

'Unjust' Transition for Youth in South Africa

A case study of youth in Steve Tshwete Local Municipality

POLICY BRIEF

APRIL 2025

AUTHOR

Murial Kwena

ABSTRACT

Climate change is necessitating a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. Despite policies implemented to mitigate the impacts, marginalised groups – including indigenous people, women and youth – remain disproportionately affected.

The unjust transition in this policy brief highlights the exclusion of young people in Mpumalanga Province's Steve Tshwete Local Municipality (STLM) in South Africa, an area heavily reliant on coal-mining industry. The limited scope of the STLM's solar installation project, the exclusion of youth from meaningful employment opportunities and their marginalisation from ownership and control of productive assets reveal the disparities in the transition process. The findings underscore the need for more inclusive and targeted policies to ensure that youth are not left behind in the transition to a sustainable future.

To ensure a just transition, it is crucial to implement policies and projects that provide comprehensive training, sustainable job opportunities and equitable access to resources for all, particularly marginalised groups. This policy brief contributes to the ongoing just transition discourse by emphasising that the diverse needs of youth must be prioritised in policy making processes.

This policy brief aims to:

- Inform policy makers of the challenges that youth face to access opportunities within the just transition.
- Draw attention to the need to increase youth participation in just transition policymaking.
- Encourage policymakers to fund innovative youth ideas.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Kwena, M. (2025) 'Unjust Transition for Youth in South Africa: A case study of youth in Steve Tshwete Local Municipality'. Policy Brief. Johannesburg: Public Affairs Research Institute..

AVAILABLE ONLINE AT

<https://pari.org.za>

Worldwide, there are measures, frameworks and policies adopted to deal with the impacts of climate change. A just transition in South Africa is a framework that is positioned at the nexus of climate and development issues in South Africa, supporting South Africa's broader efforts to redesign the economy to the benefit of most citizens to enable deep, just and transformational shifts, in the context of delivering an effective response to climate change.¹

Youth, women and workers are most vulnerable to climate change. This policy brief will focus on the experiences of youth in Steve Tshwete Local Municipality (STLM), who are important participants in sustainable development. A just transition will help South Africa's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Table 1 highlights selected SDGs and how they frame the basis for youth inclusion. The National Development Plan requires that the local, provincial and national government embrace climate adaptation – efforts to strengthen the nation's resilience, including empowering the youth to ensure resilience and recovery.² This policy brief draws from the data of larger research conducted from February 2024 until November 2024 in STLM, by ALIGN (Advancing Land-Based Investment Governance) partners and also from a survey conducted in Komati to understand the socioeconomic challenges of Komati residents after the closure of the Komati Power Station. ALIGN support governments, civil society, communities and people, and other relevant actors to strengthen governance and practices of land-based investments, ranging from agriculture to infrastructure, extractives, manufacturing, carbon sequestration and renewable energy.³

¹ <https://pccommissionflow.imgix.net/uploads/images/A-Just-Transition-Framework-for-South-Africa-2022.pdf>

² https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/ndp-2030-our-future-make-it-workr.pdf

³ <https://www.iied.org/align-advancing-land-based-investment-governance>


	Sustainable development goal (SDG)	Targets
	SDG 4 urges policy makers to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.	Target 4.4. By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. Target 4.6. By 2030, ensure that all youth and substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.
	SDG 5 emphasises achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.	Target 5.a, undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.
	SDG 8 emphasises that policy makers should promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.	Target 8.3. Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation and encourage the formation and growth of micro, small and medium sized enterprises, including access to financial services. Target 8.5. By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value. Target 8.6. By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training.
	SDG 13 urges policy makers to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.	Target 13.1. Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries. Target 13.2. Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning. Target 13.3. Improve education, awareness- raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning.

Table 1: Relevant SDGs for youth

Source: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Why focus on the youth?

