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South African Case Report

# Trade Union Engagement for a Just Transition in South Africa

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# 1. Introduction

Africa is the continent hardest hit by climate change and yet the least responsible for it. South Africa is an outlier on the continent as the 12th largest polluter in the world. And yet, it is also at the forefront of diplomatic demands for climate reparations from the Global North.

In October 2021 it set a more ambitious Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) target range, where it aims to reach net zero by 2050. However, "Despite being a step in the right direction, the updated target is not yet compatible with limiting warming to 1.5°C."[1] The country's energy infrastructure is carbon intensive. Eskom, the country's electricity parastatal, is the biggest polluter in the country. This, the government acknowledges in its agreements on NDCs, is a central focus of its carbon reduction efforts.[2] As Alex Lenferna notes,

**When measured by the amount of climate pollution produced per unit of GDP, it is worse than China and ranks behind only a handful of countries like Turkmenistan, Palau, and Mongolia. Of the major economies, South Africa's energy sector is the most polluting of all G20 nations, thanks to its incredibly heavy dependency on polluting coal. Being such a heavy climate polluter, South Africa arguably owes its own climate debt, especially to its African neighbours who have mostly done little to cause the climate crisis and yet are suffering devastating impacts.[3]**

There are significant incentives to decarbonise. Firstly, low-carbon development is vital to the country's economic growth and trading relationships, particularly given that carbon reductions are necessary to adhere to the strict terms of international trade agreements upon which over 750,000 jobs are dependent.[4] Secondly, there is a widely held view that some change is needed in the heavy-polluting energy sector due to the need to tackle ongoing power supply problems – marked by lengthy scheduled blackouts (known as "load shedding"). Thirdly, the economic case for a transition to renewables is gaining momentum in powerful government circles as the costs of maintaining and repairing an ageing and inefficient coal power station fleet grow while renewable costs fall.[5] Added to these incentives, there is significant international financial and political commitment to promoting an energy transition in South Africa. This commitment stems from South Africa's norm leadership in international relations, its considerable influence in the African continent, as well as its relatively industrialised (and carbon-heavy) economy. International financial commitments to decarbonise the electricity sector also means that South Africa has emerged as a test case for internationally-financed transition as well as a potential blueprint for transitions elsewhere. The Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) agreement struck at COP 26 between South Africa and a collection of Western actors (USA, UK, France, Germany and the EU), reflected the most significant agreement emerging from those COP negotiations. The agreement was subsequently consolidated and expanded at COP27 and has been replicated for a range of similar agreements with other countries in the Global South. The financing of the deal, initially including US $8.5bn, enables South Africa to concentrate considerable investment in the transition. However, the South African government estimates that the ultimate costs of the transition will be much higher in the medium to long term.[6]

1 Climate Tracker, 'South Africa', 2024 <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/south-africa/> [accessed 7 November 2024].

2 '**South Africa Updated First NDC September 2021.Pdf**' <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/2022-06/South%20Africa%20updated%20first%20NDC%20September%202021.pdf> [accessed 7 November 2024].

3 Alex Lenferna, 'South Africa's Unjust Climate Reparations: A Critique of the Just Energy Transition Partnership', *Review of African Political Economy*, 50.177–178 (2023), pp. 491–501 (p. 1), doi:10.1080/03056244.2023.2278953.

4 Based on estimates from interview data with the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Presidential Climate Commission.

5 Iago Davids, 'Employment Concerns: Power Stations Running out of Steam in Green Race' *Business Day*, 2017

6 Alexander Winning and others, **'South Africa Says It Needs $84 Billion for Energy Transition in next Five Years'**, section COP27, Reuters, 4 November 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/business/cop/safrica-climate-transition-cost-84-bln-over-next-five-years-2022-11-04/> [accessed 21 January 2025].

The responsibility for executing an environmental transition lies primarily with the South African government, led by the African National Congress (ANC) party since the first democratic elections in 1994.[7] Since assuming office in February 2018, President Cyril Ramaphosa has accelerated the government's efforts to tackle climate change. He has optimistically noted that despite the challenges the country faces, "South Africa is also fortunately blessed with abundant renewable energy resources, and developments in the economics of renewable energy technologies over the last decade are very favourable to low-carbon development in the country."[8] To this end the South African government has led an extensive process of consultation with business, policy makers, academics, labour, civil society and communities to develop its *Just Transition Framework* (JTF) – a document that has been hailed both domestically and internationally for its ambition.

However, this apparent congruence of political will belies the political contradictions of the project to decarbonise South Africa. We argue that the aesthetic appearance of calm, aligned commitment to action has already become bogged down in the contradictions and divides inherent to complicated postcolonial political realities. Colonialism and apartheid produced an economy skewed toward the interests of external powers and white settler communities that extracted South Africa's abundant natural resource wealth while entrenching poverty, unemployment, and precarity for the black majority. It also established resilient, vested interests in the maintenance of the highly-polluting "minerals energy complex" (MEC) that have survived (and thrived) into the post-apartheid era.[9] We argue that at the centre of the planetary crisis generated by fossil capitalism, the MEC presents a source of existential threat to humanity (through its environmental devastation), as well as a source of wealth and security for these vested interests. Building the MEC was central to colonial transformation and violence. Dismantling it represents the most profound reconfiguration of South Africa's economy in living memory, generating fear, anguish and anxieties for those communities (and their unions) most impacted. We hypothesise that this reconfiguration will generate considerable tensions and contradictions, while the substantive character of any "just" transition will be determined by how a myriad of competing interests are managed.

The biggest challenge remains to move beyond broad normative consensus established contained in the JTF into the practicalities and everyday dynamics of the transition, including the politics of how competing interests and historical conditions are navigated, challenged, and/or overcome.

7 The ANC lost its majority in the 2024 election for the first time since 1994 and now leads a Government of National Unity with several smaller parties.

8 **'South Africa Updated First NDC September 2021'**, n.d., p. 4 <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/2022-06/South%20Africa%20updated%20first%20NDC%20September%202021.pdf> [accessed 7 November 2024].

9 Ben Fine and Zavareh Rustomjee, *The Political Economy of South Africa: From Minerals-Energy Complex to Industrialisation* (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 1996).


Labour's role in all of this is fraught with contradictions and challenges. Despite the potential impacts on jobs in some sectors, unions have rhetorically committed to a just transition, particularly at a national level through the labour federation COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions). COSATU's commitment to the just transition stems from the leading role that the global trade union movement has taken in advocating for workers' rights in a transition. Indeed, COSATU set out its principles for a just transition in 2011 and has led discussions over just transition in the country, drawing on the understandings of the need for environmental justice it shares with its international counterparts.[10] However, this embrace is, at best, uneven, and always heavily caveated at the national level, particularly where unions in the carbon-heavy sectors push back against the need for change. In short, there is surface-level, precarious commitment to a just transition in South Africa but this is now facing increasing opposition, particularly in carbon-intensive sectors, which in turn is calling into question what a "just" transition is and whose agenda it should serve.

10 **COSATU, 11th Congress Resolutions** (2012) <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fmediadon.co.za%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2018%2F12%2F11th-Congress-Resolutions-and-2013-February-CEC.doc&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK> [accessed 8 November 2024].

# 2.
# Labour and climate policy in country

## Climate policy in South Africa

The overarching goal to achieve net zero by 2050 was set out in the revised Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) in 2021. According to the UNDP,

**South Africa's updated mitigation targets represent a significant progression from the first NDC : the country commits to a fixed target for greenhouse gas emissions levels of 398-510 MtCO2e by 2025, and 350-420 MtCO2e by 2030, compared to 398 and 614 Mt CO2e between 2025 and 2030 as communicated in the first NDC.**[11]

These targets are pursued via the country's Low-Emission Development Strategy (2020)[12], which is one of three key documents setting out the country's priorities and strategies for tackling climate change alongside the National Climate Change Response Policy (NCCRP)[13] and the recently passed (July 2024) Climate Change Act.[14]

Approaches to tackle the climate crisis in South Africa are incorporated in sector-specific and national level policy documents. The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) (1998) which, although not addressing climate change specifically, nonetheless sought to establish "procedures and institutions to facilitate and promote public participation in environmental governance" and that to establish a norm that "law should be enforced by the State and that the law should facilitate the enforcement of environmental laws by civil society."[15] It therefore established the legal basis for subsequent climate-related legislation as well as a reference point for future legal battles. The *National Environmental Management: Air Quality Act (2004)* established emission standards and monitoring and reporting requirements to enforce this. It wasn't until 2011 that the first legislation recognising climate change came into force, specifically the *National Climate Change Response White Paper (2011)* which "sets out the country's long-term mitigation and adaptation goals, highlighting the need to transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy."[16] Significantly, this reflects a shift instigated in large part by the unions through their alliance with the governing ANC party. Debates emerged in internal union fora about climate change and just transition and these discussions in the unions carried over into the preparation of the *National Development Plan* (NDP) between alliance partners, which would become a cornerstone of the ANC government's wider development strategy. Following the earlier discussion in the unions (see below), the NDP reflected the beginnings of a more targeted focus and future discussion around the "Transition to a low-carbon economy."[17]

This was followed by series of sector or issue-specific legislation, such as the *Carbon Tax Act* (2019) which established taxes on carbon emissions in line with the "polluter-pays-principle." The *National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy* (2019)

11 UNDP, '**South Africa: Climate Promise**', UNDP Climate Promise, 2021 <https://climatepromise.undp.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/south-africa> [accessed 7 November 2024].

12 Government of South Africa, '**South Africa's Low Emission Development Strategy 2050**', 2020 <https://www.dffe.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/2020lowemission_developmentstrategy.pdf>.

13 Government of South Africa, **National Climate Change Response White Paper, 2011** <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/nationalclimatechangeresponsewhitepaper0.pdf>.

14 Government of South Africa, '**Act No.22 of 2024: Climate Change Act 2024**', Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 23 July 2024 <https://static.pmg.org.za/50966_23-7_ClimateChangeAct22_2024.pdf> [accessed 21 January 2025].

15 Government of South Africa, '**Act No. 107 of 1998: National Environmental Management Act, 1998**', 27 November 1998, p. 3 <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/a107-98.pdf> [accessed 21 January 2025].

16 Government of South Africa, National Climate Change Response White Paper, p. 5.

17 Government of South Africa, '**National Development Plan**', 2012 <https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/National_Development_Plan> [accessed 7 May 2025].

In December 2020 President Ramaphosa established the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) with the express desire to:

> “Advise on and facilitate a common understanding of a just transition, cognisant of the socio-economic, environmental and technological implications of climate change”
> (The Presidency 2020).

identified priority sectors and vulnerable regions and necessary adaptation measures.[18] The *Climate Change Act* reflects efforts to consolidate existing work while serving as the basis for the achievement of future aims and targets. In short, “The [Act] seeks to enable the alignment of policies that influence South Africa’s climate change response, to ensure South Africa’s transition to a low-carbon economy and climate-resilient economy, and to enhance the country’s ability and capacity over time to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”[19]

The national government under Ramaphosa intensified governmental focus on climate change. While national just transition strategies are often poorly defined and developed, serving an adjunctive purpose alongside other climate policy initiatives, in South Africa the discussion of just transition has developed at length and is front and centre of both national strategy and international pressure for reform in the guise of the JETP agreements. In December 2020 President Ramaphosa established the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) with the express desire to “advise on and facilitate a common understanding of a just transition, cognisant of the socio-economic, environmental and technological implications of climate change” (The Presidency 2020). The PCC began work on developing sector specific policies, like updating the *Integrated Resource Plan* to tackle energy demand and generation. These targeted initiatives were designed to fall under an overarching just transition ‘framework’ across sectors. After widespread consultation (see below) the 2022 JTF “sets out a shared vision for the just transition, principles to guide the transition, and policies and governance arrangements to give effect to the transition.”[20]

18 Government of South Africa, ‘**National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy**’, Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, 13 November 2019 <https://www.dffe.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/nationalclimatechange_adaptationstrategy_ue10november2019.pdf> [accessed 21 January 2025].

19 Government of South Africa, ‘**Climate Change Bill: Consideration of Public Submissions | PMG**’, 2023 <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/37331/> [accessed 7 May 2025].

20 Presidential Climate Commission, **A Framework for a Just Transition in South Africa** (2022) <https://www.climatecommission.org.za/just-transition-framework> [accessed 7 November 2024].

