



November 8, 2023

A Green and Inclusive Future for Youth and Women in South Africa

a multistakeholder dialogue

1. Background

1.1 Context

South Africa is a major carbon emitter and among the most coal dependent countries on earth (1). Carbon emissions per person (7.3t) are significantly above the global average (4.7t), and more than seven times the average for the African continent (1t) (1,2). The country's economy, including its energy sector, has historically pivoted on the mining industry (primarily coal, platinum, and gold), which has been characterised by the exploitation of black, migrant labour in service of colonial and apartheid-era industrialisation. A number of large conglomerates, involved in mining, minerals beneficiation and crude oil among other sectors, have had privileged access to cheap electricity, infrastructure, and tax breaks, and have held significant power over the state and the economy (1). This has not only produced vested interests in a coal-dependent economy, but also grave inequities in access to affordable energy supply, with energy poverty concentrated in poor, black settlements on the outskirts of cities or in rural areas. A severe energy crisis, characterised by persistent blackouts and rising tariffs, has only deepened misgivings about the current energy policy. Meanwhile, low wages, health risks and poor safety have remained a key site of protest for mineworkers in South Africa.



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Nearly 30 years after democracy, South Africa remains the most unequal country on earth and among the hardest places to find a quality job (3,4). Only 40% of South Africa's working-age population is employed (5). Youth are particularly disadvantaged in the South African labour market (6). Over 45% of young people (aged 15-34) are unemployed, making them twice as likely to be jobless as their adult counterparts (35-64 years) (5). The proportion of young people in South Africa not in education, training or employment (NEET) exceeds that of any other nation (7). More than a third of youth (aged 15-24) are not in education, training or employment (NEET), with these rates having steadily risen since 2020 (5,8). Among those young people that are NEET, the overwhelming majority are black, and more than half are women, reflecting and reproducing patterns of historical, systemic inequity (9). Forty percent have not completed primary schooling (Grade 12) and are therefore entering the labour market with no formal qualifications. More than a third are looking for their first job. While being less likely to be employed, young people also have poorer job security and social protection than their adult counterparts (9,10).

The impetus for an energy transition in South Africa comes not only from the imperative to ameliorate its climate impact, but arguably even more so from an urgent need to secure and diversify energy supply, alleviate inequality, and provide opportunities for its young workforce. Yet the just transition sector, and the youth employment sector, continue to operate largely distinctly from one another. While the language of a just transition has become increasingly commonplace in policy discourse, there is little consensus about what 'justice' looks like in the context of a low-carbon transition, for whom this justice should be realised, and how it should be enacted. It is against this backdrop that the multi-stakeholder dialogue on opportunities for youth employment in the low carbon transition in South Africa was organised.

1.2 Purpose

On the 8th of November 2023, Percept, INCLUDE and Indalo Inclusive, convened a multi-stakeholder dialogue to draw together policymakers, implementers, practitioners, and advocates who intersect, in diverse ways, with questions of youth employment, and its relationship to a just energy transition in South Africa. The dialogue forms part of a collaborative project between INCLUDE and The International Development Centre (IDRC) titled "A Green and Inclusive Future for Youth in the Global South." Its aim is to scope existing knowledge and emerging trends on the topic of youth employment, low-carbon transitions, and the future of work in Africa, and facilitate engagement with key stakeholders in this field, including youth, policy actors, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders to develop an inclusive research agenda.

Our primary objectives for the South Africa multi-stakeholder were:

- Bridge existing siloes in the climate and youth development space.
- Create a space for collaborative thinking that lays the foundation for a community of practice that can inform existing processes advancing youth livelihoods and an inclusive energy transition in South Africa
- Facilitate conversation in a way that allows participants to break out of patterned ways of speaking, engaging, and imagining alternatives.

1.3 Participants

There were 30 participants including stakeholder representation across the following sectors: policy actors and government representatives, youth actors and youth networks, advocacy groups, civil society organisations, private sector companies, universities and training institutions.

The sections below provide a summary of the learning outcomes.

2. Tilling the soil: unsettling dominant narratives about youth and the low-carbon transition

The first session aimed to collectively explore and critique dominant narratives about South Africa's low-carbon transition (LCT). In this exercise, participants were asked to reflect in groups on the following set of questions:

1. **Who are the storytellers in South Africa's low-carbon transition?** In other words, who is authoring the story and what does this suggest about how power is distributed?
2. **Who are the characters in South Africa's low-carbon transition?** Stories of the low-carbon transition often have villains, victims, and heroes; actors and beneficiaries; lead roles and background actors. How these roles are cast depends on who is telling the story and what they are hoping to achieve.
3. **Where do young people and women feature?** What roles are they given in the narrative? How has this shaped how they act and/or are acted upon?
4. **Where are the silences or missing voices in the story?** What does this suggest about where power lies or gaps in the evidence base?