South Africa's youth unemployment rate stands at 45.5 per cent.⁴ The 'NEET' (not in employment, education or training) category, aged between 15–24 years, includes over 10.3 million people who have completely disengaged from the labour market and are also not enhancing their skills.⁵ South Africa's National Youth Policy and its National Youth Commission Act (1996), define the youth as any person between the ages of 14 and 35.⁶ The National Youth Policy of 2030 recognises that young people are not a homogenous group, and therefore adopted a differentiated approach in which it advocates for targeting interventions according to age cohorts (for example, adolescent and older youth, gender, disability status etc). But in the context of this policy brief, it looks at the experiences of youth from 18 to 35 years old.

The concept of 'youth bulge' describes a disproportionate increase of young people in an area, as compared to the working class and elderly.⁷ If the number of working-age individuals can be fully absorbed in innovative and productive activities, the level of average income per capita will increase and this will make the youth bulge a demographic dividend. However, many African countries, including South Africa, face the negative repercussions of the youth bulge. A large cohort of young people cannot find employment or earn satisfactory incomes and this further creates youth marginalisation and economic exclusion.

⁴ <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=17266>

⁵ <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=13379>

⁶ <https://www.news24.com/citypress/voices/at-what-age-does-the-concept-of-youth-end-it-depends-on-who-you-ask-20180615>

⁷ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382588476_Demographic_Youth_Bulge_and_Unemployment_as_Potential_for_Political_Violence_and_Insecurity_in_Africa_with_Special_Reference_to_South_Africa

The section below highlights the experiences of youth in the context of mining closures and the impact of policy interventions. It draws on examples of investments in renewable, land allocation and the closure of the Komati Power station and surrounding mines.

Just transition interventions and challenges in STLM

Steve Tshwete Local Municipality is home to approximately 317,187 people.⁸ The municipality has an unemployment rate significantly lower than the current national unemployment rate. Over the past decade, the percentage of people with 'no schooling' has declined from 18.9 to 13.2 per cent, reflecting a general improvement in educational attainment. However, the condition of poor people in the municipality is worsening.⁹ People aged 15–34 years constitute 40.7 per cent of the population of the municipality, 53 per cent of the population is employed, 34 per cent is unemployed and 13 per cent is economically inactive.¹⁰

The STLM has a high concentration of coal mines scheduled to close down as the country shifts to fossil fuels. The STLM initiated the Township Revitalisation Strategy in 2019 (Figure 1), which presents a framework to develop township economies and address challenges of inequality, limited diversification and contribute towards the transformation of townships economies and enhance the participation of women and youth.¹¹ The youth would need access to resources like land, finance and skills to benefit from the revitalisation strategy.

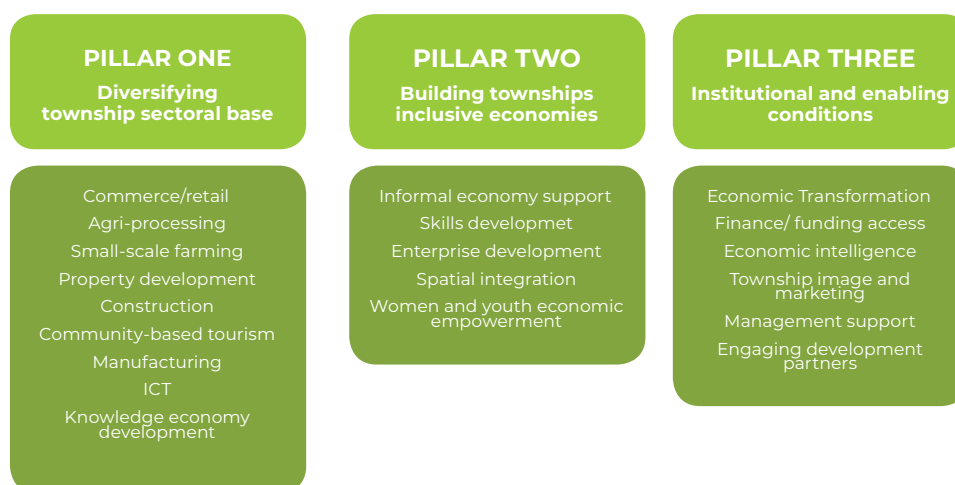


Figure 1: Steve Tshwete Local Municipality Revitalisation Strategy

Source: https://www.stlm.gov.za/documents/LED/STLM_township_development_strategy%2020192019.pdf

