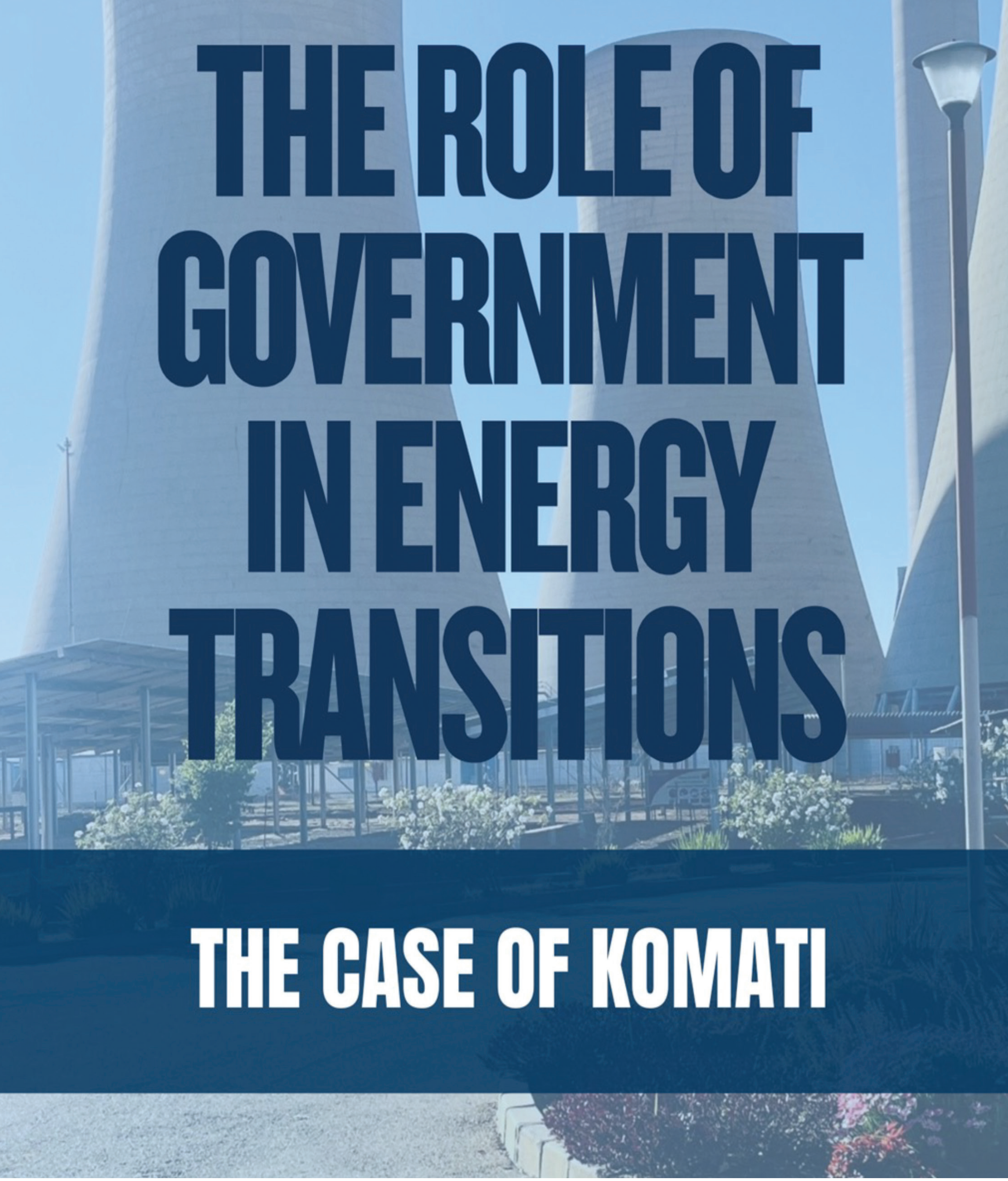

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN ENERGY TRANSITIONS

THE CASE OF KOMATI

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The Role of Government in Energy Transitions

The Case of Komati

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Executive Summary

This report investigates the critical role of government in orchestrating a Just Energy Transition (JET), using the decommissioning of the Komati Power Station in South Africa as a suitable case study. The findings reveal a profound and systemic failure of governance, where the South African government neglected its essential roles, resulting in a transition characterized by economic devastation, social collapse, and a deep erosion of trust, rather than justice and equity.

The analysis, grounded in a conceptual framework of a JET defined by the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and principles of procedural, distributive, and restorative justice, demonstrates that the government failed to fulfil its core responsibilities:

1. **As a Proactive Planner:** The government and its departments, were reactive and siloed. Decommissioning proceeded without a credible, co-created, and well-funded transition plan.
2. **As a Guardian of Justice:** The principles of the JET-IP were violated in practice.
    - *Procedural Justice was denied*: Communities and workers were excluded from meaningful dialogue and consultation, with most solutions imposed.
    - *Distributive Justice was absent*: The benefits of repowering projects were outsourced, while the costs were borne locally. Promises of 700 permanent jobs failed to materialize.
    - *Restorative Justice was inadequate*: Social protections catastrophically failed. The Social Relief of Distress (SRD) program collapsed, and the only significant intervention, the Seriti Social Employment Fund (SEF), offered temporary stipends.
3. **As a Driver of Industrialisation:** The State retreated from its role as the primary economic driver. It relied on an over-optimistic 'SMME and entrepreneurship' model and under-resourced intermediaries, instead of implementing a proactive industrial policy to create large-scale, decent work in new green industries. This aligns with the 'implementation gap' identified in the literature, where high-level plans completely fail to translate into tangible livelihoods.

The consequences of these failures are stark. Komati has failed to serve as the Just Transition blueprint it was intended to be. The community testifies to experiencing a collapse of the local economy, increased social ills, and profound psychological trauma. Workers are left with obsolete skills and worthless training certificates.

The Komati case provides a definitive lesson - a just transition is impossible without competent, proactive, and accountable government intervention. For future decommissioning in Camden, Grootvlei, and Hendrina, the State must transition from a passive facilitator to an active guarantor of justice. This requires the following:

- Mandatory, co-created transition plans finalized and funded 5-7 years before any closure.
- The establishment of a powerful, centralized implementing authority to implement the Just Transition for Mpumalanga (and the country at large) with a dedicated budget.
- A shift from temporary projects to an active industrial strategy that supports long-term decent job creating projects.
- Institutionalizing genuine community and worker co-decision-making in all planning and implementation.

Without this fundamental shift in governance, South Africa's energy transition will continue to exacerbate inequality and social unrest, undermining both its climate goals and its social fabric.

Introduction

The global energy transition, driven by the urgent need to mitigate climate change under the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C goal (IPCC, 2022), represents a fundamental restructuring of economies and societies. However, the process of decarbonisation is not just technical but also comes with harsh socio-economic consequences if not managed properly. There is the unfortunate risk that it could exacerbate poverty, therefore deepening already existing inequality. Moreover, this would undermine the social consensus, by various stakeholder groups, necessary for ambitious climate action as highlighted in the literature (Sovacool, 2021; COSATU, 2022). As a result, the concept of a Just Energy Transition (JET) has emerged as a critical framework stressing the need for a move to a low carbon climate resilient economy; but the move must encapsulate fairness and inclusivity. Instead of achieving only climate targets, a Just Transition must ensure that the benefits of a green economy are widely and equitably shared so that the burdens are not placed unfairly on vulnerable workers, communities, and regions (ILO, 2015; Heffron & McCauley, 2018). A truly just transition, therefore, will be reflective of environmental sustainability, and economic and social stability.

The government can do this through key policy interventions, of which South Africa has a few in place, as well as attracting investment - for which the country already has an ambitious plan that is under implementation. Through these interventions, the government must ensure that socio-economic considerations of those that stand to be adversely impacted are not exacerbated. This is mainly because any decarbonisation efforts have the ability to produce unintended socio-economic impacts. This involves proactive planning, coordinated implementation across government departments (national and local) and ensuring that climate goals are aligned with the imperative of decent work creation as outlined in the ILO's Decent Work Agenda (ILO, 2015). The success of government intervention will determine whether the transition, especially in Komati, becomes the blueprint for inclusive development or a case study on societal disruption.