Founded on the principle that "People must be at the centre of the climate change response Framework,"[21] there were several stages to the development of the Framework. The JTF drew on work completed by a broad range of stakeholders, including labour, at NEDLAC, the National Planning Commission, and in the drafting of the Climate Change Bill. This was supplemented by a wide-ranging series of stakeholder engagements, including: 1) the commissioning of policy briefs; 2) a series of publicly broadcasted workshops and events "incorporating views of government ministers, civil society, business, labour, traditional leadership, youth, and the research community, among others, to form a comprehensive view of the major topics for a just transition framework;" 3) commissioned "essays from experts in different fields (academia, business, labour, and civil society);" 4) consultations with workers, communities, small businesses, and social partners between 2021-22 "in line with international best practice guidance (ILO 2021), allowing impacted groups to discuss their own development pathways and livelihoods;" 5) inviting responses to the draft framework; 6) holding "a series of in-person community consultations between March and May 2022, to better understand the needs of communities that are being impacted in the shift away from fossil fuel-based economies, ensuring that the framework is tailored to those most impacted by the changes that lie ahead (PCC 2022a). This included significant engagement with municipalities and traditional leaders in affected regions (PCC 2022a);" and finally 7) "large multi-stakeholder conference in May 2022 in Johannesburg."[22] From this engagement in the development of a shared vision for just transition, the PCC claimed that the Framework had established "broad consensus on how to define a just transition, and broad commitment across all stakeholders to the principle"[23] Environmental NGO and member of the PCC, groundWork has commended this part of the consultation process, describing the process of drafting the JTF was generally transparent.[24] The unions, while retaining a strong degree of ambivalence about the JTF and wider drive toward net zero, have nonetheless welcomed their ability to influence the PCC and the JTF itself (see below).

However, the international financing of the transition in South Africa has raised concerns about the closing down of negotiating spaces over climate policy. Owing to spiralling national debt, intersecting social crises, and tepid economic growth, the South African government has sought to secure international financing for its energy transition. Internationally, there is significant financial and political commitment to decarbonising energy in South Africa that the government has successfully tapped into, particularly because of the country's status as one of the highest world polluters.

The JETP was heralded by the then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson as a "game-changing partnership [which] will set a precedent for how countries can work together to accelerate the transition to clean, green energy and technology."[25] The JETP emerged in recognition of the need to facilitate transitions in the developing world through new financial mechanisms and South Africa, as a high emitter but with a seemingly willing government, was prioritised as a test case. At the launch of JETP US President Joe Biden outlined South Africa's agreement as a precursor to wider Western-led efforts to promote energy reforms across the global South, noting that:

21 PCC, *A Framework for a Just Transition in South Africa*, p. 3.

22 PCC, *A Framework for a Just Transition in South Africa*, pp. 4–5.

23 Ibid, p.5

24 David Hallowes and Victor Munnik, **The groundWork Report 2022 - Contested Transition: State and Capital against Community** (groundWork, 2022) <https://groundwork.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/gW-Report-2022-for-web.pdf>.

25 European Commission, '**France, Germany, UK, US and EU Launch Ground-Breaking International Just Energy Transition Partnership with South Africa**', European Commission - Press Corner, 2 November 2021 <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/cs/ip_21_5768> [accessed 24 January 2025].

**Right now South Africa is the largest emitter in Africa due in large part to the heavy reliance on coal for power. By closing South African coal plants ahead of schedule and investing in clean power alternatives for the people of South Africa and supporting an equitable and inclusive transition in South Africa's coal sector, we are following through on the pledge the G7 partners made in Cornwall to accelerate the transition away from coal in developing countries.**[26]

The JETP agreement was followed up at COP27 with the JET-IP (Just Energy Transition Investment Plan). The JET-IP initiative sets out a detailed plan for how just transition will be financed and operationalised. The initiative was taken by a small group attached to the Presidency and was widely acclaimed by Western partners as a reaffirmation of the South African Government's intent to take the transition seriously. However, civil society organisations – including those linked to the PCC – alluded to similar concerns especially regarding financial packages and the prominence of conditional loans, as well as the lack of adequate consultation on key elements of the deal.[27] This shift away from the more consensual approach to policy deliberation that produced the hared normative vision of the JTF toward the closed, centralised decision making concerning just transition's operationalisation has also been a key concern of organised labour.

## Organized labour in country

Understanding the historical political context of South Africa and its unions is vital to understanding the contemporary dynamics of union organisation and how long-standing political divisions within the unions manifest in their responses to climate change. There are two core branches of what is a divided union movement: those in a formal alliance with the ruling party and those who are not.

This distinction is critical: like other former settler-colonies emerging from colonialism and white minority rule in the region, the party which headed the liberation struggle maintains a dominant position in the country's politics.[28] The ANC remains the largest party in the country. Despite losing its majority, the party's erstwhile political domination has afforded it the ability to determine the country's socio-economic agenda for three decades. Materially speaking, it has also established the party – and the entrenched networks associated with it – as "gatekeepers" to resources and opportunities through their control over the functions of the state.[29] Ideologically speaking, the party harnesses its historic identity as the figurehead of the anti-apartheid struggle to project itself as a paternalistic defender of black South African interests in the present, often in opposition to what it frames as nefarious alliances serving domestic and international "imperialist" agendas bent on subverting black majority rule. In short, the party occupies a formidable position domestically from which it can try to control ideological and material struggles for power and influence.

How the unions navigate their relationship with the liberation movement – and the ANC in particular – has been a subject of long-standing contestation dating back to the formation of the unions during colonialism. The long-standing historical divides between what might be best crudely characterised as being between the "political" and the "workerist" traditions.

26 Ibid

27 Interview HBS_SA_22; Hallowes and Munnik, **The groundWork Report 2022** - *Contested Transition: State and Capital against Community.; South Africa Climate Action Network, Joint Civil Society Organisations in South Africa Statement on the Just Energy Transition Investment Plan* – Sacan.Africa, n.d. <https://sacan.africa/2023/04/23/joint-civil-society-organisations-in-south-africa-statement-on-the-just-energy-transition-investment-plan/> [accessed 29 January 2025].

28 David Everatt, 'The Long Decline of South Africa's ANC', *Journal of Democracy*, 35.4 (2024), pp. 135–48.

29 Alexander Beresford, 'Power, Patronage, and Gatekeeper Politics in South Africa', *African Affairs*, 114.455 (2015), pp. 226–48.

The first non-racial union federation, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), was formed in 1955 following decades of work (led in part by the Communist Party in the national liberation movement) to mobilise black workers.[30] SACTU was formally aligned to the liberation movement resisting apartheid led by the ANC and its ally, the South African Communist Party (SACP). The ANC, formed in 1912, was essentially a nationalist movement aiming to secure democratic freedoms. Its alliance with the SACP was forged in the early 1950s and was founded upon an understanding among communists of the need to support and prioritise the nationalist struggle against "colonialism of a special type." In 1960 these organisations were formally banned, forcing their activities underground and many of their leaders into exile. At this stage, in the early 1960s, the ANC and the SACP leadership (which were quite fluid) began to advocate and organise armed struggle against the apartheid state and several of their most prominent leaders were imprisoned.

Aligned to the ANC during this period, SACTU was therefore part of the "political tradition" within the union movement that rejected a restrictive focus on the workplace alone and situated struggles for workers' rights and interests as indissoluble from the struggle for political liberation.[31] However, while this political involvement raised the profile of the unions and enabled their growth, it also brought SACTU and its unions into direct conflict with the apartheid state. This eventually faced forced SACTU into exile in 1964, alongside other sections of the liberation movement.[32]

With SACTU exiled and effectively moribund in the workplace, a debate emerged about the expediency of political alliances that would undermine shop floor organisation.[33] In the 1970s a 'workerist' tradition emerged urging the unions to concentrate on the formation of strong shop floor organisation and factory level demands, while maintaining a political distance from the liberation movement.[34] Despite some success for these unions – in terms of achieving employer recognition and establishing strong shopfloor democratic norms– the strategic debate re-emerged in the face of growing oppression from the apartheid state in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[35] A fragile consensus began to emerge around that idea that it was impossible to disaggregate workers' struggles from those of their wider communities and, ultimately, the struggles for political freedom. This led to the formation of a new federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985. COSATU immediately began to play a leading role at the forefront of various township struggles and within umbrella organisations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF).[36] Eddie Webster[37] famously coined the term "social movement unionism" (SMU) to describe this radical form of democratic and politicised unionism

30 Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, *Organize or Starve!: The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).

31 Roger Southall and Edward Webster, 'Unions and Parties in South Africa: COSATU and the ANC in the Wake of Polokwane', in *Trade Unions and Party Politics: Labour Movements in Africa*, 2010, pp. 135-7.

32 Southall and Webster, 'Unions and Parties in South Africa', p. 136.

33 Robert Fine, with Dennis Davis, *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa* (Pluto, 1990).

34 Eddie Webster, 'The Alliance under Stress: Governing in a Globalizing World', *Democratization*, published online 1 March 2001, pp. 256–57, world, doi:10.1080/714000178.

35 Jeremy Baskin, *Striking Back a History of COSATU (with New Introduction)* (2019).

36 Baskin, *Striking Back a History of COSATU (with New Introduction)*; Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991* (New Africa Books, 2000); Gay W. Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance: Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985* (University of California Press, 2023); Eddie Webster, 'The Rise of Social-Movement Unionism: The Two Faces of the Black Trade Union Movement in South Africa *', in State, *Resistance and Change in South Africa* (Routledge, 1988).

37 Webster, 'The Rise of Social-Movement Unionism'.

practiced by COSATU affiliated unions. Like elsewhere on the African continent,[38] unions in South Africa therefore played a role at the forefront of struggles for democracy and against colonial and white minority rule.

While this still provoked concerns that the unions' quest for socialism would be diluted or subsumed by the liberation movement, the forging of an ever-closer alliance accelerated after the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 and the release of political prisoners. This led to the formalisation of a "Tripartite Alliance" between COSATU, the ANC and the SACP.[39] As a result of its continued organisational power and its role in the alliance, COSATU secured significant "wins" from the new alliance government, including the progressive national constitution and the ambitious Labour Relations Act (LRA), which provide some of the most broad-ranging labour protections in the world.[40] The new alliance government, under the leadership of the ANC, established significant spaces for corporatist approaches to policy making. For example, the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), established by parliament in 1994, provides a platform for social dialogue between government, unions, business organizations, and civil society. Forums such as NEDLAC continue to influence the policy agenda, including climate policy (see above).[41]

However, the alliance relationship became gradually more rancorous following the embrace of what the unions perceived to be a very conservative, neoliberal economic policy by the ANC in government, which has seen the unions side-lined from critical policy debates.[42] Government consultation with NEDLAC, for example, has been variable and the forum has often assumed a deliberative rather than directive relationship with government vis a vis policy. This made the put alliance relationship under great strain, even though support among ordinary workers for the ANC remained resilient through the first two decades of its rule.[43]

It was not until 2010, however, that significant political fault lines would begin to emerge within COSATU. At this point major disagreements erupted in the union movement, creating two factions. Beresford traces the origins of this split, arguing that:

**The core areas of disagreement which began to create a wedge between these rival factions included the unions' responses to three core issues: first, the ANC's new economic programme, the National Development Plan (NDP); second, the militant strike wave on the platinum belt; and, third, the response to the Marikana massacre.[44]**

38 J. Kraus, *Trade Unions and the Coming of Democracy in Africa* (Springer, 2007).

39 Alexander Beresford, *South Africa's Political Crisis: Unfinished Liberation and Fractured Class Struggles* (Springer, 2016).

40 Although this has gradually been challenged S. (Sakhela) Buhlungu, **A Paradox of Victory : COSATU and the Democratic Transformation in South Africa** (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010) <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130282269567094656> [accessed 1 May 2025]; Oupa Lehulere, *The Labour Relations Act and the Foundation of Neoliberalism in South Africa* (Khanya, 2015); Carin Runciman, 'Rolling Back the Right to Strike: Amendments to South Africa's Labour Relations Act and Their Implications for Working-Class Struggle: Review of African Political Economy: Vol 46, No 160', 2019 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03056244.2019.1641478> [accessed 1 May 2025].

41 Buhlungu, *A Paradox of Victory;* Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster, 'Challenging Transition Theory: The Labor Movement, Radical Reform, and Transition to Democracy in South Africa', *Politics & Society*, 23.1 (1995), pp. 75–106, doi:10.1177/0032329295023001004.