⁸ <https://www.stevetshwetelm.gov.za/documents/LED/202021/LED%20Study%20final%20report.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.stevetshwetelm.gov.za/documents/LED/202021/LED%20Study%20final%20report.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.stevetshwetelm.gov.za/documents/IDP/201920/Final%20IDP%202019-2020.pdf>

¹¹ https://www.stlm.gov.za/documents/LED/STLM_township_development_strategy%2020192019.pdf

Youth do not benefit most from the interventions. They face financial challenges and are also marginalised from the productive assets such as land, equipment, social capital, and education and training. Land has been identified as one of the resources that youth can utilise to cope with climate-related job losses, particularly those caused by the closure of the coal mines and other industries along the value chain. Effective land use can significantly improve the livelihoods of young people. Farming equipment, financial resources could also enable youth to start their own businesses and generate income. Youth struggle with resources to participate in agricultural activities and also struggle to apply for loans as they are unemployed. However, there are conditions in STLM under which people qualify for land. These are as follows:

- a. **Condition 1:** *Land will be disposed of at a market value.* This is biased towards people with a certain income and permanently employed. Given the high unemployment rates among youth, they are generally unable to afford nor qualify to purchase land at a market value, thus excluding them from land ownership.
- b. **Condition 2:** *60 per cent of the stands are ringfenced for previously disadvantaged communities, these are black, coloured and Indian residents.* While this condition is not discriminatory of youth and targets the groups including the poor and unemployed, the financial barriers remain significant for youth within these communities to afford the land.
- c. **Condition 3:** *This condition is for previous property owners.* This condition favours historical property owners in the municipality. The historically favoured groups in terms of property ownership excluded the majority of black people. The apartheid-era policies discriminated against the black majority, meaning that black people are few among previous property owners. Black youth are even less likely to be previous property owners, further excluding them from the ownership of land.
- d. **Condition 4:** *Stands reserved for people who have been residents in Steve Tshwete Local Municipality for more than six months.* The study in Komati showed that the youth are highly mobile as they seek employment opportunities making it challenging for them to meet this residency requirement.
- e. **Condition 5:** *Buyers are required to pay 50 per cent of the land price as deposit.* Most youth are unemployed or earning low salaries that do not allow them to amass the savings to be able to put down a deposit.



Steve Tshwete
Local Municipality

PO Box 14 | Middelburg | 1050
Cnr Walter Sisulu Str & Wanderers Ave
Middelburg | Mpumalanga
T: +27 (0)13 249 7000 | F: +27 (0)13 243 2550
council@stlm.gov.za

Your reference:

Our reference: 5/12/9

SALE OF STANDS

1. Notice is hereby given in terms of Section 79 (18) of the Local Government Ordinance 17 of 1939 as amended read together with Section 21 of the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, as amended and Section 14 (2) of the Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003, that the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality intends to sell residential stands through a raffle (draw) system to the following areas:
 - 1.1. Dennessig North - 598 stands
 - 1.2. Hendrina - 74 stands
 - 1.3. Rockdale - 38 stands
 - 1.4. Aerorand West - 1 stand
 - 1.5. Middelburg Ext 18 - 1 stand
2. A list containing the description of the subject properties together with a pricelist can be viewed during office hours from 08 April 2024 at the following venues:
 - 2.1. Piet Tlou Community Hall (Doomkop)
 - 2.2. Eastdene Community Hall (Middelburg)
 - 2.3. Nasaret Community Hall (Middelburg)
 - 2.4. Eric Jiyane Hall (Mhluzi)
 - 2.5. Adelaide Tambo Hall (Mhluzi Ext 7)
 - 2.6. Cosmos Community Hall (Hendrina)
3. The above sale is subject to, inter alia, the following conditions:

That the stands be sold to the Community at the market value to the first time property buyers subject to the following conditions:

 - 3.1. That 60% of the stands should be reserved (ring fenced) for previously disadvantaged Communities (Blacks, Coloured, Indians).
 - 3.2. That preference be given to the residents within Steve Tshwete Local Municipality for the last 36 months.
 - 3.3. That the applicants are South African citizens.



