from the gold uranium-laced dumpsites around Johannesburg to the un-rehabilitated mining sites throughout South Africa, and the burning of toxic waste in incinerators and cement kilns, we are still faced with a current and toxic waste legacy that has to be urgently addressed.

Over the years, through its Waste Campaign, groundWork has maintained a focus on toxic waste and led civil society efforts for the National Waste Act that was promulgated in 2008. groundWork has helped expose a series of scandals concerning incinerator operators, supported action to close down polluting medical waste incinerators and forced the transition to less harmful non-burn technologies for health care risk waste.

Thirty years ago, Thor Chemicals was exposed for importing mercury-contaminated toxic waste and operating a sub-standard recycling plant that polluted local water and resulted in the deaths of workers. The mercury-contaminated toxic waste has only recently been removed for safe treatment, but the site is still largely contaminated. Government and Thor Chemicals previously abdicated their respective responsibilities until mobilisation by civil society forced them to fulfil their national mandate.

This is but one example of the toxic waste legacy that South Africa is dealing with. In the interior, hundreds of millions of tonnes of current and legacy mining waste lies across more than 6 000 abandoned or orphaned mines, which are contaminated with heavy metals and uranium. These are under the stewardship of the Department of Mineral Resources

(DMR) and present an ongoing mismanaged health risk to neighbouring communities.

An example of a toxic waste disaster from abandoned mines was the collapse of the **Jagersfontein** tailings dam on 11 September 2022 near Bloemfontein. This "dam" – essentially a legacy dump site containing toxic mining waste, dating back from the late 1800s and left by De Beers – released a toxic flood of mine residue that devastated the communities of Charlesville and Itumeleng, causing three deaths and displacing 300 residents.

Mining companies have been allowed to offload the legacy of their wealth onto our population, particularly the poor communities living on the fencelines of their operations, without cleaning up as they are required to do by law and with utter impunity for the damage caused.

More recently, poorly managed toxic dumpsites such as Midrand, Shongweni, DCLM and Aloes have sparked public health outcries in neighbouring communities. Industrial production in the Highveld, South Durban, the Vaal triangle, Richards Bay, Pinetown, Marikana, SOWETO and Pietermaritzburg are some of the places that experience industrial toxic stench from dirty production. In some instances, waste is being incinerated either in cement kilns or industrial incinerators and people are suffering as a result, as these processes result in air and water pollution that later affects communities.

In a bid to address the situation outlined in examples above, and to prevent further similar toxic disasters that are waiting to happen, the waste campaign convened a group of mining affected communities in the Vaal Triangle in the Free State, North West, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and Mpumalanga, and toxic-waste-affected communities of Aloes in the Eastern Cape, Dolphin Coast, KwaDukuza, Richards Bay, Cato Ridge and Shongweni in KwaZulu-Natal, who gathered in solidarity on 12 and 13 November 2025 in Midrand. The aim of the gathering was to



highlight the various challenges faced by communities as a result of hazardous waste mismanagement.

The meeting mapped a number of struggles taking place in different places across South Africa, such as toxic landfills, incineration of toxic waste in cement kilns, trade in toxic waste, legacy mining waste, asbestos, acid mine drainage, gold dumps, manganese and coal ash dams, to name a few. It provided a platform for affected communities to share their struggles and engage with other communities facing similar challenges in their areas and a place to begin to act in solidarity with an aim of resolving their challenges.

Participants, including experts, community people and activists, shared experiences and knowledge of the toxic waste challenges they face, where toxic waste is dumped in or adjacent to areas where they live. The meeting also provided information on the types of toxic (hazardous) waste being imported and exported to and from our shores.

Participants plotted a series of next steps to build towards a strategy to challenge the toxic waste situation we have in South Africa and developed a **call to action**, demanding accountability, plans and community participation from authorities for dealing with the toxic waste affecting communities. 🌍



Participants of the Hazardous Waste Convening in Centurion. Photo: Daylin Paul



*Top: Participants at the Launch of the Hazardous Waste Report Launch.
Bottom left: Livia Corset, author of the Hazardous Waste Report presenting on the research process.
Bottom right: Mishelle Govender from the Department of Forestry Fisheries and Environment presenting at the hazardous waste meeting.
Photos: Daylin Paul*





All pics: Impressions and participants at the Hazardous Waste Report Launch. Photos: Daylin Paul



Fruits of community voices heard @SAPToA

by Dorothy Brislin

The South African People's Tribunal on Agrotoxins (SAPToA) hearings that took place on 22 and 23 March this year and have been previously reported on, keeps bearing fruit for a just-transition-aligned transformation in the agribusiness sector.

We also reported previously on the outcome of the [Parliamentary Briefing](#) on Tuesday 20 May, following the live hearings of the Tribunal, where the SAPToA Jury made representations on highly hazardous pesticides (HHPs) to the Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, after which Cabinet announced their decision on 12 June 2025, to ban Terbufos, the HHP that caused the deaths of six children in Naledi in August of 2024. It has subsequently emerged that Terbufos has, in fact, been linked to hundreds of deaths in recent years.