South Africa, with its deep dependence on coal for electricity generation as well as high socio-economic challenges, represents a critical test case for the Just Energy Transition. The government has expressed its commitment through policy instruments like the Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET-IP, 2022) which explicitly adopts the tenets of distributive, procedural, and restorative justice. In South Africa, the decommissioning of Komati - if done successfully - was to serve as the blueprint of further decommissioning processes across the country and the continent. It was going to demonstrate how a coal asset could be repurposed to deliver renewable energy, skills development, and community upliftment. However, early lessons from the power plant closure in October 2022 has had many stakeholders questioning whether the government truly served the interests of those that stood to be direly impacted by the closure. This was due to the apparent lack of adequate social protections for the workers and community of Komati. This also called into question issues of adequate planning and early and inclusive stakeholder engagement, as well as an apparent lack of government coordination in delivering a truly Just Transition.

The early implementation of the Komati transition has been marked by significant failures. Despite several interventions in Komati, on the ground evidence points to a lack of adequate social protections for workers, inadequate planning, and fragmented governance leading to widespread unemployment and distress. Thus far, the South African government has failed to effectively fulfil its essential role of guardian and enabler of a Just Transition.

This review of the literature will thoroughly investigate the role of governments in energy transitions after offering a conceptual framework to help understand Just Energy Transitions. It will then look at supporting Fossil-Fuel Dependent Workers and Communities and, thereafter, dive into the Government Policies for a Just Transition. The literature will then look at some challenges and considerations in ensuring inclusive policymaking, and then conclude.

Literature Review

Defining a Just Energy Transition

The concept of a Just Transition is one that has become hotly contested as advancements in coal phase-outs are rapidly taking shape across nations, aided by national governments. The term Just Transition is associated with North American Trade Unions, from as far back as the 1990s (Smith, 2017). Despite various definitions of the term, it remains the brainchild of the organised labour movement. The ILO's (2015) guidelines further provide a more universal and conceptual understanding of the Just Transition to ensure that the shift towards environmental sustainability is one characterised by inclusivity and fair environmental sustainability, and that it ensures that no one is left behind.

Protecting Vulnerable Communities

The ILO just transition framework is rooted in the Decent Work Agenda and is characterised by four universal pillars:

- **Rights at Work** - are non-negotiable and include the right to freedom of association, including the right to collective bargaining.
- **Social Protection** - highlights the importance of safety nets to cushion shocks and protect people and families in the face of vulnerabilities.
- **Social Dialogue** - through multiple stakeholder collaboration, social dialogue aids in guiding and negotiating policy direction and is a primary process for achieving a just transition.
- **Employment (Protection and Creation)** - is about protecting existing jobs but also creating new decent jobs.

The ILO's guidelines offer a rather distinct conceptualisation of a Just Transition which organised labour movements, globally, use as a guiding tool in effective negotiation for favourable Just Transition outcomes.

Supporting Fossil-Fuel Dependent Workers and Communities

Scholars such as Heffron and McCauley (2018) present a more theoretical critique of the Just Transition. They first highlight that the reason why there is slow progress towards achieving a low carbon future is the fragmented manner in which scholars look at justice issues in transitioning, namely climate, energy, and environmental (CEE) justice. The paper's main proposition is that the concept of Just Transition should be used as a conceptual framework that encompasses all three justices: climate, energy, and environmental.

Despite different entry points between Heffron & McCauley (academic critique) and the ILO (policy), there are some profound similarities when conceptualising a Just Transition which are important to consider. One of the main aims between both papers is framing the transition as a socio-economic project which should not exacerbate but reduce inequality as opposed to looking at it as just an environmental transition where only climate goals are paramount.

Just Transitions are all about achieving justice, and both articles strongly highlight principles of fairness and equity . Heffron & McCauley (2018) assert that fairness in the transition can be achieved through restorative, procedural, and distributive justice; whilst the ILO's (2015) Decent Work Agenda looks at worker protection, employment creation, and social dialogue as its key components. Key to achieving this is the importance of process where both documents argue that just outcomes are not possible in the face of non-existent inclusive and democratic processes. As a result, tripartism becomes essential and Just Transition processes have extended their scope to include more than just government, business, and labour but all other stakeholders that are affected by the transition.

The ILO (2015) guidelines, therefore, offer a policy outline for a worker-centred Just Transition, whilst McCauley and Heffron (2018) provide a theoretical lens which unifies concepts of justice (CEE), strengthening the case of the ILO. Combined, they offer a reasonable rationale as to why a transition cannot be 'just' unless intentionally designed to be so.

Government Policies for a Just Transition

Incentives and Regulations

Targets and Mandates

Motivated by the global climate challenge, the ongoing energy transition is one of the most complex challenges of the 21st Century. Given the various stakeholder groups that this shift from coal to renewable energies is likely to impact, the coordinated efforts of government and other key stakeholders will be crucial in achieving a truly just transition.

For any structural changes that will impact groups of people and systems in a country, the role of the government becomes crucial in shaping and designing policies, attracting investments, and addressing socio-economic challenges that may arise from these changes. One such fundamental change is the energy transition where, in South Africa, many policies have been drafted and put into law to address its potential impacts.

The literature from Sovacool (2021), IPCC (2022), and Aleluia, et.al (2022) all highlight that whilst technological advancements and market mechanisms are crucial, the role of government cannot be underestimated. It aids in guiding the pace of decarbonisation, overcoming institutional barriers, as well as ensuring equity for vulnerable groups. What the current transition has fiercely highlighted is that the livelihood of coal and energy workers stands to be most impacted if the transition is not done right by placing safeguards to cushion the impacts of decarbonising.

Regulations to Phase Out Coal

South Africa is not the only country facing external pressures to move away from coal, and as a result it is important for this literature to look at case studies of countries that are facing mounting pressure to leave coal or have had to leave coal due to circumstantial factors. The central role of the government in fostering a Just Transition from these case studies will also be highlighted in order to draw lessons where possible.

The Case of Poland

A contextual overview by Brauers and Oei (2020) tells us that Poland is the EU's largest hard coal and second largest lignite (brown coal) producer, with 80% of its electricity generated from coal. Before the 2023 October democratic elections, the country had not committed to any coal phase-outs, with the national government being the primary defender of coal and being very vocal against EU climate policies.

For Poland, before 2023, the concept of a Just Transition was treated as a foreign imposition with the main intention of the government being to shield the coal industry from market and policy pressures for as long as possible. The strong support for the industry, despite it being non-profitable, was due to the government framing coal as a matter of national energy security, independence, and identity, (Brauers and Oei, 2020). The main discourse with the pre-2023 government was centred more on how to save coal as opposed to transitioning away from it. It is noteworthy that the state has a high degree of control of the energy sector, with majority ownership in the main energy companies in the country.

The role of the government was that it was a consistent and assertive opponent to the EU's climate policies, citing a threat to its energy sovereignty. Whilst their resistance may have protected the coal industry, it was only in the short-term because it failed to protect the livelihoods of those dependent on coal in the long-term, (Brauers and Oei, 2020). The sector is becoming highly unprofitable due to harmful geological conditions; there is aging infrastructure as competition from renewable energies increases.

The 2023 Polish election then provided a paradigm shift as a new government was elected and the previous government who opposed coal was now the main opposition party. This resulted in a completely opposite stance to the EU's climate policies. Poland is now a participant of the European Green Deal and Dempsey (2024), which tells us that the new government is open to unlocking funding and economic opportunities. The new government acknowledged the reality that the non-profitability of the high emitting sector became a massive burden on the State (Forum Energii, 2023) due to high carbon taxes and aging infrastructure resulting in high energy prices. They also acknowledged the importance of energy security but looked at it from a diversification and affordability lens, leaning towards renewable energy investment.

The Just Transition approach of both governments remains very symbolic especially for livelihoods of workers and communities. Whilst the old government mainly ignored the concept saying it threatened miners' identities, it still failed to develop coherent plans that could have potentially unlocked access to early funds. The new and current government is more proactive and pragmatic in their approach to Just Transition through active engagement with the EU to access funding and develop plans for economic diversification, up-skilling and re-skilling initiatives, as well as environmental remediation. This proactive and pragmatic stance highlights that transition is not necessarily a surrender but an opportunity to build regional resilience with the changing global economy. Ancygier (2024), however, highlights that there is still strong union opposition as there are no concrete worker protections being realised on the ground for affected workers and communities.

Workforce Development

Job Training Programs for Clean Energy Careers

It is the responsibility of the government to actively support research, development, and deployment of new and emerging technologies. A SATRI & FES (2024) report on sustainable industrial policy stresses that governments must integrate industrial policy with social equity through ensuring local content development, skills development, as well as Global Value Chain (GVC) participation to ensure sustainable transitions. Coming out strongly in the SATRI & FES (2024) report is a strong alignment of industrial policy with ensuring social protections and safeguards as well as balancing pace and equity of the transition, and calls for a strong role of the government in ensuring these.