The intention of this exercise was to surface assumptions that might be living beneath the surface of conversations on the low carbon transition, and to identify differences and similarities in perspective between different stakeholders. It also aimed to identify gaps in the policy-making process, along with areas for future research.

2.1 Outcomes from the session

Participants across all groups critiqued the role of multi-lateral organisations and Global North investors in dictating narratives on the low-carbon transition in South Africa. The ability to shape narratives around the low-carbon position was perceived to be intimately related to capital. Multi-lateral organisations and countries which offered funding or financial support to South Africa dictate the pace and timelines of the low-carbon transition. In addition, Global North investors were custodians of the technology and expertise needed for the low carbon transition and would therefore greatly benefit from investing in South Africa. The narrative from Global North investors and multi-lateral organisations does not resonate with the affected communities. Alongside multi-lateral organisations, the fossil fuel industry and the South African government were also considered to be central storytellers. The government position was often represented by Eskom, who participants argued, was often seeking to delay or divert from the low-carbon transition in their narratives, leveraging the energy crisis as justification for this not prioritising a shift to renewable energy sources. Among both fossil fuel representatives and Eskom, the language is often about 'phasing down' as opposed to 'phasing out'

coal. The media, as a key storyteller, was also said to focus on the energy crisis and Eskom's failings in resolving it, rather than on the low-carbon transition.

Many groups acknowledged trade unions, and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the largest trade union federation in South Africa, in particular, as important storytellers in the low-carbon transition: their narrative has a strong focus on protecting the interests of employees in the fossil-fuel industry as decommissioning unfolds. The unions continually advocate for the low carbon transition to occur in a manner that is fair, just, and inclusive placing workers and communities at the centre. COSATU has been particularly concerned with the impact of the low carbon transition on those living in coal mining towns and the families and communities affected by the decommissioning of coal-powered generation plants.

Participants also reflected on the role of NGOs, academics, and activists in telling the story of the low-carbon transition. While these entities might be producing a significant amount of material; their relative lack of power in shaping decision-making begged the question as to whether they can really be considered storytellers.

While policy groupings like the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) and Trade and Industrial Policy strategies were acknowledged to be important storytellers, the voices of institutions and the individuals within them are by no means homogenous. While their narratives involved local communities, policy groups were found to operate in siloes and address specific aspects of the low carbon transition which would otherwise greatly benefit from a multi-sectoral balanced approach.



Photo by: Kate Miller

Overall, participants felt a discernible disconnect between those telling the story of the low-carbon transition and those affected by it. There was widespread agreement that the language in which stories of the low-carbon transition are told are highly technical and alienating to the general South African population. The policies and proposed solutions are presented in English which is not a language that is accessible to most. There is also a failure to connect climate questions with 'bread and butter issues' in a way that makes the narrative tangible to citizens.

Across groups, there was broad agreement that narratives of the low carbon transition often tokenise young people and are only included in engagements and meetings to tick the box of youth representation. They are afterthoughts in the narrative. Where they do appear, they are positioned, paradoxically, as both passive victims and solvers of the current crisis; both as vulnerable populations and as future leaders. This paradox is commonplace in popular understandings of young people in South Africa. In some scenarios, youth are seen as incapable of driving change or having the expertise and know-how to offer actionable solutions to the conversation. This has led to feelings of frustration and in some instances, youth have considered seeking employment abroad where they feel their opinions will be valued and they will be able to earn more at the same time. In other cases, the youth are left to bear all the weight of the crisis which was created by the generation before. There was little room for co-creation among different age generations.

Post-apartheid South African policy has described the country's youth both as the "greatest threat to social stability" and as a "demographic dividend" (11). The former suggests a "ticking time bomb" of increasingly impatient, disillusioned, and economically inactive young people. The latter anticipates the economic potential of a disproportionately large working-age population. Indeed, young people are viewed with both trepidation and tremendous expectation.

