

Drowning Voices: The Climate Change Discourse in South Africa

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Introduction

Significant attention has been given to improving our understanding of the real and imminent impacts of climate change. It is accepted that rising temperatures, changes in rainfall patterns, extreme weather events, changes in sea levels and changes in biodiversity will have significant consequences on the world economy, rural livelihoods and development in general. Africa in particular will be hardest hit by climate change yet its adaptive capacity remains low. The continent faces increasing water scarcity, a reduction in agricultural productivity, increased risks of floods and droughts and negative impacts on the health sector among others. Climate change is an additional stressor for a continent that is already struggling with food insecurity, high poverty levels, and a HIV/Aids pandemic. Climate change will have critical impacts on the economies of the region and threatens to reverse the gains of sustainable development in Africa.

Climate Change Impacts and Vulnerability in South Africa¹

South Africa will be equally faced with adverse impacts of climate change. Climate change projections over the next 50 years show a warming of between 1°C and 3°C; a potential reduction of approximately 5 to 10% of current rainfall; increased daily maximum

temperatures in summer and autumn in the western half of the country; increased incidents of flood and drought; and, enhanced temperature inversions, which are likely to exacerbate air pollution problems. These changes will have significant impacts on various sectors of the South African economy. The South African Country Studies Programme² identified the energy, mining, health, agriculture (particularly maize production), biodiversity, water resources and rangelands as the most vulnerable sectors.

Impacts facing the agricultural sector include, a reduction in the amount of land suitable for both arable and pastoral agriculture; a shortening of the growing season and a decrease in yields particularly along the margins of semi arid and arid areas. Climate change impacts will further reduce the sectors contribution to the GDP, which has already been declining over the years. In 1998 agriculture and forestry contributed 4.0% to GDP, which is significantly lower than in 1965 at 9.1%³. The impacts on the agricultural sector thus not only have implications for the national and household food security but the economy as well. The predicted warming of the bio-climate and aridification are predicted to shrink the country's biomes by 38 -55% of their current coverage resulting in a displacement

1 For a more detailed analysis see: Madzwamuse, M. (2010). *Climate change vulnerability and adaptation preparedness in South Africa*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Cape Town.

2 See Kiker, G.A. (2000). *South African Country Study on Climate Change: Synthesis report for the vulnerability and adaptation section*, University of Kwazulu Natal.

3 National Development Agency (NDA) (2000).

and loss of wildlife species and biodiversity of significant global value⁴. These changes have direct impacts on local livelihoods and the wildlife based tourism sector.

While predicted shortages of water will have devastating effects on industry, the agricultural sector (which is by far the largest water user accounting for 62% of the national water allocation for irrigation) will be hardest hit. Water scarcity will be a major issue for South Africa as 98% of the national water resources are already overcommitted, while high levels of contamination from the mining industry and effluent from major cities continues to undermine the water quality⁵. The country is thus faced with both a water shortage and a water quality problem that is likely to get worse due to climate change impacts.

A neglected area in the South African climate change vulnerability assessments is social vulnerability, particularly the question of poverty and socioeconomic vulnerability. Current climatic shocks and stresses already have a devastating impact on vulnerability of the poor⁶. The poor generally have a limited number of coping strategies upon which to draw from in times of stress. This is particularly true for the poor in South Africa who have suffered a history of marginalisation and dispossession. Poverty remains a daunting challenge in South Africa after more than 15 years of democratic rule 47% of the South African population still lives below the 'lower bound' poverty line proposed by Statistics South Africa in 2007⁷. The majority of the poor are rural dwellers (59%)⁸. More than 85% of the land in rural areas is settled by commercial farmers while subsistence rural dwellers are overcrowded in highly degraded former homelands. These communities live in abject poverty isolated from economic opportunities. The majority of households facing these hardships are female headed with limited capacities to adapt to climate change impacts arising from social inequalities that manifest themselves in differences in property rights, access to information, lack of employment, low literacy levels and unequal access to resources.

4 See Kiker (2000).

5 See Turton, A. (2008). *Three Strategic Water Quality Challenges that Decision-Makers Need to Know About and How the CSIR Should Respond*, Pretoria.

6 Department for International Development (DFID). (2004). *The impact of climate change on the vulnerability of the poor*, London.

