

COMMENT



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Chasing green goals

THE year 2019 was the hottest year on record, not only in South Africa, but across the globe. Impacts are severe, leading to droughts which adversely affect food security while limiting access to fresh water supply, both of which affect the most marginalised in our society.

And while we have world class policies to address these rampant environmental challenges, including the National Development Plan's commitment to achieving a low-carbon status by 2030, implementation remains poor. We are grappling with coordinating these policies across departments at a local, provincial and national level.

Coupled with a lack of access to funding and our skills shortage that can enable our procurement of funding from a global pool of benefactors, we are seriously hampered in our ability to transition to a clean, low-carbon economy.

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

A much welcome by-product of a more environmentally-responsive society is job creation. From manufacturing buses that run on clean energy to reducing hard paving and bringing nature back into cities to driving recycling initiatives to procure waste that can be used to create new products, we can kick-start a whole value chain of employment.

Just consider plastic: there are so many opportunities for plastic waste. It can be used in different sectors. Bottles of Handy Andy or make-up containers, for instance, can be recycled and the materials reused. Reduction of our water usage can be addressed through innovative plumbing solutions and we can train artisans in this trade. Communities can also generate their own energy and sell to others, and the grid, providing alternative income streams.

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

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

In the meantime, nature needs to be brought back into our cities in the form of more green spaces and rooftop gardens. We need to reduce pollution through more environmentally-friendly transport options and launch nationwide recycling programmes.

Life must come back to the cities through biodiversity. Not only does this go some way in addressing our green agenda, but it also affects our development as humans. We need to rebuild our relationship with the environment. And it starts at home.

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