



+27 21 202 4071



info@ijr.org.za



<https://www.ijr.org.za>

Stay updated and follow us on social media



THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

21 July 2025 Column

By Felicity Harrison

JUST ENERGY TRANSITION IN SOUTH AFRICA: COMPLEXITIES AND NUANCES

In 2022, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) added Climate Justice to our cross-cutting themes, a decision borne out of the recognition that Environmental Justice is an integral element of Transitional Justice. Many colonial enterprises extracted minerals, crops and other resources from the land, with little to no regard for the indigenous people, flora or fauna. The extractive nature and harmful methods used have left communities significantly worse off and enduring lasting consequences.

The Just Energy Transition (JET) Project selected five mining communities across three provinces and committed to visiting those areas to observe the conditions first-hand and engage directly with the local communities. The aim was to better understand their challenges, their aspirations for the future, and what

solutions they envision. These communities were selected based on the understanding that mining areas face unique and particular challenges in the transition to renewable energy.

At the start of the IJR project, it was assumed that there would be resistance from the mining communities to transition as their livelihoods would be at risk. As a result, it was evident that public education on alternative energy sources would be needed. We were wrong. The situation we have found on the ground is more complex and nuanced than we had anticipated.

“THE HUMAN RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE PRESENT WERE ON A SCALE FAR BEYOND WHAT WE HAD ANTICIPATED.”

The human rights and environmental injustice present were on a scale far beyond what we had anticipated. While further work still needs to be done, initial observations found violations of several constitutional rights, including the rights to dignity, personal freedom of security, the right to a healthy environment, and the right to adequate housing.

Rather than expressing concern over the potential closure of local mines, all the communities we visited indicated that they would welcome such a step. The people with whom we spoke alluded to the health and environmental impact of mining in their communities. The water supply has been contaminated, and air pollution has led to numerous health issues, including kidney disease, lung disease, and skin rashes.

In addition to the ailments from which they suffer, these conditions render them unable to get employment with the mines. The result of this is that people from outside the area are brought in to do the work, creating conflict and disharmony within the community.

The contamination to the water supply has also had serious implications for the agricultural sector, something we observed first-hand. Not only has the contamination affected crops, but it also affects the grazing areas on which livestock feed.

Local activists spoke of the way in which open cast mining affects the environment. In addition to the air pollution, little care is taken to prevent harm in the communities. Houses have been damaged by the blasting, employees of the mining companies did not have the requisite Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and activities were occurring within the regulatory 500m exclusion zone.

One local farmer spoke to us of the high levels of tension within the area. We heard of two cases where the mining companies have been harassing local farmers for their land, one of which extended for over twenty years.

We heard reports of farms being taken over and workers evicted. In one instance, workers were evicted from brick houses and given temporary materials in compensation. Others reported workers being given a R15,000 lump sum in compensation. One of the more heart-breaking stories we heard, a community had to move the graves of their loved ones to make way for a mining company.

The tension we experienced was palpable: there is fear for the safety of activists to the point where we hosted workshops outside of communities to ensure the safety of the participants.

Furthermore, the infrastructure available to these communities was found to be inadequate. In one area, we found a multi-million-rand hospital that has been constructed far from established transport routes, making it difficult for residents to access the healthcare they so desperately need. A local resident also reported that the hospital was built on a mineshaft, raising concerns about the structural integrity of the building.

During apartheid, land expropriation and subsequent mining of mineral resources caused significant harm to both the environment and communities in the vicinity of mining activity. Addressing historical and contingent harms, looking for a future-oriented just system, mitigating environmental degradation, and enduring constitutional rights are essential. But before this can happen, it is both necessary and essential to address the dire situation many communities find themselves in. We cannot speak of a Just Transition until the legacies of the past, and the current transgressions have been addressed and rectified.



PREVIOUS ISSUES



Selective Outrage: Why LGBTQIA+ Africans Remain on the Margins of Genocide Conversations



Mixed Reactions to the New Gambia/Spain Circular Migration Deal



Bridging the Digital Divide