7 This means they did not have R322 per month (44 USD) required for essential food and non food items. This is a significant drop from 70% which was estimated in 2000, though poverty indicators were different at the time. See Armstrong, P.; Lekezwa, B. & Siebrits, F.K. (2008). *Poverty in SA: A Profile Based on Recent Household Surveys*, Stellenbosch University.

8 Armstrong et al. (2008).

Unlike other African countries South Africa is also a contributor of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, which at 10 tonnes per capita are about twice as high as in other developing countries. This is due to the fact that South Africa's economy is highly dependent on the use and export of fossil fuels such as coal. It should be noted that even though the average carbon footprint for South Africa is high due to coal dependence only 10% of the population (the affluent) is responsible for 90% of these emissions⁹. With the above impacts of climate change and the associated economic, social and cultural costs climate change adaptation is no doubt an economic development issue for South Africa that requires urgent attention. The next section therefore looks at national efforts to address adaptation needs and why climate change adaptation is seemingly low on the national climate change agenda.

The drivers for the climate change adaptation agenda

Recognising the direct and immediate impacts of climate change on the poor and their livelihoods, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is increasingly highlighting adaptation as a key response to climate change alongside mitigation measures. However, mitigation and carbon financing continue to dominate the climate change agenda. Little attention has been paid to adaptation even though this is where the focus of Africa and other developing countries ought to be, at least in terms of facilitating efforts towards meeting several Millennium Development Goals (MDG), reducing poverty and enhancing food security.

The slow response to climate change adaptation is also evident in South Africa. While the drivers for the adaptation agenda in South Africa may be similar to what is seen in other countries in the region, South Africa has a number of unique features that lead to the dominance of the mitigation discourse. Of particular importance is the high dependence of the economy on fossil fuels and the relevance of the mitigation agenda to maintaining national economic growth. As a major contributor to GHG emissions South Africa has to be seen to be on the forefront of this debate, particularly in response to pressure from its own private sector. A second feature is that the lack of civic engagement is not due to a weak civil society but rather to a lack of access to the right information and funding to support civil society led adaptation interventions.

9 See Mqadi (2009).

Policy directions

The research outcomes of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have an important influence on policy outcomes of the climate change convention. Adaptation did not feature much in the UNFCCC before 2000. Negotiations focused solely on mitigation mainly influenced by the first two reports of the IPCC, which made a strong case for mitigation as a response strategy for reducing and capping GHG emissions. It was not until the third IPCC report was released in 2001 that adaptation gained prominence in the global arena. The report alerted the world to the unavoidable impacts of climate change in the immediate future and highlighted the importance of coping with climate change through adaptation. In particular IPCC pointed out that poor countries would be more vulnerable and thus require assistance from developed countries to adapt¹⁰. Another milestone for putting adaptation at the centre of the UNFCCC is the Nairobi work programme on adaptation (2005-2010) aimed at helping all countries to improve their understanding and assessment of the impacts of climate change and implement practical adaptation measures.

Some commentators have noted that an inadequate focus on adaptation by scientists studying the impacts of climate change prior to 2000 resulted in a limited understanding of what constitutes adaptation¹¹. Gaps in knowledge continue to hamper the extent to which adaptation can be convincingly tackled in the context of the UNFCCC negotiations. Evidence for vulnerability and adaptation is highly localised and the IPCC in its fourth assessment report calls for better models and methods for improving the understanding of multiple stresses particularly at national, regional and global levels.

Practical implementation of climate change adaptation requires a deeper understanding of the barriers to adaptation both by African governments and the donor community which is currently lacking. African countries need such information in order to upscale issues for consideration at the UNFCCC negotiations and inform the growing body of knowledge on this issue.

10 Nepad & APF Support Unit (2007). *'Climate Change and Africa': Key political messages and action points*. Prepared for 8th Meeting of the Africa Partnership Forum, 22-23 May 2007. Bonn, Germany.

11 Klein, R.; Lisa, E.; Schipper, L.F & Dessai, S. (2003). Integrating mitigation into adaptation policy: Three research questions, *Environmental Science and Policy*, No. 8., 2005, pg 579-588.

