

# Climate change needs to be treated like the Covid-19 crisis

By [Liteboho Makhele](#)

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2019 was the hottest year on record, not only in South Africa, but across the globe. Impacts of this are severe, leading to droughts which adversely affect food security while limiting access to fresh water supply, both of which affect the most marginalised in our society. And while we have world-class policies to address these rampant environmental challenges, including the National Development Plan's commitment to achieving a low-carbon status by 2030, implementation remains poor.



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We are grappling with coordinating these policies across departments at a local, provisional and national level. Coupled with a lack of access to funding and our skills shortage that enables our procurement of funding from a global pool of benefactors, we are seriously hampered in our ability to transition to a clean, low-carbon economy.

The rapid rate of urbanisation compounds the problem. With more and more people coming to our cities to find work, it is often environmentally sensitive and protected areas that are impacted by the mushrooming of informal settlements. While cities have access to land that is closer to economic areas, legislation and land use policies are major barriers to what they can achieve.



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## Lessons from the crisis

Climate change is a crisis – albeit a slow-burn - that should be treated like the Covid-19 pandemic. We are running out of water at a very fast rate and despite this, we are not seeing an emergency response like we have seen with Covid-19; if we do not act now, it will be too late and all of us will be at Day Zero, not only certain cities.

Covid-19 has also highlighted how government departments on a provisional and local level can work better together, using funding more effectively. We have consistently shown through this ongoing crisis how resilient we are when we set our minds to something. But we are operating in crisis mode. We need to apply the same impetus to tackling the water crisis, waste and landfills and human settlements, to name just a few.

## Our consumerist culture

This starts on an individual level. South African consumers have developed a “throw-away” culture where we want the latest gadget, product or brand, only to discard what we already have, creating a cycle of waste that ends up in already overflowing landfills. This is yet another enduring challenge of apartheid: there is a drive to get the latest car and wear the newest fashions as this says ‘I’ve arrived’. This sense of arrival is linked to our consuming and we need to change that through increased awareness and education on a local and household level. We also need to change our language: we talk of going organic but this is perceived to be elitist, although it’s no different to how our ancestors and grandparents used to live; we need to get back to basics.



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## Job creation opportunities

A much-welcomed by-product of a more environmentally responsive society is job creation. From manufacturing buses that run on clean energy, to reducing hard paving and bringing nature back into cities and driving recycling initiatives to procure waste that can be used to create new products, we can kick-start a whole value chain of employment. Just consider plastic: there are so many opportunities for plastic waste; it can be used in different sectors. Bottles of Handy Andy or make-up containers, for instance, can be recycled and the materials reused. Reduction of our water usage can be addressed through innovative plumbing solutions and we can train artisans in this trade. Communities can also generate their own energy and sell to others, and the grid, providing alternative income streams.

## Collaborations across the private and public sector is key

Government’s integration with the private sector is key to achieving this, as is the scalability of pilot projects that happen in cities and villages. Those that are working should be replicated and municipalities, cities and different entities need to experiment and fail as in the failure, lessons can be learnt. There is an aversion to do this as government wants initiatives and programmes to work the first time around and we get caught up in the policy space, which limits our ability to test possible solutions.

Look at the renewable energy space: while we urgently need viable alternatives to our reliance on fossil fuels and Eskom, there is so much bureaucracy and legislation that delays these projects, sometimes for reasons of personal interest or pocket lining.

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## Take action today

2030 is but nine years away. To reach the country's NDP aspirations, not to mention Goal 13 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals which cautions us to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, we will find ourselves in unimagined circumstances. It can be done: consider that greenhouse gases dropped by 6% in 2020 due to travel bans and lockdowns, but this is only temporary. When life returns to 'normal', these levels will rise again – unless we act now.

In the meantime, nature needs to be brought back into our cities in the form of more green spaces and rooftop gardens. We need to reduce pollution through more environmentally friendly transport options and launch nationwide recycling programmes. Life must come back to the cities through biodiversity. Not only does this go some way in addressing our Green Agenda, but it also affects our development as humans. We need to rebuild our relationship with the environment. And it starts at home.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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