Figure 2: Advertisement by Steve Tshwete Local Municipality to dispose of residential stands.

Source: <https://stlm.gov.za/Notices/N03.03.24.pdf>

Case Study 1: Komati

Komati is a village situated approximately 37km south of the town of Middleburg in Mpumalanga Province. It falls within the jurisdiction of the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality and Nkangala District Municipality. The Komati Power Station, situated in the village, was owned by Eskom since its commissioning in 1961.¹² The decommissioning of Komati Power Station as part of the transition has negatively affected communities as it was providing employment opportunities, basic services and playing a crucial role in the local economic activity. It is said that the transition affects approximately 14,000 coal mines and countless workers along the coal value chain, including truck drivers and informal sectors like street food vendors.¹³

As part of Eskom's 2035 strategic plan, which aims to respond to the changing energy environment and the impact this has towards sustainable power utility, the last of Komati's nine units was decommissioned in October 2022.¹⁴ Eskom is planning to gradually close down Hendrina, Grootvlei and Camden by 2030.¹⁵ These closures are part of Eskom's broader just energy transition (JET) strategy, which seeks to reduce carbon emissions and transition towards more sustainable energy sources.¹⁶



Figure 3: Car wash and hair salon in Komati

Source: Murial Kwena/2025

¹² https://cer.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Eskom-Komati-EIA-report_Final.pdf

¹³ <https://africa.iclei.org/resource/project-summary/>

¹⁴ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-03-26-komati-power-station-cautionary-tale-of-the-just-energy-transition/>

¹⁵ <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2024-05-28-ramaphosas-climate-advisers-not-surprised-by-delayed-shutdown-of-coal-power-stations/>

¹⁶ <https://www.eskom.co.za/heritage/history-in-decades/escom-1953-1962/komati-power-station/>

Youth seeking alternative employment in light of the power station closure

The closure of the power station in Komati has significantly affected the livelihoods of residents and surrounding areas. Komati Power Station was a major source of employment, providing basic services to the community and accounting for a significant portion of the economic activity in the area.

A socioeconomic study aiming to understand the socioeconomic challenges faced by residents following the power stations, revealed that prior to the closure, a significant portion of the population in the province was within the working age demographics.¹⁷

The socioeconomic challenges faced by Komati residents following the closure of the Komati Power Station can further be corroborated by findings from a survey conducted in the area. Many people lost their jobs including youth, who now struggle to find employment opportunities. Before the closure of the power station, the study realised that most of the population in the province was within the working age population. But a significant part of the working age population (49 per cent) was either not employed or did not have job security.

Despite the presence of youth with skills and qualifications, including Grade 12 and tertiary education, the lack of job opportunities in the area continues to hinder their ability to secure stable employment. The situation underscores the need for targeted interventions and support to create more sustainable and long-term employment opportunities for youth in Komati.

In response to these challenges, both youth and adults in Komati have pursued various innovative employment opportunities. Some Komati youth work in hair salons and car washes (seen in Figure 3), while others have secured temporary jobs at Eskom such as cutting grass and cleaning the plant. However, these jobs are for three to six months and do not create stable financial opportunities for young people.

Case Study 2: Doornkop

The Doornkop community is located 15km north of Middleburg, Mpumalanga, on community property managed by the Doornkop Communal Property Association (CPA). This legal entity was established under the CPA Act 28 of 1996, and it is mandated to hold, control, manage and administer on behalf of its beneficiaries. Doornkop is also part of the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality. In 2021, Doornkop had a population of 8,740. Doornkop is also a refuge for people who have lost their jobs due to the closure of Komati and other power stations, and for those who rely on surrounding farms for employment.

