



LEARNING
by **DOING**

A story of a good life and public affluence in
South Africa under 1.5 °C in 2050
Combined narratives developed by the LbD South Africa team





Back in 2022, we had lived 28 years after Apartheid, a year longer than Mandela had been in prison. Yet unemployment, poverty and inequality remained at offensive levels. It seemed that a better world could not be possible. But here we are, sitting on my porch watching the neighbourhood kids play in the street. How can we explain this change, you ask? What got us from there to here, a good life in 2050, only 30 years later? This is a long story. Come, have a seat. Would you like a glass of guava juice? I planted the trees myself many years ago and now this beautiful little grove feeds us and cools the house too.

So where to start? Well let's start with society itself. Do you remember the looting that shook our country to its core, in July 2021? It became clear that we could not carry on as before. Our youth got fed up. Many young people had become increasingly disillusioned with the technocratic rationalism of their parents' generation. Some felt acutely the natural and cultural losses that peaked in the mid 2020s. They didn't want to live like this. They didn't want to have a country that they could not flourish in.

We were still figuring out whether the response to this wave of conflict was to *finally* introduce a basic income grant, or social security – when the terrible floods of 2022 hit KwaZulu Natal. More than 400 people were killed outright, houses collapsing around people. Poor communities were hardest hit, though even middle-class houses were flooded. Roads were impassable from deep rural areas to eThekweni. This brought home that climate impacts were no mere projection, a risk in the far future. And it wasn't only in South Africa! We started seeing Loss and Damage everywhere and it became apparent that without some major changes, things were





only going to get worse.

Looking back I think that the psychological impact of dealing with these social and ecological disasters – globally and in SA – helped our politics open up in some ways. Do you remember how stuck we were in cycle after cycle of fights? While everyone wanted something better, we couldn't find a way through. Some argued fiercely for a developmental state while others seemed to hold on to free markets, almost as an article of faith, as the force that would free us. Eventually, these crises allowed narratives to emerge that included both the state and markets. And little by little, a better balance was struck between the role of the central state and local governments. The response in KZN had to be local, specific to that place – with support from the rest of the country. While hard, the process of rebuilding gave a boost to local, transparent and open government. And people realised that the climate crisis would not recede quickly. And oh, I should mention, the idea of ombudspersons for the future emerged then and started to get adopted at all scales of government – even in some neighbourhoods and local communities.

That period of time also got us rethinking how we wanted to live. People started to think of ways to shift. Our previous way of doing things had become so ingrained, in our commercial and living culture, habits of consumption and expectation, which now seem almost ante-diluvian.

This was part of the opening that happened in the early 2020's. Ah, that was an exciting time! Can you hear the frogs over in the stream? They have been coming back more and more in the last few years. I hadn't realized I'd missed them until they returned.

But what about coal, you ask? Fossil fuels? Surely, in South Africa, this wasn't an easy change? Well, yes, this is a story unto itself. Do you still have guava juice?

Now obviously, public debate never stopped. This debate did however, get more robust as more and more voices were included. And as the debate widened, all kinds of interesting coalitions started to become possible.

I distinctly remember 2022 as a big year. Looking back, I think this is when the just transition debate, and the coalitions that underpinned it, gained speed and breadth. The Presidential Climate Commission (PCC)





developed a Just Transition framework. It focused a lot on the transition away from coal, but adaptation and other issues also come into the picture. And while the PCC consulted widely on its document, other groupings developed their own thinking. The National Business Initiative undertook a just transition pathways project, based on detailed techno-economic analysis, aiming to unify business ahead of COP26. This made a significant difference in the pitch for finance for our just transition. Yet the vestiges of the minerals-energy complex and decades of thinking defensively about climate change were hard to overcome. I mean, how could they not? Dealing realistically and creatively with resistance had to be part of the effort for change.

This is where broader coalitions started to really matter. Social movements became involved and demanded system change. The Climate Justice Charter Movement (CJCM) called for a deep just transition, running a six-year process with grassroots input from water stressed communities, the media, labour, faith-based communities, youth, climate scientists, academics, women's organisations, environmental and social justice organisations. Leading activists started writing think pieces. CJCM demanded that parliament adopt the Charter. Even though this wasn't successful right away, it resonated with many of the concerns that so many groups had as the economy wasn't working for many people anyway. Don't forget, unemployment before COVID was already almost 30%, and then increased to 35% as the pandemic hit the economy – and that was by a narrow 'definition' that ignored those no longer even looking for jobs, which included many more. Over time the Charter started to become used as a basis for initiating deep just transitions in communities and across workplaces. COSATU published a blueprint for workers in a just transition, talking to other formations in organised labour. It's five top demands were employment-creating and sustainable industrial policy; a Universal Basic Income Grant for all aged 18-59; reskilling and upskilling; land redistribution; and ending austerity for a climate just macroeconomic framework. These efforts were key because they made it clear that the interests of fossil fuel industry and coal workers were not the same. This was an essential break because it allowed other coalitions start to be built.

