

Opinion: The vital role of social dialogue in SA's just energy transition

The National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) recently held its 29th Annual Summit, a gathering that highlighted the essential role this institution continues to play in shaping the country's future.

The summit was a display of the collaborative spirit that defines Nedlac's approach to resolving complex challenges and provided an opportunity to reflect on this legacy.

The event served as a reminder of the power of social dialogue in driving sustainable development as it brought together representatives from business, government, organised labour and civil society, all committed to shaping South Africa's future through inclusive dialogue.

Nedlac has been a driving force behind much of the social and economic progress we have seen in post-apartheid South Africa. Reflecting on the past 30 years of Nedlac's work, the institution has consistently proven its ability to shape legislation, national policy as well as a society-wide response to emerging and imminent crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, the national energy crisis and crime and unemployment, among others.

The Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) is a multi-stakeholder body, which puts social dialogue at the fore of South Africa's just transition and was established as a result of the 2018 Presidential Jobs Summit – itself organised by Nedlac – is tasked with navigating South Africa's shift from a carbon-intensive economy to one that is more sustainable and inclusive.

Social dialogue and just transition

In South African's pursuit for a social compact to rally behind our decarbonisation, the role of social dialogue is particularly significant. Nedlac has been instrumental in shaping key policies that affect millions of citizens. These policies include the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, the Unemployment Insurance Act and the National Minimum Wage Act, all of which have helped create a more equitable and just society.

South Africa's just transition to a low-carbon economy will require unprecedented levels of cooperation between government, business and labour. The complexities of the transition – from ensuring energy security to creating new jobs in green industries – will demand open, transparent and inclusive dialogue.

This transition is no simple feat. South Africa is one of the world's largest carbon emitters, and much of the country's economy, particularly in the energy and mining sectors, is tied to fossil fuels. As the country works to reduce its carbon footprint, it must also ensure that this shift does not disproportionately affect the most vulnerable – those who depend on industries like coal mining for their livelihoods.

This is where social dialogue becomes crucial. By bringing together voices from all sectors of society, Nedlac ensures that the concerns of affected communities, workers, and businesses are heard and addressed. Without this kind of engagement, the risk of social upheaval increases, and the long-term success of the transition could be compromised.

The importance of this was underscored at the summit, where discussions highlighted the need for comprehensive policies that balance environmental concerns with social and economic imperatives. It is clear that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Instead, we need tailored solutions that consider the unique challenges faced by different regions and sectors.

For instance, while renewable energy projects in the Western Cape might create jobs and spur economic growth, coal-dependent communities in Mpumalanga could face significant job losses. Social dialogue provides a platform for these communities to voice their concerns and influence the policies that will shape their futures.

Additionally, stakeholders must consider the global dimension of South Africa's just transition. As a signatory to the Paris Agreement, the country has committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions. But international commitments must be balanced with local realities, ensuring that the transition is both fair and feasible.

As we look towards the future, the lessons from Nedlac's history become even more relevant and necessary to strengthen the social compact approach to tackle the grand socio-economic challenge of our time – climate change.

As South Africa navigates its the transition, Nedlac will continue to serve as a vital platform for social dialogue, ensuring that all voices are heard and that policies are developed with the input of those who will be most affected.

Our just transition takes leaf from the 30 years of Nedlac, and through social dialogue, we should garner the buy-in and consensus on implementation of economic, social and environmental policies needed for achieving our decarbonisation targets.

At the least we should use social dialogue and engagement to gather and evaluate experiences of communities and regions in transition and provide guidance on how to

collectively ensure a transition that is “just” and reflected throughout the policies and means of implementation our climate action and response measures.

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