



# Climate incrementalism threatens to derail COP26 negotiations

*By Thandile Chinyavanhu*

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*Greenpeace Africa urges the government to take more ambitious targets to COP26 and warns the proposed nationally determined contributions (NDCs) may give the impression that it is not approaching this negotiation with meaningful and genuine intentions to advance climate action and is acting in bad faith.*

**T**he reality of our changing climate can no longer be ignored: Germany, China and the United Kingdom have reported unprecedented rainfall; temperatures in North Africa and Turkey have surged to 50°C; and Cyclones Eloise and Ana pillaged Sub-Saharan Africa and Fiji, respectively. As the repercussions

of a 1.2°C world become apparent, the globe has come to a collective realisation that climate change is no longer imminent but violently unfurling before our eyes. As our global leaders prepare to converge at the upcoming Climate Change Conference (COP26) to deliberate their commitments to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the critical question is: will they set their political agendas aside, recognise the urgency of the climate crisis, and propose decisive action to avert a climate calamity?

A key point of departure for COP26 remains the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) of the 195 signatories of the Paris Agreement. Over the past year, the European Union, the United States and China have received criticism for their updated NDCs, which are relatively weak considering their financial and institutional capacity to commit to higher goals. Similarly, South Africa's proposed NDCs are unambitious and misaligned to what is required by science, the Paris Agreement or what

is considered to be our 'fair share' range. The absence of meaningful commitments from all parties would render the negotiation process futile. A failure from South Africa to put forward more ambitious targets may give the impression that it is not approaching this negotiation with meaningful and genuine intentions to advance climate action and is acting in bad faith.

The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) released the proposed NDCs in March 2021 for public consultation. Scientists and civil society agreed that while the proposed updates are an improvement from the 2015 commitments, they fell significantly short of what is required by science to achieve the target of mitigating an overshoot of the 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Instead, the proposed NDCs are more in line with a 2.6°C world.

The NDCs, which were accepted in September 2021, proposed reducing the upper boundary of emissions from 614Mt CO<sub>2</sub> eq to 440Mt of CO<sub>2</sub> eq by 2030, amounting to a 28% reduction ➤



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in emissions. A series of mitigation measures have been identified as critical pillars for implementing the updated NDCs, among them the recently implemented Carbon Tax, the 2019 Integrated Resource Plan (IRP), the Green Transport Strategy and enhanced energy efficiency programmes. Climate Action Tracker’s analysis of the updated NDCs revealed that the adjustments made would shift South Africa from its current rating of ‘Highly insufficient’ to ‘Insufficient’, which remains woefully inadequate.

Greenpeace Africa was among the civil society organisations that made a submission to the DFFE, requesting that they recognise the urgency of the climate crisis and consider the implementation of more robust commitments in line with the Paris Agreement South Africa signed up to, for the significant benefit of South African society, which is increasingly

experiencing the impact of extreme weather events, as detailed in the Greenpeace Africa report ‘Weathering the Storm: Extreme Weather Events in Africa’ released in 2020.

In our submission to DFFE, Greenpeace Africa insisted that the department adopt more ambitious targets, and provided scientific analysis to support our recommendations. Our analysis revealed that with the proposed NDCs, South Africa will not achieve net zero by 2050 as per the South African Low Emission 3 Development Strategy and recommended that DFFE adjust the proposed mitigation targets from the upper boundary of 440Mt CO<sub>2</sub> to 288 Mt CO<sub>2</sub> by 2030, to attain a zero-carbon economy by 2050. This target is aligned with the Paris Agreement and what is required by science. Further, an ambitious target such as this would put South Africa’s commitments in line with our peers and position us



as leaders in climate action on the continent. Greenpeace Africa was particularly concerned that of the nearly R37.5 billion in international investment required by 2030 for the South African government to support climate adaptation, stipulated in the report, the DFFE has failed to express what South Africa will commit in its capacity to mitigation and adaptation costs.

Greenpeace Africa implored the DFFE to recognise the potential of renewable energy to slash emissions. Our analysis revealed that once implemented, the IRP has the potential to reduce the country's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 84.6 Mt CO<sub>2</sub> eq annually. Among the mitigation measures proposed by the DFFE, the IRP is the most significant contributor to emission reduction; this is attributed to its renewable energy components. It is pivotal that South Africa drastically increases its uptake of renewable energy to further exploit emission reductions. South Africa has not even begun to exhaust its renewable energy potential, and DFFE needs to help in championing its deployment.

