
A climate justice critique of South African political parties

By Vishwas Satgar, Ferrial Adam and Itumeleng Mogatusi

Dr Vishwas Satgar is the founder and Board Chairperson of the Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre (COPAC), activist Ferrial Adam is also with COPAC and Itumeleng Mogatusi is a member of the GreenHouse Project. All the authors' organisations are alliance partners of the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (SAFSC).

The authors consider the policies on climate change in the election manifestos of the three largest parties in turn, and argue that all of them fail to demonstrate clear commitment to a deep just transition to sustain life.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's election took place in a context in which inequality is worsening, costs of living are going up and unemployment is a major challenge. It also occurred while South Africa's worst drought in recorded history continues to ravage various villages and towns. All our political parties have failed to recognise the drought as a climate shock. All seemed surprised by cyclones Idai and Kenneth, another climate shock, and the devastation it caused in vast sections of our neighbouring countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The science on climate change from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is clear

that as planet earth is heated through more greenhouse gas emissions (from burning coal, oil and gas) we will have more extreme weather shocks such as droughts, heatwaves, floods, cyclones, etc. We are currently 1.2 degrees Celsius hotter than we were before the industrial revolution and are fast heading to a 1.5C overshoot unless we cut emissions over the next 12 years by 45% to 2010 levels and to net zero by 2050. In short, we have 12 years to prevent catastrophic climate change.

This climate justice critique is based on a reading of party manifestos. It applies to all political parties, while making specific critiques of the African National Congress (ANC), the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the largest parties in South Africa's current political system.

GENERAL CLIMATE JUSTICE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

The climate crisis is a systemic crisis of carbon-driven global capitalism. It has its origins in 150 years of fossil fuel extraction and use by rich industrialised countries. Industrialising countries like China, Brazil, India and Russia

control substantial amounts of fossil fuel reserves today. South Africa's coal addiction also makes it a carbon criminal state. Its use of coal intensifies climate change and its impact on extreme weather events, including on the continent. More climate change brings climate inequalities and injustices through escalating food and water costs as well as job losses. Many farm workers have been retrenched as a result of South Africa's drought. Despite these stark terms, none of the parties appear to understand climate change as a dangerous contradiction driven by carbon capitalism and the need for South Africa to be a climate justice state.

The climate crisis is a complex and interconnected one, given that carbon is not just extracted but is also used as a major energy source across economies. Moreover, carbon energy use differs between sectors. In South Africa, at least 9% of emissions come from globalised agriculture. Carbon is also used in various industrial processes such as construction.

An energy transition to socially-owned renewables is just one part of the task. Decarbonising the economy is a much broader challenge. Moreover, as climate shocks continue we need new

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adaptive systems that sustain life. We have to recognise the interconnections of cause and multiple effects. For example, cyclones Idai and Kenneth and their effects could have been mitigated if there were proper disaster management systems, media reporting, dam management, food sovereignty systems and health systems functioning across the country. Instead, river flooding started before Idai hit landfall in central Mozambique, dam walls failed, there was inadequate communication to warn people and disaster management systems were overwhelmed. Cholera, hunger, lack of access to health care and water stress claimed lives over and above the direct impact of the cyclones.

South Africa's drought, another example of a climate shock, has also had severe effects on society, economy and ecological relations. We have a crisis of climate leadership amongst all of South Africa's political parties and none are committed to ensuring that South Africa, the region and the continent is on a climate emergency footing.

Being on a climate emergency footing means advancing a *deep just transition* to ensure regulated, purposive, ambitious and planned reductions in carbon emissions to prevent a 1.5C overshoot. We also need to ensure the necessary adaptive systems are in place that transform energy, production, consumption, finance and public systems through democratic systemic reforms to ensure workers, the poor and



the vulnerable do not pay the price of the transition and climate shocks. Such a *deep just transition* is led by the working class and mass social forces, rooted in a red-green alliance seeking climate justice.

In addition, South Africa's parties do not understand the climate crisis as part of a larger ecological crisis. More extraction, pollution, chemical-based agriculture, waste, deforestation and over-consumption are undermining natural cycles of the earth's system and accelerating species' extinction. According to a UN report by the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPES), up to one million species of plants and animals are now threatened with extinction. Several planetary bio-physical limits, such as fresh water, land use, ocean acidification and bio-geochemical flows are being breached and capitalism's eco-cidal logic is creating a toxic and unlivable world. We need to rethink our politics from the standpoint of eco-centric ethics and the *deep just transition*.

