Fragmentation, counter-power and symbiosis: The Life After Coal campaign

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Abstract

South Africa's environmental movement has been described as "fractured, disparate and diverse" (Death, 2014: 1232). This article considers the Life After Coal campaign's work in eMalahleni, Mpumalanga to examine the challenges faced by environmental campaigns. The article examines the relationship between the campaign and community members and activists through the lens of Jacklyn Cock's ideas of "building counter power" and Marlies Glasius and Armine Ishkanian's ideas of "surreptitious symbiosis'" The article draws on a series of interviews and discussions with Life After Coal leaders and community members and activists affected by coal mining in eMalahleni. It finds that the Life After Coal campaign's work in eMalahleni reflects the challenges of building a unified popular environmental movement. Despite its critical work in 'building counter power' through community mobilisations and the campaign's catalysing effects it has yet to fully integrate the substantive aspects of an unrealised democracy in the form of genuine socioeconomic rights into its environmental frames. Further to this, there are various levels of discord which hinder solidarity between formal civil society organisations and the organic community movement.[3]

Keywords

Life After Coal campaign, environmental movements, environmental justice, environmental activism, coal mining, civil society, South Africa

1. Introduction

Carl Death (2014: 1232) has argued that South Africa's environmental movement is "fractured, disparate and diverse." This is despite a 'vibrant' environmental sector comprised of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community movements who participate in broader networks and alliances "to exert and influence beyond their size through skilful advocacy in the courts, channels of political access, media campaigns and…mass demonstrations" (Death, 2014: 1223). One of the reasons cited for this weakness is because environmental movements have struggled to connect with popular movements. In this sense daily struggles for housing, water and electricity, dubbed 'service delivery' protests, are intrinsically linked with environmental struggles but connecting the environmental justice 'message' with the service delivery protest 'message' has not been fully realized (Death, 2014: 1227). This article considers the Life After Coal campaign's work in eMalahleni, Mpumalanga to examine the challenges faced by environmental campaigns. The article examines the relationship between the campaign and community members and activists through the lens of Jacklyn Cock's (2019) ideas of 'building counter power' and Marlies Glasius and Armine Ishkanian's (2015) ideas of 'surreptitious symbiosis.'

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2. Methodology

The research undertaken for this study was qualitative. It was undertaken in mid-2019 before the Covid pandemic. The research comprised in-depth interviews with ten eMalahleni residents directly affected by coal mining and two focus groups with civil society organizations the Life After Coal Campaign and the Vukani Environmental Movement. The majority of eMalahleni residents were female, and the focus groups included both leadership of civil society organizations and participants in these movements – each focus group was made up of seven participants. The small sample size of this study is acknowledged, however the insights generated are reflective of those who are most affected by coal mining in the area as well as those who work towards a social justice response. The authors are researchers at the Centre for Civil Society, which supports the work of South African social movements. We understand them to be critical in the struggle for social justice and a just transition.

3. Coal and mining in eMalahleni, Mpumalanga

eMalahleni is the Nguni phrase for 'place of coal' and is situated in the Mpumalanga province (Figure 1, Images 1-3) which serves as the main source of South Africa's coal supply with over sixty per cent of the Province's surface area being subject to mining rights (Simpson *et al.*, 2019: 1). The economy of eMalahleni municipality is therefore led by mines and mining related activities (Campbell *et al*., 2017: 227). The city is dominated by open and underground coal mines housing some of the biggest power stations and steel mills in South Africa – there are 22 coal mines within a 40km radius of eMalahleni (Blaauw *et al*, 2022). eMalahleni contributes significantly to Mpumalanga's economic standing as the fourth-largest provincial economy, despite its relatively small size (Mpumalanga Provincial Government, 2024). It lies within the Highveld region, characterized by its plateau grasslands and moderate climate (Image 3). The area is industrially advanced due to mining and energy production. It is also grappling with environmental challenges, particularly air quality and water resource management, due to the heavy concentration of coal-fired power stations. These issues make eMalahleni a crucial site for environmental and sustainability studies as well as environmental activism.