42 Raphaël Botiveau, 'Longevity of the Tripartite Alliance: The Post-Mangaung Sequence', *Review of African Political Economy,* 40.138 (2013), pp. 620–27, doi:10.1080/03056244.2013.854042; Sakhela Buhlungu and Malehoko Tshoaedi, *A Contested Legacy: Organisational and Political Challenges Facing COSATU* (Brill, 2013), doi:10.1163/9789004214606_002; Buhlungu, *A Paradox of Victory;* Devan Pillay, 'The Enduring Embrace: COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance during the Zuma Era', Labour, *Capital and Society / Travail, Capital et Société,* 44.2 (2011), pp. 56–79.2013

43 Sakhela Buhlungu, *Trade Unions and Democracy: Cosatu Workers' Political Attitudes in South Africa* (HSRC Press, 2006).

44 Beresford, *South Africa's Political Crisis*, p. 17.

The National Union of Metalworkers South Africa (NUMSA) – whose leadership had historically always had strong workerist tendencies - took a leading role in this emerging factional split. At its Special Congress in December 2013 NUMSA's resolution's including stinging criticism of a "dysfunctional" alliance, calling for it to be broken and for a new "United Front" political movement to emerge that would champion a new era of working-class struggle for a socialist South Africa.[45]

A rival federation called the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) emerged to house breakaway unions from the COSATU fold, as well as some of the previously independent unions. SAFTU adopted a leftist political orientation and its largest affiliate, NUMSA, even launched an ill-fated socialist party in the 2019 election. Meanwhile, COSATU maintained its close alliance with the ANC and its largest affiliate, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), still has some influence within the ANC elite, although this appears to be waning according to union leaders.

The significance of these political divides can be seen in union responses to the climate crisis. While both sections of the labour movement have influence over climate policy, there are key differences. On the one hand, COSATU and its affiliates enjoy access to channels of power in the alliance. On the other hand, the autonomy of SAFTU and its affiliates (like NUMSA) has enabled them to take more confrontational and uncompromising positions *vis-a-vis* the ANC government and its climate policy. There is, however, broad alignment regarding their opposition to the current proposals for transition contained within the JETP agreement (see below).

45 Numsa, '**Resolutions Adopted at Numsa Special National Congress, December 16-20 2013**', NUMSA, 30 January 2014 <https://numsa.org.za/2014/01/resolutions-adopted-numsa-special-national-congress-december-16-20-2013/> [accessed 1 May 2025].

## The role of unions/organised labour in climate policy making

Despite the differences in political strategies between SAFTU-affiliated unions (like NUMSA), and the COSATU-affiliated unions (like NUM), the government has given several very senior unionists commissioner status on the on the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC), which advises the Presidency on climate policy. This role in part reflects the continued influence of the alliance relationship but also, critically, that the government sees the union as powerful stakeholders in the transition whose voices cannot and should not be ignored.[46]

The PCC is an independent, statutory, multistakeholder body chaired by the president and sits directly within the presidency. The commission is designed to meet quarterly but with some of its thematic working groups meet more regularly. The PCC is comprised of 13 government ministers and 24 commissioners, which include city mayors, student activists, NGOs leaders/activists, business leaders, and religious figures. There are currently 3 unionists acting as commissioners, including Boitumelo Molete (COSATU Policy Coordinator), Mac Chavalala (President of NUMSA), and Mbulaheni Mbodi (National Secretary of NUMSA for Eskom). Lebogang Mulaisi (formerly COSATU Policy Coordinator) was previously a commissioner but in July 2023 became the PCC's Chief Operations Officer. The presence of these union voices, while outnumbered by those from business and NGO circles, yields the space for the unions to influence climate policy, both nationally and, indeed, internationally: they are all invited to join the COP to further influence, for example. At the national level, the PCC draws on corporatist institutions such as NEDLAC as a resource from which to draw insight and the perspectives of the labour movement. It does so as a "an independent, statutory, multistakeholder body" which the aim "to oversee and facilitate a just and equitable transition towards a low-emissions and climate-resilient economy."[47]

This inclusive approach, while limited to elites within the union movement, was commended by senior union leaders who commented that they felt they had a strong channel of influence in the PCC; one that could enable united unions activity. As one senior COSATU official argued:

**The PCC is now housed under NEDLAC, so we have quite a good relationship with the PCC and we're hoping that they will be considerate when it comes to worker issues. We have three representatives that are labour specific. We have Jaque [Hugo] from FEDUSA, we have Mbulaheni [Mbodi], who's from Numsa, and we have Lebogang [Mulaisi] who's then the COSATU policy head. So those are quite influential people and also we have commissioners on the PCC. So with their guidance through the process, we're hopeful that the issues of workers will be firmly raised. So the PCC has been quite welcoming of COSATU's inputs. I've represented COSATU on dialogs with the PCC quite a number of times and they do sound like they're hearing us.**[48]

Indeed, both sections of the union movement can compel government to consult with NEDLAC, while COSATU remains an influential stakeholder in policy making through the Tripartite Alliance. This enables COSATU and its affiliates, like NUM, to exert influence through informal channels regarding climate change and other issues. It is widely recognised (and celebrated) in NUM, for example that its former General Secretaries, Cyril Ramaphosa and Gwede Mantashe, currently occupying the positions of State President and Minister for Mining and Energy, respectively (and both sit on the PCC).

46 Interview HBS_SA_24

47 Presidential Climate Commission, '**Presidential Climate Commission: Overview', Presidential Climate Commission: Towards A Just Transition, n.d**. <https://www.climatecommission.org.za/> [accessed 26 January 2025].

48 Interview HBS_SA_2

One official, for example, argued that:

**I think that if you put your arguments together well, you have a friendly door [to knock on] still because its a comrade [in power]. People call them by first name. They pitch up here [in the union office], you know, and we do not see a lot of security with them. You just look up and say 'hey that looks like the president of the country' [laughs pointing down the corridor]. So I think the union still has a space to influence government directly.**[49]

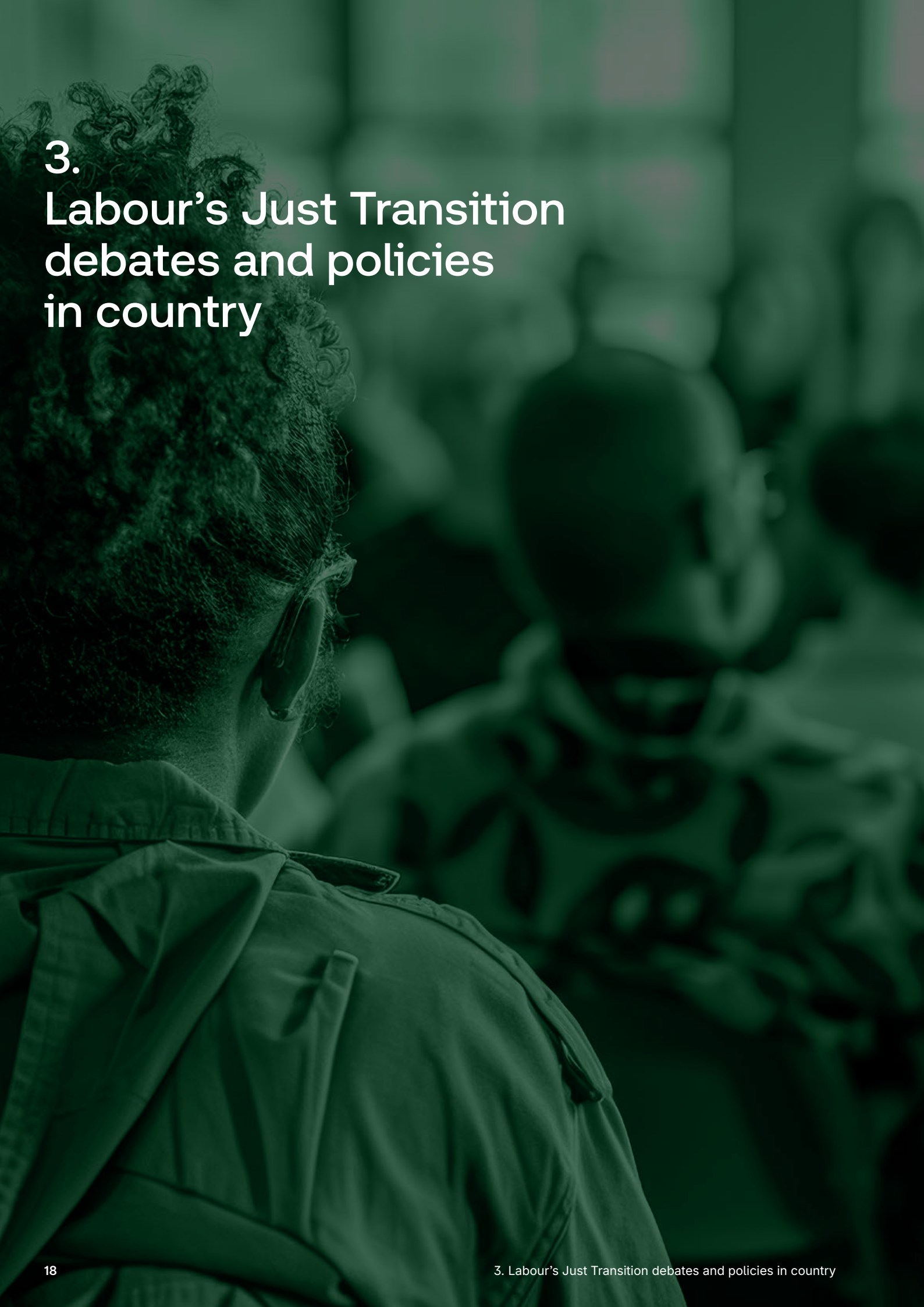
However, this perspective is not shared by those unions outside of COSATU, not least because they do not enjoy such access. COSATU's affiliates also do not universally agree on their influence in practice. Its senior leadership at both the Federation level and within its affiliates complain that their capacity to influence decisions in government is at best patchy, and that they are often ignored at critical moments.[50] Nonetheless, union leadership within and outside COSATU are united in their shared perception that, when it comes to *international* agreements like JETP, they have very little influence.[51]

This exclusion is significant for two reasons. First, in terms of substance, it has reduced union influence in ongoing debates at the centre of South Africa's climate change politics concerning the very nature of what is just transition ought to be. Second, it has generated a very public backlash to the international agreements and fuelled mistrust between the unions and those primarily responsible for the JETP and JET-IP: mistrust that has generated a level of antipathy that will be a challenge to overcome to pursue a shared normative vision of just transition moving forward. In short, the ostensive focus of all actors – including government, international lenders, unions, civil society, capital – remains centred on a 'just transition'. However, moves by the government and international lenders to determine the substance of this agenda in closed spaces erodes whatever broad consensus was achieved by the JTF, and with it its promises of procedural justice at the centre of JT action.

49 Interview HBS_SA_5

50 Interviews from fieldwork

51 Interviews from fieldwork



# 3. Labour’s Just Transition debates and policies in country

Individual affiliates, such as NUM, have long-raised environmental issues as part of specific individual campaigns to protect workers and communities from the harmful impacts of local pollution, for example. However, at a national level, COSATU's acknowledgement of global climate change has only developed recently and has been couched in an overarching strategic ambivalence stemming from competing interests within and between COSATU and its affiliates over time.

In the 1990s and early 2000s COSATU's commitments to environmental issues were scarcely articulated and, where environmental issues came onto the agenda the Federation's instinctive posture was to defend workers' jobs, even where this might create clear environmental harm. For example, COSATU was openly resistive to specific national environmental initiatives, such as the move to introduce charges for plastic carrier bags in retail. Congress resolutions argued that "Banning of high-density plastic bags will lead to the loss of 3000 jobs in manufacturing and many more in retail trade, including the informal sector" and that "Customers will have to buy re-usable bags at a cost of over R1 per bag, which will hit the poor hardest... a campaign to change attitudes on littering would prove more effective."[52]

COSATU began formally to recognise the significance of global climate at its 8th National Congress in 2003. For the first time the federation dedicated a chapter of its resolutions to "environmental issues" which considered a range of concerns, including national-level debates about food safety, genetically modified crops, and nuclear power reactors. It appears to be the first recorded incidence of a discussion (and subsequent resolution) of greenhouse gas emissions, renewable energy, and international climate initiatives like the Kyoto Protocol.[53] However, this attention was not immediately sustained, and environmental issues were subsequently left out entirely of its 9th National Congress resolutions in 2006.[54] It was from its 10th National Congress (2009) onward that COSATU as a federation really began to recognise and respond to the global dynamics of climate change in a sustained fashion. Their resolutions warned in unambivalent terms that

**the future of humanity is at stake. Climate change, caused by reliance on fossil fuels, is a reality that we must now confront. This has unleashed natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, and extreme weather patterns. South Africa is on the edge of a catastrophic water crisis, which demands a proper management of this scarce resource. The world has to act urgently to reduce emission of carbon dioxide; find new sources of renewable energy; and environmentally sound production methods. The planet's warming continues to accelerate; water wars are already underway; unending droughts and expanding desertification are affecting the livelihood of millions; the rapid melting of glaciers increases devastating downstream floods in highly populated areas; climate-related migrations, often intertwined within local and regional conflicts are growing, and substantial rises in food prices and energy costs throw millions into abject poverty.**[55]

52 COSATU, '7th National Congress: Draft Declarations and Resolutions, 18-21 September 2020' (COSATU, 2000) <http://vital.seals.ac.za:8080/vital/access/manager/PdfViewer/vital:42972/SOURCE1?viewPdfInternal=1>; COSATU, 'Resolutions of the COSATU 8th National Congress' (COSATU, 2003), p. 23 <https://mediadon.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/8th-National-Congress-Resolutions.pdf>.

