**Coal addiction**

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Friday, Nov 12, 2021

South Africa runs on coal. It is the world’s seventh-largest coal producer, and about 80 percent of the country’s energy is generated by it. In addition to the extensive use of coal in the domestic economy, about 30 percent of South Africa’s production is exported, making the country the fourth-largest coal exporter in the world.

The vast scale of South Africa’s coal operation, run by the state power company Eskom, is an obstacle in the way of global efforts to combat climate change. Indeed, today South Africa is the 12th-biggest carbon dioxide emitter in the world.

The international community has long been trying to find ways to help South Africa recover from its coal addiction. In late September, in the run-up to the COP26 summit in Glasgow, for example, high-level climate envoys from the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union visited South Africa to “discuss helping it end an over-reliance on coal that makes it one of the world’s leading carbon emitters”.

The envoys held meetings with officials from the South African government, as well as business and labour leaders. However, their offer of help was clearly not appreciated by the person whose opinion matters the most: Mineral and Energy Resources Minister Gwede Mantashe.

Mantashe, who previously described giving up coal as ‘economic suicide’ and a threat to South Africa’s energy security, did not meet the climate envoys during their visit to the country. Instead, perhaps as a diplomatic taunt, he delivered the keynote speech at a local mining investment conference while the envoys were still in the country, and called for “investment in technology that could potentially prolong the use of coal”.

Mantashe is not the only prominent force in South Africa resisting pressure from the international community to end the country’s coal dependency. South Africa’s four biggest banks are refusing to turn off coal financing, at least in the short term. And the country’s influential socialist trade unions are also publicly campaigning to stop any move away from coal and towards sustainable energy resources.

It is not difficult to understand the motivations behind widespread support for coal in South Africa.

The South African economy has long been suffering due to inconsistent and short-sighted policies and widespread corruption. And the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country’s already struggling economy hard. About one million jobs are thought to have been destroyed by the monthlong hard lockdown last year, and there has been a significant rise in reporting of hunger among citizens since. In July 2021, poverty, growing inequality and rising unemployment led to widespread riots that resulted in the deaths of at least 200 people.

In the second half of 2021, due to the global energy crunch, coal prices started to go up, and in September, the global benchmark coal price reached $177.50 per tonne.

South Africa’s government understandably saw the surge in coal prices as a lifeline – an opportunity to inject cash into the economy to calm down an increasingly restless population and aggressive trade unions.

The likes of Mantashe have always argued that South Africa does not have the necessary economic might and vast sovereign funds to abandon coal investment to meet the “green economy” demands of rich nations. But with South Africa descending into a major economic crisis with the pandemic, and coal emerging as the nation’s saviour, resistance to green energy demands became stronger and more widespread in the country.

While South Africa’s insistence on not giving up on coal at this time is understandable, this does not mean the country’s coal addiction is harmless. Beyond contributing to the ongoing climate catastrophe, South Africa’s extensive coal operation is also harming its people. According to a 2017 study, commissioned by environmental justice NGO groundWork, “2,239 human deaths per year could be attributable to coal-related air pollution in South Africa, as well as more than 9,500 cases of bronchitis among children 6 to 12.”

Moreover, regardless of South Africa’s energy policies, the country’s 80,000 coal jobs will gradually vanish, and if the country does not start moving towards renewables and creating new jobs for miners soon, its already grave unemployment crisis will grow even bigger in the coming decades.

Undoubtedly aware of the dangers of remaining dependent on coal for too long, but also unwilling to give up on the immediate benefits it receives from the industry, last week the South African delegation arrived at the COP26 summit in Glasgow looking for an arrangement that would allow the country to have its cake and eat it too. What South Africa wanted was clear: a promise from the rich nations, who are primarily responsible for the climate emergency, to fund – in full – the country’s recovery from its coal dependency.

And with its calculated pro-coal stance at the climate conference, South Africa was not only defending its own interests. It was also putting forward the points of view of many nations in Africa and the wider Global South that believe they should have their turn in benefitting from their coal reserves despite the climate crisis. For example, in defiance of global calls for greener economies, Zimbabwe is planning to open new coal mines in the near future to meet its energy needs and, eventually, become a coal exporter.

Indeed, in the run-up to COP26, South Africa’s Environment Minister Barbara Creecy had made it clear to rich nations what they need to do to entice the Global South to abandon coal: pay more than $750bn a year to help them switch to sustainable energy resources without collapsing their economies.

South Africa’s stubbornness on coal paid off at COP26 – at least partially. The US, UK, France, Germany and the EU agreed to pay $8.5bn to help end the country’s reliance on coal. South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa has called it a ‘watershed moment’, and pundits opined that the deal could be used as a blueprint to help end coal dependence in other countries.

While the deal is undoubtedly a step in the right direction, the amount offered is nowhere near sufficient to ease South Africa’s concerns about decarbonisation. In the future, South Africa will try to squeeze more money out of the West and if it does not get its way, it will continue to do what delivers the highest benefit in the short term. The same is true for other African and Global South nations.

Excerpted: ‘The COP26 deal will not be enough to end SA’s coal addiction’

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