eMalahleni has a population of 500,343 people and an estimated 28,370 households live in informal settlements (Images 1-3) and a further 20,196 in backyard dwellings. The municipality notes a backlog in providing basic services such as water and electricity (eMalahleni Municipality drawing from 2019 statistics).
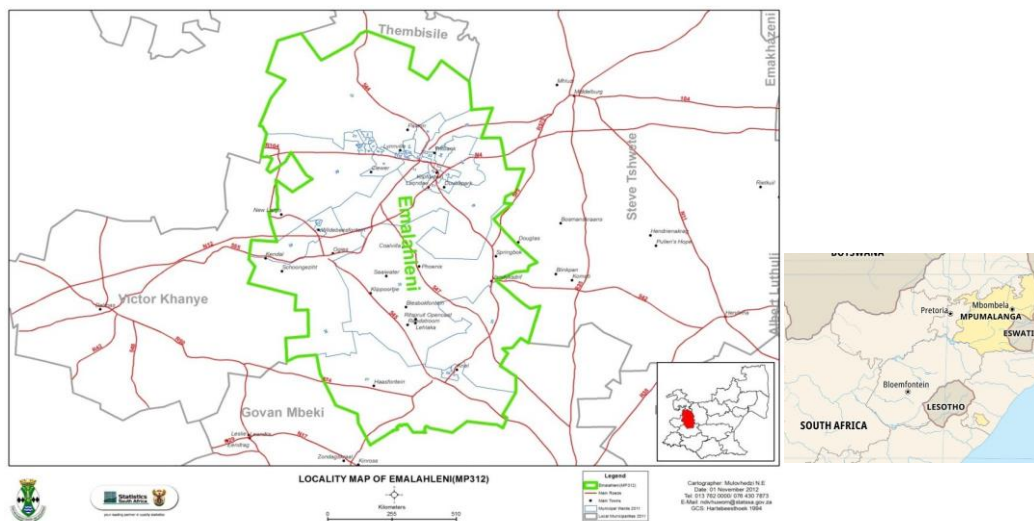

Figure 1: eMalahleni. Source: eMalahleni Municipality Website: https://www.emalahleni.gov.za/v2/about

Image 1: Informality in eMalahleni. Source: Authors

Image 2: Living with coal. Source: Authors.

Image 3: Place of coal. Source: Authors.

The province of Mpumalanga reflects what Simpson *et al*. (2019: 2) have termed the water-energy-food nexus, where a tension is created between agriculture and coal mining in terms of competition for land. This is compounded by a deterioration in the quality of water, largely due to mining activities (Shongwe, 2018). This affects food security as well as water security, and impacts health and the environment at large. It reflects what has been called 'the resource curse' (Campbell *et al*., 2017).

The negative impacts of coal mining have led to a growing realisation that coal-based growth is not sustainable. According to Kretschmann (2020) there is increasing disinvestment in coal mining in many coal regions, and this is due to consumer as well as investor pressure and as a result there is a move towards implementing decarbonization strategies. These disinvestment decisions are influenced by the impacts of coal at both the global and local level. These impacts include greenhouse gas emissions which contribute to climate change. In South Africa some of the impacts are a result of historic injustices from the apartheid era and inconsistent legal compliance by the coal sector. These have exacerbated levels of poverty and systemic inequality, as well as corruption and nepotism in mining-affected communities such as eMalahleni. This has further reinforced the notion that mining operations disproportionately favour mining companies and the state over the local communities that are most impacted by them (Fine, 2018; Marais, 2013; Terence & Humphries, 2012; Baker *et al*., 2014; South African Human Rights Commission, 2017; Shongwe, 2018; Mandel, 2019).

Despite the negative impacts posed by coal production and utilisation, it has been argued that coal mining plays a critical role in the mineral economy, as it contributes to energy needs, employment, exports, local community livelihoods, and GDP (Chamber of Mines SA, 2018). Whilst the need to transition to a low-carbon economy is now undisputed, it is equally important that this is done in a just (morally justifiable) and fair manner especially in a developing country such as South Africa (World Bank, 2018).