From an equity point of view, the role of government would be to prioritise policies that foster job creation, where governments design policies to localise renewable energy value chains to promote local manufacturing of renewable energy technologies. China has been leading in this regard, especially with solar panel manufacturing where Song, et. al (2023) asserts that China's solar panel manufacturing is enabled by strategic state subsidies and export incentives allowing the country to boast a dominant manufacturing sector.

Another important role of government is addressing skills and education gaps that may emerge from transitioning into different methods of energy generation, as well as creating policies that support local innovation. This presents an opportunity to create policies that are gender inclusive by ensuring equitable access and opportunities to green jobs. Moreover, overall industrial policy should be about social protections and safety nets for vulnerable groups dependent on fossil fuel economies.

Overall, government plays an important role in policy regulation to foster investments which will result in spurring industrial growth, training incentives, balancing pace and equity, and ensuring economic competitiveness through localisation efforts.

Transitional Support for Workers

The Case of the Appalachian Transition

Appalachia is a region in the eastern United States and is defined primarily by the Appalachian mountains with a historical heavy reliance on coal mining and timber, industries that are now facing decline resulting in job losses. Scholars such as Hess, et. al (2021) locate the Appalachian transition in Eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, and Southwest Virginia which are the regions said to have a lot of fossil fuel resources. This case highlights the importance of managing a transition proactively as opposed to reactively stressing the importance of coordinated policy interventions in the face of industrial decline. It stresses strongly that market forces will not necessarily produce an equitable transition but rather government through targeted policies will address economic, social, and community needs simultaneously.

In the case of Appalachia, there was a decline in coal resources but this was spanning over decades, and government neglected to plan for this foreseeable crisis leaving communities to cope alone, with the eventual aftermath of economic collapse. This resulted in widespread job losses and no economic diversification strategies in place, prompting various actors (government, civil society, and labour organisations) to gather and build support for a just transition (Carly & Konisky, 2020).

The Appalachian transition serves as a cautionary tale for governments to anticipate and plan for eventual decline and changing circumstances while the existing industry is still healthy. This planning, according to several authors, (Becker (2020), Pendras (2020), and US DOE (2021)) includes investing in infrastructure for new industries and creating economic development agencies. Due to the lack of forward thinking, when the mines closed people were left with specialised skills but that could not be transferred to new industries. This highlighted a failure on the part of government that even existing training programs did not result in any jobs as the approach to problem solving rested on top-down approaches which often lacked social dialogue and overall coordination with other stakeholders. Hess, et, al (2021) highlight that the important initiatives in Appalachia were locally led but not without funding constraints. This required the coordinated role of the government and the community to craft meaningful socio-economic decent work alternatives.

What the Appalachian transition teaches is a clear lesson that delaying a proactive intervention that is government led only deepens the human and economic costs, resulting in an unjust transition.

Community Investment

Funding for Clean Energy Infrastructure in Komati

The South African Energy Transition is a very complex multi-stakeholder process, and its success hinges on the effective coordination of all stakeholders involved. With one power station already shut down and more to follow in the near future, there have been deep tensions about the government's role in delivering justice to affected stakeholders, specifically vulnerable workers and communities.

The South African government and the national power utility, Eskom, are at the forefront of ensuring a just and equitable transition that ideally should leave no one behind. The South African government through the country's JET-IP (2022) is committed to achieving a Just Transition, not only narrowly through reducing greenhouse gas emissions but through redress of past and present injustices. It plans to do this through ensuring the three justices (distributive, procedural, and restorative) that have already been articulated by scholars like Sovacool (2021) in the literature.

The JET-IP intends to reinforce these justices as its basis and focus towards achieving justice in the transition as follows (Presidency, 2022: 39):

Distributive Justice	Ensuring broad and equitable sharing of benefits (jobs, opportunities, ownership) of the green economy particularly with those who are historically disadvantaged.
Procedural Justice	Hinges mainly on meaningful participation through social dialogue mainly with regards to policy planning and implementation, especially where workers and communities are concerned.
Restorative Justice	Hinges mainly on meaningful participation through social dialogue mainly with regards to policy planning and implementation, especially where workers and communities are concerned.

On the other hand is the role of Eskom, which is considered as the most crucial actor in the transition alongside the government and its entities. Eskom (2022) cites aging infrastructure as the reason for the carrying out of decommissioning processes, arguing that their plants are no longer reliable. This, along with mounting global pressure to move away from carbon intensive industries accompanied by green finance, has resulted in Eskom developing a Just Energy Transition strategy to facilitate the move. This is in a proactive bid to facilitate its future, ensure national energy security, and access funding. Eskom (2022) frames its strategy through a broader national context of South Africa's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, as well as international funding from JET partnerships.

Given the three interconnected pillars under which Eskom defines a Just Transition, the utility has so far failed to achieve their own prescripts of what should constitute a Just Transition. In its strategy document, Eskom (2022) defines a Just Transition under these three interconnected pillars:

- **People:** which speaks to social justice and managing the impacts on workers and communities that live off coal and coal value chains. The aim is to achieve this through up-skilling, re-skilling, economic diversification, and redeployment. This aspect also ties in well with the JET-IPs idea of restorative justice.
- **Planet:** speaks to emission reductions as well as environmental preservation which is associated with coal mining.
- **Prosperity:** provides avenues to stimulate new industries, creating sustainable jobs and inducing local economic development in affected regions, mainly in Mpumalanga.

Based on their own prescriptions above on what informs justice in transition, this paper will take an opportunity to critique whether Eskom and the JET-IP have achieved a Just Transition at Komati, which is the first power station that was decommissioned in South Africa in October 2022.

Assistance Programs for Low-Income Households

Funding in the JET-IP is critical for Eskom to carry out its Just Energy Transition Strategy. The JET-IP (2022) articulated that funding mobilised by the government will be utilised for repowering and repurposing coal plants, strengthening the grid, as well as enduring social mitigation. Komati was to be the first pilot project in 2022 and true to planning, it was decommissioned - with other power stations expected to follow.

Rationale for Repurposing

At the heart of the decommissioning process for Eskom is a strategy driven by compelling and social logic. Eskom (2022) in their JET Strategy justify their repurposing under the following logic:

- **Asset Optimisation:** they consider the value that the coal fleet possesses in terms of existing grid connection points, transmission infrastructure, roads, water access, and a skilled workforce. This is enough motivation to repurpose rather than discard their sites.
- **Grid Stability and System Value:** Eskom acknowledges that the grid connections are already built to handle large capacity inputs and so it makes business sense to deploy new generation at these existing sites. They argue that building new connections at new remote sites is more costly. If done at existing sites, it would assist in mitigating the anticipated job losses at power stations earmarked for decommissioning as it would spur job creation.
- **Social Mitigation:** it is anticipated that repurposing would bring about new economic activity and, in turn, employment opportunities. In this manner the devastating impact of job losses would be mitigated.
- **Reduced Environmental Liability:** sees Eskom managing the repurposing process in a manner that includes responsible closure and rehabilitation of ash dams and other environmental hazards.

Challenges and Considerations

Balancing Priorities

Addressing Climate Change vs. Economic Impacts

The decommissioning of Komati power station in Mpumalanga, if done correctly, was to serve as the blueprint for all further decommissioning in the country. It was considered as the flagship pilot project for the country's Just Energy Transition (JET). Essentially, it was intended to serve as proof that a coal-fired power station could be transformed and repurposed into a hub for renewable energy, skills development, and community upliftment. According to the World Bank Report (2022), it was in 2022 that a $497 million concessional loan was approved to carry out the decommissioning of Komati.

To offer a concise background on the intentions and promises that the loan was meant to achieve, the World Banks Project Appraisal Document (2022) outlines a detailed vision for Komati and breaks it down into three key components with costs. The first was the repurposing of Komati for renewable energy generation and Grid stability at a cost of $310.5 million. The second was strengthening Eskom's System Operations and Network Capacity at a cost of $39.5 million and, lastly, Enterprise Development and Community Support at $47 million.

According to the World Bank (2022:28), the project was designed to benefit over 3 000 people with an estimated 700 full time jobs to be created with a strong focus on gender inclusion and local economic participation.

For component one, post-decommissioning the site was to be repurposed with 150MW of Solar PV, 70MW/ 300 MWh of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS), and a synchronous condenser was going to provide voltage storage stability to the grid. This was intended to demonstrate the commercial viability of repurposing coal assets (World Bank 2022: 6-8). Component two was intended to fund studies and investments aimed at modernising Eskom's grid control systems in order to prepare the network for renewable energy. Component three spoke to the core of 'justice' in the transition, with promises for job creation (temporary and permanent), and establishing a Komati Training Facility as a centre for excellence for renewable energy skills. It was also meant to support community based projects in agriculture, horticulture, e-waste recycling, and provide support for impacted workers and SMEs (World Bank 9-11). In this manner, the local community would benefit from creation of alternative economic opportunities.

