



COAL INVESTMENTS IN ZIMBABWE: A MISPLACED PRIORITY

By Simiso Mlevu Posted August 15, 2020 In Campaigns, News

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Introduction

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Whilst most nations are putting in place measures to phase out the use of fossil fuels and focus on renewables, Zimbabwe is taking the opposite direction by increasing coal mining and fossil energy production. The intention of the government was flagged by President ED Mnangagwa in the first week of August 2020, when he expressed the Government's support for the companies extracting coal in Hwange. According to the President, Government support for the coal sector is in line with the vision of attaining a US\$12 billion mining economy by 2023 as well as achievement of a middle-income economy by 2030. On top of the Hwange coal projects, Government has also given backing to Zimbabwe's Rio Energy Ltd's plans to construct a US\$ 3 Billion thermal power plant in Sengwa, Gokwe District, with financial support from China Gezhouba Group Corporation. In October 2019, Mines and Mining Development Minister Winston Chitando, noted that Zimbabwe traditionally produced about 3 million tons of coal per annum and the produce was expected to leap to 15million tons per annum by mid-2020[1]. In his 2020 national budget statement, Finance Minister, Prof Mthuli Ncube reiterated that there is Government commitment to fully capacitate the Hwange Colliery Company Limited (HCCL) to increase output from its underground mine[2] by rehabilitation and expansion of Hwange Thermal Power Station through ZWL\$8.4 billion government assistance. The assistance will include establishing small thermal power stations as well.[3]

The GoZ's vision of attaining a \$12 billion mining industry by year 2023 is hinged on exploiting over 40 minerals around the country which include an estimated 25billion tons of coal reserves. GoZ has also set a projection of rebooting the ailing economy and increasing energy supply for domestic consumption and exports. However, although increasing energy supply is key, the path of relying on fossil fuels is tantamount to solving a problem by creating an even bigger one. Already the communities where coal is mined are experiencing underdevelopment whilst those far away are experiencing extreme weather conditions whose manifestation is increasing vulnerability of the poor and thereby draining more from the fiscus as government attends to the climate change-related disasters. Any commitment to increase energy supply should be done in a manner which should satisfy the country's climate change policy as well as the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the citizens.

Why “de-coalizing” Zimbabwe?

There are several reasons why Zimbabwe should ditch coal investments and invest more on renewable energy sources. Essentially government policies and ratification of the Paris Agreement and creation of department of Climate Change means there is enough awareness and technical competence in government to reduce carbon emissions and take practical steps towards adaptation and mitigation. Some of the issues are discussed below;

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The Environment and Climate Change Argument

Zimbabwe's constitution provides for environmental protection in Section 73. The country also has some policies and strategies that are aimed at dealing with the negative impacts of climate change and improve environmental protection. These include the National Climate Change Response Strategy; The Renewable Energy Policy and the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. In her opening remarks in the **Zimbabwe Third National Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change document in 2016**, the then Minister of Water, Environment and Climate Change, Opah Muchinguri, reiterated Zimbabwe's commitment to deal with climate change by highlighting international conventions and commitments Zimbabwe subscribes to.

“Over the years the Republic of Zimbabwe views climate change as a serious issue. Zimbabwe, through the years, has demonstrated its willingness to preserve the global climate for the good of the present and future generations. Zimbabwe was one of the first countries to sign and ratify the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. Zimbabwe acceded to the Kyoto Protocol on 28 September 2009. Zimbabwe has made great strides to date through its completion of the National Climate Change Response Strategy, the submission of its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) and the developing of the Climate Policy to ensure that climate change is mainstreamed across all the socio-economic sectors of the country. The country ratified the Doha amendment to the Kyoto Protocol in 2016 as well as signing of the Paris Agreement. In accordance with the UNFCCC commitments, the Republic of Zimbabwe prepared and submitted its Initial and Second National Communication to the UNFCCC in 1998 and 2012 respectively.”[4]



In his presentation of the 2019 Budget Statement the Minister of Finance Prof Mthuli Ncube noted that “the country’s constitution gives every Zimbabwean the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health and well-being.”[5] The signing of the above international conventions and coming up with local environment and climate change strategies and policies by the Government shows commitment, which however, has not been backed by action. The GoZ has been indicating left and turning right, as proven by the commitment to invest in coal mining. Commissioning of new coal mines and expansion of old coal mines goes against the very commitments the government has made. Coal usage is the single biggest contributor to anthropogenic climate change. The burning of coal is responsible for 46% of carbon dioxide emissions worldwide and accounts for 72% of total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the electricity sector.[6] By ratifying the Paris agreement on climate change Zimbabwe had pledged to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 33 percent by 2020 which is no longer practical considering the rate at which the country is “coalonizing”.

