

8. Caring for the environment

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The South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) was launched on the 25 November 1995, after the community, representing Umlazi, Wentworth, Bluff, Isipingo, and Merebank, met President Nelson Mandela on the streets of South Durban at the Engen gate. He had been invited to open an extension plant that would leave out an expensive scrubber which reduces sulphur. The community protested the high levels of pollution emitted from the Engen refinery which impacted on the health and wellbeing of the people of South Durban. Mandela stopped his convoy, and got out to speak to the people and their leaders.



We then had a meeting with ministers and briefed 600 captains of industry in 1995 at the Durban City Hall about the high levels of pollution and the associated health problems experienced by the community. Thereafter, we met with the Engen refinery, and agreed on a pollution-reduction programme. The formation of SDCEA led to an environmental justice and sustainable development campaign in South Durban and broader KwaZulu-Natal.

SDCEA has been both unique and tenacious in challenging government and industry to address the injustices of pollution and unsustainable development in the area, and, simultaneously, raising public awareness about environmental rights. The work and knowledge of SDCEA have grown enormously, and used all over the country, continent, and world by communities affected by pollution. The media has been instrumental in providing necessary coverage. Members of the organisation have 'walked the talk' by taking their own air samples when incidents and accidents occur at all times of the day or night. Journalists representing various media houses, both electronic and print, were able to expose these inequities to a broader audience. The methodology used by the organisation has been deemed acceptable, and that has contributed to national, provincial, and local government legislation which is key in holding defaulting companies accountable. SDCEA has played a key role in getting the media to write about, or film the many fires, explosions, and gas leaks. Establishing a good working relationship with the media is important when you need to publicise a relevant story. Through the use of the media, the SDCEA has been able to communicate, educate, and engage

with affected communities which have created change in the struggle against environmental and human rights injustices.

The 'health' of the natural environment affects all citizens no matter the place of residence. When the environment is damaged, its ability to provide the services that are essential is diminished. Climate change is already affecting South Africa in a life-threatening way, as seen with extreme weather events, such as the drought in the Western and Eastern Cape as well as Limpopo, flash floods in KwaZulu-Natal, increasing average temperatures, and changing rain patterns all over the country – there is no indication that the situation will improve. Media can be key influencers – the nature and extent of their reporting are crucial in making the public constantly aware about the climate crisis. "The media exists to serve society. Their freedom provides for independent scrutiny of the forces that shape society and is essential to realising the promise of democracy. It enables citizens to make informed judgments on the issues of the day, a role whose centrality is recognised in the South African Constitution", as contained in the preamble of the Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African Print and Online Media. (Press Council of South Africa, 2019).

Climate change is a complex issue. Journalists should unpack it by showing that it is not just an environmental issue, but a social, economic, and justice problem – one that requires a systemic change of how society and economies function as a whole. In South Africa, government claims to be dedicated to climate action, but continues to ratify an economic model that is unsustainable, and fails to meet the requirements of a low-carbon and just society. Thus, the media have a critical role to inform public opinion, and shape its views on the climate crisis.

A gender perspective is usually left out of the climate change narrative. Listening to the experiences of communities, women are unfavourably impacted by the effects of climate change than most other demographics. The empowerment of women and promotion of gender equality will positively change the way in which the environment is understood. Education, support, and amplifying women's voices are paramount. South Africa is warming up at twice the pace of the global average. In other words, when the global average temperatures increase by 1°C, South Africa's average temperatures go up by 2°C. "Africa as a whole is one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change due to its high exposure and low adaptive capacity" (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014).

In 2019, Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swedish climate activist, missed school every Friday to sit outside parliament to generate the required awareness. This action was shared by the media and went viral, inspiring strikes with 1.4 million youths all over the world demanding that elected representatives take

immediate action on the climate crisis. The media has been hugely influential and has formed the basis of many citizens' understanding of climate change.

SDCEA has compared the way multinational oil corporations operated in all parts of the world, and, by using media, it was able to expose the double standards of the companies. The oil giants in Europe treated lives better by having the best technology, whereas in Africa they operated with old, outdated technology that resulted in regular explosions.

The oceans have reached a critical juncture in the fight against climate change. The ocean is one of the most important carbon sinks in the world, considering that the global emissions for 2019 were estimated at 36.8 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, according to Harvey and Gronewold (Scientific American, 2019). The usage of the ocean varies as it is also an economic stream for many subsistence/commercial fishing folk as well as the recreation and tourism industry. In many parts of the world including, South Africa, the ocean is a spiritual talisman for cleansing and blessing. The marine life is beautiful, diverse, and endangered, making it all the more reason for the protection of our ocean.

Operation Phakisa, an initiative designed to establish a South African 'Blue Economy', was established in 2014. Hence, it is planned that 95% of our ocean is going to be leased out to businesses which will include oil and gas drilling and sea mining. These developments will affect our ocean in various ways and will result in ecological, social, and economic impacts. A significant consequence of this development is climate change. The impact of climate change seriously threatens every person's right enshrined in section 24 of the Constitution of the country. It, therefore, makes no sense to drill for oil and gas.

The role of the media regarding the ocean is, however, problematic as the tendency is to focus mostly on plastic pollution. Plastic

is a product of oil. Therefore, if we divest from fossil fuels, the production of plastic will be minimal. The media should also emphasise the banning of single-use plastics which will affect the supply and demand of fossil fuels. In terms of the 'Blue Economy', there needs to be more focus on ocean governance from a social and civil society perspective. Business and government cannot be the only stakeholders involved in the decision-making process regarding the use of the ocean, but should be inclusive of all South Africans.

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Gratitude, on the whole, must be expressed for the vigilance of the media. Throughout the 25 years since democracy, it was through the lens of many journalists that the health and air pollution problems affecting people were highlighted. Media entities have been instrumental in documenting evidence such as air quality data. No matter the hour, journalists have made themselves available to report on a variety of issues. The work of SDCEA would not easily have been communicated to the broader community if journalists and media houses did not underscore the ongoing plight of the South Durban people.

Desmond D'Sa was assisted by Joanne Groom, Shanice Firmin and Sherelee Odayer for this chapter.

References

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