The body established to advise the presidency on a just transition towards a low-carbon, inclusive, climate-change-resilient economy and society, known as the Presidential Climate Change Co-ordinating Commission (P4C), submitted a response to the updated NDCs in June, which were accepted

by the President in September 2021. The commission is made up of key stakeholders across business, civil society, academia and labour. It was evident from the report that it was a challenge to balance these interests. What emerged was a document that resembled DFFE's proposed emission reduction range. Understandably, this is a weaker recommendation than what civil society organisations had put forward in their submissions on the updated NDC. It was indeed a challenging feat to put opposing interest groups to work together on a recommendation for the NDCs, and what has emerged is representative of that resistance.

Much was left to be desired as three commissioners expressed a desire to commit to demanding more ambitious targets than those put forward by the commission. The recommendation still falls short of what is required by science (including proposals made in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] reports). While civil society has successfully advocated for a reduction in the lower boundary from 398 Mt CO<sub>2</sub> to 350 Mt CO<sub>2</sub>, the margin has not changed much for the upper boundary, which has shifted from 440Mt CO<sub>2</sub> to 420Mt CO<sub>2</sub> eq. This recommendation would still allow for the fossil fuel industry to thrive unabated, locking South Africa into a

high-emissions trajectory.

Greenpeace Africa anticipated that the DFFE would apply the P4C recommendation as South Africa's final NDC commitment in October 2021, ahead of COP26. This recommendation accommodates carbon majors to operate under a business as usual scenario while appeasing civil society's demand to lower the emissions boundary. For these negotiations to be successful, all actors must prioritise trust and reciprocity for improved coordination. It is essential that South Africa demonstrates that it is acting in good faith and demands the same from our co-signatories. In the absence of this trust, negotiations will reach an impasse, and we are likely to see bad faith actors lean on tactics such as dragging out the negotiation process, expending energy on unrelated issues and dwelling on constraints that they claim limit their ability to comply with the demands of the deal.

The government continues to delay climate action that could potentially mitigate irreversible climate change caused by anthropogenic activities. This is demonstrated by our government's continued support of carbon majors such as Sasol, which has admitted that its Secunda plant is the largest single-source coal combustion driven emitter in the world. In addition to this, the frequency of fossil fuels bills is indicative of South Africa's continued ►

addiction to fossil fuels.

The Gas Amendment Bill was released on 29 April 2021, and the Upstream Petroleum Development Bill was released on 1 July 2021. These Bills have been in the pipeline for an extensive period. If passed, they will allow for South Africa to accelerate petroleum exploration and production, which could potentially undermine efforts to mitigate climate change. While the social licence of coal is waning in South Africa, shifting to another heavy emission resource ie gas, which the fossil fuel industry falsely promotes as a renewable energy source, is not a solution and will undoubtedly lock us into a high-emissions trajectory.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE BILL**

South Africa cannot in good conscience approach the negotiation table without a ratified climate change Bill, a crucial piece of legislation to enable the mechanisms necessary to achieve deep emission reductions. The proposed climate change Bill would make provision for the framework of a coordinated response to climate change from all spheres of government and enforce the national GHG emissions trajectory through carbon budget programmes and sectoral emission targets (SET). The ratification of this Bill is a definite step to addressing the climate crisis in South Africa through codification in legislation. This is a clear route to the declaration of addressing the climate emergency in real terms. Furthermore, this Bill could demonstrate South Africa's commitment to mitigating climate change. Failure to do so will not be a good show of South Africa's commitment or willingness to use its capacity to tackle climate change.

### **A CASE AGAINST CLIMATE INCREMENTALISM**

The allegory that a frog placed in a pot of boiling water will instantly jump out, but if placed in tepid water that



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is gradually heated, the frog remains until its eventual death rings true in the case of how decision-makers approach climate action. Self-preservation is a logical pattern of thought and behaviour. However, the undue influence of the fossil fuel industry has corrupted our decision-makers through decades of climate change denial and millions spent in lobbying dollars. Decision-makers are misled into believing they can withstand the heat. Journalist Kate Aronoff argues in her book *Overheated: How Capitalism Broke the Climate and How We Fight Back* that the globe has shifted from outright climate change denial to a more sophisticated form of climate change denial, and that is actively delaying climate action while commitment is dwindling in comparison with the scale of the crisis, or our historical responsibility.

This is achieved by advocating for an incremental approach to climate action. Incrementalism can be a plausible approach to a variety of policy decisions. However, the government, and particularly South Africa, need to recognise that climate incrementalism is no longer a luxury we have. There is a lot at stake for South Africans as the impacts of climate change intensify. The World Health Organisation anticipates that between 2030 and 2050, climate

change will claim an additional 250,000 lives annually from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress. The Global South will be least prepared to respond. South Africa's ailing healthcare system and dilapidated infrastructure will not be able to withstand the inevitable extreme weather events. Unfortunately, South Africa's structural inequalities render us more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, similar to how patients with co-morbidities experience the coronavirus tenfold. South Africa will be forced to deal with a two-pronged disaster; on one end maladministration and the other our burning planet. Without a robust and effective administration, we will not have the resilience to adequately deal with climate calamity.

