

A paradox of dependence and affectedness: A decolonial analysis of Environmental justice and coal-phase out in South Africa

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TOWARDS A JUST TRANSITION - THE ROLE OF INDUSTRIAL POLICY

Key argument: Coal communities find themselves in a paradoxical position due to the coal-phase out unfolding through the just energy transition

Introduction

- The contribution of coal to global energy is well known. An analysis by the world coal association asserts coal as the bedrock on which energy access is built
- The coal economy has a long history that is tied to extractivism which has facilitated injustices through dispossession and environmental degradation
- Coal contributes significantly to South Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and export market (Baxter- Council for Mineral resource).
- On the other hand, coal's contribution to the environment is equally known and is replete with cases of degradation, contamination, and environmental and social injustices
- This dual picture captures the essence of dependence and affectedness, which presents a paradoxical position of communities in the coal mining regions

Coal phase-out: Implications for the coal-affected and dependent communities

- The transition away from the coal-intensive energy system presents a paradox for coal communities with environmental sustainability on one hand and livelihood alterations on the other.
- Although environmental sustainability presents coal communities who contend with injustices deeply entrenched in the coal-intensive energy system with an opportunity to escape these injustices, it equally presents the same community with risks of losing jobs and livelihoods
- The paradoxical stance is entrenched in the twofold nature of coal communities, characterized by dependence and affectedness: coal-affected populations and coal-dependent populations.
- Chambers (1983) deprivation trap: powerlessness, vulnerability, and voicelessness. Powerlessness can be facilitated through issues of 'bread and butter'

Multi-faced injustice for coal communities: An Ontological perspective

- The dynamics manifest themselves in a complex web that enables and perpetuates the injustices.
- The struggles for coal mining communities are multifaceted and they evolve. These are entrenched in colonial and neo-colonial mechanisms that underprivileged resource-wealthy nations
- Walter Rodney (1973) argues about the role that imperial systems played in retarding Africa's economies through the exploitation project which saw African wealth being drained, systems being manipulated, and also on the capitalist strategies used to exploit Africa
- As a system of accumulation, the MEC addresses the historical development, and the influential and/or subordinate position of the gold, coal, diamond, and related industries (Fine and Rustomjee, 1996).
- Perpetual crisis- cheap labour, migrant labours, cramped hostels, diverse social ills, exclusion
- Entrapment in a vicious cycle- failing legislation, challenges relating to enforcement and monitoring
- Zama Zamas presents an example of evolving societal challenges

At the core of the debates around green growth is the question of the relevance of green growth for developing nations

Debates around 'Greening a developing state'

- Is green growth good for the poor? Dercon (2014)
- A new debate has emerged on the question of the relevance of the goal of green growth to developing countries amid their economic growth and development pursuit (Barbier, 2016)
- These questions prompt a thorough analysis of the relevance of significant structural reforms which alters the societal, economic, and environmental landscape in the context of states whose core focus is development and meeting basic needs
- Different trajectories: DS- accelerated economic growth based on industrialisation; ST- achieving a socio-technical transition that results in a low-carbon resource-efficient economy
- “a coal phase-out constitutes only one aspect of the socio-technical transition... and for communities whose lives are entangled with the hydrocarbon economy, a crucial concern is what will follow in its wake” Brown and Spiegel (2019:161)
- “because poverty reduction remains at the top of the agenda, different shades of green may be needed” Dercon (2014:17)

Considering injustice through the three Es- Exclusion, Enclosure, Externalities

- Decisions that could potentially impact negatively on these communities are made in their absence, and important information is either withheld or made available in a manner that makes it impossible for these very communities to access it and use it effectively (Moeng, 2018).
- Hallows and Butler (2002) defined environmental justice in terms of fair and equal relations within and among people which provides the basis for the definition and achievement of their aspirations without the imposition of unfair, excessive or irreparable burdens on each other

The three Es (EEE) captures the essence of the injustices experienced by coal-affected and dependent communities.

E' talks to the exclusion from decision-making and processes that affect one's well-being and livelihoods

E' talks to an enclosure of resources for the benefit of a few;

and the last 'E' talks to the imposition of externalities (Hallows and Butler, 2002; Munnik 2012).