The significance of this Cabinet decision was that it recognised the constitutional imperative to put the child's best interests first. It marked the end of a long era during which the chemical industry had undue influence over the regulation of their deadly products. The highest level of government reined in corporate impunity and said that all South Africans, particularly children, have the right to a safe and healthy environment.

One down, 194 to go. The banning of Terbufos was a significant victory, signalling the beginning of the transformation of an agriculture system rife with conflicts of interest, inequity, abuse of worker rights and the unchallenged hegemony of toxic chemicals.

The SAPToA coalition that hosted the hearings resolved to continue to push for the banning of all 194 HHPs currently registered in South Africa. It also rejected the notion of "phase out periods" subject to industry discretion, which agribusinesses have continued to use as a delaying tactic to continue using HHPs with the impunity they have always enjoyed.

Pesticide Policy Framework

Late in August 2025, the National Department of Agriculture convened a historic colloquium on its Pesticide Policy Framework in Stellenbosch, bringing together government departments, farmer associations, scientists, civil society, industry, labour, farm workers and human rights organisations in an unprecedented, multi-sectoral dialogue on pesticide policy reform.

This was a landmark moment for agricultural reform and environmental justice, as the colloquium reflected a serious effort to modernise South Africa's pesticide governance, especially the grossly antiquated Farm Feeds, Fertiliser and Agrochemical Remedies Act 36 of 1947, signalling a shift from a fragmented and outdated regulatory framework towards a unified, science-based and socially accountable system.

The event sought to reignite national commitment through a One Health approach, integrating animal, human, plant and environmental health to evaluate pesticide risks in an holistic and interconnected manner, and to finally modernise and implement the 2010 Pesticide Management Policy, which has remained unimplemented 15 years later.

"For the first time in history, civil society was not merely in the room, but at the table," said Anna Shevel, network coordinator of UnPoison. 🌱

Background

South Africa is the largest consumer of agrotoxins in Africa, with over 9 000 toxic chemical compounds registered for use in our chemically based industrial farming, including approximately 195 highly hazardous pesticides (HHPs), many of which are banned in the European Union.

At the frontline of exposure are farm workers, their families and communities living in the vicinity of spraying, including aerial spraying



by drones. Commercial farmers and industry use many agrochemicals that are categorised as HHPs and are slated for banning by the international community. Government policy committed to phasing these out more than 14 years ago failed to do so. Information on pesticide registration in South Africa is not publicly available, but it is estimated that at least 195 HHPs are still in use in South Africa, over a third of which are banned in the European Union. Examples of these include:

- Mevinphos, linked to neurological defects leading to long-term health complications;
- Carbofuran, associated with reproductive and developmental defects; and
- Terbufos, a neurotoxic insecticide recently implicated in the deaths of children in low-resource urban areas and which is banned in 12 out of 16 countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

In 2023, a group of civil society organisations, trade unions and individuals united to create a stronger collective voice against harmful agrochemical practices. Having exhausted numerous attempts over the years to remedy the situation, they set about planning the people's hearing, working tirelessly to create a platform for farmworkers and affected communities to share their stories and demand accountability from the system. They provided education and resources to vulnerable communities, equipping them with the tools to advocate for safer agricultural practices and healthier living environments. Through research and collaboration, the dangerous effects of pesticides and agrottoxins on workers, families and ecosystems across South Africa were uncovered. Participating organisations included Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU), Women on Farms Project (WFP), African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), groundWork (Friends of the Earth South Africa), South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE), Khanyisa/Kouga Workers Forum, DKA, and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

As our turbulent world is plunged into greater chaos, there is also great momentum and impetus amongst us in our collective struggles to reclaim our sovereignty and dignity. For many years, farm worker organisations, unions, civil society, and academics have been calling on the government to phase out HHPs and update our antiquated regulatory framework. This has been done through sharing current science and research, commenting on policy, letters of demand, objections, petitions, protests and campaigns. Having reached exhaustion of remedies, we decided to host the Tribunal as part of our ongoing and collective solidarity struggles.

Statement by the civil society coalition made up of groundWork, ACB, Women on Farms, CAWUSA and TCOE that implemented the South African People's Tribunal on AgroToxins

It is long overdue that we uncover the ongoing violations of Section 24, Section 27 and Section 28 Constitutional rights of farm workers, farm dwellers and fenceline communities perpetrated by industrial farmers and agrochemicals companies, while our government fails to implement the legal obligations it has undertaken to protect people's rights. We will end the impunity this sector enjoys as they prioritise profit over people.

Judge Navi Pillay, Chair of the SAPToA Jury

We see a complete regulatory breakdown and a "free-for-all" for the agrochemical industrial complex that is symptomatic of a dismantled and dysfunctional state. It also links back to a long history of extraction and colonisation in South Africa, resulting in gross human rights violations and environmental calamity.

Haidee Swanby, Coordinator of the People's Tribunal on AgroToxins

Many farm workers are forced to work with poisons that have been banned in Europe and many countries in the SADC region. It is difficult to live on our wages or access good health care, and when we become too ill to work we can just be evicted from farms where we have been working and living all our lives.