Key barriers include¹²:

- Lack of adequate human and institutional capacity to deal with uncertainty;
- Lack of guidance and political will;
- Conflicts with competing development agendas and needs;
- Aversion to change.

To some extent the policy environment for climate change adaptation in South Africa reflects the above issues. South Africa produced its National Climate Change Response Strategy (NCCRS) in 2004; it provides an overall policy framework for addressing climate change related challenges and was developed in the early days after ratification of the UNFCCC. The response strategy is based on national vulnerability assessments which were undertaken in 2000. Although the strategy was developed in 2001 and released in 2004 the NCCRS reflects the trend in the development of the science on climate change at the time. The strategy is biased towards the biophysical aspects of climate change neglecting the socio-economic aspects that are critical for mainstreaming climate change adaptation into national economic development planning. This is typical of the first generation of national climate change response strategies.

A number of sectoral adaptation strategies have been proposed in the NCCRS to address vulnerabilities in the agriculture, health, biodiversity and water sectors. However, the strategy fails to adequately highlight cross-sectoral impacts of climate change and advance integrated adaptation strategies. In addition the NCCRS does not adequately reflect the socio-economic implications of climate change particularly paying attention to vulnerable areas and most vulnerable sections of the South African society. Therefore, proposed actions do not provide for strategic interventions that would build the resilience of key sectors, vulnerable groups and ensure adaptation preparedness. With high levels of poverty and inequality and a dual economy it is important that issues that relate to the second economy are not overshadowed by the interest of the most powerful groups particularly if there are no political champions to speak for and represent the interests of the rural poor, small scale farmers and the landless in the policy making arena.

12 See Nepad & APF (2007).

A typical example of the above is the fact that proposed adaptation options for the agricultural sector are narrowly focused on maize production. By so doing, the NCCRS in its current form takes care of the interests of the commercial farmers and neglects the needs of subsistence farmers faced with significant challenges that undermine their adaptive capacity. Furthermore, unlike other countries in Southern Africa, South Africa also occupies a unique space in that it has a high urban population as well, which needs to be considered in the development of local adaptation strategies. A better understanding of the vulnerabilities facing the urban poor is needed so as to strengthen adaptation interventions.

An improved understanding of the socio-economic impacts of climate change will help to highlight the magnitude of the problem, point to policy related barriers and possibly lead to political will and commitment to address climate change adaptation. It would enable African states to better articulate priority areas for adaptation in the global negotiations and provide a more holistic picture of the challenges at hand.

South Africa and playing the north south politics

It is not only the science that is driving the adaptation agenda and the political will of the UNFCCC parties to give it the required attention, but also geo-politics as reflected in the North-South divide that characterises the negotiations. Adaptation is an issue for poorer developing countries most of which are in the South (Africa in particular), mitigation on the other hand responds to the needs of the more powerful North. The dominance of mitigation over adaptation in the earlier years of the UNFCCC negotiations reflected concerns from some parties that adaptation would weaken society's willingness to mitigate climate change while others felt that mitigation efforts would adequately facilitate adaptation.

The Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC stated with 95% confidence that climate change is happening and that it is caused by human activities. It highlighted that the atmospheric space is rapidly becoming congested by GHGs and that if countries do not act to tackle climate change by 2015, the impacts of climate change would be severe. The Greenhouse Development Rights Framework argues that even if all developed countries were to cut emissions deeply, immediately, it would not be adequate to halt climate change. This is because of the amounts of GHGs already in the atmosphere and growing emissions

from developing countries. This of course implies that developing countries with large emissions (e.g. South Africa) will have to take on some emissions reduction targets. Debates within the UNFCCC negotiations over the last two years have reflected this understanding and in fact South Africa and other large developing countries have agreed to undertake Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMAs).