Meeting Energy Demands vs. Environmental Protection

Komati Successes and Failures According to the PCC

In its efforts to carry out a Just Transition the government works with, amongst other bodies, the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) which serves an advisory role to the government on its climate change response. The PCC does this by producing evidence-based recommendations and facilitating dialogue to define a clear pathway towards a green, low carbon, climate resilient economy.

In its latest report (June 2025) titled, 'Komati's Just Transition: Assessing Progress Challenges and Lessons,' the PCC highlights that despite stakeholder engagements and early stage projects, the large-scale socio-economic benefits have been limited and delayed. Furthermore, the report states that despite ambitious transition plans, the implementation is slow - with construction yet to begin on major job creating projects.

The section below will tabulate both successful and unsuccessful projects (per the latest PCC report). The successful projects the report mentions have been made often in soft skills, engagement, and planning rather than physical infrastructure or job creation. This is a clear indication of the lack of progress in socio-economic gains, and it highlights decent work deficits which are an integral part of achieving a Just Transition. The failure, stalling, and cancellation of projects has been due to lack of procurement, planning, and coordination.

Considered Successful Programs/Initiatives

Program/Initiative	Lead Agency	Status & Success Reasons
Stakeholder Engagement & Coordination	PCC Steering Committee & Eskom	Successful. Cited as the most improved area. The creation of the community-led Ward 4 Steering Committee
Re-skilling & Up-skilling Training	Eskom, IA (Genesis), SARETEC	Partially Successful. About 393 workers and community members received training in renewables, soft skills, data engineering, and welding by end of 2024. This provided early benefits and improved community engagement. However, a permanent training facility has been delayed, and many graduates lack job opportunities to utilize their new skills.
Social Employment Fund (SEF)	IDC/SERITI Institute	Successful (as a short-term measure). Created 300 part-time jobs for a year in areas like food security and education. Launched in Jan 2025 after initial delays were overcome through community engagement. It provides crucial short-term relief but is not a permanent solution.
Agrivoltaics & Aquaponics Pilots	Eskom	Successful (as pilots). These projects have been built and are operational. Produce is used by the station's caterer and donated to a local school. A former KPS security manager now runs the aquaponics facility, demonstrating successful repurposing of skills.
Komati Protocol & Community of Practice	Groundwork, Indalo	Successful. Development of the Komati Protocol provides principles for procedurally 'just' community engagement. The Facilitators' Community of Practice is pioneering how to apply the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework in a just transition context.
JET Funding Platform	JET-PMU	Successful (as a mechanism). Launched in late 2024, this platform aims to match credible transition projects with grant funders. It has received over 150 applications and has the potential to unlock critical funding for Komati and other sites.

The above 'successes' are not representative of what organised labour and communities demand out of a transition. In its policy conference discussion document in 2024, the NUM used the SATRI definition of what constitutes a Just Transition. SATRI (2024) defines JET as 'a move from high emission to low emission energy generation and use, in which the livelihoods of people and communities that depend directly or indirectly on the high emission energy are protected and guaranteed.' In the above table, successful stakeholder dialogue and launching of funding platforms does not translate to protection of livelihoods and job protection. There is no clear localisation or industrialisation that has the potential to translate to decent work gains. Below is the documentation of the failed programs.

Programs that Failed or Faced Major Challenges

Program/Initiative	Lead Agency	Status & Failure Reasons
Component A: Decommissioning Eskom and Demolition	Eskom	Major Delay. Failure to appoint an Owner's Engineer (OE) in 2023 due to procurement challenges and scope uncertainty (e.g., what to do with the iconic cooling towers). A new tender was cancelled as bids exceeded the budget. An OE is now expected only by July 2025, pushing the entire component back. (Findings in Set 2025 reveal that none is still appointed.)
Component B: Repowering with Renewables	Eskom	Major Delays & Scope Reduction. • Wind Energy (70 MW): Likely cancelled. Environmental assessments found it was not feasible due to negative impacts on local wildlife (birds/bats) and grid infrastructure. • Solar PV (150 MW): Delayed. Phase 1 (72 MW) construction is now expected by Nov 2025. The loss of wind capacity means the total renewable energy built will be less than originally planned. • BESS (150 MW): Procurement is underway, with construction expected by Oct 2025.
Permanent Job Creation	Multiple	Failed to Materialize. This is the core failure. Despite training programs, permanent, sustainable jobs have largely not been created. Economic diversification projects (e.g., copper recycling, PPE manufacturing) are still in the business case phase. The report notes a significant concern that many future jobs (e.g., in renewables) will require highly technical skills not readily available in the community.

Community Development Infrastructure	Multiple	Largely Stalled. Critical community-requested projects like a clinic, library, and proper bus shelters have seen little tangible progress. Reasons include: • Unclear ownership: It is often unclear which government department or entity is responsible for funding and maintaining infrastructure. • Lack of municipal capacity: The local municipality (STLM) faces significant resource constraints. • Funding gaps: Many projects fall outside Eskom's mandate and the World Bank loan, requiring grants that have not yet been secured.
Economic Diversification Strategy	TIPS	Delayed. A comprehensive strategy is crucial for long-term planning. While work has begun, the final report is only expected by August 2025. This lack of a guiding framework has contributed to ad-hoc planning and coordination challenges.

These failures mentioned above indicate poor planning and coordination and more of just a rush to fulfil the decommissioning mandate of an external funder, without proper planning and institution of safeguards. For trade unions, a Just Transition must be worker-centred, publicly led, and socially negotiated; however, the failures above indicate that the aspects that are meant to benefit workers are the ones experiencing the most failures. Considering these failures, it appears that the government is not acting as a guardian of social justice and public interest. The transition is neither inclusive nor sustainable.

The Impact of Macro-economic Policy on South Africa's Energy Future

South Africa's transition challenges are not due to a lack of planning from government but rather the macro-economic pathway executed within a neo-liberal framework the State has chosen, which is fuelled by a lack of political will. This framework is characterised by austerity and reliance on blended finance, and has created a hostile environment for success as the transition is an externally driven process.

For years, the national treasury has tried to reduce its budget deficit by slowing down the growth of its debt through fiscal consolidation by capping public expenditure. The state usually does this to create macro-economic stability, control inflation, build investor confidence and avoid a debt crisis. One of the best ways to do this is by spending less money. However, this austerity measure by the government forces the State into a dependent relationship with private and external funders whose core objectives are misaligned with the goals of justice. The State is in essence deliberately weakened and loses its ability to act as the primary driver and investor of the transition. As a result, its macro-economic framework is one that allows external funders and private capital, who bring in neo-liberal mechanisms such as blended finance, to be the main drivers of the transition.

A genuine Just Transition requires massive public investment in new grid infrastructure, renewable energy manufacturing, and social infrastructure like the clinics and schools demanded by the Komati community. Austerity makes this impossible. Scholars such as Weber (2023) make the argument that the State must serve as the investor of first resort to de-risk and catalyse strategic sectors. Furthermore, the work of Dani Rodrik (2004, 2008) on industrial policy makes the strong emphasis that successful economic transformations require a capable, interventionist State. Unfortunately, South Africa's austerity measures weaken the capacity of the State to lead.

The reliance on external finance from international partners such as the World Bank and IPG partners recreates dependency, with the risk of international agendas overriding local needs. The procurement rules attached to the loans often sideline local businesses and rushes decommissioning processes without adequate local planning. This deviates from Mazzucato's (2021) concept of mission-oriented innovation which stresses that the State must shape markets to serve public goals, not just fix market failures. Blended finance treats issues of 'justice' as secondary. A successful transition in South Africa demands a new macro-economic consensus that prioritises public investment, empowers the State as a driver of change, and uses its full fiscal and regulatory abilities to build a new inclusive economy.

The failure of the Just Transition in Komati is not a story of isolated administrative incompetence but the direct and predictable outcome of a deliberate macro-economic policy choice. By adhering to a regime of austerity and fiscal consolidation, the National Treasury systematically disarmed the State, eroding the very capacity required to lead a complex socio-economic transformation. This forced a reliance on external funders and private capital, whose neo-liberal mechanisms, like blended finance, are structurally misaligned with the demands of justice.

Consequently, the transition was hijacked by a logic that prioritizes fiscal targets and investor returns over community needs, replacing the State's duty to act as the 'investor of first resort' and guarantor of decent work with a model that offers little more than temporary stipends and unfulfilled promises. Until the State is re-empowered to drive a mission-oriented industrial policy, South Africa's energy future will remain an externally driven process, destined to repeat the injustices of Komati rather than deliver a truly just and inclusive transition.