53 COSATU, 'Resolutions of the COSATU 8th National Congress'.

54 COSATU, 'Political Resolutions of the 9th National Congress', COSATU, 21 September 2006 <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fmediadon.co.za%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2018%2F12%2F9th-National-Congress-Resolutions_-Political.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK> [accessed 29 January 2025].

55 COSATU, 'COSATU 10th National Congress: Draft Final Resolutions, 21-24 September 2009', COSATU, 2009, p. 36 <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fmediadon.co.za%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2018%2F12%2F10th-National-Congress-Resolutions.doc&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK> [accessed 29 January 2025].

It was in this document that the federation discussed the international dynamics of climate change. In attributing blame, the Federation argued that "Climate change is mostly the responsibility of developed countries" and that "the destructive legacy of apartheid capitalism is responsible for South Africa's contribution as one of the biggest producer of carbon emissions in the world."[56]

When it came to what they advocated for South Africa, however, their resolutions remained broad and equivocal, reflecting a long-standing strategic ambivalence. On the one hand, they called for "Climate change provides an opportunity to change our productive model. The transition to a 'green' and low carbon economy must address worker concerns and the impact of climate change on employment" and noted that "It is important to conscientise [sic] workers and communities through education and organizing campaigns around issues of climate change."[57] This document is the first to directly addresses 'just transition' (see below).

However, once again caveats are immediately introduced, with COSATU arguing that any such transition must "recognise the reality of fossil fuel; particularly coal, as factor of production in both developed and developing economies."[58] Congress resolved to research alternative energy sources, establish worker education on climate change, and to establish a range of environmental campaigns. Following this, the COSATU Central Executive Committee called upon NALEDI, the Federation's research arm, to develop a Climate Change Policy Framework. In their study of COSATU's climate policy, Onginkosi Zulu notes,

**NALEDI formed a Climate Change Reference group in 2010 which then developed a Policy Framework which was endorsed by the CEC [Central Executive Committee] in 2011. Following the endorsement of the policy framework, the COSATU Climate Change Policy document was developed and it was adopted at the 2012 COSATU National Congress.**[59]

56 Ibid, p.37

57 Ibid, p.38

58 Ibid, p.38

59 Onginkosi Paul Zulu, *The Role of Trade Unions in Advancing a Just Transition 'in South Africa: A Case of COSATU's Perspective and Approach to Climate Change*, 2021.

Zulu argues in his detailed study of this development that COSATU's approach to climate that it was heavily influenced by the support and engagement of the ITUC and that the 2012 policy was ultimately the product of a "top to bottom policy approach" because "workers were only consulted when in-depth research was done in the Poultry, Chemicals and Mining sectors, after the policy framework was endorsed by CEC in 2011 and after the Climate Change Policy was adopted in the 2012 COSATU National Congress."[60] As a result, Zulu observed that as late as 2021, "COSATU's position supports a deep transformative change in theory (climate change policy document) but in practice it promotes a narrow reformist transformation and little or no action has been taken to further advance the policy commitments."[61] This is because, Zulu claims, COSATU has never fully developed its conceptualisation of an "ecosocialism" which "remains a utopian project within COSATU" and that in reality COSATU's position supports the "accumulative imperative" and has adopted only a "minimalist approach to just transition."[62]

This strategic ambivalence, characterised by a broad commitment to "eco-socialist" ideals while at the same time equivocating on or delaying climate change initiatives reflects the conflicted interests within the unions, between the unions and their government, and between the unions and international actors. These conflicts and the ambivalence underpinning them cuts across both sections of the divided union movement, but nowhere are these tensions laid bare more prominently than in the contested articulations of just transition.

## Just transition debates and activities

**Just transition first entering public debate**

Tracing how just transition is interpreted and contested in South Africa requires a detailed chronology of the terms' etymology in public discourse in the entangled spaces of the country's post-liberation politics. The term "just transition" formally entered the political lexicon in 2009 when COSATU's 10th National Congress. The Federation argued that "'Just Transition' recognises the right of society - in consultation with stakeholders - to decide, even in a precautionary manner about environmental issues" and that:

**"'Just Transition'... is more extensive than traditional labour market adjustment programs. It includes support for communities, industries, and a period of income protection for workers. It moves workers from existing jobs to emerging ones, and to prepare them for the next phase in their lives. It proposes the protection of trade union rights and enhanced successor rights, to create institutional stability throughout the transition period."[63]**

The federation resolved that any agreements at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen later that year to "include action on green jobs, financing of support for developing countries and support for just transition strategies aimed at protecting the most vulnerable from the effects of climate change" and that "Provision must be made for consultation with trade unions and civil society."[64]

60 Ibid, p. 5

61 Ibid, p. 4

62 Ibid, p. 5

63 COSATU, 'COSATU 10th National Congress: Draft Final Resolutions, 21-24 September 2009', p. 38.

64 Ibid, p. 39

COSATU also adopted the international language[65] on the wider changes this might involve for the economy, noting that: "An economic transition is needed that shifts global economic growth patterns towards a low-emissions economy based on more sustainable production and consumption, promoting sustainable lifestyles and climate resilient development while ensuring a just transition for workers."[66] In its subsequent 11th Congress in 2012, COSATU began making more detailed arguments about the ownership of production and the need for "just transition" that would not be co-opted and distorted as a "capitalist concept," and that it must instead be "informed by the principle of just transition which promotes our right to industrialise and to protect jobs and that new technologies that mitigate climate change must be socially-owned by the state and cooperatives."[67]

This discussion within the unions gradually spread into the wider alliance with the ruling party. In 2012 the government released its National Development Plan (NDP), which articulated the need for "Managing a just transition" noting that "equitable transition must protect the poor and vulnerable from the transitional costs associated with mitigation, such as increased costs of energy, food and transport, job losses in carbon-intensive industries, and the demand for different skills."[68] However, the plan equivocated on whether a transition was economically viable. For example, it weighs the prospects of building new coal fired power stations and exploiting new coal and shale gas, noting that the "exploitation of these resources would contribute to environmental damage and the national carbon footprint, but could potentially create jobs and be a source of foreign exchange and investment, providing a level of energy security. It could also provide a lower-carbon fuel source that allows the economy to make a transition from its dependence on coal."[69]

The national government under Cyril Ramaphosa focused greater attention on climate change and just transition (see above). The Climate Change Act argues that just transition "means a shift towards a low-carbon, climate-resilient economy and society and ecologically sustainable economies and societies which contribute toward the creation of decent work for all, social inclusion and the eradication of poverty."[70] Just transition has been promoted across a range of government departments to develop a broad-ranging and in-depth understanding of the concept, including discussions about fishing, tourism, electric vehicles, and, predictably, minerals and energy. The JTF claimed that

**The just transition imperative has now been entrenched and embraced by most major stakeholder groups in South Africa. There is broad consensus among social partners that climate change will impact people and the economy, and that a just transition to a sustainable, cleaner, and more inclusive economy is required... All social partners are clear that a just transition should protect constituents, provide a reasonable opportunity to work, and empower those that are most impacted.**[71]

65 Labor Network for Sustainability, '**A Just Transition**', undated <https://www.labor4sustainability.org/post/a-just-transition/> [accessed 2 February 2025].

66 COSATU, 'COSATU 10th National Congress: Draft Final Resolutions, 21-24 September 2009', p. 38.

67 COSATU, '**Adopted Resolutions from the 2012, 11th National Congress and as Further Adopted by the 2013 February CEC**', COSATU, 2013, p. 83 <https://mediadon.co.za/resolutions/> [accessed 2 February 2025].

68 Government of South Africa, **National Development Plan (2012)**, p. 211 <https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/National_Development_Plan> [accessed 7 November 2024].

69 Ibid, p. 211 - 12

70 Government of South Africa, 'Act No.22 of 2024: Climate Change Act 2024', p. 10.

71 Presidential Climate Commission, *A Framework for a Just Transition in South Africa*, p. 7.

From this quite comprehensive engagement in the development of a shared vision for just transition, the PCC claimed that the Framework had established "broad consensus on how to define a just transition, and broad commitment across all stakeholders to the principle"[72] It established an ambitious "overarching goal of improving the lives and livelihoods of ALL South Africans, particularly those most impacted. The scope of a just transition is wide, both in the focus on people, and on the time scales of action and delivery."[73] Specifically on labour, the Framework claims that its approach "complements international best practice guidance on achieving just transitions," making explicit reference to the 2015 ILO guidelines.[74] The Framework sets out the following definition:

**A just transition aims to achieve a quality life for all South Africans, in the context of increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate, fostering climate resilience, and reaching net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, in line with best available science.**

**A just transition contributes to the goals of decent work for all, social inclusion, and the eradication of poverty.**

**A just transition puts people at the centre of decision making, especially those most impacted, the poor, women, people with disabilities, and the youth—empowering and equipping them for new opportunities of the future.**

**A just transition builds the resilience of the economy and people through affordable, decentralised, diversely owned renewable energy systems; conservation of natural resources; equitable access of water resources; an environment that is not harmful to one's health and well-being; and sustainable, equitable, inclusive land use for all, especially for the most vulnerable.**[75]

This definition has several notable points. First, definitions in the JTF are not worker centric. Indeed, they privilege a broad focus on quality of life rather than what might be the specific demands of workers themselves in terms of jobs, wages and growth. In this respect, workers are not identified separately as having distinct interests – unlike "the poor, women, people with disabilities, and the youth". Instead, they are conceptually subsumed as

72 ibid p. 5

73 Original (capitalised) emphasis, Ibid, p.3.

74 ILO, **Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All (2015)** <https://www.ilo.org/publications/guidelines-just-transition-towards-environmentally-sustainable-economies> [accessed 8 November 2024].

75 Presidential Climate Commission, *A Framework for a Just Transition in South Africa,* p. 6.

part of an amorphous wider citizenry whose "resilience" should be built up and whose common interests in decent work and social inclusion should be met *through* JT, rather than *in spite* of it. Second, adaptation is prioritised over mitigation, and in this respect building the "resilience of the economy" is framed as an explicit aim of a just transition alongside the 2050 net-zero target. In short, as is clear from the President's own prevarications in his speeches, the pursuit of net-zero must be complementary to the country's wider efforts to achieve growth-led development.

**JETP, JET-IP, and the breakdown of consensus**

However, this aim of "improving the lives and livelihoods of ALL South Africans, particularly those most impacted" in the JTF has been gradually diluted when it came to negotiating international agreements that would determine the financing and priorities for the transition. For example, the pronouncements on JETP are very broad and ambiguous in terms of how just transition – and its operationalisation – are to be understood. JETP resolves to

**"Establish an ambitious long-term partnership to support South Africa's pathway to low emissions and climate resilient development, to accelerate the just transition and the decarbonisation of the electricity system, and to develop new economic opportunities such as green hydrogen and electric vehicles amongst other interventions to support South Africa's shift towards a low carbon future."[76]**

This articulation of what constitutes the "just transition" to be pursued within this partnership is vague within the joint JETP declaration itself and in the immediate responses of those behind it. While, for example, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen claims that "This partnership is a global first and could become a template on how to support just transition around the world," the primary goal is to "speed up the phasing out of coal in partner countries, while supporting vulnerable communities that depend on it."[77] In this light, "supporting vulnerable communities" appears as a second-order priority, mitigating the fallout of the pursuit of the overarching objective. The agreement itself only expresses an aspiration to "enable South Africa's efforts to lead a just transition that protects vulnerable workers and communities, especially coal miners, women and youth, affected by the move away from coal."[78] In this vein Ramaphosa's language around JETP is notably less ambitious than the no detriment vision articulated in his government's own JTF. He argued for "the importance of a just transition to a low carbon, climate resilient society that promotes employment and livelihoods", noticeably opting for the more passive articulation of "promoting" workers interests rather than rehearsing the "overarching goal" of the JTF and setting commitments to particular outcomes.[79] There is a discontinuity here with the JTF in terms of the President's explicit focus on worker centric issues like jobs – although this is couched in a vague language of promoting employment rather than any specific commitments to job retention and job quality.