4. Building movements, counter power and surreptitious symbiosis

Carl Death (2014: 1216) argues that there is no clearly identifiable, unified and popular environmental movement in South Africa. He notes that this is not due to a lack of material, institutional, cultural or human resources. Nor is it due to a hostile political opportunity structure. For him the answer lies in perceptions about there being more pressing challenges to meet basic needs, to 'deliver services' and to realize the substantive goals of democracy. This is linked to a focus on economic growth which is often at the expense of environmental protection. Llewellyn Leonard (2021) notes that South Africa's neoliberal framework promotes industrial development, giving mining a prominent place. This promotes "inhospitable environments" characterized by poor housing, roads, sanitation, unsafe water and electricity "under clouds of smog, dust and particulates" described aptly by Death as derived from South Africa's "national development path dominated…by heavy industry the minerals-energy complex, dirty and dangerous transport systems and a political economy in which economic growth has produced widening inequality, and continued high levels of poverty" (Death 2014: 1219).

Leonard also shows how neoliberalism works to "re-configure the geographies of environmental justice struggles contributing to a fragmented micropolitics" in her case study of opposition to mining in KwaZulu-Natal (Leonard, 2021: 37). Powerful mining interests co-opted traditional authorities to oppose local environmental campaigns, undermining solidarity. Environmental struggles therefore battle industries working to "divide local communities" (Leonard, 2018: 35). Challenges to building a coherent environmental movement in South Africa are part of struggles to connect environmental "messages" to popular movements and daily local struggles (Death, 2014: 1227). These struggles are typically articulated as demanding access to clean water, sanitation, safe electricity, housing and infrastructure. In essence, they are struggles for a decent environment. Death (2014: 1230) has posited that "there is an opportunity for environmental activists and movements to articulate these struggles through ecological frames."

Despite these challenges Jacklyn Cock (2019: 860), through her work on resistance to coal in South Africa, argues that there are examples of environmental resistance which "build counter power." This "challenges inequality and generates solidarity" which "connect" organized labor, affected communities and environmental justice movements towards a "just transition." "Counter power" reflected in Cock's research is underpinned by a variety of features including new forms of organizing at community level (Cock, 2019: 867)

and also through catalytic work by environmental justice organizations (Cock, 2019: 868). Aside from catalytic work it is also possible to connect affected communities and community-based activists with environmental movements and organizations in what Marlies Glasius and Armine Ishkanian (2014: 2620) have termed a "surreptitious symbiosis" relationship. Here activists or active communities resist becoming "part of the civil society industry" despite evidence of "cross over and collaboration." Resistance to the "civil society industry" is rooted in perceptions of NGOs as being complicit with the "material and coercive logics of the market and state" (Glasius & Ishkanian, 2014: 2629) which place them 'against' the interests of communities and in opposition to activists questioning the status quo. Despite this, civil society organizations are seen as useful for the resources they can access and share. In this sense the more institutionalized, professionalized organizations may provide office services, campaign material and information central to protests.

5. The Life After Coal campaign

The Life After Coal campaign (Impilo Ngaphandle Kwamalahle) is a joint campaign by Earthlife Africa, groundWork and the Centre for Environmental Rights. Its aim is to: "discourage the development of new coal fired power stations and mines, reduce emissions from existing coal infrastructure and encourage a coal phase-out and enable a just transition to sustainable energy systems" (Life After Coal campaign website). The Life After Coal campaign started in 2016 amid an intensifying debate around South Africa's long-term energy plans. The campaign was a response to the proposal for the development of a new coal power station in Mpumalanga where climate change impact assessment procedures were not followed.

The three-alliance campaign by Earthlife Africa, groundWork and the Centre for Environmental Rights employs various tactics to target a wide range of stakeholders, including government and corporations. Among these tactics has been shining a light on critical issues through research. An example of this is the study commissioned to evidence mining violations of environmental rights in Mpumalanga entitled: *Zero hour: Poor governance of mining and the violation of environmental rights in Mpumalanga*. The study confirmed mining negatively impacting air quality, water sources, food security and the health and well-being of surrounding communities (Centre for Environmental Rights, 2016). There was also a two-part groundWork report entitled *The destruction of the Highveld – 'digging coal' and 'burning coal.'* These reports evidence the ways in which communities are externalized, dispossessed and excluded (Hallowes & Munnik, 2016, 2017). Research also forms the basis for submissions to formal regulatory bodies, government ministers and departments (Life After Coal website, 'Submissions & Correspondence', ND).

