WESSA SUBMISSION ON:

CLIMATE CHANGE

MADE AT:

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEES AND SELECT COMMITTEES HEARINGS

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WESSA welcomes this opportunity to make a submission on the impacts of climate change and thanks the various committees for holding these hearings. In this submission, WESSA will try to cover issues that have not be typically tackled during these hearings.

In South Africa, we confront the climate change crisis as a divided nation, characterised by staggering levels of poverty, but equally staggering levels of highly consumptive, wealthy and unsustainable lifestyles.

ECOSYSTEMS

We focus on the term "climate change", forgetting that, in essence, the crisis that is predicted revolves around an earth that may become incapable of delivering the ecosystem services that are necessary to sustain human existence.

Climate change is compounding a crisis that we have been systematically creating through destruction of ecosystems. It would be extremely foolish of us to believe that we need focus only on the greenhouse gas emissions that are responsible for climate change. We must develop a comprehensive picture of the multiple impacts on ecosystems, rather than honing in on the climate change impacts only.

We have to focus on restoring and maintaining ecosystem health in South Africa so that we develop the greatest possible resilience to the negative impacts of climate change at the widest level.

For many years, in South Africa, we have compromised the capacity of ecosystems to deliver the services that are essential for human survival. We have done this in the name of economic development that has not adequately achieved its goal of eradicating poverty and establishing a just and equitable society. A just, equitable and prosperous society must be our goal, but it will have to be a society that is not modelled on current notions of wealth, lifestyle and prosperity. We have to acknowledge that, in future, it will not be "business as usual".

Using computer models, scientists have provided the broad brush-strokes of what the South African landscape may look like as climate change manifests itself. Members of the Portfolio and Select Committees have recognised that it is at the local level that particular impacts will be felt and hence these hearings are being held.

Climate change impacts at a local level are unpredictable. It is therefore important for us to ensure greatest national resilience to climate change through maintaining healthy ecosystems. This is the same strategy that you and I employ when we take out short-term insurance on our property. We do not take out insurance because we know our property will be destroyed; we take out insurance because we know that, should our property be destroyed, we will be unable to sustain the loss. Healthy ecosystems countrywide are thus our best insurance against climate change-induced hardships.

Simply put, as a country, we would go a long way towards successful climate change adaptation if, for example:

- we do not overgraze our rangelands,
- we do not pollute our rivers with industrial effluent, acid mine drainage and sewage,
- we do attend urgently to the nation-wide problem of malfunctioning or non-functioning waste water treatment works,

- we do not allow the over-abstraction of groundwater and the collapse of aquifers,
- we do not destroy productive agricultural land in the name of development that seldom, if ever, results in the promised job-creation and economic growth,
- we do not allow an unnecessary proliferation of golfing estates that consume not only land, but vast amounts of water too,
- we empower, support and encourage sustainable artisinal fisheries in favour of energy- hungry and destructive commercial fisheries,
- we do not allow mines, with a life of say twenty years, to wipe out truly sustainable food production and jobs in the agricultural sector.

Environmental Impact Assessments or EIAs are designed to identify the potential impacts of a proposed development on the environment and its capacity to deliver ecosystem services. Currently, there is a widely held belief that environmental impact assessments hold up development and moves are afoot to minimise the number of environmental impact assessment processes that are carried out. Over and over again, developments are approved, when it is blatantly obvious that the development is both unsustainable and highly environmentally destructive.

If the integrity of the EIA process was upheld and strengthened, we would already be making significant progress towards increasing our ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

The current Draft of the NEMA EIA Regulations contains no reference to climate change impacts. On the contrary, the single reference to climate change that was present in the previous draft has now been removed altogether. In order to ensure a comprehensive climate change response, it is essential that risk aversion be included in the NEMA EIA Regulations. This means that one of the criteria for assessing development applications should be that the proposed development avoids potential climate change risks, for example, flooding, in the case of a development near a river.

BIODIVERSITY

Biodiversity conservation is often dismissed as pandering to the leisure pursuits of the elite. Biodiversity is, however, recognised as key to how well people can adapt to climate change, how well landscapes can absorb and store carbon and how effective vegetation and ecosystems are in reducing the effects of climate change. The predicted change in climate is going to be too rapid for organisms to adapt genetically and thus, in order to survive, organisms will have to be able to move at a rate that is sufficient to keep up with the changing spatial distribution of their preferred environment. Once again, it simply makes good sense to ensure that we have a diverse genetic base that provides variety in order to withstand a range of climatic conditions. Biodiversity in South Africa is currently being threatened in the same manner in which the integrity of ecosystems is being compromised. Biodiversity loss is, in itself, a serious threat to the health of ecosystems.