In addition to the tokenistic and paradoxical positioning of young people in the low-carbon transition, participants noted other key silences in the narrative:

- A gender analysis of the low-carbon transition is often missing.
- The voices of local communities outside of urban centres are relatively muted. Participants also felt it important to acknowledge that the interests of local communities tend to be opposite or divergent from the interests of climate activists.
- Women's groups, churches and other community-based organisations were often missing in dominant stories of the LCT.
- The realities of systemic racism and land dispossession, which have significant bearing on the justice elements of the LCT are often underplayed in dominant narratives.
- Indigenous approaches and local knowledges related to the energy transition and the green economy are under-explored.
- In-work precarity does not feature as loudly as job losses in the context of a just transition.
- The implications for children and people with disabilities are under-explored.
- Those Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) often fall outside the youth age bracket.



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3. Seeding collaboration

In the final session of the day; participants were encouraged to draw on the knowledge, relationships, and expertise in the room to find opportunities to shift power dynamics, enhance inclusivity in current policy processes and support strategic collaboration.

In the session, participants worked in groups to articulate a roadmap for collaborative action. This included articulating:

1. Shared goals.
2. What it would take to reach them.
3. What obstacles they might face along the way.
4. What their next steps might be.

Participants were encouraged to reflect on both their personal commitment to next steps, as well as

opportunities to intervene in current policy processes. They were also encouraged to contribute to a shared toolkit – a collective map of the resources, knowledge, and networks each participant might bring to progress the group towards these goals.

3.1 Outcomes from the session

Many participants acknowledged the complexity of navigating a transition to a low-carbon economy, as well as vested interests shaping its trajectory. In the face of this, it was often difficult for participants to articulate how they might influence the pathway of the low-carbon transition.

Nevertheless, participants articulated collective goals in several key areas:

Skills development

Participants identified the need to create an environment for upskilling and reskilling, particularly for women and young people. This, they argued, would require that the just energy transition and concepts of climate change is incorporated as early as possible in primary schools and into higher education and training curricula and that teachers and lecturers are appropriately capacitated. It would also demand that technical and vocational training colleges (TVETs) build stronger linkages with employers.

Given the challenges of transitioning recently out-of-school youth into the workplace, there was recognition of the need to mentor young people to support the just energy transition. Programmes would also need to be developed to re-skill coal mineworkers and identify expertise that might be transferrable to green jobs.

Knowledge-sharing

Participants argued that information and knowledge of the energy transition, and its implications, needed to be more widely shared. This would include translating technical research into accessible language and relevant messaging, including translation into local languages where necessary. Participants highlighted the importance of community-based workshops and information sessions in schools as vehicles to raise awareness about the implications and impact of the low-carbon transition.

Participation

Another key priority area identified by participants was the need to increase participation in and enhance the inclusivity of policy and decision-making processes. This would mean substantively involving affected communities in decision-making, and actively involving and incentivising youth. The creation of a youth working group to regularly input into policy processes around the low-carbon transition was also suggested. Finally, participants discussed the need for an organised movement, along with routes to stimulate the political mobilisation of young people, particularly in the lead-up to the 2024 general elections in South Africa.



Photo by: Kate Miller

Research

Finally, participants identified several areas for future research including the need to explore the potential of public employment programmes for the creation of green jobs; as well as the development of measurement frameworks to track youth employment in the green economy and the rate of funding being targeted to youth.

Several key obstacles were identified to achieving these objectives. Resource constraints, fuelled by a fiscal and debt crisis, were a major concern, as was a lack of political will and the prevalence of state-sponsored corruption. Participants also highlighted a lack of coordination and accountability among key stakeholders. Government and policy-making institutions were believed to be deliberately selective in their stakeholder consultations, while big corporates were accused of regularly greenwashing their role in the energy sector. Some also noted the challenges for women in entering the energy sector which included lack of adequate representation in the energy sector and safety concerns at works and in mines.

Coalition building

To achieve their goals, participants signalled the importance of building meaningful partnerships and extending information about the just energy transition policymaking. They also saw the need, in this awareness-raising, to connect the low-carbon transition with the lived realities and challenges of everyday South Africans. A stakeholder mapping and database of allies were considered key starting

points to building meaningful partnerships. Local funding, not driven by foreign investors, was also seen as an important lever for change with suggestions that the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA), and others might unlock funding in the green economy.

4. Closing and next steps

The workshop ended with each participant committing to taking an idea/ practice/ responsibility forward. These were captured as 'I will' commitments. All knowledge products, together with a database of fellow participants, are intended to be shared with participants to sustain relationships and conversations and build momentum for collaborative action.



Photo by: Kate Miller

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