Schlosberg's Environmental Justice

- The conception of justice from capabilities theory, participatory theory, and recognition theory which Schlosberg argues based on their practicality and comprehensiveness (Schlosberg, 2007).
- The framing of Environmental justice based on Schlosberg's approach further presents an element of restoring the dignity of populations groups that were unjustly dealt with.
- The traditional framings of environmental justice neglect and overshadows sociological aspects which can seem insignificant within the broader political and academic debate, while they represent the real practical injustices suffered by communities (Schlosberg, 2007).
- Newell (2014) asserts that the injustice claims of poor populations go beyond just distribution of the good and bad to encompass the question of whose vision of the environment is recognized
- Williams and Maswsley (2006) argue for broadening justice beyond the examination of the goods and bads into the examination of the complex relationships between exposure, risk, vulnerability, and the procedural structures, constraints, and opportunities that attempt to depict the reality of others and their ability to participate and influence decisions affecting them
- Conde and Billon (2017) maintain that participation, as informed by the environmental justice paradigm, is linked to recognition and like distributive justice, it could potentially impede justice
- Malin et al (2019) also expand on this contemporary framing by arguing for a definition of procedural justice that captures the authentic participation of members of the public in decision-making

Schlosberg's Environmental Justice

- Recognition justice with emphasis also placed on unmasking the processes underlying maldistribution and the position and recognition of social classes considered less significant within the distribution schemes (Schlosberg, 2007)
- Recognition justice endeavours to bring about equality, fair treatment, and inclusion of all regardless of social class.
- Schlosberg's environmental justice is also seen in Montmasson-Clair's significant contribution to the policy primers for the South African Just transition framework
- Montmasson-Clair's policy primers capture the human element of the Just transition, with a clear emphasis on a justice that considers the legacy of exclusion and oppression which was shaped and perpetuated by capitalist modes of accumulation
- Robins and Rydge (2019), have captured the human dimension characterized by workers, communities, consumers, and citizens which represents the strong interlocking human relationship, thus arguing that the policymakers and investors in the just transition should consider all four dimensions.

“colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation... while coloniality on the other hand refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism,” Maldonado-Torres (2017:234).

A decolonial perspective on Environmental Justice

- As such Gatsheni-Ndlovu (2015) equates coloniality to the ‘invisible power structures’ and epistemological design guided by the North.
- Alvarez and Coolsaet (2018) argue for a more decolonial approach to environmental justice:
 - epistemic limitations of environmental justice which can potentially marginalize certain conceptual formations and as a result produce new injustices or perpetuate existing ones
 - “failure to explicitly include a decolonial analysis, Environmental justice scholarship not only risk undermining its emancipatory power but may also deepen some of the injustices it claims to address”
- Unmasking and finding alternative ways of imagining an escape from these injustices
- The current scholarly emphasis on the significance of drawing from African epistemological frameworks and systems or approaches that benefit Africans prompts new alternative ways of arguing our context and the relevant solutions thereof
- decolonial emphasis will augment the relevance of environmental justice for the South African context

A decolonial perspective on Environmental Justice

- Malin et al (2019) bring a perspective that considers the 'indigenous people' by arguing that the historical exclusion and displacement of native and indigenous peoples whose relationship with the land has been altered or redefined through co-option, industrialization, and defilement and thus, argue for recognition justice in terms of repairing the disruption and empowering the affected populations to define their own justice.
- Gilio-Whitaker(2021) argues that in decolonising environmental justice, it is important to recognise past and present colonial structures and acknowledge Indigenous people's distinctive relationship with their land.
- Coolsaet (2020) argues that misrecognition in the context of the environment broadly constituted two opposing ways, the first one which saw people being systematically treated differently because of who they are, while in the second context the differences become invisible when universal solutions are applied in the name of the environment
- Alvarez and Coolsaet, (2018) maintain that the idea of equity provides a more generalized approach to justice thus undermining modes of life -which in the context of this paper can be argued as the complex web of injustices dealt with in the previous sections.

Justice questions for coal communities

- environmental justice prompts a rethinking of environmental justice in the context of coal communities. Furthermore, it prompts the questions
- ‘what constitutes a decolonial environmental justice for the populations who have had to battle out injustices for a long time?
- and how would these populations define their own justice? Therefore, when considered through a decolonial lens, environmental justice re-directs focus towards the multiple ways in which people experience injustice and how they envision their own justice. Thus presenting a shift towards a more humanizing perspective that presents justice as care, respect, and consideration.

Rethinking the Principles of Environmental Justice

- The contemporary framings of environmental justice and the decolonial perspective offer alternative and more localized ways of thinking about justice-these alternative ways reposition society especially coal communities within the just transition agenda
- In addition to the framings captured above, environmental justice must consider principles from social justice and cognitive justice
- Social justice undergirds environmental justice in that the core issues at the centre of environmental justice are social issues and constitute social injustice
- Visvanathan's Cognitive justice appreciates the diversity and plurality of knowledge and demands that these different forms of knowledge be recognised and allowed to co-exist.
- A shift from disempowering towards participation guided by the principles of open dialogue, parliamentary of knowledges, 'invited and invented' spaces, and levelled playfields

In Conclusion, The decolonial school of thought which is premised on unmasking the structures and patterns of coloniality offers an alternative way to consider and deal with the injustices suffered by coal communities. Thus promising a real and inclusive justice for these communities within the broader context of the Just transition.

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