Deneco Dube, General Secretary of the Commercial Stevedoring Agriculture and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU)

For the first time in history, civil society was not merely in the room, but at the table.

Anna Shevel, UnPoison Network Coordinator, commenting on the colloquium convened by the National Department of Agriculture on SA's Pesticide Policy Framework, August 2025.



Meet Mbali Mthembu

My name is Mbali Mthembu. I was born and bred in the northern part of the KZN Province, KwaNongoma. After matriculating, I worked as a chief cashier in retail, which sparked my interest in the financial field, and that led me to studying and obtaining a Bachelor of Commerce degree.

My love for interacting with people and the community made me branch into the education field (Post Graduate Certificate in Education), after which I taught both at primary and high-school levels.

I initially worked for groundWork on a short term contract in 2024, tasked to assist with the logistics of the Human Rights Defenders' gathering that took place at the Union Buildings in 2024. At that time, what stood out for me was the number of people who came out in masses to stand in solidarity with our fallen heroes. Hearing about the reality of how they lost their lives while trying to protect their environmental rights, and how our country's justice system has failed them and their loved ones, is heart-wrenching.



At the beginning of 2025, I joined groundWork, serving as the Admin and Logistics Assistant in the Middleberg office. Before joining groundWork, my exposure to activism of any sort was a bit limited. However, I have learnt so much thus far, and I am excited about this journey. 🌟



Wall sized Life After Coal (LAC) poster used as an educational tool in the Highveld Air Quality and Health campaign in the form of a giant jigsaw puzzle. It depicts the polluting value chain of coal mining and coal-powered industries on the Highveld, an air pollution hotspot. Workshop participants piece together the puzzle as they consider the health impacts at each stage. Artwork: Kyla Hazell



Introducing Sifiso Dladla

Sifiso's activism is rooted in lived experience. He has become a prominent voice in national campaigns, challenging destructive mining practices, including advocacy around the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy's authorisation processes, the rise of illicit artisanal mining economies and the widespread targeting and intimidation of human rights defenders in South Africa.

Dladla was born in Pietermaritzburg. He became a community activist while still at school, when the Greater Edendale Development Forum (GEDF), a poverty reduction strategy of Msunduzi Municipality focused on the Edendale area, was formed. He later became GEDF's Communications Officer. He holds various certificates from international and local training institutes covering a broad range of courses including gender equality, Alternative to Violence Project (AVP), Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and a leadership course by the University of KZN.

He worked as a journalist and a film producer before dedicating his life to community activism. The change in career direction came as a direct result of producing a film for SABC's 50/50 about the Somkhele communities living adjacent to Somkhele mine, close to the boundary of the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park in Zululand. The social, economic and environmental injustices he witnessed spurred him on to join forces with Somkhele elders and leaders committed to upholding both tribal and the constitutional laws of South Africa that protect the well-being of all citizens through the provision of a healthy environment, clean air and water, and sustainable livelihoods.

Within groundWork's Human Rights Defenders programme, part of the Just Transition and Coal Campaign, Sifiso works closely with partner organisations such as MACUA, the Centre for Environmental Rights, All Rise, Life After Coal and Amnesty International, to document violations, support community mobilisation and build legal, political and public advocacy strategies. He has

facilitated community hearings, safety workshops for defenders and submissions to oversight bodies such as the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC).

Sifiso has contributed to national platforms and inquiries, including engagements on Operation Vula Umgothi, artisanal mining impacts in Stilfontein, and the broader crisis of violence facing activists in mining regions. He has also worked with families and communities affected by environmental harms, displacement and threats, ensuring that their stories shape national discourse and policy.

Committed to centring grassroots voices, Sifiso combines research, organising and public advocacy to advance a people-powered vision of environmental and social justice. His work continues to strengthen the South African human rights defender landscape, ensuring that communities on the frontlines of extraction are seen, heard and protected. ☺



Social Ownership of Renewable Energy Convening

by Sphokazi Sigwebela

On 29 to 30 September, groundWork hosted the Social Ownership of Renewable Energy (SORE) Convening, gathering grassroots activists, labour unions, academics and government representatives. The event focused on social ownership as a pathway to energy democracy, emphasising just, community-centred renewable energy solutions to empower those most affected by the ongoing energy crisis.

The convening began with a powerful statement that emphasised that social ownership of renewable energy solutions must be democratic, creating job opportunities, developing skills, sustaining livelihoods and promoting environmental justice. It stressed that true ownership is not about replacing public monopoly with private monopoly, but is the establishing of democratic control to ensure energy fairness and affordability. This principle underpinned all discussions, highlighting that renewable energy should improve access while directly benefiting community development and livelihoods.

Inclusion as a cornerstone of energy justice

Labour unions raised concerns that workers and communities most affected by energy sector changes remain excluded from decision-making. “Labour unions feel like they are not included in decisions, whereas they are the workers being affected the most,” said Mangwandile from NUM.

Participants called for education to clarify what true social ownership means. Thandeka from Abahlali baseMjondolo explained, “We should make sure that we teach the communities about these terms and how it will benefit them”.

