



End the Media Silence about the Ongoing Drought!

Call to Media to Report on Worsening Climate Crisis and Extreme Weather

5 March 2019

The UN International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued one of its most important scientific studies late last year. The report, referred to as the 1.5C report, highlights we are one degree warmer since pre the industrial revolution and have 12 years to ensure dramatic cuts to prevent an overshoot of 1.5°C and catastrophic climate change. The ongoing extraction and use of fossil fuels will only accelerate and make climate change worse. More gas, oil and coal extraction and use imperils all human and non-human life.

South Africa's media has not done enough to draw attention to the worsening climate crisis. South Africa's drought was merely reduced to 'day zero' for mainly wealthy white Cape Town. This made headlines and grabbed international attention without telling the larger story of climate crisis and growing climate inequality for working class and poor communities. Moreover, economic impacts of failing agriculture have also been covered but in a manner that does not assist our democracy and citizens understand the larger threats of a collapsing food system due to climate shocks. Recently many in our media have been vaunting the new Total gas find, as the 'game changer' for the country. President Ramaphosa and his government's support for this expansion of the minerals-energy complex is a climate disaster. More extraction and use of carbon will mean greater heating and more extreme weather for South Africa and the world. The media is not talking about this, with a few exceptions such as the Daily Maverick, the Mail and Guardian and some local radio stations.

President Ramaphosa and the Speaker of South Africa's Parliament, were also sent an open letter by us and endorsed by over 60 other organisations (including two trade union federations) in October last year demanding an emergency sitting of parliament to deliberate on the UN 1.5°C report and its implications for South Africa's climate policies to advance the deep just transition (see <https://www.safsc.org.za/open-letter-to-president-cyril-ramaphosa-demand-for-emergency-parliamentary-sitting-on-un-1-5c-report/>). Up till now we have not received a response from the President or the Speaker of Parliament to our open letter. Most of the media did not cover our open letter, including the Sunday Times, after we submitted an article to the editor providing a motivation for our open letter. Our article was rejected by the Sunday Times. When asked, the editor of the Sunday Times did not provide us with reasons for rejecting our article on the climate crisis. This should come as no surprise as this is a newspaper that has been involved in factional battles in the ANC that have contributed to the destruction of the South African Revenue Service. It has questionable ethics. The unresponsiveness of the Sunday Times and its editor, undermines the right to know by the South African public, about the worsening climate crisis. But maybe the corporate controlled media in South Africa, clearly in this instance, are unwilling to promote the public interest.

South Africa's drought is a climate shock, in the context of a heating world. It is also far from over and more of such shocks will be experienced in a heating world. Various villages, towns and cities in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape are still experiencing severe drought conditions but this is not making national headlines. Many communities are still not receiving water due to corruption and governance failures in different parts of the country. Makana Municipality stands out as a glaring example, in this instance, in which ANC government corruption, collapsing water infrastructure and drought are making a town of over 80 000 people almost unlivable. There is potential for serious social conflict in this situation and 'water wars'. We do not need to have more Andries Tatane's (the first martyr of a water war). The denial of water needs is a violation of human rights and merely continues the lived experience of 'day zero' for many, in a country in which only 46% have access to clean drinking water through a household tap. At the same time, heavy and continuous downpours in some parts of the country are also inducing flood like conditions. Our towns and cities are not prepared to deal with these extreme changes in weather. Bridges in Johannesburg which require proper maintenance investment are also showing weaknesses due to being inundated by water.

In this context and as we have declared after the non-response from President Ramaphosa and the Speaker of Parliament regarding our open letter, ongoing and non-violent civil mass resistance is absolutely necessary against the elites and power structure in our society perpetuating our mass extinction, including the South African media (See <https://www.safsc.org.za/call-for-civil-resistance-against-anc-governments-blanket-of-secrecy-around-climate-science-and-our-possible-extinction/>). We support school children taking a stand like Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion in South Africa, Life After Coal and many other climate justice initiatives.

Hence we demand the following from the media:

- End climate denialism in the media. Inform the South African public about the science of climate change and the importance of climate policy that promotes climate justice, including from other parts of the world.
- Report on the ongoing drought and other extreme weather conditions. Mainstream climate crisis news now and the systemic solutions required to advance a deep just transition.
- There are direct connections between failing water supply, corruption and maladministration in many of these situations. Make the connections.
- Provide coverage of climate justice struggles.
- Empower our citizens and our democracy to deliberate on the existential challenges and transformative solutions we require to confront the climate crisis. The worsening climate crisis is a nation building challenge and poses the challenge of inter-generational justice. We have to affirm citizens rights in our constitution to confront these challenges. As a start we want the media to use Human Rights Day to amplify the message about how the right to water is being undermined in our democracy mainly for the poorest in our society.

We are sending this message to all editors of South Africa's print media, the South African National Editors Forum, the Press Council, the Media Ombudsman and the South African Human Rights Commission. We demand a written response from these institutions regarding the failure of most of South Africa's media to inform South African society about the worsening climate crisis.

Our democracy requires a media that empowers our citizenry rather than undermining it through selective, sensational, factional, fake, biased and thoughtless journalism. We are running out of time in the context of the climate crisis.

Forward to a Climate Justice Charter for South Africa!

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