

Interview Bobby Peek/ Groundwork/Friends of the Earth:

“We need to build up an international Resistance”

1. Can you tell me something about groundwork? What aims and which areas is groundwork working on?

Groundwork is an environmental justice organization based in Pietermaritzburg in South Africa. But we work through all South Africa with community people that are resisting environmental injustices. And challenging for just environment. The main objective of groundwork is that people are living well together and when we say people are living well together we're meaning that people from different communities, from different classes, from different backgrounds are all living in harmony in a way that is just towards each other because when you have bad justice you will have environmental justice and environmental be prospective environmental be protected. Our main focus areas are we work on climate and energy justice, where we work with people who are challenging government for excess to energy because South Africa suffers from the history of Apartheid where poor people in primary black can not have access to resources. And today in a democratic South Africa again they don't have access to the basic needs of live such as energy to have a decent and meaningful life.

The second campaign we have is waste campaign and with the waste campaign we work at again assisting society and community of colour that in the past had toxic dumpsites in their neighbourhood and in democratic South Africa today we still have people, black people with toxic dumpsites in their neighbourhood. I am glad to say toxic dumpsites are slowly but surely closing in black neighbourhoods but we also have general waste dumpsites in black neighbourhoods and while we've been working on waste we noticed that are a lot of poor people that were scavenging, that were collecting waste on these dumpsites and selling it and earning a livelihood out of this process, having a livelihood out of this process. So we started working with wastepickers in 2007 and we managed to with waste pickers to secure their rights in parliament where parliament has said in the new waste act that nobody has the right to disregard waste pickers, that waste pickers are part of the waste system and that they have to be consulted on new waste plans going forward.

The third campaign we have is a campaign on environmental health. Where we are working and assisting communities to understand what are the health implications of all the environmental injustices that they face. But also we assist communities that are living next to toxic facilities

suffering from either toxic waste or air pollution, how that impacts up on their but we also assist government understanding what are the implication for chemicals, and especially for mercury in governance and what are the impacts of mercury on chemicals in peoples house so we assist government not only in South Africa but in Africa as well to better understand chemicals.

Our fourth campaign is, which we just starting now, is to work on coal to be able to work to move away from coal as an energy source.

2. How does it fit together, you have said that you are concerned about the population, the great part of the population that does not have access to energy and at the same time you are campaigning against coal.

The important thing to recognize that we are campaigning in a way to make sure that we move away from coal because today while we do have coal providing 90% of the South Africa's energy 4 millions homes do not cook with electricity 2 million homes use candles they don't have access to electricity. The critical thing is to be able to find why this is so and we find this is so because our energy is focused on coal which is creating a lot of energy cheaply for big industry and not for community people. And the most important thing that we have seen with the coal energy with the getting energy from coal is that coal energy is centralized. We are hoping that by working with communities to challenge for new forms of energy that not only where we get decentralized energy and put in the control of democratic control of people and municipalities but also with the alternative energy approach we start creating new jobs, different jobs so that we have jobs that are meaningful and decent rather than coal mining jobs presently which harm people and as you have seen by the many protests in South Africa that they don't pay people, the meaningful salaries so that they can have a decent living.

3. But the coal mining sector is saying if they pay higher wages they will not be able to survive.

Oh no, let's consider the South African economy. The South African economy is often referred to minerals and energy complexes this framing was started, this thinking was started by Restumge and fine about 15 years ago. And what it does is says the Apartheid economy relate on coal which they dug out from the ground cheaply and all the externalities in terms of the water and air pollution was put on the environment of people. They took this coal and burned it in a way that was cheaply burned where the polluted people through chimney stacks with the

toxic waste from premier coal fired facilities to give the cheap electricity to instructive industry that has instructive in gold, platinum and a whole of commodities from South Africa and make huge profits for multinational cooperations and for in the past white south africans and presently for very narrow ban of very rich black south africans. And finally that is all relaying on cheap labour. So cheap, coal cheap electricity to extracts commodities all relays are cheap labour to make a few people rich and that why we have to turn this on. We need to have an economy that supports people, jobs that are local, that are supporting South African rather than supporting a global economy.

4. But as Groundwork is partner of friends of the earth and friends of the earth is a international environment movement. Do you think that the environment is really what the majority of poor South African concern?