The convening stressed financial support should prioritise grants over loans, reflecting communities’ financial vulnerabilities. Megan from Sustainable Energy Africa affirmed, “Communities should be given grants, not loans for support; the communities

cannot afford to pay back the money.” This is crucial for sustainable community projects.

Community realities and labour perspectives

Voices from Mpumalanga revealed the dual crises of mining pollution and energy deprivation. Promise from the Vukani Environmental Movement said, “Emalahleni is the capital city for mining, which causes pollution, killing people; while some do not even have power.” These examples show the urgency for solutions that address environmental justice and energy access.

Labour unions COSATU and NUM emphasised protecting livelihoods and creating new opportunities. Sifiso from COSATU said, “This must not disturb the livelihood of our communities and job opportunities,” stressing, “reskilling, upskilling, skills development, and training”.

Mangwandile from NUM added, “We should focus on manufacturing energy materials so we do not source from outside; everything must be produced from South Africa and people must be trained.” These points highlight skills and local manufacturing as critical.



*Some of the people and partners involved in the energy democracy journey that gave rise to the documentary film *Our Light, Our Power*, by Lara Taylor of Mycelium Media Colab.*

Photo: Tsepang Molefe



Legislative and policy reforms needed

Participants identified gaps in legislation that block real social ownership. Policies often exclude meaningful community participation in energy governance. The convening called for reforms that clarify social ownership versus community-led initiatives, with governance structures that give communities real control.

A key insight was that national procurement programmes often overlook local social ownership. The conclusion was clear: “We need to create legislation and policy that allows social ownership to happen at the local level,” enabling communities to fully benefit from renewable energy projects.

Practical lessons from pilot projects

Pilot projects showed promising community-scale renewable energy models that improve local access. However, challenges like municipal resistance and infrastructure limits remain.

Speakers stressed learning from programmes like the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP) to avoid elite capture and poor consultation. The coal crisis deepens urgency – “We have about three or four power stations that are about to shut down in the next five years” – raising the stakes for a just transition that includes social ownership.

Collaboration for a just energy future

A strong plea for collaboration over blame echoed throughout the convening. Working across sectors and social groups is essential to a just, equitable energy transition. Participants committed to ongoing dialogue in convenings and communities to tackle tough issues about social costs, value chains and balancing environmental sustainability with economic livelihoods.

Conclusion

Participants agreed that this convening marked a turning point, shifting South Africa’s energy crisis dialogue from technical fixes to social mobilisation. Combining visionary ideas with collective action, the meeting built a strong coalition committed to people-centred energy reforms. The key conclusion was that solving the crisis requires democratising power,



A participant at the SORE Convening gets the mic.

Photo: Tsepang Molefe

not just increasing electricity supply. Presentations highlighted that a century of centralised control has created an economically fragile and socially unjust system. Participants emphasised that true ownership means democratic control to ensure affordable energy, rejecting private or public monopolies. The strong support to sustain SORE signals the convening as the catalyst for a genuine energy democracy movement.

From the discussions, four key collective actions emerged: financial mobilisation, with the coalition advocating to access funding for socially-owned renewables including the JET-IP Fund and encouraging trade unions to invest using their buying power; scaling up initiatives, with commitments to identify what’s needed to expand renewable energy projects and assign responsibilities; governance and advocacy, where the coalition will support municipalities in energy distribution and push for government recognition of its solutions; and broadening the conversation by engaging the public and social justice groups beyond the energy sector, making this a priority in future meetings. Additionally, there was a call for groundWork to hold space and maintain SORE advocacy efforts. ☀️



Gas battle rages on

by Yegeshni Moodley

Sweet Victory: Eskom's Richards Bay gas to power

There was a short reprieve in the ongoing fight to keep expensive gas to power plants out of South Africa. In the Richards Bay area alone, eight power plants have been proposed for construction. The Eskom-owned 3 000MW closed cycle power plant was one of the first planned for the area and our first challenge to the energy shift towards risky gas power.

The plant's EIA process was **successfully challenged** in the Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA). This followed a flawed judgement from the Pretoria High Court, which allowed the plant to proceed by applying backward-looking justice. What does this mean? The judge ruled that communities' concerns on the past Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process could be addressed by changes in future authorisations. Communities upheld the principle that justice delayed is justice denied, and the principle of procedural justice, which is pushed by the Presidential Climate Commission, on which our Executive Director participated.

Some of the key concerns related to the lack of local language use in consultation and documentation, a very limited climate change assessment and no consideration of renewable energy as an alternative. The use of gas is also restricted by the unclear supply region, whether it is blood methane from conflict-ridden **Cabo Delgado**, where Total has its claws in, or the significant methane leakage associated with shipping from the Gulf states.

As a remedy, the SCA has sent Eskom back to the drawing board for this authorisation. This sends a clear message to developers and environmental assessment practitioners on the rules of engagement with communities.