It is in response to this perceived watering down of the JTF that some of the more deep-rooted tensions around just transition in South Africa have emerged. To begin with, it marks a shift away from the forward-looking overarching ambition of the JTF to positively uplift standards of living for "ALL South Africans." Unions across their political divisions share a commitment to the aim of there being no detriment to workers. One senior figure from the NUM's research unit argued that

76 European Union, '**Just Energy Transition Partnership with South Africa**', Text, European Commission - European Commission, 2021 <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/cs/ip_21_5768> [accessed 7 November 2024].

77 Ibid

78 Ibid

79 Ibid


**Simply put, just transition should be a transition from high to low carbon emission whereby the livelihood of anybody who was dependent on the high emission [economy] is not negatively affected. In fact, the intention is to improve it [for them] and for those who are both directly and indirectly affected. That is at a micro level. At a macro level, we should not live in a national state in a worse situation than it is [already].**[80]

Indeed, this "no detriment" approach, while often loosely articulated by the unions, is nonetheless common to them. For example, NUMSA asserts that

**While we accept we must move from being more dependent on fossil fuels, we are adamant such a move must be in line with the principles of a Just Transition. That means the transition must be affordable for us as a country and it must not worsen conditions of the working class and the poor... Where possible every job lost in the coal sector must be replaced, and the benefits, conditions and wages workers received must be maintained in the renewable energy sector.**[81]

This narrative in one sense conforms more with the shift toward addressing worker issues distinctly, such as employment, rather than using the broader language of social inclusion contained within the JTF. On the other hand, it represents an emerging divide over the broad aims of just transition between the unions and those immediately behind JETP in terms of its reiteration of a no-detriment approach. This is symptomatic of a wider anxiety shared across the unions about the closed decision making around JETP and concerns about who was setting the agenda. William Mabapa acting General Secretary of NUM at time of the JETP agreement at COP26 raised concerns that

**"While funding the transition is key, the process followed is more important to the union. The union needs assurance that workers and working-class communities will not be negatively affected. Presently, it is not clear what this money will be used for, under what conditions it will be accessed, and if a significant part of it will be used to protect workers and communities. The unions remain uneasy about the deal"**[82]

80 Interview HBS_SA_5

81 Phakamile Hlubi-Majola, 'Green Energy and Class Struggle', **Daily News**, 2022 <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/daily-news-south-africa/20221109/281814287839912?srsltid=AfmBOoq5SOXw_0rjXNNIdGbSVvpD11Qfr9L8OjrXWl1Bi40mdKvtstZT>.

82 IndustriALL, '**IndustriALL Panel at Mining Indaba Demands Decent Work during Energy Transition**', IndustriALL, 9 February 2023 <https://www.industriall-union.org/industriall-panel-at-mining-indaba-demands-decent-work-during-the-energy-transition> [accessed 8 November 2024].

This unease around the JETP and JET-IP deals fuelled broader concerns about how the agenda was being set and what precisely was on the agenda to begin with. These concerns relate to a broad range of issues, including the debt implications of the JETP and JET-IP initiatives,[83] which unions fear will reduce South Africa's sovereign determination of the just transition agenda, provoking a form of debt bondage between the country and the Global North.[84] They also raise concerns about the leading role of the private sector in the energy transition in particular, which they fear will diminish workers' influence on the implementation of a just transition. According to activists, the JETP and JET-IP deals accelerate privatisation, which risks jobs as well as creating unaffordable energy supply.[85] In this respect they can point to a divide between what the JTF had promoted (in terms of mixed ownership of the energy sectors) and the reality that large renewable energy has been driven almost exclusively by the private sector. Indeed, promoting a private-sector driven transition in the energy sector risks overlooking wider socio-economic transitions to address the climate crisis in South Africa. Even with the energy sector focus there is the criticism that the deals offer very little in terms of concrete protections for workers, whether that be job guarantees or reskilling, or investment in their communities.

As a result there have been repeated calls to slow down the pace of transition, particularly in critical sectors like coal-energy where the social impacts of closures will be most profound. This call to slow things down reflects anxieties about the way JETP and JET-IP have been negotiated and underlying issues about how the plans are being accelerated while the unions themselves remained unprepared for the change. Recalling Zulu's argument that ultimately COSATU has never fully developed its conceptualisation of an "ecosocialism" which "remains a utopian project within COSATU,"[86] there is a clear sense that, unions and their affiliates must link commitments to an "eco-socialist" just transition to practical policy prescriptions to avoid being increasingly marginalised from the agenda-setting.

Union concerns about the international agenda-setting are harnessed to justify their longer-term strategic ambivalence regarding climate change narratives. Assigning blame to a coterie of malevolent international forces lends itself very easily to resource nationalism discourses. For example, NUM reverted to a defensive resource nationalism, denying the need for a transition, noting in response to the JETP agreement reached at Glasgow,

**"South Africa has an abundance of coal reserves. The NUM is opposed to the R131 billion offered to South Africa by developed countries so that it can accelerate the closure of coal power stations"**[87]

83 Alex Lenferna, **'Does South Africa Deserve Climate Reparations?**', Daily Maverick, 24 January 2023 <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2023-01-24-does-south-africa-deserve-climate-reparations/> [accessed 8 November 2024].

84 Irvin Jim, '**ANC Govt Must Stop Perverting Words** "Just Energy Transition" – Irvin Jim - POLITICS | Politicsweb', 2022 <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/anc-govt-must-stop-perverting-just-energy-transiti> [accessed 8 November 2024].

85 Azfar Shafi, '**Just Energy Transition Partnerships: Market Capture or Climate Justice?'**, 2023 <https://www.jetknowledge.org/insights/op-ed-just-energy-transition-partnerships-market-capture-or-climate-justice/> [accessed 1 May 2025].

86 Zulu, *The Role of Trade Unions in Advancing a Just Transition 'in South Africa: A Case of COSATU's Perspective and Approach to Climate Change*, p. 5.

87 Anna Majavu, '**Labour in Peril As Just Transition Hits Cul-De-Sac**', *New Frame*, 25 November 2021 <https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crid=a510ba6e-68ef-4173-a846-76adfe39f6a8&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A6459-0VP1-DY15-S33W-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=361904&pdteaserkey=sr0&pditab=allpods&ecomp=hc-yk&earg=sr0&prid=b45bf36a-a9d8-40f7-94e5-5db7de1d499d> [accessed 25 April 2025].

These kinds of discourses – which in many ways are an extension of the government's own "right to development" discourses – are shared by NUMSA and affiliates in the SAFTU fold. They offer narrative legitimacy to long-standing attempts to either stall or subvert practical policy efforts to address the climate crisis. At times, for example NUMSA has acted to obstruct or slow the process, such as by using High Court interdicts to prevent the Minister of Energy signing new contracts with IPPs.[88] NUMSA even goes as far to say that the current status quo warrants an abandonment of the just transition agenda altogether:

**This transition is not just, by virtue of the fact that it will burden future generations with debt and deepen poverty. Furthermore, it will make electricity more expensive and thus less accessible to the poor and the working class, whilst choking our economic development. By its very definition, a Just Transition should not worsen conditions for the next generation and this deal will do precisely that. This is why NUMSA is calling on government to stop using the word 'Just Energy Transition' because they are perverting its meaning and misleading the public.[89]**

The JETP is therefore coming to define (and potentially sully) the meaning of "just transition" in South Africa, and risks derailing efforts to tackle the climate crisis in the country by ignoring the voices of key actors. By setting out a narrow conception of just (through reduced emissions) the JETP is limiting spaces for deliberation over what just transition should be defined as, and how it should be operationalised, highlighting differences between the unions and those immediately responsible for JETP and JET-IP. While the unions agree with each other on the substantive issues, they divergence on how to address them, mirroring historical fractures within the union movement over the political relationship with the liberation movement. For example, COSATU and its affiliates continue to invest faith in the ANC and play the game of alliance politics, leveraging their access and influence within the ruling party. And while SAFTU-affiliates like NUMSA will continue to try and influence the just transition within forums like the PCC, agreeing on the fundamentals with COSATU affiliates, they will nonetheless adopt a much more critical and abrasive political posture in their communication.

88 Katie Connolly, '**5 Lessons from South Africa's Just Transition Journey**', World Resources Institute, 9 January 2022 <https://www.wri.org/technical-perspectives/5-lessons-south-africas-just-transition-journey> [accessed 25 April 2025].

89 Jim, 'ANC Govt Must Stop Perverting Words "Just Energy Transition" – Irvin Jim - POLITICS | Politicsweb'.

# 4.
# Addressing current crises

The scope for just transition in South Africa cannot be understood without reference to five critical contexts: 1) its high levels of unemployment and inequality; 2) its minerals-energy complex; 3) the energy crisis; 4) the current public debt crisis and 5) the war in Ukraine. These intersecting crises are precipitating a buildup of counterforces to transition and climate protection that must be understood in a context of postcolonial African politics, including the legacies of colonialism and apartheid and the enduring unequal inclusion of South Africa into the global economy. These crises present significant obstacles to transition in South Africa and, given its status as a "blueprint" for JETP agreements, this threatens the wider viability and integrity of western-led multilateral climate action.

## 1) Unemployment and inequality

Successive ANC governments have found it difficult to address both legacies, and both unemployment and income inequality have actually worsened since 1994, long before the pandemic. According to government statistics, the official unemployment rate was 31.4% for 2025Q4, although the expanded definition reached 42.1%.[90] This unemployment rate is regarded by some measures as the highest in the world.[91] As can be seen from Figure 1, the COVID19 pandemic hit the country hard, leading to job losses and overall rises in unemployment since the second quarter of 2020. However, despite concerns about a "worst case scenario" in which the pandemic would generate even higher rates of unemployment[92], this has not materialised and, while still gradually rising during the pandemic, unemployment peaked at 35.3% in the final quarter of 2021 and has since fallen.[93]

90 Statistics South Africa, '**Quarterly Labour Force Survey - Quarter 4: 2025**', Statistics South Africa, Statistics South Africa, 17 February 2026 <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2025.pdf> [accessed 7 March 2026].