CLIMATE JUSTICE CRITIQUE OF THE ANC

The ANC as the ruling party in South Africa has locked South Africa into the pledge and review mechanism of the United Nations. The ANC government turned its back on a climate justice approach to the historical debt owed by rich industrialised countries, to

ambitious regulated reductions in carbon emissions and is certainly not positioning South Africa as a climate justice state on the continent. Moreover, its response to the drought, as a major climate shock, has been dismal. A national disaster was declared in early 2018 after the food system collapsed, many communities were devastated by the drought and various national water projects compromised. The drought continues in South Africa and there is no leadership from the ANC-led state based on lessons learned to prepare for the next round of climate shocks. The drought and the climate crisis are not mentioned in its party manifesto.

The ANC manifesto reads as though South Africa owes the ANC a debt for the great job it has done based on a set of quantitative indicators showing grand successes and improvements. These hide more than they reveal. South Africa has an economy in deep crisis: inequality, unemployment and hunger have all increased. The ANC takes no responsibility for this disaster and crisis of social reproduction that it has led South Africa into for 25 years. Climate shocks will deepen the suffering of the majority, yet the ANC manifesto makes no attempt to bring to the fore the existential threat of the climate crisis.

The ANC proclaims a commitment to industrialisation (including for localised renewable energy technology production), the '4th industrial revolution', township economies, land ➤

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reform, public transport, National Health Insurance etc, in a context in which state capture has fundamentally compromised the ability of the state to lead even modest reforms. According to the auditor general reports of 2017-2018, irregular expenditure in government was R72 billion. The majority of state entities audited had adverse findings. The country knows, through the Zondo Commission, how ANC factions have been engaged in state capture regarding Eskom (South Africa's monopoly energy parastatal) instead of laying the basis for a *deep just transition* to a socially owned renewable energy system aimed to resolve the challenges of Eskom and fix our water systems.

The ANC manifesto calls for gas and oil extraction in our oceans. It also understands renewables as complementary to coal. All of this is linked to the game plan of raising investment levels to R1.3 trillion over the next four years. The ANC manifesto still envisages a deeply globalised economy, driven by the interests of transnational capital. Within that it is creating space for black industrial capital, agrarian capital, cooperatives and worker ownership in the economy through employee stock option schemes. De-racialising capitalism is at the heart of its multi-class project; a little more trickle down with a slightly broader base. Ironically globalisation cannot be a development strategy let



alone a basis to transform South Africa to deal with accelerating climate change.

CLIMATE JUSTICE CRITIQUE OF THE DA

The DA failed to prepare Cape Town for its drought, despite scientifically based academic warnings. Its day-zero approach placed a squeeze on poor households and passed on the pressure of managing the drought to working class, middle class and poor households. It did not challenge water ownership and control by white agricultural interests. High water levies raised billions for the DA-led metro while working class and poor households were faced with punitive tariffs that undermine their water needs.

Day zero was about climate injustice and creating new climate inequalities. As a neoliberal party, the DA has expressed a 'green neoliberal' response to the drought which always privileges the wealthy. Hence it encouraged thousands of boreholes in Cape Town and smaller towns, something only affordable by the wealthy and which threatens the long run viability of aquifers in these areas.

The DA has a manifesto that deals explicitly with climate change and the need for a resilience plan. However, several problems stand out. First, the DA views the Paris Climate Agreement as a viable instrument for dealing with emission reductions. However, that agreement's voluntary approach

to reducing emissions and building a registry are really a "green wash". South Africa needs more than this to meet its reduction targets given the current urgency. Second, it supports fracking, nuclear and off-shore gas extraction. Like the ANC it still has a shallow conception of how to get to a zero carbon economy. Third, it has a private-sector led approach to renewable energy. Essentially Eskom must make way for independent power producers that supply the national grid and local governments. There is no real concern for workers in Eskom or for the working conditions of workers in the renewables industry. Renewable energy capital – not workers, communities, households or public institutions – is the key driver of the energy transition in their manifesto. Fourth, the DA advocates carbon capture and storage as a solution to South Africa's emission problems. This is an untried technology and a techno-fix that detracts from the need for a *deep just transition* to a zero carbon energy system.