Free State is not open for business

While the onslaught of gas applications for the Free State and Mpumalanga continued unabated, the Free State Environmental Justice Network (FSEJN) steadied its hand as the movement gained clarity and momentum. At the annual meeting in Bloemfontein, representatives were selected for the network to further action plans and mature the local activist network. Legislative knowledge-strengthening was emphasised as a key growth area.

Together with Natural Justice, the National Environmental Management Act and Upstream Petroleum Resources Development Act, as well as local gas applications underway, were thoroughly unpacked in our sessions. This allowed activists from MACUA and groundWork to engage in the first network-related community workshop, focusing on those affected by the only operational gas production facility in South Africa, Tetra 4, owned by Renegen.

Communities shared experiences of operations and prospecting activities, including accounts of pollution impacts. They left feeling knowledgeable about processes and better equipped to face violations of the Act, encouraging them to engage further.

Next steps for the network include meeting with communities in eastern Free State, who are faced with gas applications from Rhino Oil and Gas, Panoro and others in their surroundings. 🌍



SAHRC investigates Stilfontein

by Sifiso Dladla

The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) held a National Inquiry into the policy framework governing artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), the human rights impacts on surrounding communities and the scope and tactics employed in the government's anti-illegal mining initiative, Operation Vala Umgodi. The inquiry came at a critical moment, as the country grapples with rising tensions, inadequate regulation, community harm and a growing recognition that current responses, both legislative and operational, are failing to protect human rights or create sustainable economic alternatives for mining-dependent communities.

The inquiry investigated the Stilfontein débâcle, where about 93 artisanal miners lost their lives between October 2024 and January 2025. The inquiry took place between 1 and 3 October 2025. Sifiso Dladla, who is the groundwork Human Rights Defenders Campaigner, was part of the

panel, alongside Commissioner Makoasha and Commissioner Kwinana.

Artisanal mining has long been part of South Africa's mining landscape. Historically, it provided livelihoods for thousands living near abandoned or unrehabilitated mines. However, the sector has remained largely unregulated, criminalised and ignored within formal mining policy. The absence of a coherent national framework has allowed a vacuum in which informal miners, known as *zama zamas*, operate without legal protection, while communities endure safety risks, violence, environmental degradation and severe socioeconomic impacts. The SAHRC's inquiry seeks to address these long-standing structural failures and map a path toward rights-centred solutions.

The inquiry looked into the policy and legal frameworks that currently regulate artisanal mining. The Commission aims to understand why the sector remains marginalised, despite repeated calls from



Sifiso Dladla on the SAHRC Human Rights panel on mining. Photo: Supplied by SAHRC



civil society, community organisations and academic institutions for a formalised and inclusive approach.

Key questions include whether the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act (MPRDA) adequately accommodates artisanal miners, what barriers prevent licensing, and how policy incoherence contributes to conflict, criminal syndicates and community harm. By probing the gaps within national and provincial policy, the inquiry hopes to make recommendations for a framework that is enabling rather than punitive, and development-oriented rather than criminalising.

Central to the process was an investigation into human rights impacts on surrounding communities. Communities living near artisanal mining hotspots often describe a climate of fear, instability and environmental harm. Residents face threats of violence from syndicates competing for control of shafts, intimidation from security forces, and deteriorating safety conditions due to unregulated underground activities. Women and children are particularly affected, facing risks of sexual violence, trafficking and exploitation. At the same time, communities suffer from polluted water sources, soil contamination, infrastructural collapse and the impacts of abandoned mine shafts left unattended by mining companies.

The inquiry sought to document these experiences, highlight systemic patterns and centre the voices of communities that have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes affecting their land, livelihoods and safety. Their testimonies came from organisations such as Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA), Lawyers for Human Rights, South African Police Services and the Department of Mineral Petroleum Resources to mention but a few. This is to help the Commission assess how the rights to life, dignity, security, health, environment and economic participation are being violated.

The third pillar of the inquiry focused on Operation Vala Umgodi, the government's recent crackdown on illegal mining. Since its launch, Vala Umgodi has deployed the South African Police Service (SAPS), the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and various specialised units to mining areas in Gauteng, North West, Limpopo and the Free State. While the operation aims to dismantle criminal mining

networks, concerns have emerged about excessive force, unlawful arrests, harassment and profiling of foreign nationals. Civil society and human rights monitors have raised questions about militarisation, the accountability of security forces, and whether the operation addresses root causes or merely escalates violence.

By examining the scope, methods and impact of Vala Umgodi, the SAHRC intends to determine whether state actions comply with constitutional obligations and human rights norms.

Ultimately, the National Inquiry presented an opportunity for South Africa to shift from a reactive, security-driven approach to a policy model that is inclusive, rights-based and economically empowering. Through evidence gathering, community hearings, expert submissions and on-the-ground investigations, the SAHRC aims to produce recommendations that transform artisanal mining from a site of conflict into a pathway for community development and sustainable livelihoods. 🌟



SAHRC HRD Panel deliberates after testimonies on the Stilfontein deaths of numerous artisanal gold miners.