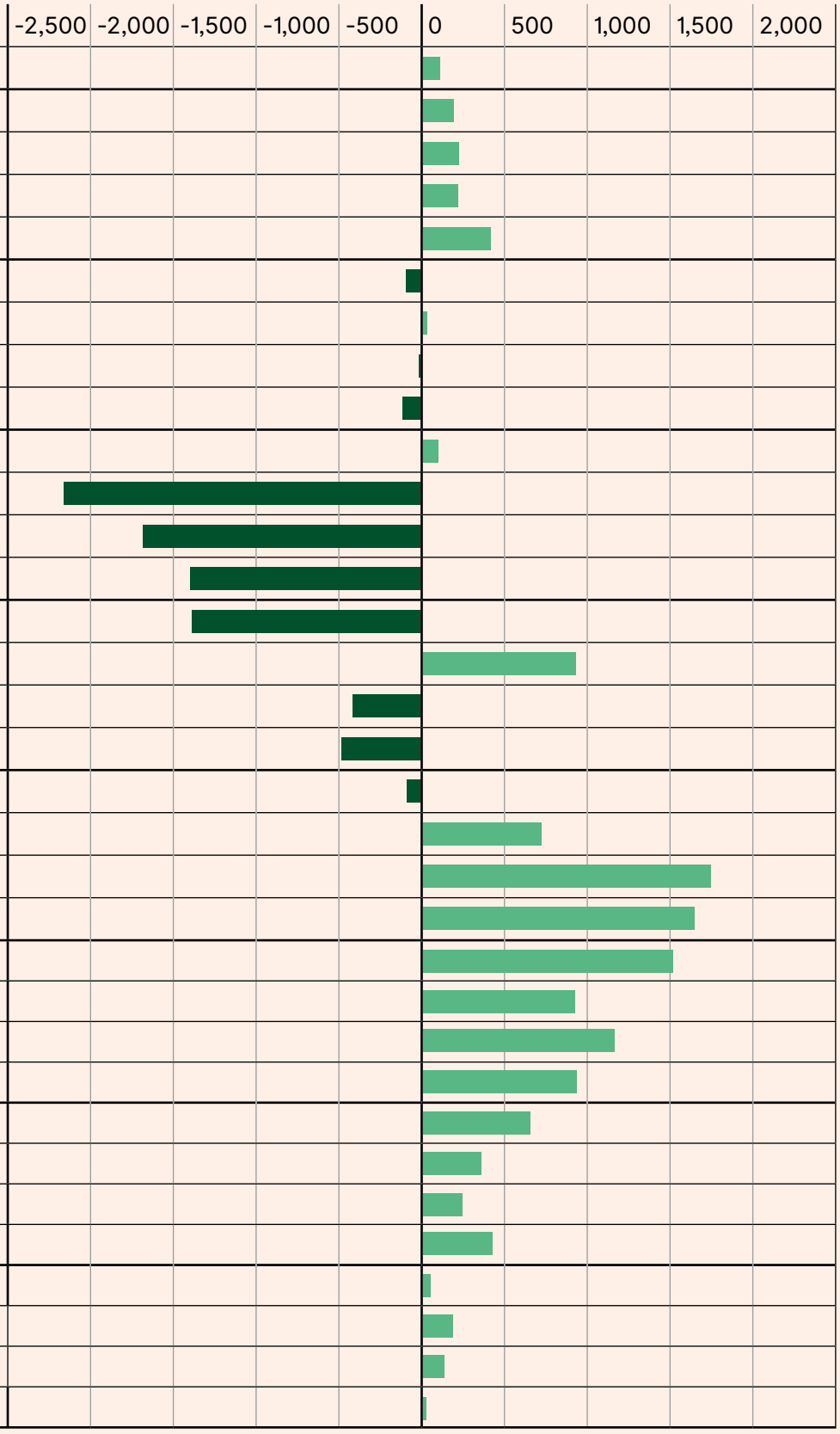
91 World Bank, '**Unemployment, Total (% of Total Labour Force) (Modelled ILO Estimate)**', World Bank Open Data, 17 January 2026 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?most_recent_value_desc=true>.

92 Government of South Africa, *Briefing by the National Treasury on Financial Implications of COVID-19 on Both the Budget and Economy* (2020).

93 Statistics South Africa, 'Quarterly Labour Force Survey - Quarter 4: 2025'.

**Figure 1: Year-on-year changes to total employment 2017Q4 – 2025Q4 (From StatsSA, 2026)**
StatsSA

| Year on year change: | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2017 | Q4 | 102 |
| 2018 | Q1 | 165 |
| | Q2 | 188 |
| | Q3 | 188 |
| | Q4 | 358 |
| 2019 | Q1 | -86 |
| | Q2 | 25 |
| | Q3 | -5 |
| | Q4 | -108 |
| 2020 | Q1 | 91 |
| | Q2 | -2,164 |
| | Q3 | -1,684 |
| | Q4 | -1,397 |
| 2021 | Q1 | -1,387 |
| | Q2 | 793 |
| | Q3 | -409 |
| | Q4 | -479 |
| 2022 | Q1 | -81 |
| | Q2 | 620 |
| | Q3 | 1,483 |
| | Q4 | 1,390 |
| 2023 | Q1 | 1,278 |
| | Q2 | 784 |
| | Q3 | 979 |
| | Q4 | 789 |
| 2024 | Q1 | 552 |
| | Q2 | 306 |
| | Q3 | 201 |
| | Q4 | 355 |
| 2025 | Q1 | 43 |
| | Q2 | 154 |
| | Q3 | 109 |
| | Q4 | 21 |



The economic outlooks is mixed. In the 2023 budget speech the Finance Minister reported that "At R4.6 trillion, the size of the economy in 2022 was bigger than the pre-pandemic levels in real terms, evidence of a robust economic recovery even in the face of lingering COVID-19 scarring."[94] However, the 2026 budget speech indicated that growth would remain sluggish at an estimated 1.6% and that "persistent logistics bottlenecks, weak public infrastructure and the recent outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease continue to weigh on economic activity".[95]

In 2025 there are estimated to be 449,000[96] employed in the mining sector, a rise from 384,000 in 2020.[97] Overall, the sector accounts for 2.7% of national employment. However, this does not account for ancillary services and supply industries dependent on the mining sector, nor does it account for the large informal sector employment connected to mining communities.

The current prospects for job creation in other sectors to offset any reduction in employment in the mining-energy sector are not strong, not least because of the fragility of the wider economic position: South Africa is simply not creating enough jobs to replace existing employment.[98] In terms of job substitution in other industries, Asmal et al note, "The post-apartheid South African economy has been characterized by an eroding primary sector and a stagnant manufacturing sector.... there has been a shift toward services sectors, with finance, transport, construction, and other services experiencing employment growth. Notably, the financial and community services sectors have accounted for over half of the increase in employment between 2000 and 2019."[99] Research from the Brookings Institute highlights the potential in 'Industries Without SmokeStacks' (IWOSS), such as tourism, because IWOSS "have advantages over other industries when it comes to addressing employment changes. Not only are IWOSS more labour intensive overall, they also employ a higher share of low-skilled labourers as well as more women and youth."[100] In particular, tourism, horticulture and agri-processing have high shares of low-skilled and semi-skilled employment that could potentially offer job opportunities outside of carbon-intensive industries such as mining.[101] Nonetheless, these industries offer little prospect of decent work in the eyes of energy and mine workers in our focus groups. There is very little prospect for transitioning workers to maintain their levels of remuneration (which they use to support a wide network of dependents) and workers are wary of taking jobs that do not recognise their skills and training. Zooming out, at a macro level, industries like agro-processing would reflect a continuation of extractive capitalism rather the kind of restorative justice promised in South Africa's JTF that explicitly sought to address historical injustices. Serious debates and planning about global industrial restructuring, including the devolution of green-technology manufacturing to the Global South, are

94 Enoch Godongwana, '**Budget Speech**', National Treasury, 22 February 2023 <https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2023/speech/speech.pdf> [accessed 25 April 2025].

95 Enoch Godongwana, '**Budget Speech**', National Treasury, National Treasury, 25 February 2026 <https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/National%20Budget/2026/speech/speech.pdf> [accessed 10 April 2026].

96 Statistics South Africa, 'Quarterly Labour Force Survey - Quarter 4: 2025'.

97 Statistics South Africa, '**Quarterly Labour Force Survey - Q4: 2020**', 23 February 2021 <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2020.pdf> [accessed 25 April 2025].

98 Zaakhir Asmal, Haroon Bhorat, and John Page, '**Exploring New Sources of Large-Scale Job Creation: The Potential Role of Industries Without Smokestacks**', Brookings, 2020 <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/exploring-new-sources-of-large-scale-job-creation-the-potential-role-of-industries-without-smokestacks/> [accessed 8 November 2024].

99 Asmal, Bhorat, and Page, 'Exploring New Sources of Large-Scale Job Creation'.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

conspicuously absent, illuminating the neocolonial injustices replete within mainstream multilateral approaches to "just" transitions.[102]

Moreover, areas in the coal belt may not be suitable for 'green industries' thereby requiring workers to migrate for new positions, compounding problems of stranded assets linked to closing power stations and increasing the risk that an energy transition will leave workers worse off. Alternative sectors also lack the capacity to replace jobs in carbon intensive sector. According to Asmal et al. the shift towards formal sector services has not generated the volume and type of jobs needed to reduce unemployment and inequality. In short, while the shift to services may offer South Africa an opportunity for the type of structural transformation previously anchored by growth in manufacturing, this achievement depends, importantly, on the type of services.'[103] This aligns with broader critiques of 'green jobs' or 'green growth' which do not "resolve the social and ecological contradictions of capitalism."[104]

In the most vulnerable sectors like mining, the impression the western money behind the transition further fuels uncertainty and concerns about the motives of those pushing the agenda. As NUM General Secretary William Mabapa complained,

**"South Africa is going to lose jobs in the coal sector but not gain them in renewables. We are not going to be dictated to. You [in the West] are wasting your time. We are a country that must do things at our own pace."**[105]

Due to this uncertainty, the unions are calling for more time to provide workers and communities most directly impacted by potential job losses to deliberate and set in place a viable, just alternative. The future of work in post-coal South Africa consequently must be reviewed beyond seeking simply replacing jobs in coal mines or coal-fired power stations.

**2) MEC: Vested interests in coal-power**

Fine and Rustomjee identified the 'minerals energy complex' (MEC) in the early 1990s to describe the determining role of energy-intensive sectors, such as mining and manufacturing, in the country's economy, and these sectors' dependency on low-cost, coal-generated electricity.[106] There is a great deal of political and economic interest in sustaining the MEC. Politically, the NUM National Union of Mineworkers, which organises around 300,000 nationally, has played a critical role in helping the ANC historically and in mobilising support ahead of elections since the end of apartheid. Its influence is strengthened by its politically educated members, who are active within local party structures, while the ANC's senior leadership includes several NUM leaders.

102 Pritish Behuria, '*The Injustice of Just Transitions: How the Neglect of the Green Division of Labour Cements African Dependencies'*, Energy Research & Social Science, 122 (2025), p. 104007, doi:10.1016/j.erss.2025.104007.

103 Ibid.

104 Beate Littig, with Sherilyn MacGregor, 'Good Green Jobs for Whom?: A Feminist Critique of the Green Economy', in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment,* 1st edn (Routledge, 2017), pp. 318–30, p.326, doi:10.4324/9781315886572-22.

105 '**South Africa Load-Shedding: The Roots of Eskom's Power Problem**', BBC News, 23 May 2023 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65671718> [accessed 1 August 2023].

106 Fine and Rustomjee, *The Political Economy of South Africa.*

In terms of the immediate economic health of the nation, the mining production value of over R1 Tn is crucial. As the Mineral Council notes,

**Taxes paid to government have helped save the country's fiscus from dangerous debt metrics exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown and economic contraction. Mining company tax in 2022 was R74 billion (R81 billion, 2021) and royalties increased to R14 billion from nearly R12 billion. Mining's contribution to GDP grew by 4% to almost R494 billion, keeping its percentage contribution to GDP at 7.53% (7.56%, 2021).**[107]

Public enterprises, like Eskom, occupy a central role in the MEC linking private enterprises to the state as the country's dominant electricity provider but also as the biggest coal buyer by volume. After the transition from apartheid, sectors within the MEC offered lucrative empowerment deals as politically-connected black elites established partnerships with previously white-owned mining companies to gain political capital and secure contracts with state-owned companies.[108] These transactions have perpetuated the political value of the MEC, even as the mining sector's direct contribution to economic growth has waned. Such is the scale of this rent-seeking behaviour (referred to in South Africa as 'state capture') that there has been an extensive investigation into Eskom and prosecutions of elites connected with the corruption. Interview data attests to the role of vested interests in the MEC as an impediment to reforming the energy sector (*see below*).[109] Indeed, this is a view widely held among political commentators and politicians who blame "the ongoing love affair between the entrenched coal lobby and the agents of State Capture" as the major impediment to transition of the energy sector.[110]

Looking ahead, however, the government continues to declare that the green transition must happen. There is a very real prospect that South Africa will be locked out of trading with the EU, for example, owing to new regulations in Europe about trade with heavy carbon emitters in its "Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism" (CBAM). As Crispian Olver, Executive Director of the Presidential Climate Commission Secretariat, has said, "If we don't decarbonise, we're going to be shut out… and we're going to lose massive amounts of jobs."[111] This concern is shared by others on the PCC that we have interviewed, as well as national officials of COSATU, who together raise concerns over 750,000 jobs vulnerable to these agreements.[112] While these fears about the impact of trade losses are important and valid, if they are used as an excuse to drive forward the transition against the interests of workers and communities dependent upon carbon-heavy they are likely to be cited as yet another example of external agendas being pushed upon South Africa. This will fuel existing narratives of foreign subversion, 'white monopoly capital', and comprador elites that could resonate strongly with vulnerable and marginalised working-

107 Mining Review Africa, '**The Minerals Council Facts & Figures Pocketbook 2022**', Miningreview.Com, 6 February 2023 <https://www.miningreview.com/base-metals/the-minerals-council-publishes-facts-figures-pocketbook-2022/> [accessed 8 November 2024]; **Minerals Council, Facts and Figures Pocketbook 2022** (Minerals Council, 2023) <https://www.mineralscouncil.org.za/industry-news/publications/facts-and-figures> [accessed 27 April 2025].