The DA approach to water mainly reflects the interest of white, agro-industrial capital. It recognises the impact of the drought on farmers and hence champions more dams, infrastructure and policy support for these farmers. The DA does not question the fact that 62% of South Africa's water resources are controlled by these farmers. Moreover, this kind of mono-industrial agriculture failed South Africa in the drought; it collapsed. South Africa

needs a new food system based on localisation (not exports), small-scale farmers, agro-ecology and seed, water and food sovereignty.

CLIMATE JUSTICE CRITIQUE OF THE EFF

The EFF is a racist, Afro-chauvinist party, with a strong authoritarian populist streak. It is generally not clear what it stands for; it has contradictory policies and practices. One day it is for the Constitution and another day against it. One day against corruption and another day its leaders are implicated in corruption (the VBS 'bank heist' and tender hijacking in metros are examples). One day for state ownership and another for stakeholder capitalism. Its manifesto has a section on 'Environment and Climate' but it still supports a carbon, mainly coal-based and mining-driven economy.

Its commitment to addressing the climate crisis, let alone the larger planetary ecological crisis, is incoherent to say the least and its explicit target to reduce emissions by 10% in 2024 is certainly not ambitious enough. It betrays a lack of understanding of the urgency of the climate crisis and scientific necessity to cut emissions even more drastically. This is a party without any progressive values. Its general orientation is against a climate justice politics that stands for all the workers, poor and vulnerable in our society – black and white.

The energy section is probably the least progressive section of the manifesto. It has no original thinking on the energy challenge as part of the larger *deep just transition*. The EFF is state-centric in its energy approach and supports the use of mixed energy sources, including so-called *safe coal*, nuclear energy, as well as renewables. The plan outlined in the manifesto is that an EFF government will have a state-owned company take over all Eskom-owned coal mines and assist Eskom in establishing a renewable

energy division, with the energy base still anchored in coal and nuclear energy. It will also end preferential pricing to big energy users. The EFF's energy approach completely avoids and neglects the dangers of coal and nuclear. It also shows a lack of understanding of the urgency to completely break from fossil fuels and false energy solutions to ensure a rapid transition to a zero-carbon energy system based on socially-owned renewables.

The EFF is committed to a resource nationalism based on reproducing South Africa's toxic minerals-energy complex through a statist capitalism. Understanding the climate crisis in its interconnections requiring systemic alternatives to drive the *deep just transition* is absent. The EFF endorses the "One Million Climate Jobs Campaign", while still remaining committed to an energy programme centered on coal and nuclear energy, merely discrediting and making a mockery of the campaign. The EFF commits to the 'Green Revolution', as part of its understanding of agricultural transformation. The 'Green Revolution' is about productivist, corporate-led agriculture. Such agriculture collapsed during South Africa's drought and on a global scale contributes about 40% to global emissions. This is not a systemic alternative to address the challenges of building a new food system in South Africa. On water issues, the EFF merely has a narrow 'service delivery approach'. Yes, safe, clean water must be delivered to the people. But from the standpoint of the *deep just transition* our water resources are being compromised by more mining, including coal mining, which the EFF supports. An example of contradictory EFF practice is their support for the Xolobeni community's rejection of mining. This is rather hypocritical given the EFF's support for more mining in general. Corruption has affected water infrastructure delivery and the EFF is no shining example of fighting corruption. South Africa needs more than a shopping

list approach to its water crisis. It needs a people-driven water sovereignty approach to planning, managing and sharing our water commons.

TOWARDS A CLIMATE JUSTICE CHARTER FOR SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is experiencing a crisis in political leadership regarding the climate crisis. It is in this context we invite all in South Africa to contribute to the Climate Justice Charter for South Africa to ensure we hasten the *deep just transition* to ensure that the workers, the poor and vulnerable do not pay the price of climate change.

Key themes for the charter, which will be elaborated in grassroots dialogues, relate to systemic alternatives that would bring down carbon emissions and ensure we sustain life as climate shocks hit.

These themes include:

- Principles for the Charter;
- Our conception of the just transition for South Africa taking into account class, race, gender and ecological relations;
- Systemic alternatives related to land use, water, rights of nature, energy, food, production, consumption, waste, transport, housing, finance;
- The role of the climate emergency state and our international relations as a climate justice society;
- Communication, education and awareness raising to mobilise society;
- The role and form of people's power from below.

We also have an inter-generational obligation to act, now, to ensure present and future generations have a future. It is not too late to act to prevent the extinction of human and non-human life forms. We welcome further inputs to this important task.

Send inputs to Jane Cherry on copacz@icon.co.za 