Photo supplied by SAHRC



The Baku to Belem superhighway to hell

by Greenfly



Entrance to the CoP30 Belem Blue Zone. Photo: Tsepang Molefe

The Baku to Belem elite superhighway is lined with miracles and wonders. The \$billions will be turned to \$trillions at the tables of the moneylenders, combustion won't turn to carbon dust and ashes, and the dead shall arise. Meanwhile, the earth is becoming a different place as the global temperature pushes past 1.5° above the preindustrial average. 2025 follows the two hottest years ever and may yet equal 2023, despite being cooled by La Nina surfacing in the tropical Pacific.

Let's start with the dead. The tipping point for tropical corals has now tipped them into long-term decline, with no coming back without a rapid reduction in temperatures. That can only follow from – but will lag behind – a rapid reduction in carbon emissions, which isn't happening. So that's about a quarter of marine life heading for the marine mortuary.

Next, the undertaker's trolley is being readied for the Amazon. The hottest two years ever brought drought and intensified wildfires started by cattle



ranchers stealing indigenous people's lands, as well as by increasing lightning strikes. The mighty river shrank to a trickle and river dolphins turned belly up as water temperatures topped 40° – hotter than a hot bath.

Then we have melting permafrost and mountain glaciers, ocean currents stalling, icesheets sliding off Greenland and Antarctica – a process that will take a few centuries and may or may not have passed the point of no return. That's the thing about a tipping point. You only know it's done once its irreversible.

So to combustion. Fossil fuels were unmentionable through 27 CoPs. CoP28 in Dubai produced much heat over a brief line on transitioning away from fossil fuels. At Baku, the line was smudged out. Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev declared oil a Gift from God and the petrostates forbid any repetition of those holy words. Baku, on what remains of the Caspian Sea, is shrouded in a petrochemical haze.

Belem is at the mouth of what's left of the Amazon. On shore in the Amazon, Brazil has opened up 105 oil exploration blocks with 21 going to production. Several blocks require fracking. Offshore, a line of oil blocks stretches for a thousand kilometres across the Amazon mouth. Brazil's 'leftist people's' President Lula has just forced the environmental agency to permit Petrobras, the national oil company, to drill Block 59 – one of 19 blocks opened for exploration just an oil executive's helicopter ride from Belem. It threatens one of the most intact tropical coral reefs – protected by the muddy plume of the river – and a great mangrove forest that lies along the shore. Lula says "we have to use the oil" to fund the energy transition. Just like Sasol. The CEO of Petronas says, "let's drill, baby, drill". Just like Donald Trump. Just like AJ Ayuk of the Africa Energy Chamber. Just like Gwede Mantashe.

Lula adds, "I want to know [of] any country on the planet that is prepared to have an energy transition and can give up fossil fuels". And so say all of them. Which is why the combination of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) – the pledges submitted by all the parties to the UNFCCC – won't give us 1.5°, or 2°, or 2.5°. We are more likely headed for an unliveable 3°, which means about 6° in Africa.

So to the money. At Baku, the Northern powers said they would 'mobilise' \$300 billion a year "from

a wide variety of sources" as climate finance for the global South. That's less than a third of the US military budget. Southern countries demanded \$1.3 trillion. So it was decided in Baku that the CoP29 and CoP30 presidencies (Azerbaijan and Brazil) would put together the "Baku to Belem roadmap to 1.3T". The trillions are also to come from that 'wide variety of sources' which will magically quadruple. Private capital is the biggest part of the wide variety. Magically, capital will get its return but won't make more debt.

In addition, the Northern powers and the ever-loving International Monetary Fund (IMF) should help "alleviate onerous debt burdens faced by developing countries". The IMF has been alleviating debt for decades in a manner that manages to multiply the debt. Much of that debt is illegitimate and unpayable – which means repayment stretches into forever, a permanent rent for 'investors'. The roadmap adds the novelty of 'debt for nature' swaps – a new way of sanctioning land grabs in the global South.

Brazil's pet project is the Tropical Forests Forever Fund. This invites investors, aka global capital, to put up money for a fund to invest in global capital markets. Or perhaps to work the carry trade – borrow cheap in the global North and invest in high returns from the global South. Magic money. The investors are to get a generous return with extra added greenwash, the administrator (the World Bank) is to get a generous fee with greenwash and, if anything is left over, it will be split between about 75 countries as compensation for not cutting and burning their forests or killing local people who live in the way of development. Except it won't match the income from logging, cattle ranching, soy farming and palm oil plantations – all the ways of extracting money in the name of development. And TFFF income looks highly uncertain as capital markets wobble. So, if the whole thing goes south, risk goes global South. As always. Forever capital, not forests forever.

Meanwhile, big investors are piling into oil and gas wherever they can find it: in Brazil and all the nine Amazon countries, in the US, in Canada, in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, at the ends of the earth. And Big Oil has abandoned any pretence of going green as investors demand more bigger bucks now.

Thanks Lula! ☀️



Live from Belem, Brazil

by Tsepang Molefe

Whose CoP30 is it anyway?



spaces of the UNFCCC. The voices of the people refused to be suppressed or to just be passengers in the CoP bus moving slowly towards an unclear destination. The main highlight has been the Peoples' Summit, a parallel gathering of international solidarity among climate justice movements, including Friends of the Earth International. The people's summit included a series of protest actions, demonstrations and events from 10 to 16 November.