Industry and the private sector are well aware of the implications of the UNFCCC debates and highly proactive in terms of influencing policy and taking advantage of the opportunities with regards to clean energy development and market response strategies. Furthermore the recent energy crises and the negative impacts this had on the economy has jolted the commitment of the government to assess the viability of clean energy. In view of its international obligations, the government developed the Long Term Mitigation Scenarios (LTMS) which was endorsed by cabinet in 2008¹³. The LTMS presents options for reducing GHGs and thus mitigating climate change. Although the strategy takes into account the results of various options on the GDP, job creation and wealth distribution (a level of detail that is lacking on the options for adaptation as entailed in the NCCRS) business and capital interests are driving this strategy as is the trend with the rest of the African continent¹⁴. Private sector and governments in Africa are more interested in the commercial opportunities of climate change negotiations as presented by carbon finance mechanisms and clean development mechanisms (CDM) opportunities. Consequently while the influence of the global discourse is evident perhaps a much stronger influence is the national agenda, particularly the interests of the private sector and industry. Therefore in the case of South Africa the North-South divide is not so clear cut.

Political will and economic development imperatives

As is the case with the rest of the African continent, leadership and political will is required on the part of the South African government to champion climate change adaptation. Currently the governments of Africa seem to be responding more to the macro-economic needs of the state and therefore

13 See Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) (2008). *Long-term Mitigation Scenarios – Strategic options for South Africa*, available at: <http://www.pmg.org.za/files/docs/080610ltms1.pdf>.

14 Hallows, D. (2008). *A critical appraisal of LTMS*, Earthlife Africa, available at: <http://www.earthlife.org.za/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/ltms-final-web.pdf>.

pushing an aggressive agenda on the development of clean energy, technological and managerial responses to climate change. Where state interests in adaptation are demonstrated governments again push for technology transfer and capacity building initiatives targeted at government agencies and sectors, ignoring local adaptation capacity needs of vulnerable communities which are more micro-level concerns.

Addressing climate change vulnerability and adaptation is an uncomfortable issue for African governments and other parties to the UNFCCC. It calls for a new order at both global level and on the domestic front. That is, the need to deal with the underlying causes of Africa's vulnerability as a continent and those who are most vulnerable to climate change. It points to the structural causes of poverty, poor economic and agricultural performance and other variables that make Africa vulnerable to climate change. At the core is the issue of resource tenure and the need to revisit land policy and land governance in order to address questions surrounding access to land and natural resources for local communities and tenure security in general. The land question is a highly political and complex matter for Africa but also one that has to be dealt with in order to build the resilience of African communities to climate change. Currently the resource and land rights as well as benefits of local communities are recognised for as long as there is no economic demand on the land¹⁵. As it is, the world is on verge of a global land rush due to an increase in demand emanating from the food crises, energy crises and the emerging carbon finance markets. The demands for land are forwarded through sovereign funds and inter-state negotiations on transnational companies and commercial investors¹⁶. The interests and rights of the poor are marginalised in such deals. African governments are reluctant to deal with the land issue and at the same time the developed world is apprehensive about land reform policies in Africa.

South Africa is not immune to the controversies surrounding the land issue. Land tenure reform is of critical importance to climate change adaptation in South Africa yet the NCCRS is silent on this issue. The resilience of the poor, rural dwellers and subsistence farmers to climate change impact will not

be enhanced if adaptation interventions are divorced from the broader rural development framework and land and agrarian reform. The 'willing buyer, willing seller' approach to land distribution has also proven to be too expensive an approach to implement. As a result landlessness continues to impede communities especially in rural areas to have access to a source of livelihood through farming and other land based activities¹⁷. On a gender dimension while some women gained access to land through the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) programme and other land reform programmes between 1994 and 2000, land reform did not at a sufficiently large scale benefit the great majority of the poor rural women.

The economic and development policy environment at the international level also influences to the extent to which climate change adaptation will be addressed at a national level. One of the fundamental pro-poor responses to climate change is to ensure that macro-economic policies reduce people's vulnerabilities¹⁸. Although the development framework policy is built upon a progressive set of rights stipulated in the constitution, the implementation of macro-economic policies in South Africa is not friendly to the poor. Macro-economic policies in South Africa are observed to have effectively denied the poor development opportunities and marginalised them from the economy. Programmes such as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Policy (GEAR) and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) have undermined the poor's adaptive capacity by focusing on attracting foreign direct investments (FDI), higher domestic savings, industrial competitiveness, fiscal policy, moderation of wage increases at the expense of poverty reduction¹⁹. While these policies are critical for ensuring economic growth, the implementation in practice fell short of addressing the needs of South Africa's 'second economy' and building the resilience of the poor against climate change and other future shocks.