Not only will coal extraction result in global warming but it will also have detrimental impacts on the environment. An independent report by the Centre for Natural Resource Governance on the impact of coal mining in Hwange showed that, coal mining by Hwange Colliery, Makomo, Chilota, WMK & Coalbricks Mines has resulted in substantial and permanent damages to the landform. The report also showed that the burning of coal by Zimbabwe Power Company (ZPC) emits pollutants such as matter (PM) and ground-level ozone (O₃) — the key ingredients of smog – along with nitrogen oxides (NO_x), sulphur oxides (SO_x), volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and carbon monoxide (CO).[7] As such the air in Hwange is heavily polluted and this has serious health impacts on the community. Studies have shown that living near coal combustion power plants is associated with fatal health risks – in the form of lung, laryngeal and bladder cancer. Respiratory complaints, increases in non-melanoma skin cancers, still births and miscarriages are also common.



In an effort to address environmental related issues the Minister went on to state that in order to curb environmental challenges; “the thrust is to deal with, rampant deforestation, with an estimated loss of 100 000 – 320 000 hectares of forests per year, solid waste management confronting urban authorities throughout the country, destruction of wetlands and many other risks to our environment” (2019 National Budget Statement). One of the result of coal mining is massive deforestation. A CNRG (2017) report revealed that coal mining in Hwange had resulted in many of the vegetated areas being converted into mining fields. Therefore, large forest areas were cleared to make a way for large opencast coal mines which include but not limited to opencast mining at Hwange Colliery, W&K, Makomo and Chilota Mines^[8]. These areas will take a long time to rehabilitate and will lead to landscape scarring as these expanses of land will be incompatible with the surrounding landscape. One of the ways of reducing deforestation as the Minister alluded to is to stop relying on fossil in this case coal expansion projects.

Social impacts

Corporate Social Responsibility has been a problematic issue between local communities and extractive industries. In most instances, little developments that have taken place serve to benefit the interest of the corporates to allow for the easy transportation and extraction of the precious resources. Whilst a lot of environmental degradation will be taking place affecting the local communities there is very little if any to show for the resources – hence the term privatising profits whilst externalising the cost to the community. Mining firms are causing land and water pollution and destroying road networks but also failing to plough back to the communities impacted by their businesses. For instance, the Hwange community has suffered much harm at the hands of the HCCL and other mushrooming coal mining companies. In a petition directed to Zimbabwe Zhongxin Coking Company (ZZCC), the community expressed concern at the effects of pollution caused by shunting trucks carrying coke from the plant to external markets. Villagers indicated that the dust has affected the Lukosi Irrigation Scheme and yields have gone down over the years. The dust also affects Lukosi primary school and Lukosi hospital. There were similar concerns about water pollution on Deka River by the mining companies that discharge effluent into the water body, killing livestock and fish downstream. Hwange Colliery Company Limited has failed to pay workers their outstanding salaries but instead the company is fighting to evict the workers from the company premises.

Coal financing depletion and the shift to low carbon renewables



Zimbabwe has a Climate Change Response Strategy which is hinged on promoting resource use efficiency and less carbon intense pathways in all economic activities. The strategy also speaks to the development of a climate change resilient energy infrastructure that is not carbon intense. The new dispensation also finalised a National Renewable Energy Policy (March 2019), which spells out that, Zimbabwe has huge and diversified renewable energy potential which needs to be harnessed effectively to create a sustainable energy portfolio in the country[9]. The National Renewable Energy Policy also addresses the climate change concerns and the country's commitment to adhere to global standard geared towards reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The policy enunciates that Zimbabwe has vast renewable energy resources like solar, hydro, biomass and to a limited extent, wind and geothermal, that to date have largely remained unexploited[10]. Based on the above Zimbabwe is capable to transit from the use of fossils to low carbon renewables without much hustles because the foundation has already been set.

The global shift from coal financing should also implore Zimbabwe to move along with global trends. By Mid-2020 over 129 globally significant banks and insurers had announced their divestment from coal mining and/or coal-fired power plants[11]. This is the trend which has seen major global financial institutions shifting focus to low carbon renewables. Many governments and corporate leaders are also moving away from coal. President Moon Jae-in of South Korea made significant waves with his Green New Deal to cease coal financing globally, while Ayala Corporation of the Philippines and Verbund AG of Austria both also announced in April 2020 their exit from coal, with the latter stating "the future belongs to renewable energy".[12] Shell, Total and BP have also shown commitments to move to zero emissions electricity generation. These are all very significant moves building on the momentum of global financial institutions' accelerating exit from coal, pivoting to sustainable growth options.