But the indigenous peoples' march through the streets of Belem on 17 November is what shook the towers of authority and the talks had to be suspended for the day. Following the indigenous peoples' protest, the UNFCCC Secretariat sent a letter to the Brazilian government to escalate security forces. It seems the government responded, immediately and without hesitation, with high visibility of police and heavily armed forces and armoured vehicles at all the entrances and check points of the Blue Zone in particular.

This militarisation of the space in the second week of CoP30 made it rather unwelcoming. It was clear that this was not only done as a show of force but also as a form of intimidation, an

attempt to draw the line of exclusion for communities, indigenous people and civil society.

In a show of defiance, civil society groups and activists continued to stage a blitz of actions in the middle of the chaos, including demonstration action focused on adaptation finance, which was led by the Asian Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development. Right in the middle of the hallways of capitalism, governments and corporations, the calls for adaptation finance and reparations echoed in the air, drawing attention from the crowds and the massive traffic of people in the corridors of power. The action's main purpose was to apply pressure on developed nations to

The whole world has descended here, in Belem, Brazil, for the CoP30. From governments giving themselves a pat on the back and flaunting the minimal action they've taken to resolve a problem they've caused and continue to allow; to corporations positioning themselves to benefit and profit further while claiming to have found innovative and green solutions to curb a global crisis; to investors and funders looking to avail resources to ideas, projects, campaigns and organisations that could contribute to the acceleration of much needed change. It is all here in Belem.

But here in Belem there is another power. The power of people gathered outside of the undemocratic



deliver concrete commitments and sufficient finance for climate adaptation.

On Thursday 20 November, the Africa Just Transition Network launched an electric solidarity action with youth and community voices from across the continent united in calling unequivocally for a people-driven just transition.

The South African Presidential Climate Commission also hosted a Just Transition panel discussion, which was hosted at the Ford Foundation Pavilion. Facilitated by Blessing Manale from the Presidential Climate Commission, the event was opened by Mbali Baduza, a PCC Commissioner and CEO of Con Hill, who read an extract from the preamble to the South African constitution: “We, the People”. The panel was made up of diverse representatives, from the government of Mpumalanga, civil society and community members.

The discussion put a spotlight on Komati, the lessons learnt in the Komati decommissioning, and how government, civil society and affected communities were picking up the pieces to get the “JUST” part of the transition right in Komati. The event also created an opportunity for South Africans who had travelled to Belem to meet and engage, supporting initiatives to and act in solidarity with each other in various spaces and activities.

When the CoP30 reaches its decisive stage, it should not fail to offer an historic opportunity to ensure that the clean energy transition does not repeat the past extractive harms. It should clearly articulate and push for the inclusion of human rights, indigenous people’s rights, environmental protection and equality within global climate policies.

But the reality is, it will not. Because, for those in the halls of undemocratic power, the reality is CoP is about making a buck from the transition. Damn the “just” – it is about the “buck” – until the people rise.

One sure thing that all global movements are clearly articulating is that the world leaders cannot continue to maintain, pursue and rewrite a future that is in favour of corporations at the expense and cost of ordinary people around the world. 🌍

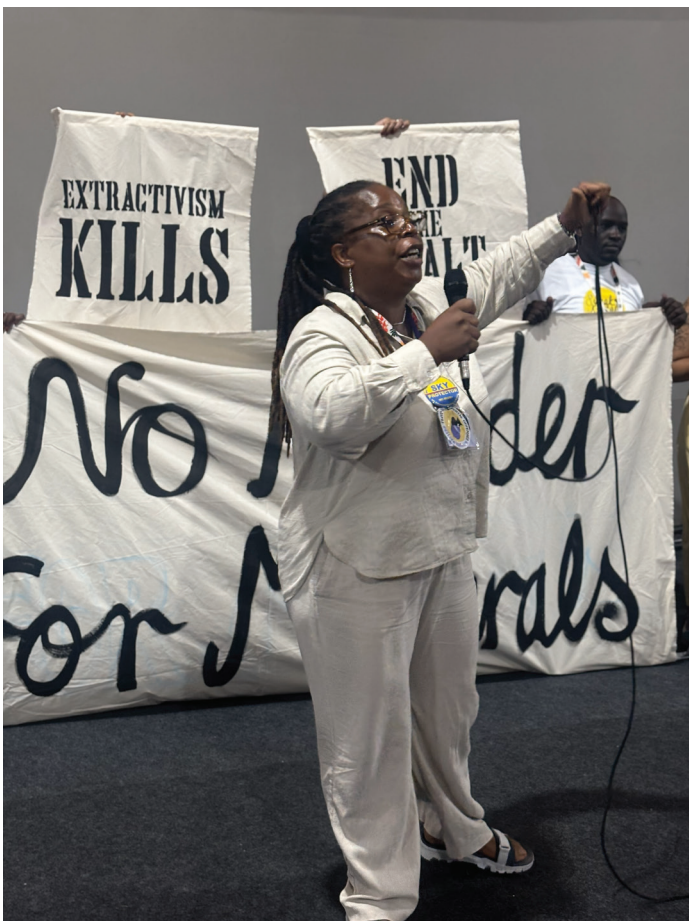


Photo story depicting scenes from events and actions at CoP30. Photos: Tsepang Molefe



