

Renewable energy at a municipal level: possibilities for social ownership?

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South Africa is in the midst of an electricity crisis – it is a crisis of lack of access, disconnections, and inadequate free basic amounts of electricity. But it is also a crisis of supply. And yet, in the midst of this supply shortage South Africa sits with some of the richest sources of renewable energy in the world – particularly solar and wind energy.

Because of its nature renewable energy has the potential to overcome the problem of supply, help address climate change, create jobs, and increase access to electricity– both on-grid and off-grid. For example, it opens up possibilities for communities who are not on the grid to gain access through small, localized, decentralized renewable energy solutions. Because of its decentralized nature, it also has the potential to increase democratic decision-making over its generation and distribution. But it also has the potential to individualize and de-socialize access to electricity - the rich are able to take themselves off grid and ensure ongoing access to electricity; while the poor continue to be reliant on infrastructure which the state has fewer and fewer resources to maintain in a neoliberal economic climate.

An enormous challenge facing labour and social movements in this context is how to ensure that renewable energy is introduced in a way that does not simply perpetuate existing patterns of inequality, injustice and poverty, but actively works to increase access of the poor and working class and reduce poverty. Local government, as the sphere of government closest to people and communities, has considerable potential, in this decentralized renewable energy context to play a key role in this process.

This paper will address the role local government is playing in relation to the shift to renewable energy. It aims to address a number of key questions:

- What role is local government playing in relation to co-ordinating the roll out of renewable energy and acting as a direct provider of renewable energy?
- What are the implications of off grid generation, such as embedded generation, for municipal finances?
- What is the legal and regulatory framework local government is working within in relation to renewable energy?
- What implications does renewable energy and a decentralized energy sector have for the jobs, wages and benefits of municipal workers?

This will then provide the context within which to explore policy questions related to strengthening the ability of local government to play a role in ensuring electricity for all through renewable energy sources.

The methodology will involve desk top research on the regulatory framework and role of local government as direct provider and as co-ordinator of renewable energy. It will also involve interviews with workers and shopstewards at a minimum of two municipalities in South Africa, as well as councilors, officials and management from the same municipalities. Interviews will also be conducted with unions organizing in the municipal sector and with SALGA, the Local Government Association.