How did we build those coalitions, you ask? Well, to some extent it's the oldest story in the book. We had to find common ground.

The reality was that despite serious engagement of '22, there wasn't a coherent political strategy to achieve social justice. After a few more years of *Angst* and social debate a broad front politics started to be crafted. It dawned on South Africans of different walks of life that climate action and a concerted move to sustainable development could make our lives better – immediately – but we would have to work together in new ways. This wasn't about the future only, but about making change in people's lives right now.

Some of this was really driven by the younger generation. They, well I guess if I'm honest, this was me too back then! This is all before I even planted those guava trees! A broad swathe of individuals and groups started to understand that politics, business, and activism were not separated domains but that they could be brought together. We started paying close attention to local areas and asking how we could solve problems in specific places, with specific communities. We understood that solving issues of poverty, inequality and unemployment were linked to ecological devastation – and that we needed to connect thinking and people.

A big part of this was starting to change mind-sets. Overall, we saw ways to shift from an economy driven by consumerism to one focused on human interaction. Once it had sunk in that you can live well, not by having more stuff – much else followed. Of course, we know that for those living in abject poverty, having basic material needs met is essentially. Poverty is no fun. But it was startling to many to realise that even the rich were often unhappy. Instead of working less, most South Africans worked more as they climbed the endless ladder. When it sunk in that they were working all the time to live badly, that was a key moment both for the rich and for the middle classes, who had aspired to live like the rich. The new aspiration became what our Latin American friends call *buen vivir* – living well, a good life. Being able to see that a good life was really possible



meant that we could more easily join forces across diverse communities and build more powerful coalitions. The 2020's version of broad front politics mobilised groups behind a just transition to a good life.

The importance of organised labour and community organizations in this mobilisation can't be overstated, though it took most of the early 2020s for traditional unions to overcome the splintering, internal contestations and the influence of particular interest groups (most visibly the coal lobby) and to coalesce around more inclusive forms of union organising. They really took proactive leadership of the process and were particularly useful at persuading government at local and national level to come on board with these new visions. Eventually even the mining companies learned that compliance with regulation was just the start, that they needed to become sustainable, to secure a long-term social licence to operate. As coal mines closed, rehabilitation became important – and together with gold, found there could be very good mine closure plans. Other stakeholders discovered that platinum group metals were a resource needed in future.

Meanwhile, business made a significant shift – accepting that the transition had to be led by those whose future lives depended on it. Business continued to do what they are good at, searching for opportunities, replicating successes and learning from failure, but toning down claims to lead on justice (!) and engaging with others.

Some time in the early '30s, we had really nationalised the just transition process. And let me be clear, by nationalised I'm not talking about a top-down process. Things were happening in government, as I've described, but by the 2030's people in all parts of society across the country were starting to develop their own visions and narratives of a good life – and participating actively in making it happen. Social movements bringing together youth, women, faith communities and many others, developed their visions for a just transition. Citizens became actively engaged in self-determining their own destiny. Participation in national and local development debate *and action* is part of being a South African. Everyone was assured that basic





necessities would be available—food, shelter, health, education, clean water, affordable energy, and so on. But we as citizens came to understand that we need to pay for basic services, and *then* that we should demand them. Service delivery protests morphed into a more active engagement, making clear to local authorities that, if they did not deliver, citizens would take the initiative and make the change they want to see happen. Some changes led to quite different forms of social organisation.

That's when I planted those trees. There was a lot of public discussion about agriculture and food security and I realized I had an opportunity to participate too, even if in a small way. And here they are, still feeding the community! I don't technically own that land, land ownership has changed a lot in my life, but there started to be more ways to take care of the land and I wanted to be part of it.