ENERGY

WESSA acknowledges that, to a large extent, human endeavour and prosperity is and will continue to rely on the provision of energy. To this end, WESSA strongly contests South Africa's current commitment to bulk energy supply that is based on coal, and possibly nuclear fuel. WESSA strongly supports previously articulated positions with regard to

decentralised energy provision from multiple sources and a firm commitment to using renewable sources of clean energy. This strategy makes long-term sense from an economic and an environmental perspective.

WATER

Water is at the centre of climate change impacts in South Africa. It may be argued that one can survive without energy, but not without water. South Africa has long been recognised as a water-scarce country and for many years, water has been cited as a possible limiting factor to economic growth. At any given time, there are areas in South Africa that are suffering from the effects of severe drought.

With predicted climate change impacts, many areas of South Africa will become hotter and drier, with less predictable rainfall. Water, which is already scarce in many areas, will become a critical resource. We all know this, yet we continue to allow neglectful and criminal pollution of our rivers by industry and municipalities; we continue to allow developments to compromise wetlands; we continue to allow inefficient irrigation practices. The poor and marginalised use a negligible amount of water – approximately 1,4% - for their survival and yet they are going to feel the most severe combined impacts of wastefulness, negligence and climate change. Climate change is recognised as one of the key drivers requiring us to find different and better ways of managing water. However, there is no deeper analysis about how to reconcile the goals of: “Water for all”, “Water for growth and development” and climate change related water scarcity.

GAPS IN LEGISLATION AND POLICY

Specific gaps in legislation and policy have been identified more comprehensively in other submissions. WESSA contends that the most serious gaps in both legislation and policy are:

- fragmentation,
- lack of integration of climate change into all policy and legislation, and
- lack of enforcement.

By way of example, WESSA refers to an important and current policy process, the Green Paper on National Strategic Planning. This draft policy is likely to result in a powerful decision-making framework that will affect decisions made at all levels of government. Although the importance of sustainability, the environment and climate change are alluded to in the Green Paper, WESSA believes that environmental sustainability and potential climate change impacts should overarch and inform this planning process. There is little, if any, evidence of consultation between the various Ministers in the process of drafting the Green Paper.

SOME POTENTIAL ACTIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Jorgen Randers and Paul Gilding said, “If the message is too soft, people don’t confront the scale of the challenge and find endless reasons for delay. When change is difficult, or failure frightening, then avoidance is a welcome escape.” These parliamentary hearings are testimony to the fact that our leaders are not looking for the welcome escape of avoidance.

- We must focus our energy on local and national responses to climate change and not wait for conscience-driven commitments from the developed world.
- We must commit to renewable energy sources and articulate an economic growth and development strategy that contains a firm commitment to rejecting the carbon intensive development pathway of the past.
- By means of legislation, taxation and cajoling, we must slash the emissions of the already wealthy South Africans and, at the same time, ensure that we address local poverty without unbounded growth in emissions. Climate change mitigation must remain a priority.
- We must urgently implement more efficient use of water by wealthy households, industry and agriculture.
- Approximately two-thirds of South Africa is classified as arid or semi-arid. Consequently there is a wealth of historical community responses to the challenges of water scarcity. These include forage management, changing livestock types and water and soil conservation.
- We must preserve our productive agricultural land and encourage traditional farming systems that have proved to be both sustainable and resilient to change.
- Priority must be given to local initiatives that use local knowledge and approaches such as traditional farming methods or systems that conserve biodiversity and reduce poverty. For example, wild rooibos tea is more resilient to pests and droughts than the cultivated rooibos tea. A marketing channel has been developed for wild rooibos tea which has enabled propagation and sustainable harvesting of wild rooibos as a community initiative near Nieuwoudtville in the Western Cape.
- Africa has a wealth of local knowledge that has been overlooked in the face of the predominance of western knowledge systems and values. We need to tap into tried and tested indigenous ways of dealing with environmental change and challenges. There are many innovative ideas, developed over centuries, that we have almost forgotten.
- Indigenous game species are more adaptable to drought conditions and are a more sustainable source of meat. This should be explored as an alternative land use for the farmlands of the western parts of South Africa that are likely to become drier and less productive.
- Climate change adaptation works best at a local level where the most appropriate local responses to local climate change can be developed. Within a national strategy, it is important to strengthen civil society structures and work with NGOs and CBOs in order to facilitate local adaptation strategies.

Current climate change presents unprecedented challenges and opportunities for reassessing how we live and how we relate to each other. We cannot solve a problem using the mindset that created it, because the mindset is the problem. Historically, societies have shown themselves to be highly innovative, original and adaptable. In this challenging climate change context, South Africans surely have the potential to be leaders.

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