Ensuring Inclusive Policymaking

Engaging Diverse Stakeholders

As earlier articulated, the transition journey is one that is known to come with unintended socio-economic consequences. Sovacool (2021) argues that it is often marginalised communities who are mainly the casualties of climate policies. Furthermore, the workers' federation COSATU in its Blueprint (2022) shares similar sentiments with Sovacool (2021) that energy transitions must not exacerbate inequality nor leave workers behind.

Both Sovacool (2021) and COSATU (2022) highlight the important role that government must play in safeguarding jobs for workers dependent on coal communities, ensuring social protections and community reinvestment for economic diversification support. Furthermore, scholars like Sovacool (2021) and Aleluia, et. al (2022) highlight some cases of inequitable transitions such as India, where solar parks have been placed on agricultural land leading to protests by farmers. Another case study in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, has seen economic decline in East Kalimantan with no alternative employment opportunities and lack of clear localised economic diversification strategies.

These cases highlight the importance of a coordinated role by government with affected stakeholders in advocating for policies that promote aspects of:

- ***Procedural Justice:*** involves inclusive decision-making, ensuring meaningful worker and community participation.

- ***Distributive Justice:*** recognises the fair distribution of costs and benefits of transitioning.
- ***Recognition Justice:*** is about respecting and acknowledging historical inequalities in energy access.

The COSATU Blueprint (2022) comes out very strongly in its rejection of climate goals that sacrifice workers, and this calls on the government to ensure meaningful worker protections through inclusive policies, community engagement, and social safety nets.

Addressing Concerns of Marginalized Communities

It is important to emphasise that the government's role in South Africa's transition is multifaceted and is carried out by its entities as well. The government is viewed as the guardian of Just Transition principles, and a facilitator. Through key governmental bodies, the National Treasury and the Presidency, the government is responsible for setting the vision and strategic direction of the transition. The Presidency plays a supervisory role and within it is the Just Energy Transition Project Management Unit (JET-PMU). The National Treasury is responsible for negotiating key financial agreements, managing finance structures, as well as ensuring fiscal sustainability. The PCC is a multi-stakeholder advisory body which was established to provide independent advice on climate policy to ensure legitimacy of the process.

Government as a Facilitator and Enabler

The JET-IP (2022) highlights the manner in which government creates a conducive environment to attract the investment that is required. This has seen various international governments partner with South Africa to pledge funds in the form of loans, donations, grants, and investments to assist the country to accelerate the decommissioning of their coal-fired power stations and replace them with renewable energy (JETIP 2022, Presidency 2022, European Commission, 2022). These pledges also then resulted in the ambitious $8.5 billion JET-IP (2023-2027), which is an accelerated decarbonisation pathway for a country that has come under much scrutiny and backlash

As a result, government is responsible for policy and regulatory reform, de-risking investment, and coordinating State Owned Entities (SOEs) such as Eskom and Transnet who are considered big emitters in this transition. Simultaneously, they also have to be the guardians of justice, where through new built renewable energy projects they have to foster and enforce localisation through implementing policies with local content requirements. This is attempted through the South African Renewable Energy Master Plan (SAREM). Furthermore, protecting workers in affected sectors by preparing them for changes brought about by transitioning remains a key priority for the government, alongside community support through economic diversification projects.

Conclusion

From this review of the literature, there are a number of lessons that can be drawn especially on how to approach the Just Transition more successfully. A core prescription of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda of Social Dialogue was found lacking. There was no early inclusive stakeholder engagement before the shutdown, especially with the most affected stakeholders. It was only much later that a community steering committee was established, highlighting that communities have the right to be co-creators of their future.

The Komati experience also highlights the importance of capacitating. For example, local municipalities could be capacitated with technical expertise for anticipated changes and new economic activities. National government plans must include a dedicated capacity-building and funding stream for the local governments that will have to deliver basic services and local economic development.

The rushed timelines for decommissioning failed to take into account the scale of the challenge. Transformation is not an overnight job for a community that is built largely around coal, as was apparent with the two case studies of the Polish and Appalachian experiences referred to in the literature. It was also an even bigger misfortune that the initiatives highlighted as successes in Komati translate to no real decent job gains for workers and the community. The scale of funding to carry out the essential elements of social justice was not as readily available as the decommissioning budget.

Overall, the role of the government as a facilitator has failed on the ground in achieving real tangible gains for the impacted communities. There is a strong need for coordinated planning where future plans must involve intentional community and worker inclusion in decision-making and planning. In essence, the lack of 'just' outcomes in the case of Komati shows that any attempts at achieving justice must be proactive and not reactive, and require early planning long before a crisis strikes.

Policymakers and government entities must prioritize the protection of workers and communities in energy-transition planning. This requires implementing the ILO's Decent Work Agenda pillars, ensuring meaningful social dialogue, and providing adequate funding for social protection measures. The Komati case demonstrates that without intentional design and proactive government intervention, energy transitions risk exacerbating inequality and creating sacrifice zones, rather than delivering 'just' outcomes.

Methodology

This research report sought to understand government interventions since the decommissioning of Komati Power Station by consulting with representatives from national and provincial government departments as well as hearing their reports on their interventions at a community meeting. These departments included the Department of Social Development (DSD), Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs (DARDLEA) in Mpumalanga and nationally, and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE). The government interventions highlighted a contrast between high level strategic planning and raw, grassroot realities where reactive planning for a green future dismally failed to manage the ongoing socio-economic crisis at Komati.

Government partnerships with stakeholders who work as intermediaries to implement Just Transition interventions at Komati and in Mpumalanga Province at large were also explored. This research was able to understand interventions from the Green Cluster Agency, SERITI/IDC, and Indalo. These interventions highlighted how, despite the government understanding the problem intellectually, its interventions are still failing as they involve short-term underfunded projects with no real long-term benefits for the intended recipients. The PCC also emerged as a significant actor and high-level coordinating body to the Just Transition process. However, it was mainly critiqued by workers and the community in the interviews, that although there is awareness of the problems faced on the ground, they still fail to drive effective implementation.

Results and Discussion

It has been three years since the decommissioning of Komati Power Station. If done correctly, this decommissioning was to serve as the blueprint of all Just Transition efforts in the country and globally. Numerous promises were made by the government through ambitious commitments. However, most of these promises have been unfulfilled for workers and the communities. The findings highlight government failure in driving industrial policy and ensuring decent work, providing essential services and infrastructure, funding and mobilising investment, and in planning and coordinating proactively. All these shortcomings have done nothing but deepen the inequality for the once robust town of Komati and its neighbouring farms. The lived reality of the people of Komati reveals a concerning implementation gap.

Lastly, it was important to document the voices of workers and the community to understand how they have experienced the role of government in facilitating and in preparing them for a Just Transition. Both groups of actors believe the government failed and continues to fail in actively planning sufficiently for the livelihoods of the people of Komati, leaving them with a profound anxiety about the future. Worker and community voices need to be not at the periphery but at the centre of planning and implementation.

Programs Implemented by Government and their Outcomes

In energy transitions, the role of the government is considered multifaceted and a key priority in ensuring justice, equity, and inclusivity. The role is not only facilitative, but it has to be proactive, interventionist, and coordinated. In this way, they are able to more effectively manage the complex socio-economic and technological shifts towards a low carbon, climate resilient economy. Moreover, there is an expectation that the government should be the guardian of justice by ensuring procedural, distributive, and restorative justice.

The role that the government was supposed to play at Komati was one that was proactive, involving strategic pre-planning. However, responses from its departments (local and national) vary across strategic planning, coordinated implementation, as well as social relief. The majority of the programs and interventions as articulated by the departments were implemented long after the closure of the power station and they are also likely to materialise in future and not for the current period in which people are experiencing the hardships.

The **Provincial Just Transition and Climate Challenge Committee (JTCC)** is a high-level committee co-chaired by heads of departments of Department of Economic Development as well as DARDLEA. In the JTCC there is representation from various departments, district municipalities, and labour unions - with the Green Cluster Agency (GCA) serving as the secretariat. The outcomes are procedural and are only starting to emerge. GCA highlights the lack of poor participation from various stakeholders, and labour participation is particularly low despite representation by three federations: COSATU, FEDUSA, and SAFTU. Given that it is in its early days as it only began meeting in September 2024, its true impact in Komati is yet to be determined.