How has land changed? Well, land emerged as a key element of the just transition. Land represented many things. The deep pain of Apartheid dispossession created a long-burning need for redistribution. This distribution included changes to ownership, certainly, but also beyond legal title it meant changes to political control, and land tenure security. Land can provide nutrition, health and community through local food production. And very fundamentally, land is about a sense of place. A good life is bound up with making particular places better, more liveable and attractive, and creating a sense of belonging. Now more people can have that sense of belonging, and have ways of taking care of the land so it can take care of them.

Land is fundamental to food security. Eish, that regional war in Europe that started in 2022 made big waves. Global food security hung by a thread. Yet the crisis pushed us to produce food in a much decentralised way. We have no more industrialised meat production. And we use much less land now, compared to industrialised agriculture

Of course, visions alone weren't enough, nor even were efforts to redistribute land relations. New energy systems were key to everything. The solar revolution that had started in earlier in other countries really hit SA in the 2020s. Well, once Gwede Mantashe moved on from being Energy Minister - that cost us several years, and he seemed happier back in Luthuli House anyway. At the same time, the just transition discussions caused





the renewable industry to do some soul-searching. It became clear that if solar and wind were going to take off, they were going to have to become pro-worker industries providing good green union jobs and feeding benefits back into all communities, including rural ones. I think the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022 was also a pivotal moment in this shift. The war disrupted food security world-wide and raised energy prices. While some backslid to coal, or reverted to the 'gas as a transition fuel' narrative it also highlighted that renewables were much more reliable, and locally available. It also reinforced the idea that just transitions were needed to enable resilience to shocks of many kinds.

Making these shifts in the energy sector required some other really big changes. It helped to have some practical funding mechanisms, though we went well beyond the ESG and 'impact investing' of the '20s. Green BIG made a difference. But crucially the financial sector needed to be entirely revamped. Several parts were brought together. A new financial strategy placed carbon budgets and social justice at the core of the financial system. The Development Bank of Southern Africa was repurposed, supporting large, nation-wide projects were supported that were both employment-intensive and low emissions. Infrastructure now serves more sustainable development – transforming dysfunctional rail systems, rethinking how we move around cities ('urban mobility'), designing our cities with the flow of water – and reusing the resource. Treasury developing a green taxonomy to push the private sector finance to meet climate and other sustainable development goals – and to ensure that the social aspects of ESG were included. It was not all about large banks – a myriad of small communities' banks gave real meaning to 'direct access'. All banks and many businesses took a longer-term view, and more risk – not just passing it all down the line. Cooperative business models – for everything from food systems to renewable energy projects became more common. Oh, and of course it was key that we taxed the robots, before the algorithms got to a point to outsmart us.

Another important shift was how we thought of governance finance. Given that social grants were so important in post-Apartheid SA, it took some time to realise we can't move to a more equal society through redistribution. For sure, social grants were an achievement and had their time and place. Gradually, as we imagined and worked into new development pathways, we realised social grants should not be forever. By 2050, we no longer had to spend on social grants. The just transition processes that started in the early '20s really did deliver socio-economic benefits, and reduced inequality.

What were the biggest challenges you ask? Well, none of this was easy to be honest, although continually reinforcing commitments to inclusive politics and coalitions certainly helped. We had seen the efficacy of globalised supply chains under transnational corporate ownership and growing dominance of the financial sector decline. Even so, giving up on concentrated private ownership was tough for many. The idea of sharing resources and assuming you would have enough did not come easy. But remember when I said that people started to find ways of caring for the land? That word 'care' is important here because it wasn't only caring for land that was essential but caring for each other generally; of course, this was underpinned by the greater sense of security associated with a more communal context of shared resource ownership.

A care economy became understood as foundational, as infra-structure – not just in the old sense of industrial infrastructure. Domestic work that is not automated is highly skilled, and people still prefer other humans caring for them – when they are sick, or young, or in a vulnerable state. Oftentimes care work had been overlooked in labour coalitions, but as people started looking more creativity at what a good life is, it became apparent that this too had to be recognized in discussions about employment, and in economic models that would work for diverse communities. Everyone needs care! Over the course of my lifetime, we have started to be much better at recognizing the importance of many care roles. Much higher value is now given to teachers, those supporting public spaces, nurses and many other care workers. This value has shifted both in



terms of financial support and recognition which has helped diversify local economies.

