

South Africa's coal workers face uncertainty—study shows they're being left out of the green transition

August 29 2024, by Nthabiseng Mohlakoana



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South Africa is on the path to decarbonization—doing away with burning coal and other fossil fuels and moving towards renewable, clean

energy, such as solar and wind power. However, the coal industry [employs 91,000 people](#). If these workers lost their jobs and were not transferred to new jobs in renewable energy and other sectors, this would [devastate entire communities](#).

Recent estimates by the [renewable energy industry](#) say the shift from coal has the potential to create 250,000 [jobs](#) by 2047. Energy transition researcher [Nthabiseng Mohlakoana](#) was part of a group of [Center for Sustainability Transitions](#) academics [who asked workers](#) living near a coal mine and coal-fired power plant what they knew about the [coal industry](#) winding down and the [renewable energy](#) transition, and whether they thought it would provide decent jobs.

What is the biggest problem for coal industry workers in this transition?

Our study's aim was to draw attention to how decent work is understood by those who are working with [fossil fuels](#) in South Africa, and whose jobs will be phased out.

[We interviewed 13 women and 38 men](#) who were current and former coal mine workers and electricity power plant workers from KwaGuqa township. This is a low-income community in Emalahleni, a coal-intensive area in South Africa's Mpumalanga province that is [home to 20 collieries](#). The group were working as coal cutters, machine operators, welders, electricians, boiler makers, underground water pumpers, drivers and coal conveyor belt operators. Some had worked for [coal mines](#) for between 10 and 30 years.

These workers said they had not been consulted about how the transition would affect them. Their biggest concern was the lack of information: they had not been told how they would be reskilled for renewable energy

jobs. In areas where coal mines had already closed, the workers had observed that mine workers had not been retrained or placed in [new jobs](#) in renewable energy. This resulted in a lot of fear, apprehension and anxiety. Some coal mine workers felt that they were too old to learn new skills and gain new experience in unfamiliar industries.

Workers stressed that decent jobs were important, with benefits such as pensions, medical insurance, and a safe and healthy working environment. They said these should be presented prior to phasing out coal jobs.

Among renewable energy sector employers, [there is no agreement on what decent work means or even what a job entails](#). The [International Labor Organization](#) defines decent work as one that considers workers' rights, ensures that workers are protected from harmful working conditions, pays workers fairly based on their cost of living and provides promotion opportunities.

The workers we interviewed did not regard jobs in the coal mines and power plants as decent work; 80% stated they would not want their children to do the same jobs, because of the dangers associated with this kind of work. However, they were concerned about the loss of jobs. If the coal mines and power plants closed, these job losses would have a trickle down effect on other industries and people who depended on income earned by the workers.

What kind of decent jobs should be created in renewable energy?

This is mainly dependent on the local context. In South Africa, [renewable energy jobs](#) include work on the construction of solar and wind plants, and setting up infrastructure for green hydrogen and large

scale battery storage facilities. Operations and management jobs are fewer and they require a higher skill level.

Job creation and decent work are not the same thing. Decent work refers to [job quality and working conditions](#). Job creation is associated with the number of jobs created.

As South Africa becomes more and more dependent on renewable energy, this industry must provide skills, training and better security, fairness and just working conditions. The people we interviewed said that factories manufacturing renewable energy components should be set up, and that these might even create more jobs than the coal mines did.

There is indeed potential to create jobs in manufacturing instead of importing renewable energy parts. There are also jobs in researching new innovations. As the demand for renewable energy knowledge and skills increases, there should be more jobs in renewable energy education and training.

What are some of the training gaps?

South Africa began its transition to [clean energy](#) when the [Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Program](#) was launched by the government in 2010. This program has procured renewable energy from private companies through a competitive bidding process for the past 14 years. A renewable energy education curriculum should have been developed then and integrated into schools and training colleges. Renewable energy education cannot happen only in institutions of higher learning, because only a few have access to such knowledge.

Another gap is the integration of the gender agenda on the energy transition dialogue and planning. This has led to [women being left out](#) and not considered for training and skilling opportunities, because they

are in the minority in [coal](#) mines and power plants.

What solutions did your research find?

We concluded that the government must regulate the renewable energy sector so that it offers workers decent work. Jobs and skills in the low-carbon economy must be demystified so that workers know exactly which skills and qualifications are required for these jobs. This is crucial for building confidence and facilitating a smoother transition. It is in line with the decent work principle of there being adequate opportunities for work.

The government must also provide funding and subsidies for organizations and companies in renewable energy that commit to creating decent work.

Job losses in South Africa are a sensitive subject because of the [high unemployment rate](#) of 32.9%. South Africa is also the [most unequal country in the world](#). The country's transition to renewable energy is thus very complex. It intersects very closely with the country's history of Black workers' poor working conditions and pay during apartheid, and with the current state of the economy which has produced high levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment.

Apart from the technical shift to green energy, South Africa's [climate change policies](#) emphasize that the transition must be "just." Creating decent work in the renewable energy sector must therefore move away from oppressive employment conditions and towards offering [workers](#) a decent share in the economy.

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