The other related government initiative is the establishment of the **Komati Steering Committee.** This intervention is around coordinated implementation and community structuring, facilitated by DARDLEA, which involves more direct engagement with the Komati community. DARDLEA facilitated the establishment of this steering committee in 2023 (a year after the shutdown) to create a structure for donors and the government to channel assistance. With the structure now functioning, this is cited as a key success that creates a platform for the community voice; however, the outcomes have been more procedural than substantive.

The table below gives an analysis of the government-led interventions or programs in Komati and Mpumalanga, along with the implementing agents/intermediaries that partnered with government. They reveal an implementation gap where there is a profound disconnect between strategic policy and tangible sustainable outcomes for workers and communities. This gap directly goes against the core principles of a Just Transition as defined in the literature, which demands procedural justice (inclusive decision-making), distributive justice (equitable sharing of benefits) and restorative justice (social protection and redress) (Sovacool, 2021; JET-IP, 2022). The approach has been reactive and fragmented and shows a lack of implementation of the various green industrialisation strategies that the country has in place to ensure a just transition.

As seen in the Appalachian case, the failure to plan proactively while the existing industry was still healthy has deepened the human and economic costs in Komati. The over-reliance on small scale, temporary initiatives like SMME support and short-term stipends aligns with the literature's warning against the 'entrepreneurship fallacy'- the mistaken belief that such measures can replace the scale of formal employment lost in a coal-based economy. As a result, instead of being a blueprint for Just Transitions, the interventions have failed the local community.

Government Initiated Programs or Interventions with Implementing Agents

Program/ Intervention	Implementer	Description	Outcomes	Location
Just Transition Phase One Plan	DARDLEA	A plan to identify key issues and vulnerable groups (communities, workers, and municipalities) in the Mpumalanga Transition The plan was intended to serve as an initial engagement tool	The plan was reactive and is more procedural without any realisable tangible benefits for the community and workers of Komati as yet The plan highlights critical failure in planning, where the climate and JET departments are working in silos	Mpumalanga Province
Green Youth Enterprises Development Program (Deliverable only expected by May 2026)	DFFE in partnership with OECD	A partnership to overcome both financial and capacity building barriers as well as empower green small-scale enterprises The program aims to support only youth SMMEs in the green economy, with funding and business support over a three-year cohort model	No measurable outcomes for Komati to date as program is in its early stages	Broad geographic focus (many provinces, including Mpumalanga)

Social Relief of Distress (SRD)- Food Parcels	Department of Social Develop-ment (DSD)	A program to provide temporary food relief to qualifying households in dire straits	A catastrophic failure in implementation and communication Of 289 families, 223 were reportedly approved for delivery in 2024; however, DSD argued that only 14 families qualified - blaming double dipping with other grants Community frustrated that another December is approaching with no social relief packages	Komati
Deployment of Social Workers at Komati	Department of Social Develop-ment (DSD)	A promised intervention to station social workers in the community to address mental health and rising social ills (substance abuse, trauma, crisis, etc.)	Complete failure leading to a 'blame game' between department officials and community members DSD cited a lack of office space hindering assumption of duties and community cites lack of intent to fulfil duties Community remains in psychological distress without any professional support structure	Komati

SERITI Institute/ IDC Social Employment Fund (SEF) Initiative	SERITI/IDC	A one-year funded program funded by the IDC/PCC, employing 305 participants across six key areas, namely: 1. Food Security (gardens) 2. Greening 3. Parenting 4. Digital Inclusion 5. Healthcare 6. Sports and Recreation	Outcomes are tangible but temporary (one-year period) and funding dependent, with no guaranteed extension	Komati
Indalo Co-Creation Project	Indalo	The project focuses on co-creating, developing, and piloting community-conceptualized business ideas Its core mission is to involve the local community directly in creating and incubating sustainable enterprises, ensuring they benefit from the shift to a greener economy	Key initial phases like project planning, awareness workshops, and co-creating innovations are complete Five distinct community enterprises are well into the business incubation process Administrative hurdles such as land permit delays, incomplete validation and awaiting grant disbursement; highlighting a disconnect between project planning and project financing At the time of the presentation it is a project with potential but without power	Power Station Communities facing decommis-sioning including Komati

Innovation Challenge Model	Green Cluster Agency (GCA)	An annual competition providing cash prizes and mentorship to green economy SMMEs.	The program has supported specific businesses but is fundamentally incapable of addressing the scale of job losses, with the GCA noting that for every one job lost, 'we need to create four jobs,' in order to address the broader existing high unemployment rates in the province	Mpumalanga Province (Challenge also open to people of Komati)

Table: Government Programs and Interventions

Worker Perspectives

The testimony from former and current Komati Power Station workers reveals a workforce that felt misled by unfulfilled government promises. They also felt professionally stranded. The role of the government was perceived as distant but very directive in ensuring the shutdown of the power station whilst failing to take responsibility for the human consequences. There was an expectation from workers that the government failed in fulfilling its role as planner, facilitator, and provider when considering the role that the government played in Komati. Workers admit to being 'technically' informed of the closure; however, they stress that there was no meaningful consultation in the whole process. They argue that there was no meaningful government intervention, no credible training, nor a transparent pathway to a secure future.

Government Failure as a Proactive Planner and Funder

The government's most fundamental role is to anticipate structural economic shifts and plan for them. The workers' experience highlights a complete neglect of this duty. The worker's statement:

> *'When Eskom was shutting down the units, they did not have a plan for what was going to happen with the employees. Even after they shut down the units, there was no plan,'*

is a damning accusation. This aligns with the cautionary tale from the Appalachian transition, where government failure to plan for foreseeable industrial decline resulted in widespread human costs (Hess, et al., 2021). The workers' metaphor of:

> *'crossing the river first and building the bridge after'*

perfectly captures this reactive governance, directly contravening the ILO's (2015) guideline that a Just Transition requires 'careful and early planning.'

Government Failure as a Facilitator of Credible Training and Re-skilling
A key government function is to bridge the skills gap through accredited, relevant training. The workers' unanimous condemnation of the:

> *'five-day training on solar PV' that was 'not even accredited'*

reveals a failure in this facilitatory role. This training was a tick-box exercise, not the strategic re-skilling needed for a new industrial economy. The outcome:

> *'We cannot even use that certificate…'*

demonstrates a total disconnect from the JET-IP's (2022) commitment to 'targeted up-skilling and re-skilling' and the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, which prioritizes skills that lead to decent work. This failure left workers professionally stranded.

Government Failure as a Provider of Essential Services and Social Protection
The State is the ultimate provider of social safety nets in times of crisis. The workers' testimony that:

> *'The government does not help us at all, they are just spending money'*

and their observation that the only visible support (the Seriti stipend) came from a private entity, indicates a complete withdrawal from this role. This absence violates the principle of restorative justice articulated in the JET-IP and the ILO's pillar of Social Protection, which mandates 'safety nets to cushion shocks'. By failing to provide meaningful support, the government exacerbated the vulnerability of the workforce.

Government Failure as a Guardian of Procedural Justice
The government's role as a convener of inclusive dialogue was replaced with top-down communication. Workers received information via 'toolbox talks and bulletins' but were excluded from meaningful negotiation, pointing out that they were not part of community meetings. This violates the core of procedural justice (Sovacool, 2021) and the ILO's principle of Social Dialogue, which is a 'primary process for achieving a just transition'. The workers' experience confirms that without inclusive processes, 'just' outcomes are impossible.

In conclusion, the worker perspectives provide direct evidence that the government failed to execute its essential roles. It was not a planner, but a reactor; not a facilitator of credible trainer, but an implementer of hollow programs; not a provider of safety nets, but an absent entity; and not a guardian of fair process, but an imposer of decisions. This multi-faceted abdication is why the transition in Komati is perceived not as 'just,' but as a profound 'betrayal'.

Community Perspectives

The Komati community's testimony provides a ground-level assessment of a government that has fundamentally failed in its core responsibilities during the energy transition. Their experience, similar to workers in some respects, reveal a State that has abdicated its roles as a proactive planner, meaningful facilitator, and primary provider of essential services and sustainable livelihoods.

Failure as a Proactive Planner and Coordinator
The government's first duty was to plan for a sustainable economic transition, and coordinate a coherent response. The community's experience highlights a catastrophic failure in this role. The foundational shock was the lack of forewarning, as one member stated:

> *'People were only notified about the closure on the actual day it happened.'*

This imposition shows the lack of partnership from the outset, and it violates the core principle of procedural justice, which the JET-IP (2022) and scholars like Sovacool (2021) define as inclusive decision-making and early engagement. Moreover, while a steering committee was formed a year after decommissioning, this delayed reaction epitomizes the 'reactive governance' condemned in the literature, mirroring the failures of the Appalachian transition where a lack of anticipatory planning deepened the economic collapse.