CoP30 Action in Belem

Photo story by Tsepang Molefe





Photos from page 38 through to page 42 depict scenes from events, solidarity activities and protest actions of AJTN, groundWork, SA partners, GGON Africa, FOEI, Power Shift Africa and other civil society allies at CoP30. Photos: Tsepang Molefe





Our Light Our Power film premières at SORE convening

by Sphokazi Sigwebela

A powerful new film, *Our Light Our Power*, premièred at Suncoast Cinema in Durban during the recent Socially Owned Renewable Energy (SORE) Convening.

The documentary shines a spotlight on community-driven energy solutions that champion a just transition from fossil fuels to clean, renewable sources like solar and wind.

Inspired by the initiative *Mobilising Social Movements for Energy Democracy and Sovereignty in South Africa*, the film chronicles the journeys of the three grassroots organisations of South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), Vukani Environmental Movement (VEM) and Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), as they work toward socially owned renewable energy systems.

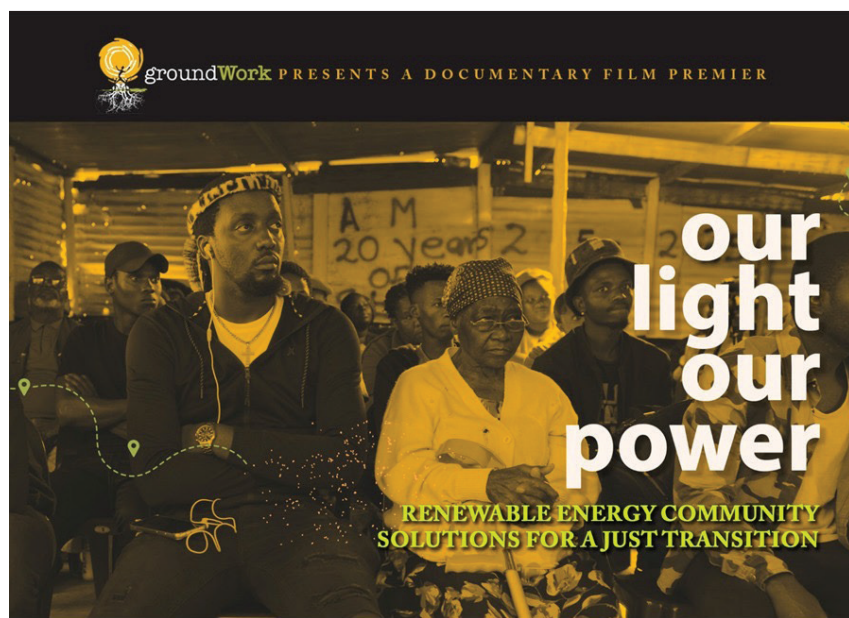
“The film tells stories of determination and hope from communities grappling with socio-economic and energy poverty. It highlights their mobilisation for community-led energy solutions and the power of grassroots organising in shaping a just energy future,” said Yegeshni Moodley, Climate and Energy Senior Campaign Manager.

Moodley explained that the film explores the diverse pathways these communities followed to establish socially owned solar demonstration units.

“From educational workshops and dialogue sessions to engaging with local government, the film shows how these organisations are crafting renewable energy models that work with and for the people, especially those historically excluded from energy decision-making,” she added.

Through the lens of film, *Our Light Our Power* captures the spirit of collective action and the pursuit of energy justice. It celebrates how communities come together to build inclusive, participatory energy alternatives, ensuring that the disadvantaged communities not only benefit from but also shape and own their energy futures. ☺

Sphokazi Sigwebela works on the Energy Democracy Project within the Climate and Energy Justice Campaign.



29 SEPT 2025 6-9PM
SUNCOAST CINEMA
FILM SCREENING AND PANEL DISCUSSION

RSVP: soreconvening@groundwork.org.za
by 16:00 on Monday 29 September to confirm numbers
due to limited seating

#PEOPLESPOWER#RENEWABLEENERGY #CLIMATECRISIS



Congratulations!



Left: We congratulate groundWork CEJ Campaigner, Siphesihle Mvundla, who was invited to serve as the civil society representative on the first ever Ethekewini Municipal Climate Change Forum. This will be an important space to see if and how the new Climate Change Act drives municipal action. Go, Sphe!

Photo: Lunga Bhengu

The groundWork team congratulates activist John Mthembu, co-founder of Vukani Environmental Justice Movement (VEM), our partner in Emalahleni, on winning the inaugural Black Sash Human Rights Award in the Youth Justice category. This award highlights the leadership and courage of a person under 35 in championing human rights and recognises John's contribution to

advocating for energy democracy, the just transition, access to information and community-centred leadership, which has advanced VEM's many successes in Mpumalanga and across the country.

Photo: Natalie Sternberg