I think we need to remeber environment is development and environment and development for people is not seperate. In South Arica the South African constitution says that everybody has the right to an environmant that is not harmful of the house and well being. They do not have a right to a clean environment, they have the right to an environment that is not harmful of the house and well being. And if you read the constitution commitment further it says that this rights will be deliverd while there is development in the country. So it links development and environment under one frame and what our governments would like to, the global governments, including the South African government would like us to believe is that there are two narratives. One narrativ on environment and one narrativ on development. No there´s not. For communities on the ground if they don´t have clean water, they get sick and their children die. If they don´t have clean air, their don´t have energy in their homes there breas in toxic chemicals because they burn caol in their homes and their children die early and they get sick. So for us environment is key to development. It is development. Because without clean air, clean water, decent jobs, people will die.

5. But do you have proves that there is a direct line between coal and health?

Very interesting groundwork has always looked at insuring that we have evidence of the link between health and evironmental injustices. In the early 2000 we, for instance, went into clinicts in Sasselberg and got held informations. Sasselberg is where they burned a lot of coal to get liquide fuil in the old days and we found out that respirity problems in these communitities were sitting 40% of problems that were by the health of the clinics. It is just

groundworks anecdotal informations. But critically, globally there is a evidence space that clearly links coal to health problems globally and even early mortality. And we can now even start linking energy burnt, energy came from burning coal, we can link the amount of energy to the amount of gas and that is international dated disappearing now in perreviewed articels like in the landside journal. The evidence is there. If coal is killing people in Europe and the people US, are people in South Africa different? Why can and should the South African government say, prove that there is a link. The link is there already. We don't need to prove it, we need to start working on how do we reserve. What we now is there.

6. But the air pollution in South Africa is it really so bad?

South Africa has a very sad legacy with regards to air pollution. The old apartheid state did not look at managing industrie through stopping their pollution. They actually gave the permission to pollute. There was no system holding industries accountable and groundwork by 2004 had managed to get a new air pollution act which was the first air pollution act in South Africa dealing with holding cooperation accountable by having emission standarts and having what comes out of the stack you are limited on that. Also the air that we breath has very clearly indicators that the air that we breath needs to have a paticular good quality. It's chemny pollution as well as air general pollution. We were successful in early 2000 to get government to start turning around so the very bad pollution that we monotor ourselves you took air pollution ourselves in the early 2000 by the middel of 2000 seamingly government was starting to act on in. But we can safely say now that the capacity of government and the willingness to deal with air pollution has been arrodet over the last 5 years. We are having now government, local government departments and even national governments departments that can't take action. There is no inforcement capacity and ability and the monotoring we are doing now or from governments monotoring repeatingly places like the highfeld in Mpumalanga where there are 100s of coal mine and more than 10some of the world biggest power stations air pollution standarts are broken or excided every day of the year for the last 5 years. We have high cronium levels, high solfer levels, high voletare organic compounds like bansings in the air and critically high dust, high particular mater which clearly leads and recently the research for the South African government found evidence of pollution that was so high that the monotoring system they were using couln'd even mager it.

7. Is it true that this is the highest in the world in the highfeld?

I think, i must be honest there is no claim to be the highest in the world because i am sure in the middle of china and middle of deep south america and in parts of eastern europe air pollution is just as bad. but i think to be able to make that claim indicates how desperate it is in terms of air pollution in South Africa.

8. So you are working with communities on the ground because the name is Groundwork so you're working on the ground. What are the communities feel, how are they effected?

Communities are very aware of the impacts. We don't have to tell NGOs to our communities what they are feeling and what they experiences. They are very clear about it and and they are very clear about what needs to be done. There is a very big environmental justice awarness amongst communities wanting on doing something different. And we know we work with communities on dumpsides through out the country. We work with communities living next to coal facillities in the Highfeld, Mpumalanga area, in the Vaal, Triangle area, in South Durben and Lephalale, where the Medupi power station is been build, one of the biggest in the world. And they are very clear, they know what they problems are. And what we need to do as Friends of the Earth is to strenghten those challenges, strenghten those resistance. And what we do as an international network is link resistance in South Africa with resistance in Nigeria, with the restistance in Guatemala and Sambia so that it is a global resistance.

Interviewer: Monika Scheffler