108 Roger Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party & State in Southern Africa* (James Currey, 2013); Andrew Bowman, 'Black Economic Empowerment Policy and State–Business Relations in South Africa: The Case of Mining', *Review of African Political Economy,* 46.160 (2019), pp. 223–45, doi:10.1080/03056244.2019.1605587.

109 Ruth Bookbinder, '**Rent-Seeking Dynamics in South Africa's Minerals Energy Complex: The Political Economy of Procurement at Eskom**' (unpublished PhD, University of Leeds, 2021) <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/30082/> [accessed 8 November 2024].

110 Kevin Bloom, '**Grim Reippp(Er) — Undoing the Choke-Hold on SA's Renewable Energy Programme**', Daily Maverick, 26 September 2022 <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-09-26-grim-reippper-undoing-the-choke-hold-on-sas-renewable-energy-programme/> [accessed 28 April 2025].

111 'South Africa Load-Shedding', 23 May 2023.

112 Interviews HBS_SA_5 and HBS_SA_24

class communities when they are confronted with threats to their livelihoods. Such narratives emerge frequently in interviews with those in the sectors most impacted, such as one NUM Shop Steward in the coal-energy sector who saw this as an externally-driven agenda:

**"you will know that IMF and World Bank are pawns of the U.S.A and so they are being used by the U.S.A. I remember at some point we met with the ambassador to South Africa from USA, you quickly detect that these people are not patient, they want to close power stations by tomorrow and they don't care if people will be unemployed or not. And so where we are sitting, we strongly believe that the U.S.A is the one that is driving this particular agenda of just energy transition."**[113]

### 3) Energy Crisis

South Africa has faced recurrent periods of scheduled power cuts, or loadshedding, since late 2007 when an unexpected dip in coal supplies led to the first power crisis since the end of apartheid. The power generation crisis necessitates capacity being added to the grid to avoid the economic damage that would be caused by further power cuts, which are already by some to have cost the economy R1.2 trillion,[114] which is equivalent to one quarter of the country's GDP. It costs the country and estimated $50m a day.[115] This significantly undermine business confidence, economic growth, job creation and the country's credit rating. Furthermore, the social costs to power cuts can be life-threatening, in terms of the greater risks of accidents on roads without adequate lighting and signals, damage to health infrastructure[116] (e.g. vital heating and refrigeration) and the broader impacts on mental health.[117]

A report into the first loadshedding crisis noted that wet weather and poor-quality coal had been the immediate cause of the shortages. However, structural problems like aging infrastructure, short-term coal supply contracts and gaps in skilled workers were also contributing factors.[118] These issues partially stemmed from the ANC's priorities after the end of apartheid. For instance, the 1998 White Paper on Energy correctly estimated that Eskom would be unable to meet demand by 2008 unless investment was made to update the country's electricity infrastructure.[119] However, the need to immediately improve people's living conditions meant that the government prioritised increasing access to electricity over investing in infrastructure. Meanwhile, Eskom leadership rapidly proceeded with initiatives to diversify its workforce, meeting its quota for 50% black employees at management and senior management level by 2000. Yet, the company also set recruitment quotas that did not match the labour force. According to

113 Interview HBS_SA_11

114 Baldwin Ndaba, '**Load Shedding Has Cost SA Economy More than R1. 2 Trillion, Court Hears'**, IOL, 1679464577000 <https://iol.co.za/pretoria-news/news/2023-03-22-load-shedding-has-cost-sa-economy-more-than-r1-2-trillion-court-hears/> [accessed 29 April 2025].

115 Dennis Shen, '**South Africa: Governance Risk and Rising Debt Challenge Credit Ratings**', FX Empire, n.d. <https://www.fxempire.com/news/article/south-africa-governance-risk-and-rising-debt-challenge-credit-ratings-1321428> [accessed 29 April 2025].

116 Ndaba, 'Load Shedding Has Cost SA Economy More than R1. 2 Trillion, Court Hears'.

117 Anelisa Sibanda, **'New Study Lays Bare Effects of Loadshedding on Mental Health'**, Sunday World, 19 April 2023 <https://sundayworld.co.za/shwashwi/lifestyle/new-study-lays-bare-effects-of-loadshedding-on-mental-health/> [accessed 2 August 2023].

118 Centre for Development and Enterprise, **South Africa's Electricity Crisis: How Did We Get Here? And How Do We Put Things Right?** (Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2008) <https://www.cde.org.za/south-africas-electricity-crisis-how-did-we-get-here-and-how-do-we-put-things-right/> [accessed 29 April 2025].

119 Government of South Africa, **White Paper on the Energy Policy of the Republic of South Africa** (Department of Minerals and Energy, 1998) <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/whitepaperenergypolicy19980.pdf> [accessed 29 April 2025].

one report, the company was trying to employ 470 black engineers at a time when there were only 230 qualified black engineers in the country.[120] Similarly, quotas to increase the number of Eskom's black-owned suppliers – alongside the demand for better quality coal from newer mines – led to a proliferation of short-term coal procurement contracts that often involved trucking coal from the mine to the power station. These contracts dramatically increased costs in comparison to the system of transporting coal to power stations via conveyor belt, while short-term contracts hindered efforts to plan long-term coal supplies, further reducing Eskom's ability to respond to crises.

While Eskom has always been an important source of government rents, since Jacob Zuma's presidency (2008-2018), efforts to secure access to these rents drove instability in company leadership and resulted in costly and ineffective transactions. Moreover, Zuma's government – with Eskom executives – stalled the renewable energy procurement programme, increasing the grid's vulnerability to maintenance issues and shortfalls in coal supply. Similarly, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts heard evidence in May 2023 that coal was mixed with rocks, so that contractors had to be employed to repair the resulting damage to the mills.[121] Reports of sabotage at coal power stations, has highlighted the impact of this failure to diversify the energy mix. According to former Eskom CEO, Andre De Ruyter 'cartels' operating within the utility contributed to loadshedding by damaging conveyor belts between mines and power stations so that their trucks were used to transport coal to power stations.[122] Added to this are concerns about the active sabotage of power capacity. The BBC's Andrew Harding, for example, argued that there is

**…. a vast, ongoing, and highly successful criminal enterprise that involves murders, poisoning, fires, cable theft, ruthless cartels and powerful politicians. It is an enterprise that risks derailing international attempts to nudge South Africa away from its dependence on coal and towards renewable energy sources.[123]**

120 CDE, *South Africa's Electricity Crisis: How Did We Get Here? And How Do We Put Things Right?*, p. 11.

121 Standing Committee on Pubic Accounts, '**Eskom Corruption and Related Matters: Engagement with Minister of Public Enterprises (with Deputy Minister Present)**', Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 17 May 2023 <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/36960/> [accessed 29 April 2025].

122 SCOPA, '**Mr Andre De Ruyter on Corruption within Eskom**', Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 26 April 2023 <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/36757/> [accessed 29 April 2025].

123 '**South Africa Load-Shedding: The Roots of Eskom's Power Problem**', Africa, BBC News, 23 May 2023 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65671718> [accessed 8 November 2024].

The precise motivations behind the sabotage are unclear. Some could relate to local-level attempts to pressure management into accepting particular business contracts or, indeed, to (corruptly) hire companies to fix the sabotaged infrastructure at high prices. De Ruyter, argued that such sabotage was widespread and reflected a residual, nefarious network of individuals and collectives bent on preserving their access to the spoils of the MEC by obstructing a transition toward renewables.[124] De Ruyter himself was a victim of an assassination attempt which he alleged was orchestrated by criminal cartels profiting out of Eskom intent on subverting his reform agenda. However, these are claims widely refuted among Eskom's workforce and in particular by the unions, who have accused De Ruyter and his allies of deliberately sabotaging the power stations in order to undermine South Africa's power generation capacity in an effort to justify the growth of the independent power producers in the renewable sector and to ensure Eskom would not be trusted to control the renewable energy sector. Commenting on the dangers of ongoing power outages, and fuelling rumours of nefarious political agendas, the Minister for Energy, Gwede Mantashe remarked that "Eskom, by not attending to load shedding, is agitating for the overthrow of the state."[125]

Following further loadshedding and revelations regarding procurement and management practices Eskom during the Zondo Commission into 'state capture' (corruption), Ramaphosa established a task team that produced the 'Roadmap for Eskom' that outlined a plan to reform the company in 2019. Implementation has been slow, underlying the difficulty in overcoming political barriers to reform and the wildly different interpretations of the reasons for Eskom's decline that reverberate from the Cabinet office right down to the power station shopfloor. Whoever was to blame, because of mismanagement Eskom amassed what the National Treasury described as an "unsustainable" ZAR423 billion ($22.6bn) debt. The Treasury has intervened with a debt relief arrangement that absorbs ZAR230bn of the debt over the next three years so that the utility can "restructure and undertake the investment and maintenance needed to support security of electricity supply."[126] It is notable that Eskom marked 300 days of no loadshedding in March 2026, which contributed to the company's first profit in 8 years in 2025.[127] According to a March 2026 presentation the company's debt burden has reduced to ZAR360 billion. Nonetheless, municipalities' debt to Eskom is a problem and is expected to reach ZAR358 billion by 2031, threatening the improvements to the Eskom's financial outlook.[128] These factors have added to a growing public debt crisis that could limit the South African government's capacity and willingness to lead a public sector-led just transition, or indeed the social investments that unions and civil society are also demanding.

124 André de Ruyter, *Truth to Power: My Three Years Inside Eskom* (Penguin Random House South Africa, 2023).

125 Onke Ngcuka, '**Mantashe Slams Eskom as 1,759MW of Renewables Signed Up**', Daily Maverick, 8 December 2022 <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-12-08-mantashe-slams-eskom-as-1759mw-of-renewables-signed-up/> [accessed 29 April 2025].

126 Government of South Africa, 2023 Budget Review: Eskom Debt Relief (National Treasury, 2023) <https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/National%20Budget/2023/review/Annexure%20W3.pdf>.; Eskom, 'Condensed Group Interim Financial Statements For the Six Months Ended 30 September 2025', Eskom, Eskom, 2025 <https://www.eskom.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Eskom-interim-financial-statements_30-September-2025.pdf> [accessed 10 April 2026].

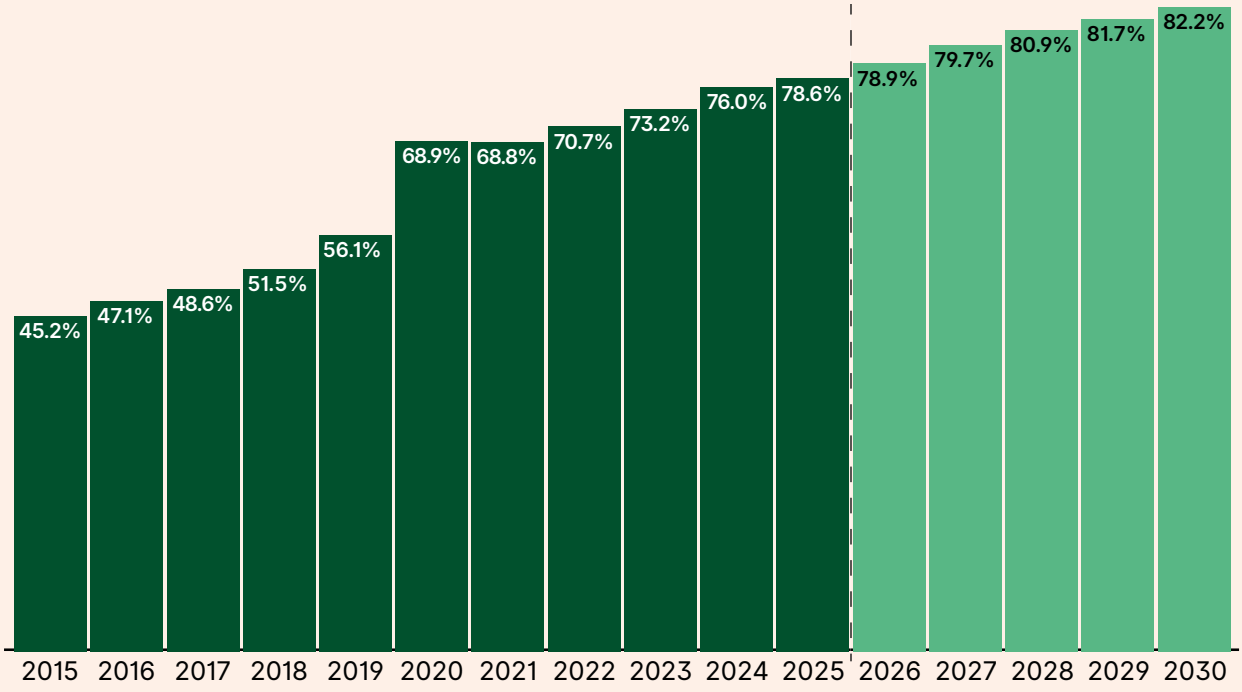
127 Eskom, '**Standing Committee on Appropriations: Update on FY27 Finance Plan and Eskom Debt Relief Programme**', Parliamentary Monitoring Group, Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 24 March 2026 <https://static.pmg.org.za/260324Standing_Committee_on_Appropriations_Plan_F27__Debt_Relief_Rev_8.pdf> [accessed 10 April 2026].

