

TREAT THE CLIMATE CRISIS LIKE THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY

It has been recorded that 2019 was the hottest year on record, not only in South Africa, but across the globe. The effects of this are severe, leading to droughts that adversely affect food security and limit access to fresh water supply, both of which take a toll on the most marginalised in our society.

While we have world-class policies to address these environmental challenges, including the commitment in the National Development Plan (NDP) to achieve low-carbon status by 2030, implementation remains poor at all levels of government. Coupled with a lack of access to funding, we are seriously hampered in our ability to transition to a clean, low-carbon economy.

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

The climate is in crisis and should be treated with the urgency afforded to the Covid-19 pandemic. We are rapidly running out of fresh water, and might well do so by 2030. Yet we are not responding to this emergency as we have done to Covid-19; if we do not act now, it will be too late and all of us will be faced with day zero.

Action starts on an individual level. South African

With our fresh water reserves and other resources rapidly dwindling, we face an environmental catastrophe that may well be our undoing, writes **Liteboho Makhele**

consumers have developed a “throw away” culture - in which we want the latest gadgets and products, discarding what we already have and creating a mountain of waste that ends up in already overflowing landfills.

This excessive consumption is yet another enduring remnant of apartheid - there is a compulsion to drive the latest car and wear the newest fashions to state: “I’ve arrived!” We need to change this mind-set by increasing awareness and education around waste.

We also need to change our language: we talk about “going organic”, but this is perceived as elitist, although it is no different from how our grandparents and older ancestors lived. We need to get back to basics.

CREATING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

A welcome by-product of a more environmentally responsive society is job creation. From manufacturing buses that run on clean energy to reducing hard paving, bringing nature back into cities and driving recycling



PHOTO: ISTOCK

initiatives to procure waste that can be used to create new products, we can kick-start a whole value chain of employment. Just consider the many opportunities that exist for plastic waste. Bottles of household cleaning materials or make-up containers, for instance, can be recycled and the plastic reused. Reducing our water use can be addressed through innovative plumbing solutions and we can train artisans in this trade. Communities can also generate their own energy and sell it to others and the national grid, providing an income stream.

COLLABORATIONS ARE KEY

Government’s integration with the private sector is key to achieving this, as is the scalability of pilot projects in cities and villages. Those that are succeeding should be replicated, and municipalities, cities and different entities need to experiment and fail because, in that failure, lessons can be learnt.

There is an aversion to doing this, as government wants initiatives and programmes to work the first time around and we get caught up in the policy space, which

limits our ability to test possible solutions.

Look at the renewable energy space: while we urgently need viable alternatives to our reliance on fossil fuels and Eskom, endless bureaucracy and legislation delay these projects, due to either personal interest or financial gain.

TAKE ACTION TODAY

There are only nine years to go before we hit 2030. We need to achieve our NDP aspirations - not to mention goal 13 of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, which cautions us to take urgent action to combat climate change and its effects - or we will find ourselves in yet unimagined circumstances.

It can be done - greenhouse gas emissions dropped by 6% last year due to travel bans and lockdowns, but this is only temporary. When life returns to “normal”, these levels will rise again unless we act now.

In the meantime, nature needs to be brought back into our cities in the form of more green spaces and rooftop gardens. We need to reduce pollution through more environmentally friendly transport options and launch nationwide recycling programmes. This biodiversity not only goes some way towards addressing our green agenda, but also affects our development as humans.

We need to rebuild our relationship with the environment. And it starts at home.

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