Another set of tactics employed by the campaign revolves around demonstrations and protest such as an organized gathering outside the Pretoria High Court in May 2021 to protest 'toxic air' in Mpumalanga (Bega, 2021). Examples of forms of disobedience include constructing graves and gravestones for 'fossil fuels' outside the Department of Energy in Pretoria and staging a sit-in next to these 'graves' (Life After Coal website, 'Evidence', ND).

A further tactic employed by the campaign is litigation. An example was the 2017 judgement where the court found in favor of Earthlife Africa who had brought a motion against the Minister of Environmental Affairs, the Minister of Energy and the National Nuclear Regulator for granting authorizations for the proposed Thabametsi coal fired power station (a High Court of South Africa Judgement, 2017).

6. Living in eMalahleni: "Our life is mixed with coal"

> Our Life is mixed with coal. We breathe dust coming from the mines. Living in eMalahleni is not good. There is a lot of dust and smoke. (CP2)

Testimony from community participants in eMalahleni paint a picture of environmental degradation and the negative impacts of this on daily life. A community member described it thus: "In the morning when you wake up the weather is different to night … during the day the sky is not blue and the clouds turn yellowish in colour" (CP3). They noted that coal and specifically coal mining has polluted the air" "it causes smoke

everywhere" (CP2). Further to this, water sources are polluted: "our water is dirty, it is not safe to drink" (CP3). The impact on agriculture and consequently food security in the region is also affected by coal mining. According to Life After Coal campaigners, the quality and the output of the Province's maize harvest has been affected due to pollution, since more land is allocated to mining activities rather than agricultural ones (FGD – LAC focus group). This also affects smaller agricultural activities, a community member claimed: "We were able to plant but now the land and water are contaminated. We can't plant" (CP8). Participants also complained that their built environment is jeopardized by mining in that the roofs on their homes are habitually damaged by blasting operations (CP7).

Another obvious consequence of a polluted environment in eMalahleni are various health problems experienced by people who live there. Participants cited poor health related to breathing difficulties and sinus infections, and experiencing stomach cramps, in effect mining pollution has made them sick:

> It's making me sick as it has already made other people sick. It causes us lung diseases (CP2).
>
> Look at me I am sick. I can't be normal again. I can't even run. I always have a handkerchief with me as I sneeze and cough a lot (CP3).
>
> Most of the time you can't breathe and you also get stomach cramps (CP4).
>
> Our children are sick because of the mines. They suffer from asthma and sinuses (CP8).

Despite these observations, there were prevailing views and perceptions from some community members which suggested they believed mining could have positive consequences in the area. These were based largely on ideas about economic benefit. A participant stated: "The economy is boosted because of coal. I would say it benefits the economy of South Africa and in terms of me personally it gives me energy in my household" (CP4).

Another community member mentioned ways in which mines could potentially benefit the area in terms of creating employment opportunities:

> We've got two giant companies of steel. We've got Highveld and Transalows. In mining we've got Anglo American (it's a big one). We've also got small mines like Mpofu. The only people that come to the party are these small mines because they do use contractors – they do come and employ our people. But we need big mines like Anglo American to come and employ our people. (CP7)

This community member also argued that the mining industry needed to "develop our people" by giving locals a chance to own and mine coal in the area – he added "I want to be part of the mine, I want to be part of the coal. I want to be part of the operations" (CP7). For him a big part of the problem is that locals are excluded from mining operations which also include associated services such as transport and trucking, which are contracted to a truck company in Johannesburg – he said: "All the people from outside are benefitting. The white man came with people from outside our community and benefits them" (CP7).