Failure as a Facilitator of Sustainable Livelihoods

A key government role is to facilitate the shift from old economies to new ones through credible training and job creation. The community's critique of training as a futile exercise:

> *'Don't teach [training] me, only to give me a certificate to put under my mattress but give me a tool that will allow me to go and knock on doors and find a job.'*

exposes a facilitation failure. This misalignment between training programs and actual job opportunities stands in direct opposition to the ILO's (2015) Decent Work Agenda, which emphasizes quality skills development for decent work. Furthermore, the community's observation that skilled work on renewable projects was outsourced to external contractors reveals a failure to facilitate local economic benefits, contravening the JET-IP's commitment to distributive justice.

Failure as a Provider of Essential Services and Social Protection

The State is the ultimate provider of social protection and essential services, especially during a crisis. The community's experience demonstrates a wholesale abandonment of this role. The meagre R1,900 SERITI stipend was correctly identified as an insult, not a solution, with a leader asking:

> *'Who in this day and age could live off R1900?... how many plastics from the store would you come back with?'*

This stop-gap measure fails the test of restorative justice, which the JET-IP defines as providing social protections for those who lose their jobs. The plea for municipal rates relief:

> *'Our government is aware that households no longer have an income. Almost all people in a household were either working at a mine or the power station and all lost jobs, but guess what…every home is still subjected to the same rates and taxes as when they were working… The government has no consideration for us.'*

highlights a rigid, unresponsive State apparatus that exacerbates hardship instead of cushioning it, directly violating the ILO's pillar of Social Protection.

Failure as a Funder of a Credible Alternative Economy

Beyond temporary stipends, the government's role is to act as the primary funder and driver of a new industrial base. The community's narrative is one of economic collapse, not transition. The reliance on small-scale SMME support and temporary gardens, while large-scale industrial projects remain unimplemented, reflects the 'entrepreneurship fallacy' critiqued by the SATRI & FES (2024) report. This approach is structurally incapable of replacing the formal economy that was lost.

An Intersectional Analysis of the Gendered Dimensions of Failure

While the Komati transition was launched with commitments to gender inclusivity, the on-the-ground reality reveals that the transition did not only fail women but it exacerbated pre-existing gendered inequalities. Viewed through an intersectional lens—which considers how gender, class, and geographic location combine to create unique forms of disadvantage—the Komati transition emerges as a profoundly gendered failure.

The Gendered Impact of Economic Collapse

The shift from formal, unionized employment in the coal value-chain to a precarious 'stipend economy' has disproportionately impacted women, leading to loss of direct and indirect livelihoods. While the coal sector was male dominated, it supported many women-run businesses from food vendors and spaza shops to childcare services. The economic collapse is described by the community:

> *'What about the person selling vetkoek… the Gogo selling vegetables in the corner…'*

This disproportionately affects women who rely on the informal and service-based economy. Furthermore, as formal employment vanished and household incomes became less, the unpaid care work of managing a household becomes more stressful as resources are no longer sufficient (such as the R1 900 stipend) and this burden falls overwhelmingly on women. This labour crisis is a direct outcome of the decommissioning of Komati.

The Erosion of Social Infrastructure and Safety Nets

The stalling of community requested infrastructure, a key failure of the transition, has a severe gendered impact. The repeated delays in building a permanent clinic, highlighted in the PCC report, disproportionately affects women who are the primary users of healthcare services for themselves and children as well as the elderly. Reliance on a mobile clinic that only visits twice a week is a direct threat to the overall health and well-being of the community.

Furthermore, the community testimony noted a rise in social ills, including substance abuse and prostitution. This points to a landscape where women's physical and economic security has deteriorated. A Just Transition requires investment in social infrastructure that keeps women and children safe; its absence makes the transition inherently unjust for them.

An intersectional analysis reveals that the experience of the transition is not uniform for all women. Female-headed households are already at a higher risk of poverty following the collapse of the local economy. Older women, depending on a State grant and caring for grandchildren, are also particularly vulnerable. The DSD's failure to deliver food parcels due to its rigid criteria - which disqualifies households receiving any grants - demonstrates a lack of intersectional understanding, leaving these caregivers in a state of crisis.

The promise of a gender-inclusive transition in Komati has been broken. The macro-economic framework that prioritized austerity and blended finance was inherently gender-blind, unable and unwilling to fund the targeted, social infrastructure and support systems required to include women meaningfully. Consequently, the Komati transition has not merely overlooked gender - it has systematically placed the burdens of a failed economic restructuring onto the shoulders of women, deepening inequality and violating the core principle of justice it claimed to uphold. A future Just Transition must be evaluated by its success in dismantling these intersecting inequalities.

The Prescribed Role of Government for a Just Transition in Mpumalanga

The collective testimony from government departments, intermediaries, workers and the Komati community paints a picture of an unjust energy transition. The o government has failed to effectively facilitate and deliver. The findings highlight that the current model is characterised by reactive planning, outsourced implementation, and a lack of decisive leadership. This has resulted in a policy implementation gap where collective testimonies have highlighted how strategic plans have failed to deliver sustainable livelihoods for the community of Komati, with fears that they are now a ghost town. In order for the transition to be a truly Just Transition, the government needs to be more proactive in guaranteeing justice and driving a new inclusive economy.

Required Role of Government Based on Failures

Proactive and not Reactive Leadership

All stakeholders agree that planning for a transition of such magnitude where entire economic ecosystems are likely to be negatively impacted should be done years in advance before the actual decommissioning takes place - not plan as you go. One worker describes this proactive planning by stating that the reason the current approach failed is because:

> *'The government crossed the river first and then only built the bridge after - there was no proper planning'*

This lack of coordinated planning and reactive approach by the government is further illustrated by a DAARDLEA official who said:

> *'We were not involved in the decommissioning and mine closures - we were not even aware of it... all this planning was supposed to be done prior.'*

For stakeholders it was not surprising that everyone is in the crisis that they are faced with now. The role of the government is to endorse and secure funding for comprehensive Just Transition plans, co-created with workers and affected communities long before the closure; this can be between five to seven years in advance.

Driver of Decent Work and Guarantor of Economic Justice

Whilst the temporary stipends are a welcome and appreciated initiative for the community, including the small scale SMME initiatives, there is unanimous agreement that the support is inadequate. One community member critiques the initiative by saying that:

> *'Who in this day and age could live off R1,800?... how many plastics from the store would you come back with?'*

An official from the Green Cluster Agency also paints a picture of the already high existing unemployment in Mpumalanga Province and stresses the need for even more job creation over the jobs lost by stating:

> *'The current interventions are small pockets of difference, however for every job lost we must create four'*

This highlights the 'indecency' of the work that people are meant to derive livelihood from, as well as the stark unemployment rate that the province in general is faced with. Moreover, the fact that the community of Komati has seen devastating economic collapse demands a shift from these band-aid type measures of stipends and small scale SMMEs to active industrial policy measures. This requires the role of the government as lead in attracting and investing in job-intensive green industries, such as renewable energy manufacturing hubs and a rehabilitation of the economy to replace the lost jobs.

The Guardian of Procedural and Restorative Justice

The role of the government in ensuring procedural, distributive, and restorative justice comes across strongly even in the literature and in the interviews, where the community's plea for respect and inclusion is echoed with conviction. A community leader uses an analogy to describe the top-down approach in solutions where decisions are already taken on behalf of the community without understanding the community's needs. He vehemently states:

> *'Do not come to me and give me sushi as it is not filling for me rather give me pap that will fill me- come to us and find out what we want.'*

Further is the human cost of this transition, which has been ignored. The community has constantly made a request for a social worker to deal with the social ills that have since plagued the community. This request has not been heeded by the government, as no social worker has been deployed. The government has clearly failed the community by failing to carry out its own mandate as a government, which is to institutionalise meaningful, genuine social dialogue as well as provide psycho-social support as part of the transition. Furthermore, the government must act as a restorative force by providing the high school and the clinic that Komati lacks. All these needs were explicitly raised by community members.

Funder and Market Creator for Community-led Solutions

The experience with intermediaries like Indalo and Seriti highlights a critical failure. Communities are empowered to co-create projects but are sometimes abandoned due to lack of capital, making the co-creation process a hollow exercise. For instance, as noted by a GCA official:

> *'None of the Grootvlei projects that were Co-created by the community have received funding.'*

Moreover, besides the lack of funding, the co-creation projects which have great potential are said to face administrative delays. It is the role of the government to establish a dedicated JET Fund to provide potential capital to community-owned enterprises, especially in power station communities facing decommissioning, and to serve as an anchor buyer for their goods and services, which creates a guaranteed market.