128 Eskom, 'Standing Committee on Appropriations: Update on FY27 Finance Plan and Eskom Debt Relief Programme'.

## 4) Debt crisis

South Africa's national debt burden as a percentage of GDP remains high. Although it began to stabilise in the past two years, the government's decision to take on over half of Eskom's debt (so that the utility can urgently invest in maintenance and upgrades)[129] means that instead of a gradual reduction in debt to GDP, it has increased 56.1% in 2019 to 78.6% In 2025.[130] South Africa's economy was already in recession with a significant public deficit which had grown considerably since the 2008 global financial crisis as spending under the Zuma administration on the public sector wage bill, rising interest costs, and bailouts for public enterprises escalated. The inefficiencies of government investment are considerable, in terms of both wastage and corruption, while, simultaneously, there is a gap between the government's revenue projections and its actual tax revenue collected.[131] The pandemic had a seismic impact across the South African economy, which contracted by 7% in 2020. The Treasury proposed a range of measures to tackle the debt burden, including public spending cuts and raising R40bn in extra tax revenue. Although the 2026 budget increased spending on public services, organisations such as COSATU have responded negatively to what they argue is underinvestment in services to tackle unemployment and poverty.[132]

**Figure 2: South Africa Debt-to-GDP (%) (IMF, 2026)**




129 Olivia Kumwenda-Mtambo and others, '**South Africa Govt to Take on Half of Struggling Eskom's Debt**', Africa, Reuters, 22 February 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africas-government-take-over-half-eskoms-debt-2023-02-22/> [accessed 8 November 2024].

130 International Monetary Fund, 'World Economic Outlook April 2026: General Government Gross Debt (% of GDP)', International Monetary Fund, April 2026. https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/GGXWDG_NGDP@WEO/ZAF (accessed 20 May 2026)

131 Haroon Bhorat and Gracelin Baskaran, '**From Stimulus to Debt: The Case of South Africa**', Brookings, 2021 <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/from-stimulus-to-debt-the-case-of-south-africa/> [accessed 8 November 2024].

132 COSATU, '**COSATU 2026/27 Budget Reaction Statement**', COSATU, COSATU, 25 February 2026 <https://mediadon.co.za/cosatu-2026-27-budget-reactions-statement/> [accessed 10 April 2026].

## 5) War in Ukraine

After the Russia invaded Ukraine the demand for South African coal in Europe surged. Coal exports to Europe went up over 700% in 2022 as European energy markets adjusted to the bans on Russian resources. South African policymakers, unionists and environmental campaigners have all been quick to point out what they perceive to be the moral hypocrisy of this increase while European capitals are exerting pressure on South Africa to move away from fossil fuels. Although this demand for South African coal in Europe waned over 2023 and 2024, overall demand in Asia remains high, indicating a durable pattern of demand.[133] At the very least, this alleviates pressures on the coal mines to close in the short-to-medium term as South Africa continues to contribute to global carbon emissions.

There is an inevitable trade-off for South Africa between its ostensive global commitments to reduce carbon emissions with its immediate need to continue mining and shipping coal to protect jobs. This apparent even where climate-sensitive senior figures like President Cyril Ramaphosa are extolling both the virtues and necessity of climate action. As he noted in a "Letter from the President:"

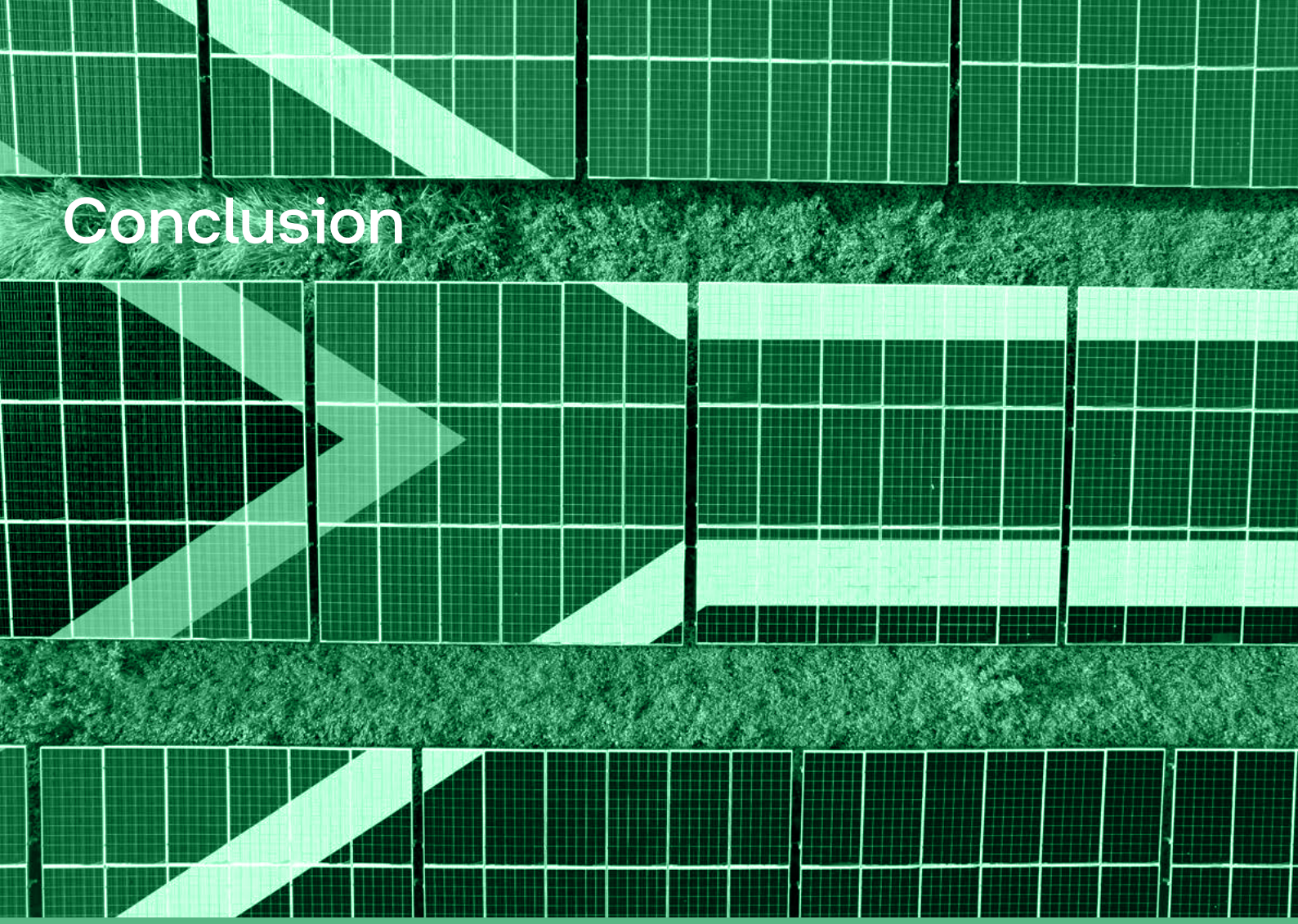
**Although South Africa is playing its part in the global climate change effort, we have been consistent in emphasising our right to development. We must ensure that the transition to a low-carbon, climate change resilient economy does not jeopardise our developmental goals. The move from fossil fuels to greener, cleaner energy sources cannot take place at the expense of economic growth and job creation.**[134]

This "right to development" discourse is bound together with calls for the Global North to contribute more to the climate change agenda in the Global South. It dovetails with the resource nationalist arguments sometimes aired by union leaders discussed above and such narratives complicate the political imperative to tackle climate change. These dynamics fuel a narrative within the unions of global injustice rooted in Western duplicity in which "they" (the West) are promoting rapid transition in Africa while safeguarding their own energy security and stalling their own transitions when it is expedient to do so.[135]

133 Reuters, '**South Africa's Richards Bay Coal Exports up 11% on Rail Improvements**', Reuters, Reuters, 27 January 2026 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africas-richards-bay-coal-exports-up-11-rail-improvements-2026-01-27/> [accessed 10 April 2026].

134 Cyril Ramaphosa, '**Letter from the President: Our Common Future Depends on Climate Action Now**', Daily Maverick, 7 November 2022 <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-11-07-our-common-future-depends-on-climate-action-now-ramaphosa/> [accessed 8 November 2024].

135 This comes up again and again in interviews with union leaders at all levels, right down to the 'shopfloor'.



# Conclusion

South Africa has quite a unique emphasis on just transition at the heart of its climate action agenda. The Just Transition Framework reflects some of the most ambitious and progressive approaches to establishing a normative consensus around a transition that positively benefits all South Africans.

Unions have been at the forefront of discussions around just transition, although responses have been mixed. The national union federation, COSATU, was the first to instigate discussions about a just transition in the 2010s and, from the outset, COSATU expressed concerns about how it might be appropriated as a 'capitalist concept' that ignored labour's promotion of social justice. Despite consensus on the need to promote a just transition among unions nationally, their understanding of JT has always been loosely defined in terms of its operationalization. This ambiguity enabled COSATU to avoid potential conflicts among its affiliates, such as with those unions most directly impacted by efforts to decarbonise the economy but creates problems when identifying specific demands when implementing policies.

The lack of definition of just transition in the union movement was mirrored in government policy. The JTF eventually agreed in 2022 is very broad in its ambitions but shallow in terms of the mechanics of implementation. Heavily indebted, the government sought international financing for its transition and the JETP agreement struck at COP26 provided loans from a collection of Western countries to accelerate the transition in South Africa, with a particular focus on the heavily polluting energy sector. The role of loans to finance the energy transition deepened the disagreements between unions and actors promoting JETP (primarily government and international donors). In addition to concerns around increasing South Africa's economic dependency on international governments, the loans drove union criticisms that donors were determining the pace and terms of the energy transition.

There is an important political context to concerns over the role of international actors and finance. Populist narratives of foreign subversion, 'white monopoly capital', and comprador elites are already widespread in the country. Just transition initiatives in their current form are susceptible to being heavily politicised by very influential groups in the unions (who hold considerable influence within the ruling party). These narratives resonate strongly with vulnerable and marginalised working-class communities when they are confronted with threats to their livelihoods. They are used express fear, anxiety, mistrust, and enmity toward internationally financed, state-driven efforts to implement a 'just transition' in the country as it moves away from coal toward renewable energy. A new opposition led by former president Jacob Zuma, uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP), has weaponised opposition to the transition in its manifesto and its continued growth could entrench political opposition to decarbonisation.[136]

Unions' concerns and criticisms of an impending energy transition in particular – which is front and centre of the national transition - are rooted in persistently high levels of unemployment, which renewable energy projects are ill-equipped to mitigate, and ongoing electricity supply crises. In the face of these problems, workers have questioned the wisdom of making people redundant or reducing the amount of available electricity. The wider socio-economic impacts of unemployment in a country where one worker may be supporting an extended family network are particularly pressing. Meanwhile, demand for South African coal is high in international markets, adding to workers' sense that an international push for an energy transition in South Africa is deeply hypocritical. These national and international dimensions are contributing to a perfect storm that is creating barriers and resistance to an energy transition in South Africa and underscores workers fears that this transition will be unjust and neocolonial in character. This storm will, in the short term at least, delay plans to decarbonise the country's energy sector. However, workers' concerns do not appear to be rooted in climate denialism and their engagement with ideas around justice in the post-apartheid state creates spaces for discussion and progress, provided their concerns are heard and meaningfully accounted for.

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This project focuses on studying **Just Transitions** by comparing concepts, policies, and strategies across 14 diverse countries to ensure a **socially just shift towards decarbonisation**. It aims to develop recommendations for climate-friendly structural changes that protect workers and vulnerable groups. The project is funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation – Just Transition: Aktivitäten im internationalen Vergleich 2021-582-2.


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