

How the environmental justice movement is gathering momentum in South Africa

By [Jacklyn Cock](#)

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Environmental justice is a travelling discourse which has taken on distinctive meanings in different parts of the world. South Africa is no exception. As a mobilising force the concept emerged from the US where it was developed 50 years ago in opposition to practices that were identified by black communities as "[environmental racism](#)".



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The concept was first introduced in South Africa at a [conference](#) of environmental activists in 1992. Tackling environmental racism was seen to be central to the process of democratisation, especially between 1992 and 1994.

A form of environmental racism persists. Most black South Africans continue to live on the most damaged land, in the most polluted neighbourhoods near coal-fired power stations, steel mills, incinerators and waste sites. Many are without access to clean air, water and services.

Climate change is accelerating with devastating impact on the poor and working class. This is evident in rising food prices, crop failures and water shortages.

South Africa is in a state of ecological collapse moving towards ecological catastrophe. Many South Africans are exposed to what award-winning author Rob Nixon has [called](#) "the slow violence" of toxic pollution in a process which is deeply damaging and largely invisible.

New groups, new alliances

Over the past two decades a number of environmental justice organisations have been established. These include [Earthlife Africa](#), [Groundwork](#), the [Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance](#) and the [South Durban Community Environmental Alliance](#). And new environmental organisations are emerging such as [Mining Affected Communities United in Action](#) and [WoMin](#).

They are all involved in building popular power, developing new strategies and forms of communal solidarity, including formal and informal alliances. They are organising around concrete issues in the everyday experience of working people, especially rising food and energy prices.

Some of the new alliances are between very different groupings. An example is the [iMfolozi Community and Wilderness Alliance](#) which is engaged in a [struggle](#) against the proposed open cast [Fuleni Coal mine](#). Local women have mobilised with the support of conservation organisations against powerful forces such as commodity trader [Glencore](#) and resources group [BHP Billiton](#).

New linkages between labour and environmental activists are also emerging. The focus is to promote a "just transition" from the fossil fuel economy and challenging the binary between jobs or environmental protection.

Environmental justice struggles involve a range of mobilising issues. The most common demands and claims relate to rights and health. These are framed within Section 24 of the [Bill of Rights](#) in the South African constitution. This guarantees the right of all:

“ ... to live in an environment that is not harmful to health or wellbeing. ”

Environmentalism and South Africa's racist past

During both the colonial and the apartheid regime environmentalism operated effectively as an authoritarian conservation strategy. This was mainly concerned with the protection of threatened plants, animals and wilderness areas, to the neglect of health, labour and development issues. For many black South Africans dispossession was the other side of conservation as they were forcibly removed to create national parks and 'protected areas'. In the process they lost their land and livelihoods.

The concept of [environmental justice](#) provides a radical alternative to the discourse of conservation, questioning the market's ability to bring about social or environmental sustainability. It affirms the value of all forms of life against the interests of the rich and powerful. It represents a powerful challenge to the anodyne concept of sustainable development, and the increasing commodification and financialisation of nature packaged as "the green economy".

It is summed up succinctly by Samson Mokoena, speaker, founder and current chair of the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance.

“ For me with environmental justice you become yourself. You engage with real issues that the community is faced with everyday, like having water in your tap. It's a powerful concept because it links all the issues. It shows how everything is connected. ”

The South African government has not caught up with the concept of environmental justice. Its [commitments](#) to reducing polluting carbon emissions are vague and insubstantial. At present over [500 tonnes](#) of carbon a year are emitted. On top of this two new coal-fired [power stations](#), among the largest in the world, are being built and 40 new coal mines are [planned](#).

The possibility of a unified movement

What is the possibility of a unified environmental movement emerging? Clearly coal, as the main driver of the ecological crisis in the form of climate change, constitutes a powerful ground for unified action. Formal alliances in opposition to coal are growing. These alliances object to or call for:

- human rights abuses such as land dispossession,
- health impacts through water and air pollution
- loss of livelihoods,
- corruption in the granting of mining license,
- inadequate consultation with frontline communities, and
- increasing food security.

While coal is a cause, food insecurity is acknowledged to be one of the most serious [consequences of climate change](#). There is also a connection between food sovereignty and the logic of eco-feminism: both emphasise working with, rather than against, nature.

Collectively all these initiatives confront different aspects of the ecological crisis. They demonstrate an alternative paradigm, a different relationship both between human beings and between human beings and nature. What Hilary Wainwright [calls](#) "power as transformative capacity".

Transnational solidarity

All over the world the discourse of environmental justice is forging alliances locally and globally between north and south, and in linking the principles of social justice and ecological sustainability.

The South African case described here is not unique. Many of the environmental justice struggles on the African continent are against the dispossession and toxic pollution involved in extractivism.

South Africa is a microcosm of the contemporary world order, a world marked by growing inequality and environmental degradation that is leading to environmental catastrophe. The travelling and adaptive discourse of environmental justice has the capacity to connect local struggles, generalise them and forge global alliances in a process of 'globalisation from below'. This transnational solidarity is necessary to counter the current unprecedented global concentration of corporate power in a process of 'globalisation from above'.

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