The impacts of climate change will be felt at a local level and for this reason responses to climate change must integrate issues from the grassroots to national and regional levels. However the most

15 See Murombedzi (2007) on the effects of China and Africa trade relations on the poor and access to land.

16 Taylor, M. (2008). *Presentation on securing access to land for food security*, UNDP Conference on land governance and emerging development agendas: Legal empowerment, climate change and food security, 24-25 November 2008, Oslo.

17 See Noyoo, N. (2008). *Civil Society and Poverty Reduction in South Africa*, A research conducted for the Foundation Maison des Science de L'Homme, Paris.

18 See DFID (2004)

19 See Noyoo (2008); Frye, I. (2005). *The "Second Economy" short hand, underhand or sleight of hand?*, Johannesburg.

affected communities do not have a space for dialogue in the UNFCCC or to influence climate change policy decisions at the global, regional and national levels. Several studies have noted that communities are normally aware that climatic changes will affect crop production; they have observed the changes in climate in recent times; communities in arid lands have been adapting to climate variability for decades and yet despite the fact that their governments have been representing them in the global negotiations they are not aware of these global debates and even less aware of the opportunities regarding carbon markets²⁰. So far indications from the region reveal that local participation and accounting for household coping strategies remains a real challenge in the development of adaptation policies because there is a tendency to focus on sectoral transfers of technology based on projected physical changes in climate²¹.

While local coping strategies are critical for adaptation to climate change most government policies tend to undermine these, thereby weakening the resilience of local communities to the impacts of climate change. The local knowledge, social networks, traditional institutions and local biodiversity that are often used for coping are often ignored by the formal financial, technological and institutional frameworks of most countries. Certain critical elements of local adaptation strategies employed by local communities such as flexibility and seasonal mobility are undermined i.e. through promoting specialised agricultural production of single crops for export at the expense of crop diversification by small scale farmers; privatisation of land restricting mobility of pastoralists and other communities whose livelihoods are directly dependent of natural resources, parcelling out the best arable land to commercial farmers, restricting access through protected areas thereby restricting access to areas that local communities use during drought periods or reducing access to high ground plots in times of floods²².

South Africa's history of displacement and marginalisation of the majority of the population makes development of appropriate and responsive local adaptation strategies even more complex yet critical. Even after 15 years of democratic rule high

poverty levels still persist and the majority of the poor remain landless. Social systems that often form the base for local adaptation have been weakened and therefore the post-apartheid transformation agenda will be central to addressing issues of social vulnerability in the country. The social transformation agenda needs to be a critical part of the policy framework for climate change adaptation.

Media and civic voices

Civil society organisations (CSO) work directly with rural communities and small holding farmers. They are aware of local realities on vulnerabilities that communities are facing on a daily basis. Civil society is in a better place to advocate for pro-poor adaptation strategies and climate change policies in general. They also have a potential role to play in raising awareness about climate change impacts, opportunities for funding local initiatives and together with local communities in designing appropriate interventions. Playing this role successfully however depends on the extent to which governments (especially local government) regards CSOs as partners in tackling the challenge of climate change. State and CSO relationships have in the past proven to be problematic. Without the involvement of local communities and CSOs, implementation of national adaptation strategies will fail at a local level.

The democratic space allows for civic engagement and yet climate change particularly climate change adaptation has not been taken up in the broader public arena. This is a result of several reasons. Firstly, public consultation during the development of the National Conservation Strategy was limited. Secondly, there is no clear communication and public awareness raising strategy. Thirdly, lack of funding presents a problem. A civil society network, the South African Climate Change Action Network (SACAN), has been calling for government action to increase funding for adaptation responses²³. This call for funding was also repeated by the civil society organisations through the global Climate Action Network (CAN) in Copenhagen, once again calling upon states to provide predictable funding for climate change adaptation in developing countries²⁴. Lastly, the level of understanding of climate change

20 See Riche, B. (2008). Urgent need for climate change adaptation, in Kamocho, S.; Strahm, W. & Wollangel, C. (2008). *The nature of drylands: Diverse ecosystems, diverse solutions*, Nairobi.

