

Brief from Webinar 5: 28 February 2024

Climate justice and health equity in extractives



Regional Network for Equity in Health in east and southern Africa (EQUINET) through Southern African Trade Union Co-ordination Council (SATUCC) with Training and Research Support Centre



Background

Climate justice and equity, is an urgent issue for communities, countries, and the region, and intersects with, impacts on and is intensified by other areas of inequality that EQUINET is focused on. Given this, EQUINET in 2023 – 24 aims to strengthen knowledge, understanding of experiences and impacts of climate from community, local, national and regional levels, and what this implies for action to expose, prevent and identify responses to climate impacts that are intensifying inequities. It is against this background that EQUINET has organised a series of online dialogues to share knowledge and perspectives from community/local, national and international levels on the impact of climate trends, the intersection with the other drivers/ determinants of inequity, the implications for policy and action that links climate to health equity and vice versa, and the proposals for policy, practice, research, and action.

This brief reports on the evidence and issues raised in the fifth webinar on Climate justice and equity on extractives in East and Southern Africa (ESA), convened by SATUCC with support from TARSC. The webinar was held on 28th of February 2024, with 57 participants from ESA Countries. It was moderated by Nathan Banda, SATUCC and EQUINET Steering Committee member standing in for Mr. Nyasha Muchichwa and technical support was provided by Belinda Ncube, TARSC consultant. The three speakers were Dr M Dhiwayo, Executive Director Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Association, Mr. D Van Wyk, Researcher at Benchmarks Foundation and Mr. E Katema, Malawi Non-State Actors Union. The webinar video is available on the EQUINET website at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OF7z_QgG8s8&t=5109s

This brief summarises key points raised by speakers and participants on

- how climate features are impacting on the extractives sector and health;
- proposed actions to address these issues at local, national and regional level, including by trade unions, and in international/ global level processes;
- issues raised to be further discussed in the other thematic webinars.

Climate impacts on extractives and health

- The extractive sector is a key contributor to climate change impacts and must thus play a role in mitigating these impacts. Mining operations emit pollutants that contribute significantly to greenhouse gasses and global warming, and that also have a negative impact on health.
- While mineral resources are in great demand globally for key areas of economies, the non-renewable nature of minerals makes mining a time limited and unsustainable activity, that comes along with water and air pollution, land subsidence and seismic events.
- Large-scale mines have different health and environmental impacts across the exploration, planning, ramp up, operational, closure, rehabilitation, and the life beyond mining phases. Exploration phases entail heavy drilling, perforation of aquifers, and pollution of air and water. This degrades ecosystems and has multiple health effects, including increased respiratory problems and water scarcity for hygiene. At operational phase, open cast mines can further deplete water sources and lead to acid drainage and pollution. This further undermines ecosystems, leads to health damage and makes communities and economies more vulnerable to climate change.

- Mining displaces people from land and other economic activities that may be more sustainable, with local communities that have been displaced from farming bearing the brunt of the negative impacts of extractives, including through loss of livelihoods.
- Children and pregnant women in surrounding communities affected by pollutants, such as lead or mineral dusts, suffer negative impacts on their cognitive and physical development, undermining health into the next generation. This is also affecting those involved in small scale artisanal mining.
- In the extractive sector, therefore, the intersect between mining and climate and the harms to health are violating a range of rights to health that are promoted under national, regional, and international law and commitments made in the Sustainable Development Goals. While there is environmental impact assessment in the region, as there is limited legal requirement for and practice of health impact assessment, the impacts are often not well exposed, or controlled, especially for wider communities.
- With large scale mining implemented by large transnational corporates, local communities and state officials often lack the resources and political power to protect themselves against these impacts, and communities bear a disproportionate burden of the environmental harm.
- The high degree of foreign ownership in the sector and the influence mining companies have on the state through their export earnings means that the impacts may not be effectively regulated. Mining companies often get tax exemptions or export unprocessed raw minerals, limiting the public funds available for the public sector to inspect and control the health and ecosystem impacts, or to provide services for the surrounding communities. All of this makes the local state and population more vulnerable to climate shocks.
- Given the non-renewable nature of minerals it is important that countries have long term plans to ensure that the returns are used for long term and equitable benefit, to create new jobs, expand services and infrastructure and to climate proof the economy. Mining needs to be implemented in a manner that does not simply extract and export resources, but builds links across the wider economy, and this needs clear planning and state measures. However, there is limited evidence of this necessary, longer term planning in the region.

Actions to address climate impacts on trade and health systems

- There are measures that can be taken to mitigate these impacts, such as requiring joint health and environmental impact assessments prior to licensing or relicensing mines; building capacities in communities and workers jointly to monitor pollutants and implement rights claims, including through litigation; and ensuring mines contribute to taxes and public health services as a legal duty and not just as corporate responsibility.
- There are also measures that can be taken to ensure that mining is carried out in a more ecologically sustainable way, requiring technologies that reduce emissions into air and water, replacing the demand for unwanted minerals such as asbestos for roofing, with other materials that include solar panels so that people increasingly use renewable solar energy, and can also earn income from selling power back to the grid.
- Trade unions can also educate their members on the link between their labour, health and ecological rights, so they generate bottom up proposals from members on ways to protect themselves and future workers from short term economic activities that produce long term harms, and make trade unions a leading voice and driver of sustainable and equitable development in the region.
- These strategies are noted to call for a just transition that is bottom up, not top down.
- People in the region need to reclaim, repurpose and hold their states accountable to rebuilding public infrastructures, public health and social services, and public education, to make current extractive sectors liable for fiscal contributions towards these areas as part of their licensing requirements, and for states to ensure their laws protect health of all in and around the extractives, that legal measures are in place that respect the rights and livelihoods of communities and the ecosystems in the region, and that such laws are enforced.
- At the same time the power of the sector and its scale in the economies calls for more deeply rooted responses. Countries need to take ownership of minerals and the land that the extractives are based on, avoid wholesale extraction without benefit for the local economy in terms of linkages to other local production, avoid displacement, ensure raw mineral materials

are processed locally, and apply longer term planning, institution, revenue and capacities to cut dependence on foreign ownership and control of the sector. Countries need shift from mining and to transition to renewable energy sources, sustainable agriculture, ecotourism, and other low-carbon sectors to reduce dependence on extractive industries. States should be publicly accountable for this, including through parliaments.

- This calls for regional approaches where ESA countries do not compete against each other, but work as a region to manage the sector and its impacts on climate and health, especially given that the impacts do not respect national borders.
- A regional approach is also critical so countries bring unified demands to global processes. Global forums apply a reactive and financialised 'loss and damage' response to climate impacts with control of funds in high income countries, marginalising or rendering ceremonial African and community voice.

Issues to carry forward for discussion in future webinars

- How to strengthen a bottom-up regional and cross-issue and cross-sectoral approach to and partnerships for action on climate justice.
- Building synergies between inclusive economies and climate justice, e.g. building solar panels on roofs for every household to be a producer rather than consumer of energy.
- Making links between trade unions, workers, communities, indigenous communities from local to national to regional and global level on joint engagement on fair transition at all levels.
- Strengthening longer term planning in countries, such as for the mining sector to reengineer mines and the sector to plan for post mining economies, in terms of how profits are used during periods of high return and planning to use housing, training, sport and recreation facilities of mines for the communal good and turning mining towns into manufacturing hubs for alternative energy, technology and manufacturing.
- When and how to say no to extractive ventures that may lead to social harm or long term damage, and institutionalising this, such as not permitting ventures without comprehensive and participatory HIAs that internalise (not externalise) health costs, and if needed give affected communities the right to say no.