This behavior change by major financial institutions which have been historically motivated by the easy and quick money drained from fossils than the existential threat of climate change shows there is a new global trend. Mining review.org shows that the rate of transformation by globally significant banks, insurers and asset managers/owners announcing new or improved coal restriction policies has accelerated by 50% in 2020 compared to 2019. With this global trajectory, Zimbabwe has to action its commitments to the conventions, local policies as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) number **7**, Affordable Clean Energy, **12** responsible consumption and production, **13** Climate Action, **14** Life under water and **15** life on land which all speak to the effect of tackling climate change and providing clean energy.

Continued investment into coal projects by Zimbabwe is however chasing away clean energy investments as remaining global fossil financiers stampede to dump their money in Zimbabwe and in the process, hampering the country's efforts to reduce carbon emissions. While attracting coal investors might seem plausible to the Government of Zimbabwe in the short term, it is in reality a dangerous path to community wellbeing, environmental destruction and climate change whose deleterious effects are now frequently witnessed in Zimbabwe. Since climate change is claiming hundreds of lives annually through droughts, floods, cyclones and fires, it is essential for government to consult citizens on its energy policy and decisions. Currently these decisions are undemocratic and unilateral even though people ultimately pay the price through loss of lives and property.

The Myth About Clean Coal Technology

Scientists have coined the term 'Clean Coal Technology' to refer to any technology deployed at a new or existing facility which will significantly reduce emissions of sulphur dioxide or oxides of nitrogen associated with the utilization of coal in the generation of electricity[13]. Others have argued that any technology that can lower carbon emission from burning of coal is clean energy. However, there has been serious arguments that such technology is too complex, expensive and therefore beyond the reach of most governments. Pascoe Sabido, a researcher and campaigner at the non-profit Corporate Europe Observatory, has concluded that there is no such thing as clean or emissions-free coal.[14] If such technology is available it will increase the cost of production of coal which will have a bearing on the end user.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the country's addiction to coal is not healthy for the citizenry as it does not only go against Zimbabwe's own policy and strategies but also globally agreed frameworks. Coal extraction and burning not only has serious environmental impacts on land, water and air, but has social impacts on the human population too, resulting in many succumbing to chronic diseases such as tuberculosis. Further, coal has been singled out as the major contributor to global warming through high carbon emissions. In Zimbabwe communities that host coal mining companies have nothing to show despite a gloomy environment that is coupled with extensive damage of flora and fauna. This creates an ecological debt that investors will not bear the burden but the communities. Therefore, Zimbabwe should maximize and take action on its renewable energy potential which is not only eco-friendly but also sustainable.

Recommendations



- Zimbabwe should halt coal related investments and focus on tapping the renewable energy potential, such as solar energy. This entails civil society lobbying for the central government to allocate more financial resources towards financing renewable energy, as reflected in the national budgets
 - The government must show political will in implementing policies and frameworks that promotes affordable low carbon renewables to the people.
 - Priority should be given to mining companies that are willing to invest in low carbon emissions.
 - Communities that host coal sites need to be sensitised on the Climate Change Response Strategy and National Renewable Energy Policy so they put pressure on the central government to implement the its own renewable energy policies and international commitments
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[1] <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/coal-output-projected-at-15m-tonnes/>

[2] Treasury , THE 2020 NATIONAL BUDGET STATEMENT 'Gearing for Higher Productivity, Growth and Job Creation' Presented to the Parliament of Zimbabwe On November 14, 2019.page 74

[3] Ibid page 93

[4] Ministry of Water, Environment and Climate Change, Zimbabwe Third National Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Chang, Foreword page ii

[5] ibid

[6] <https://endcoal.org/climate-change/>

[7] CNRG, Environmental Impact Assessment Report for Hwange Coal Mining Activities 2017 page 12

[8] CNRG, Environmental Impact Assessment Report for Hwange Coal Mining Activities 2017 page 18

[9] MINISTRY OF ENERGY AND POWER DEVELOPMENT National Renewable Energy Policy, March 2019

[10] ibid

[11] <https://ieefa.org/finance-exiting-coal/>

[12] <https://www.miningreview.com/coal/coal-finance-heading-logical-terminal-conclusion/>



[13]

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coal_pollution_mitigation#:~:text=%22The%20term%20clean%20coal%20technology,in%20the%20generation%20of%20electricity.%22

[14] Ibid