¹⁷ https://www.eskom.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/KPS_SEIA_Final_Integrated_Report_March2023.pdf



Figure 4: Doornkop solar powered streetlights

Source: Murial Kwena/2024

Marginalisation of youth from renewable energy infrastructure installation in Doornkop

Job opportunities in Doornkop are limited, with some residents working in the Community Work Programme (CWP). The Community Work Programme is an innovative offering from the South African government to provide job safety net for unemployed and underemployed people of working age. The stipends participants receive supplement their existing livelihood means and provide them with a basic level of income security.¹⁸ Programme participants do work of social value, which includes looking after the sick in the community, assisting police and teachers on various tasks and also cleaning various premises in Doornkop. Programme participants work two days a week – eight days a month – and receive R81/day in stipend, or R648/month. This programme is not appealing to youth as some of the tasks do not have skills that youth can use for future employment and the stipend is very low for those who might only be depending on the programme.

Doornkop has a renewable energy project to install solar panels for domestic and street lighting. The community has highlighted that the project can be a great source of possible employment for youth. The two contractors for the project install lighting in houses, benefitting the community as a cheap source of lighting and reducing the reliance on coal, candles and grid electricity. For each household installation, three people are employed – a qualified electrician and two local youth. However, youth are only responsible for installing the switches and receive only three days of training. The short-term work does not impart skills that could enable them to obtain or secure employment after the end of the project.

The solar installation project is divided among all informal settlements in STLM, covering 2,700 households. However, this is insufficient given the scale of Doornkop, the municipality and the Nkangala region. According to recent data, STLM has approximately four informal settlements with 12,000 households. This means that the project only reaches about a quarter of the total households, leaving a significant portion of the youth population without access to these employment opportunities.

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.za/CommunityWorkProgramme>

With the project employing only three people per household, installation for 2,700 households mean the chances for meaningful and sustained employment for the youth are quite low. This highlights the need for a more extensive and inclusive approach to ensure that a large number of households and youth can benefit from such initiatives.

The case study of Komati and Doornkop highlights the challenges faced by youth in accessing employment and ownership of productive assets. Despite the potential of land to help youth cope with employment, they are often marginalised in land allocation processes. The closure of the Komati Power Station further exacerbated these challenges, leading to innovative but unstable employment opportunities. The solar installation project in Doornkop, while beneficial, is insufficient in scope, reaching only a fraction of households in the municipality.

The situation exemplifies an unjust transition, where the shift towards renewable energy and other sustainable practices does not equitably benefit all community members. The limited scope of the solar installation project and exclusion of youth from meaningful employment opportunities highlight the disparities in the just transition process. To ensure a just transition, it is crucial to implement policies and projects that provide comprehensive training, sustainable job opportunities, and equitable access of resources for all, particularly marginalised groups.^{19/20}

CONCLUSION

This brief has discussed the conditions under which youth experience the transition are not *just* unless policymakers pay attention to the issues that emerged in the case studies. These are summarised below.

- The closure of coal mines in response to climate change leaves unemployed youth with little or no opportunity to find other ways to make a living. This worsens the existing problem of unemployment.
- While access to land has the potential to provide a place for youth to set up their own employment opportunities to cope with climate adaptation and job losses, this access is severely limited by affordability. The conditions under which STLM, for example, disposes of land is biased towards those who are gainfully employed or have a history of property ownership. The youth are excluded because they have no money for deposit, they do not fulfil other conditions to qualify for municipal land. Youth remain marginalised to use land as a coping strategy in transition.
- Interventions aimed at helping youth cope with climate change must be designed considering the different experiences and challenges for youth. They must contain criteria targeting the youth and be monitored in terms of the interventions' impacts – in terms of providing youth with sustainable income, skills and ways to cope / bridge the gap between projects.

¹⁹ <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/briefings/unjust-transition-on-trial-communities-and-workers-litigate-to-shape-corporate-practice/>

²⁰ <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/what-climate-justice>