7. Push-back

The Life After Coal campaign works in various ways to ensure there is a 'push back' against coal impact (FGD – LAC focus group). One of its objectives is to *educate* communities about their constitutional right to an environment that is "not harmful to their health and wellbeing" (Sec 24, Constitution of South Africa). Community participants confirmed that awareness of their rights on issues of the environment was consolidated through the Life After Coal campaign: "I know I have a right to clean air and I have a right to a clean and healthy environment. I didn't know these rights existed but through their (Life After Coals) awareness (campaign) I know…" (CP3).

The campaign also works to *inform* affected communities about the dangers and the impacts of coal mining. Here they work in communities already impacted and that are feeling the effectsc, as well as in communities where coal mining operations are in the pipeline. The aim is to arm communities with facts and data to oppose mining developments as a Life After Coal representative explained: "This helps communities to anticipate what so called 'developments' mean because whenever the corporates come in they … are unlikely to give them information about the negative impacts, they would rather preach a lot of all the good things that would come, bursaries, development, tar roads, employment" (FGD – LAC). Informing usually results in community mobilization against mining operations as a participant said, "They talk to people from the streets and ask them to join and participate. Some people invite friends and that is how people are recruited" (CP3).

Life After Coal further works to encourage a process of '*connecting the dots.*' An example is working to link health issues with environmental degradation linked to mining. In this sense communities are encouraged to understand the cause of their troubles. Testimony from community participants suggest that this has been a critical factor in awareness and opposition to coal and to mining. A participant stated that she re-orientated the way she understood her health problems following engagements with a Life After Coal representative: "I thought my health conditions were probably witchcraft, but she (Life After Coal representative) actually made me realize that it was the mines that are surrounding the town that cause these issues" (CP3). Another participant noted that following interactions with the campaign he now understood his constitutional right to a clean environment to have been 'violated' by mining operations in the area (CP5).

The Life After Coal campaign has also been critical in facilitating communities to '*ask the bigger questions*.' In this sense a counter-hegemonic consciousness at community level begins to develop. An example of this is testimony from a participant who mentioned how he had been introduced to different ideas about energy provision through the campaign – here he was referring to solar energy solutions (CP4). This suggested to him that 'cleaner' alternatives were available and needed to be demanded by people affected by 'dirty' methods currently in use.

8. Links with civil society organizations

Despite the critical work of the Life After Coal campaign in eMalahleni there were some community members who had misgivings about the role and broader motivations of civil society organizations, or the civil society 'industry' – it is important to note here that these community members were not referring specifically to the Life After Coal campaign. Their misgivings were implicit in their framing of civil society organizations as 'structures' – "Civil society, we are talking about concerned groups and all of the structures" (CP7). 'Structures' in this context was understood as 'outside interests' that firstly did not represent the community as participants explained, "We want to remain as a community because people from outside they take advantage of our community … we crush everything that comes in a form of structure" (CP7); "The community want to deal with the mines directly. This thing of concerned groups only benefits those that are part of it, their members" (CP9). These sentiments were echoed by smaller community mobilization members who argued that "the big NGOs" failed to properly involve communities in their campaigns. This effectively drowned out genuine community voices or input from those most affected by mining operations. As explained by a community activist,

> We are partly involved. They just come with their books and reports and tell us 'this is e.g. the Life After Coal campaign.' Then how do you explain something (to your community) that is started when you were not there? You must be there for the planning, have questions and rectify so that when you go back to your community, and they have questions you can answer. (FGD – VEM, local activists)

Following this, a second criticism was that NGOs divided the community, "Large NGOs tend to make us fight … Sometimes large organizations would promise us things like coming to us to work on campaigns but next thing they are talking to other local organizations and implementing what we spoke about with them"

(CP8). For this participant NGOs promising resources which were then channeled to other networks or communities created competition for these resources, together with resentments over strategies that were devised at community level and then appropriated or implemented at civil society level.