Emerging Themes

- **Lack of Agency, Consultation, and Imposed Solutions**

  The transition process systematically hollowed out the agency of those it was meant to protect and empower. The systematic hollowing out of community and worker agency in Komati stands in direct violation of the core principles of a Just Transition as defined by the literature. This failure to facilitate procedural justice—defined as 'inclusive decision-making ensuring meaningful worker and community participation' (Sovacool 2021) undermined the entire process. Consequently, the imposed solutions and lack of ownership led to the 'unintended socio-economic impacts' the JET-IP (2022) aimed to avoid, proving that a transition cannot be 'just' unless it is 'intentionally designed to be so' (Heffron & McCauley, 2018). In order to rectify this, the government must consider community-led implementation and meaningful consultation as the transition continues.

- **Lack of State-led Industrial Policy to facilitate decent work**

  As evidenced in Komati, the transition's most glaring failure lies in the absence of implementation of existing industrial policy to suitably replace the coal economy and its value chains, and this is felt across all stakeholders. The findings show that the government has been mostly reactive with promotion of small scale enterprises and short-term stipends which are insufficient in replacing the jobs already lost. The use of implementing agents by the State highlights that its fundamental responsibility has been outsourced.

  The findings highlight that in terms of industrial policy, government's inability is not due to a lack of strategic options but a failure of implementation. South Africa has several industrialisation strategies whose potential remains unrealised in Mpumalanga, and these are scattered across multiple national policy documents and strategies developed over the past decade. Below are some of them and the role that government can play in effectively implementing them:

- **Renewable Energy Manufacturing Strategy:** this industrialisation strategy has the potential for creating a hub for producing solar panels, wind turbine components, batteries, and leveraging existing infrastructure and JETP funding. Government has failed to use procurement power (e.g. Eskom's massive build programme) to create local content demand and attract original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) to set up local factories (South African Renewable Energy Masterplan (SAREM), 2022; JET-IP, 2022).
- **Green Hydrogen Hub Strategy:** this strategy could make use of Mpumalanga's water resources and strategic location to produce green hydrogen for export and domestic use, as highlighted in national plans. There has been a lack of concrete investment in feasibility studies and challenges in attracting large scale investment (South African Hydrogen Society Roadmap (HSR), 2022; JET-IP, 2022).
- **Circular Economy and Rehabilitation Strategy:** has the potential to create permanent jobs in Mpumalanga in mine rehabilitation, e-waste recycling, and repurposing coal ash, turning environmental liabilities into economic activities. Funding remains a major constraint, and there are no large scale public works programs dedicated to repurposing; the projects are small and pilot based (National Waste Management Strategy (NWMS), 2020; JET-IP, 2022).
- **Sustainable Agriculture and Agro-processing Strategy:** Mpumalanga has the potential to develop climate-resilient food systems and agro-processing value chains to enhance food security and create rural jobs. Government support, which is also a failure of State-led industrial policy, remains at the level of subsistence gardens (like the SERITI project) without a strategic plan to commercial-scale, market-linked agricultural enterprises. (National Development Plan (NDP), 2012; Agricultural and Agro-processing Master Plan (AAMP), 2022).

  This failure directly contravenes what in the literature is said to help achieve a Just Transition. The SATRI & FES (2024) report stresses that governments must integrate industrial policy with social equity to ensure sustainable transitions through effective policy implementation, a role that the South African government has abdicated. The over-reliance on SMMEs and stop-gap measures stands in stark opposition to the JET-IP's (2022) commitment to 'restorative justice' and the ILO's (2015) Decent Work Agenda which prioritizes the protection and creation of decent jobs. Without proactive, state-led industrial strategy to implement these options, the transition in Mpumalanga will continue to be characterised by temporary projects instead of a transformed economy.

- **Implementation Gap Failure**

This gap between government plans and on-the-ground reality is universally acknowledged. A DARDLEA official explicitly admitted to a fundamental failure in inter-departmental coordination, stating:

> *'We were not involved in the decommissioning and mine closures- we were not even aware of it,'*

This reveals that the very department tasked with rural development and environmental affairs in the province was operating in a silo, completely detached from the Eskom-led decommissioning process. Furthermore, the Department of Petroleum and Mineral Resources (DMPR) is the one responsible for mine closures but there was no communication with local departments to ensure coordinated planning to achieve a Just Transition - hence the reactive approach. This admission is symptomatic of a broader systemic disconnect between strategic planning and timely implementation. The result is a devastating implementation gap where high-level promises of restorative justice, community dialogue, and new industrial opportunities systematically collapsed into a reality of economic devastation, hollow consultation, and temporary stipends. The government's strategic plans existed on paper, but the coordinated authority, proactive funding, and political will to translate them into tangible outcomes for the people of Komati were entirely absent.

The JET-IP (2022) and ILO (2015) explicitly frame the transition as a socio-economic project intended to *reduce* inequality and leave *no one behind*, ensuring procedural, distributive, and restorative justice. Instead, the implementation gap in Komati has produced the exact 'unintended socio-economic impacts' and exacerbated inequalities that Sovacool (2021) and the COSATU Blueprint (2022) warned against. The onus is, therefore, on the government to build a viable local economy that will continue to sustain the community even after the shutdown.

Recommendations for Future Just Transitions

Based on the collective voices of stakeholders that have been interviewed for this report, the following recommendations are made in order to ensure a just transition in Mpumalanga Province, but also in ensuring future Just Transitions as the government moves forward to decommission more power stations in Mpumalanga.

- **Enact Mandatory Pre-Decommissioning Transition Plans** - Legislate that no station or mine can close without a fully-funded plan. This plan must be binding and co-created with those who stand to be impacted most - workers and communities - at least five to seven years in advance.
- **Establish a Powerful Mpumalanga JET Authority** - To avoid departmental siloes, create a single provincial authority with a dedicated budget and the power to direct and hold all government departments and municipalities accountable for JET outcomes.
- **Launch a Mpumalanga Just Transition Fund** - The fund must provide multi-year grants for social employment and seed capital for community projects whilst waiting for long term industrial solutions to take shape.

- **Implement an Active Industrial and Trade Policy** - It is important to move beyond SMME support. In order to catalyse large scale, job intensive green industries in manufacturing and green hydrogen, the government should use State procurement, special economic zones, and public investment.
- **Mandate and Resource Inclusive Governance** - Formalise the role of labour and community representatives in decision-making bodies, granting them power over the projects that affect their lives. Integrate gender responsive programs, including childcare and safe transport into all JET initiatives.
- **Create a Binding Framework for Future Decommissioning Processes** - Officially acknowledge the failures in Komati, document the testimony of workers and the community, and use these as binding lessons for Hendrina, Grootvlei, and Camden and all other future decommissioning processes in order to ensure systemic change.
- **Shift from External Dependency to Locally-led Transformation** - Reject the top-down, externally-driven model by instituting a mandatory governance framework that prioritizes worker and community-defined 'home-grown' solutions—such as local economic hubs and skills ecosystems—as the non-negotiable foundation for all planning, funding, and implementation of future decommissioning processes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of the government in facilitating a succeful energy transition cannot be overstated. The decommissioning of Komati Power Station was intended to be the national blueprint for a Just Energy Transition. Instead, this report highlighted the profound failures of the government in proactively planning for and facilitating a truly Just Energy Transition, resulting in livelihood destruction.

The core failure lies in the gap between policy and implementation. Despite a well-intentioned conceptual framework articulated in the JET-IP and various green industrialisation strategies aligned with international standards from the ILO, the government failed to operationalise the principles of procedural, distributive, and restorative justice. These are central to achieving the transition envisioned by workers and communities. The transition in Komati was imposed without any meaningful consultation or the co-creation of meaningful solutions.

Despite promised up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities, workers were left with obsolete skills, unaccredited certificates and no jobs to match the acquired skills - essentially, training for unemployment. The government's over-reliance on small scale SMME support and under resourced intermediaries has thus far failed to provide sustainable economic diversification required in such a huge economic shift.

The lessons from Komati are stark and carry profound lessons for the decommissioning processes that are anticipated across Mpumalanga - in Camden, Hendrina, Grootvlei, and others. Therefore, a successful transition cannot be achieved without a competent, accountable, and proactive State. It also cannot be achieved by a State that outsources responsibility to intermediaries for underfunded 'band-aid' solutions that provide only temporary relief and uncertainty for the future.

The South African government must use this transition as a vehicle for redressing historical inequalities and building an inclusive economy to ensure that it does not deepen the already existing inequalities. The time for planning is over, it is time to put to test the existing strategies and masterplans that hold the promise of procedural, restorative, and distributive justice.

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