Part of this shift to care also meant that we began to work differently. South Africans are now ‘working’ three days a week, as material goods are largely produced by machines. We spend the rest of the time on community activities. But even what is meant by ‘work’ has changed – it is not chopped up into 8-hour days, with some activities getting paid and others not. The idea of an 8 hour work day seems absurd now, doesn’t it? It seems obvious now that people work well on their own terms, and find their work meaningful and valuable. Which means that time spent in the community is part of what we do, including caring for others. Care here encompasses making connections, building community relationships. Cooking is part of work, or getting food from the local garden. Almost all of this is closer to home, there is much less need to travel – and we fly only for ‘love miles’. Much more attention is paid to local transport systems, and how everyone can use them together.

Inextricably with the shifts around care, we also changed how we measured wellbeing. Youth discovered what older activists had long known, that the idea of continuous progress is an illusion, and that growth measured by GDP is a very poor metric. Have you ever asked any of our children born after 2030 what GDP means? Yes? So, then you know that blank stare they give you because this metric simply doesn’t get used anymore. More than once I’ve been teased mercilessly by a young person about the stupid ideas that our generation had for measuring progress. ‘What, you counted war as output?’ Instead, kids now will be happy to explain the Sufficiency Metric to you in detail, although they may pause briefly to express amazement that you did not learn this in Grade 3. Our education system at mid-century is very different – obviously to Bantu Education but also to the outcomes-based education. The *formation* of young people values different forms of knowledge





– imagination and rigour, creativity and science. Breaking the strangle-hold of SADTU in protecting even poorly performing teachers broke in the late ‘20s. That enabled a refocusing on how young minds are formed – and shake up old thinking. Clearly these shifts did not happen overnight. Remember when I said we had to get creative, and find every opportunity to contribute to change? This is where academics, teachers and key government administrators really had to step up and help create new ways of doing things.

One of those new ways of thinking focused on the connections between things. Have you noticed how this story keeps coming back to systems? This wasn’t an accident. Understanding systems as live things, as things that are all interconnected became central. We increasingly thought of sectors as systems, as we found change in transport, for example, depends on urban systems, energy, land and many others. It’s about systems thinking – and looking at nature. We have learned to live with nature. We live ‘local is lekker’. Reducing, reusing and recycling are ingrained, a ‘circular economy’ is hardly mentioned as a concept – it’s just how we do things. These approaches had each on its own way advanced a renewed love and respect of nature.

We also had to do some reflection about what the values are that bind us together as South Africans. We had – and maybe still have – a tendency to focus on our differences. Apartheid cut deep. But we rebuilt trust, by re-focusing on values we all share – such as justice, care, solidarity, even the very idea of being South Africa, what it means to be SAn. We care what others think of us – also in the world, and acted on the belief that we are ‘responsible global citizens’, as our national climate policy says.

At the time people thought that two additional issues would be challenges, but it turned out they were wrong. First, it seems unimaginable that the diversity among South Africans led to violent conflict, back in ‘21. SA in 2050 is a society where there is respect for differences for cultures, no one size fits all. Life is convivial. There is peace, not merely an absence of violence, but a sense that everyone can live safely in their community. And go into any other community, feeling welcome and safe. I personally think that those commitments to inclusive politics, and really insisting on wellbeing for all was central to this.

The second challenge was population. Some thought that population would be a tough issue. Well, our ‘demographic pyramid’ had a big dent from HIV/AIDS. And we do have a relatively young population – and as with many other countries, it has become increasingly urban. But in the end, it was education, really supporting early childhood development and equal attention to young girls, that was key. The *formation* of young people happens not only in schools, but in the community – people learn skills all the time, life-long. And education critically led to women having choice. And they use that choice well, family size is diverse but on average declining. This is another example of how centering care, in this case in the form of education, has paid off for the country.

Common values helped us to change now, and imagine even more in future. We have seen a transformation of how we lived in the 2020s – from how we commute, produce food, communicate, innovate, entertain, educate, approach health care – and indeed technologies. In 2050, it is not hard to imagine future transformations of ways we will live in the future. We’ve seen it before – and perhaps how we live with nature, the land, water, and get to zero waste, are shifts that remain ahead.

So here we are, and the sun is starting to go down. We should probably head in as it is my night to cook in the communal neighbourhood kitchen. We seniors do the worknights so parents can focus on helping their children with school work, and then they do the weekends. It’s a nice system. The thing is, we have not solved all problems. Global temperature went above 1.5 °C, and we still feel the impacts – efforts continue to bring global warming down below 1.5 in the next decade or two. But we have a firm foundation. We have created ecosystems where people work, create food, and live. Or to put it another way, we eat, drink, talk, and do some work. In short, we live a good life in 2050; this is our culture now. Now, shall we go chop some vegetables?