A third criticism of 'structures' was that they had their own agendas. A participant argued that an organization working in the area had made demands from mining interests in the form of monetary reparations for an incident. and there was a sense that these organizations were to benefit financially:

> …these structures came here and claimed to be here for the community but after the leaders of those structures changed everything … they just want to claim that money. There are a lot of structures more especially in eMalahleni … and all of the structures their motive is to benefit and not to help the community … they want to do the same things the mines are doing. So we have decided as a community we are going to work as a community towards the mines. (CP7)

Implicit in this argument seemed to be the perception that civil society organizations or 'structures' were somehow complicit with the mining industry in that they also sought specific material or profit-related outcomes that did not "help the poor of the poorest" (CP7). A participant further explained how civil society 'structures' are perceived to be complicit with 'corrupt' local government agents which further removed their efforts as being part of the community struggle: "I think civil society is part of those people that are sitting at eMalahleni offices to be used to go and loot in the mines or get business in the mines for themselves. I don't think these groups are helping the community in any way. They are not here to help us. They are here to fight us" (CP9).

There is evidence, however, that campaigns such as Life After Coal do provide critical support and resources for struggles at community level despite the critiques they receive at the level of community movements. This is reflected in two ways. The first way is by providing the resources for awareness campaigns which are carried out in affected communities, or communities that have been earmarked for mining operations. These campaign resources include door to door campaigns, the publishing and distributing of pamphlets and posters, and the use of community radio to spread the word (CP1). Community members argue that the municipality never runs awareness campaigns such as these, and that civil society organizations are the only form of information and support in terms of community awareness drives – a community member stated that "we need to have at least five or six a year of these awareness (campaigns)" (CP1). Another elaborated "(the campaign) is very involved – they teach people a lot as they educate people … they raise awareness of how people are affected by coal mines" (CP3).

The second way campaigns such as Life After Coal provide support and resources to communities and activists is by "talking it to the relevant people" (CP4). In this sense NGOs such as those affiliated with the Life After Coal campaign are perceived as having official connections and access, enabling them to place the plight of communities on the agenda. Participants explained that civil society organizations working in the area had been vocal at the local level – arguing the case of communities with municipal officials and politicians (CP4). The Life After Coal campaign further participates in formal environmental policy processes such as with the National Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) process (FG – LAC). It makes an input into legislation, e.g. the Air Quality Act through the Air Quality Management Plan and engaging with the Department of Environmental Affairs, the Department of Minerals and Resources and the Department of Water and Sanitation (groundWork, 2018). The campaign has also litigated against environmental injustice – these actions have been levelled at the state but also directly at mining corporates (FG – LAC). Successes with the litigation strategy includes critical precedents set with reference to polluting water sources and protected environments in the the Mabola case in 2018[4] (FG – LAC).

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[4] The Mabola case against the Mineral Resources and Environmental Affairs Ministers was brought by eight civil society organisations (including Earthlife Africa and groundWork) opposing coal mining in the Mabola Protected Environment Area in Mpumalanga. The proposed coal mine would have affected strategic water sources and encroached on protected

In considering the civil society concerns raised by some participants, the Life After Coal campaign is firmly rooted in a commitment to a "just transition" which it understands as being an "open" agenda that is "community driven" (Hallowes & Munnik: 2019: 98). In this sense it prioritizes proposals identified by coal affected communities themselves, and works to further these agendas.

9. Fragmentation, building power and symbiotic elements

Testimony from this study sample suggests that the forging of a 'unified and popular' environmental movement is impeded by the challenges of encompassing daily struggles within 'ecological frames' (Death, 2014). It is also challenged by fragmenting micropolitics (Leonard, 2021). In the first instance there is a clear division of 'us' vs. 'them' emanating from communities who are at the receiving end of the negative consequences of mining. Communities see themselves as 'the poor' (CP7). They see mining operations, the state and civil society or 'structures' all working in opposition to them in different ways, with the intention of gaining materially from coal (CP9). The community response is therefore to *also* demand material benefits from coal in the form of "wanting to be part of' the mining operations" (CP7). In this sense civil society organizations such as Life After Coal have not yet made a strong enough campaign-related connection between neoliberal systems that support powerful mining interests and the costs to the socioeconomic *and* environmental well-being of ordinary people. This sort of connection is difficult to formulate in contexts where "the prominence of coal mining…the privileged place of green capitalist logics and corporate transition agendas (prevail) over local visions of energy development" (Banks & Schwartz 2023: 653). As has been shown in other Global South contexts, specifically in Banks and Schwartz's (2023: 655) Colombian study, this prevailing narrative works to "delimit the kinds of environmental, economic and political futures that are possible instead of facilitating a 'just transition' foregrounding socioeconomic justice, degrowth, decolonization or communal energy futures."