The sixth assessment report (AR6) by IPCC, which distilled over 14,000 individual climate studies to guide decision-makers on climate policy, was released in August 2021. The report revealed the climate crisis to be much worse than previously anticipated. The report incontrovertibly linked climate change to anthropogenic activity, further stating that the last decade has been the hottest within a period of 125,000 years, with the globe experiencing 1.1°C of warming.

The implications for southern Africa are dire, and we have already begun to see some of these take effect. South-eastern Africa will experience an increased frequency and intensity of precipitation and cyclones. In contrast, south-western Africa will experience a decrease in precipitation, more arid conditions and ecological drought, which is a concerning thought considering this region is home to the most botanically diverse flora in the world. The fynbos indigenous to South Africa, a source of national pride, could potentially be threatened by the changing climate.

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for humanity, rather it is the bell that warns of a looming freight train coming down the tracks. Now is not the time for climate fatalism, now is the time for climate action. If decision-makers can initiate an immediate end to GGEs, the global temperatures will stabilise within the decade. This report should signal the beginning of the end for the fossil fuel industry. However, the industry has continued to thrive over the past few years in the face of mounting evidence against its practices. Despite having access to information from the best minds in climate change, government officials have continuously failed to put forward science-aligned commitments.

South Africa continues to use our status as a coal-dependent economy with historical inequalities as a crutch for delaying strong climate ambitions when, in reality, this decision is not to serve the working class and poor but rather to benefit the minority economic elites that hold an overwhelming majority of South Africa's wealth. This approach allows for carbon majors to exhaust their resources and wring out fiscal returns before the social licence of fossil fuels has been wholly eroded. The tragedy is that the low-income mining communities that the government uses as a reason for delaying action will not

have an equitable share of what is left of the fossil fuel industries' returns. These communities will be left to shoulder the burden of climate shocks alone.

These negotiations have been ongoing for decades and cannot be delayed by bad faith actors any longer. South Africa's failure to act timeously has resulted in massive economic and social disasters in the past; one of these is the government's failure to heed the warning of South Africa's looming energy crisis. In 1998, then Minister of Minerals and Energy Penuell Maduna warned in the White Paper on the Energy Policy of South Africa that Eskom's generation capacity at the time would be fully utilised by 2007, stating 'although 2007 seems a long way off, long capacity expansion lead times required plans to be put in place in the mid-term so the needs of South Africa's growing economy can be met'. Former President Thabo Mbeki's response at the time was 'Not now, Later'.

We continue to reel from the repercussions of this decision more than a decade later. Again in 1990, warnings that the City of Cape Town's water resources would be depleted within 17 years were ignored, culminating in the devastating 'Day Zero' witnessed in 2017. South Africa has a history of ignoring or delaying taking action on expert advice and is doing the same with the climate crisis -- only now failure to meet mitigation targets will prove to be the difference between life and mass extinction. Let this warning ring loud and clear; our best odds of survival are linked to mitigating global warming to 1.5°C. At our current emission rate this carbon budget will be exhausted within the next five years, and no country has an excuse for delaying action.

South Africa's socio-economic position is underpinned by injustice and inequality; these issues stand to be further exacerbated by climate change. The government must recognise the social imperative that the Paris Agreement holds and embrace the

potential of a green economy not only in creating jobs but also in achieving improved public health outcomes. As extreme weather events increase in frequency and intensity, South Africans will be left in the lurch due to the government's failure to take decisive action to mitigate climate change.

For many South Africans, climate change is a foregone conclusion. They are reminded of this reality with every passing season yielding less than the year before, their livelihoods hanging in the balance. As food security diminishes, they are forced to make trade-offs between food on the table or heat for those increasingly cold winter nights, only to watch their possessions being swept away by flash floods, locking them into a cycle of poverty. Minister Barbara Creecy must recognise the woeful inadequacy of the updated NDCs and prioritise social justice ahead of profits. President Cyril Ramaphosa must engage in these negotiations in good faith and demonstrate a true intention to advance climate action for the significant benefit of South Africans. He must demand the same of our co-signatories. This process could truly be a definite step to mitigating climate change if all actors can approach negotiations, not with self-interest but with honesty, reciprocity and a collective understanding of the gravity of this moment.

The fate of South Africa's underprivileged communities hangs in the balance as the government dawdles on climate action. These communities face the daily discomfort of living in the shadows of polluting coal, and the climate impacts hit them in more ways than one, given their overall lack of access to resources to provide them resiliency. For the South African government to truly live up to its commitments of protecting its people and the environment on which they depend, bold action on climate change and good faith in the negotiations is by no means a desirable luxury, it is an absolute necessity. **NA**