

South Africa in Climate Change Crisis

By Blessing Ngwenya

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On 19 September 2023, a group of activists from different communities came together to protest outside of the Standard Bank building in Rosebank, Johannesburg. These activists came to protest the investment that Standard Bank, along with other companies, is making into fossil fuels and coal.

The protest took place in the morning, at 10:00 AM. The protestors wanted to be heard by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the bank, Sim Tshabalala. They were told that a formal email was required before Tshabalala would address anyone who disagreed with Standard Bank's policies. This was sent according to Standard Bank's procedures, yet the organisers received no response from the company.

Instead, Standard Bank officials sent a complaint to the police claiming that the protestors were being violent when in fact one of the protesters was roughly handled by the private security company that is hired by the bank. The protestor in question began bleeding profusely after his head hit the floor. Other activists ran to stop the security guards who were still handling him roughly, but they were pushed away.

After a few minutes, security told the protesters that their injured comrade had been sent to the hospital for medical reasons. But it became clear that he had not been taken for medical help at all, but had instead been kept inside the building bleeding. No help was called for the man assaulted by the private security group.

Later, the police arrived and went straight into the building for a very long time. None of the protestors were included in what was being decided or talked about.

At midday, one of the security guards who works at Standard Bank, addressed the activists saying that if they did not move away from the company buildings, they would be forcibly removed by the private security company, who would not be held accountable for any injuries sustained in the process. The organiser of the protest, Malik, spoke with the police officers about the forced removal, asking if it was necessary. Malik also showed the officers the complaint that was sent by the bank, accusing the activists of violent behaviour, which he explained was untrue. But he was told that if their commanding officer instructed them to remove the activists, the police would do so without any hesitation. "On whose instructions will you remove us, your commander or the CEO of [Standard Bank]?" Malik asked in response. The police officers did not respond but were seen going back into the building.

One of the activists, from an organisation called Extinction Rebellion, who was at the protest told Karibu!, "Standard bank spends four times more on fossil fuel investments than on renewable energy: a massive sum of R120 billion a year that could finance South Africa's entire transition to renewable energy in four years. This could change if a few people, like Sim Tshabalala [CEO] and Kenny Fihla [the senior executive] listened and made the right choices," he continued, "We've tried it all – pickets, memorandums, open letters, but nothing seems to work. History has shown that civil residents have been the driving force behind transformative change. It's time for us to rise up and make our voices heard!"

Explaining the issue further he said, "Our mission is clear: a radical transformation of the energy and food systems, healthcare, housing, environmental protection, and more. Climate collapse is real and

happening now. If we don't transition away from fossil fuels, millions in Southern Africa will suffer and even die."

This group of passionate individuals are dedicated to creating a better future for all. They came together in non-violent civil resistance, which is a form of direct action taken by ordinary people against government and corporate powers; disrupting business as usual in order to demand change. Energy experts concluded that there is no room for more coal in South Africa, and it will not improve the energy crisis. The emissions from coal have resulted in Johannesburg being one of the most polluted cities in the world, which kills over 20 000 people per year, and violates civilians' constitutional right to a healthy environment.

South Africa has vast renewable energy solutions already recognised as more effective than coal. And access to clean and affordable energy is a basic right enshrined in the energy justice principles. The activists from 19 September were calling on Standard Bank to stop new coal investments by 2024 and instead redirect that money towards poor communities for community-owned renewable energy projects.

Despite their commitment to the agreements of the United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative [UNEPFI] and the Equator Principles, Standard Bank's involvement in projects like Cabo Delgado gas production and the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) disregards the wellbeing of local communities and the planet.

Inequality, Gender-based violence and poverty that are all linked to energy security. These investments are not helping the poor, instead they are maintaining the status quo for the wealthy. This can change if the private sector takes up the call for increased investments into clean, affordable, and sustainable energy solutions in poor communities so that South Africa can be a better country for all.

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