The Life After Coal campaign is pivoted on ideas of a 'just transition' drawing from "a broad transcultural compilation of concrete concepts, worldviews and practices from around the world, challenging the modernist ontology of universalism in favor of a multiplicity of possible worlds" (Hallowes & Munnik, 2019: 98). And within promoting pathways to new kinds of energy systems, restoring ecosystems, food security, a zero waste and well-being economy as well as increased social benefits lie opportunities to develop new frames. Another Colombian study, that of Martin and Pedraza (2021: 732) has shown that enmity is produced through "bio and necropolitical practices, violence via environment" e.g. through land grabbing, counter insurgency and militarization. The mining terrain is therefore fraught with conflict. Reflecting the second instance drawing from participants critiques about civil society 'structures', civil society organizations risk fragmenting micropolitics in the same way that mining interests do. They can divide communities and set up competition among them for resources (CP8). This process also involves co-optation of community voices and ideas (CP8) which removes rights and abilities to self-determination. These fragmentations effectively blunt entrenching organic movements or "working *as a community* towards the mines" (CP7).

This study has revealed that campaigns such as Life After Coal have been critical in "building counter power" through mobilizing and catalyzing resistance to mining (Cock, 2019). Key campaign work has educated and informed affected communities, providing lessons about environmental rights and the negative impact of mining. This has encouraged mobilizations (CP3). Participants noted that they had been unaware that the effects of mining were a violation of their rights (CP5). Information about the impact of mining further armed them to oppose their living conditions (CP3).

Catalytic elements within the campaign strategy included linking health problems with mining operations to promote a process of 'connecting the dots.' Here, community members had begun the process of a re-conscientization where they began to see the impact on their bodies through poor health, as a direct consequence of mining in the area. This did not serve their own economic interests (CP3). Furthermore, the

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areas. On 8 November 2018 the North Gauteng High Court reversed the Ministers' approval to mine in the area, citing a failure with respect to South Africa's responsibilities to the environment (Centre for Environmental Rights, 2018).

discourse around 'an alternative' was introduced through discussions about cleaner energy forms such as solar power (CP4).

Implicit in the process of 'building counter power' among study participants are elements of 'surreptitious symbiosis' (Glasius & Ishkanian, 2015). Communities either directly or indirectly draw from campaign work, using resources and access. In terms of resources, the Life After Coal awareness campaigns work to conscientize communities about coal and to mobilize them against mining operations. The community push-back against coal is therefore supported by the campaign, despite perceptions that it should be a 'community' and not a 'civil society' effort (CP7, CP8, CP9). Resources directed towards these campaigns include distributing printed material and disseminating the message via media sources. In terms of access, community participants have attested to the fact that the campaign has been integral in engaging with local authorities, showing how communities are badly affected by coal mining (CP4). The foundational and ongoing work of the campaign also reflects that impact is being made in policy-making circles, through formal civil society participation channels and in the courts. It fights on the basis of law, and seeks compliance with state Constitutional obligations (as discussed in the FGD – LAC Life After Coal focus group). This impact works to strengthen community causes, whether or not they are mobilizing in conjunction with civil society groups.

10. Conclusion

The Life After Coal campaign's work in eMalahleni reflects the challenges of building a unified popular environmental movement in South Africa. Despite its critical work in 'building counter power' through community mobilization and the campaign's catalyzing effects, it has yet to fully integrate the substantive aspects of an unrealized democracy in the form of genuine socioeconomic rights into its environmental frames. Further to this, there are various levels of discord which hinder solidarity between formal civil society organizations – 'structures' – and the organic community movement. The underlying work of the campaign is, however, preparing the foundations and laying the groundwork for effective community mobilizations oriented towards environmental justice.

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Interviews

Interviews: Community Participants – (CP1-10)

Focus Group: Life After Coal Representatives – (FGD - LAC)

Focus Group: Community Activists, Vukani Environmental Movement – (FGD - VEM)