21 See Erikse et al. (2007).

22 See Eriksen, et al. (2007); Mortimore (2009) and Madzwamuse, M. (2009). *Adaptive Livelihood Strategies of Basarwa Communities: Ngamiland Botswana*, Lambert Academic Publishing, Germany.

23 See www.sacan.org.za for a full NGO statement circulated at the South African Climate change Summit held in March 2009.

24 CAN International (2009). *Fair Ambitious & Binding: Essentials for successful climate deal*, available at: http://climatenetwork.org/climate-change-basics/CAN_FAB_Essentials.pdf.

particularly local level impacts is limited among the members of the public. With better awareness raising local communities will themselves begin to demand climate change adaptation policies and interventions. A pressure that would perhaps be more compelling for change than science has been so far.

Accountability can be promoted and improved if mechanisms can be developed to enable South African citizens and their representatives to move climate change on to the political agenda; and to exert pressure on their own government with respect to climate change policies, adaptation funding, technology transfer emissions reduction and other response strategies²⁵. This brings into question the role of the media. Although the media covers issues of climate change quite widely including hosting TV and radio shows, a concerted media and communications strategy is needed to firstly, ensure the transmission of key messages and enable citizens to communicate their own perspectives and demands to decision makers and secondly raise awareness on how climate change relates to people's lives and livelihoods at a local level.

Which way for climate change adaptation in South Africa

Climate change impacts carry significant implications for the economies of the region including South Africa. The very sectors that are engines of economic growth are the most vulnerable to climate change while the most vulnerable sections of society already faced with multiple stressors (poor health, poverty, food insecurity, weak institutional capacity) face the biggest brunt. A well resourced pro-poor adaptation agenda is required to overcome the impacts of climate change and adequately respond to the climate change challenges facing South Africa. A pro-poor agenda would require:

1. An urgent review of the impacts of macro-economic policies on the poor and the extent to which these policies are undermining the adaptive capacity of the poor to climate change impacts;
2. Reviving the land and agrarian reform agenda to ensure that issues such as insecurity of tenure and resource rights that present barriers for poverty and adaptation especially in rural areas are addressed;

3. Building the institutional capacity at local level for the implementation of climate change adaptation measures;
4. Improving access to information as well as providing a forum for local communities to engage with and influence the climate change agenda at national level and international level, thereby up-scaling and improving the understanding of climate change adaptation needs from a local level perspective.

In developing a pro-poor agenda South Africa will be directly responding to the needs of 47% (the poor) of its citizens and taking forward its post-apartheid transformation agenda.

Governments have a significant role and responsibility to push climate change higher on the national level and international agenda. In addition to providing political leadership on this issue the South African government needs to demonstrate the commitment to respond to the needs of its vulnerable citizens by mainstreaming climate change into the national economic and development planning frameworks as well as committing national resources towards pro-poor adaptation. South Africa is in a good position to provide this leadership due to its advanced economy and strong private sector. Such actions by the national government stand to direct priorities for development cooperation assistance.

Furthermore, using its research capacity, its position in the international policy arena, active civil society network and policies that promote equity, South Africa is better placed to provide technical leadership and fill the knowledge gap for adaptation in Southern Africa. To play this role more effectively the country needs to embark on a participatory process of reviewing its NCCRS and provide a deeper understanding of barriers to adaptation at various scales and respond to socio-economic vulnerabilities.

All in all, a careful balancing of the competing development needs is required, not only at an international level, but at the national level as well. South Africa with its dual economy characteristics and a rights based development framework is best placed to provide this leadership in the region.

²⁵ See Neville, L. et al. (2010).

Biography

Masego Madzwamuse

Masego Madzwamuse, MA, has over 10 years experience in conservation and development in Southern Africa. She worked for the *International Union for Conservation of Nature* (IUCN) as the Botswana Country Programme Coordinator (2001-2006) then later as Regional Programme Development Officer with IUCN Regional Office for Southern Africa and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on the TerrAfrica Programme promoting sustainable land management in Sub-Saharan Africa. Masego's main focus has been on community based natural resource management and rural livelihood strategies in Southern Africa. Her research interests are on indigenous knowledge systems and the interface between conservation and rural livelihood security particularly looking into the plight of ethnic minorities, local communities and other marginalised peoples. She is currently an independent consultant and researcher based in South Africa.



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