

# Reflections prompted by an address by President Jacob Zuma to the Informal Ministerial Consultations on COP 17

*In his opening remarks, President Zuma confirms the importance and urgency of the climate change challenge. He follows this up very well in the subsequent paragraphs, stressing the need for a global approach to the problem and the importance of rising above self-interest. He sees creative thinking as integral to this process which is based on the “principles of multilateralism, environmental integrity, common but differentiated responsibility and respective capabilities, equity and honouring of all international commitments and undertakings made in the climate change process.”*

The focus on climate change as such is appropriate. President Zuma’s address, however, does draw attention to a number of possibly less prominent environmental problems which exist and have been known to exist for many years. The principle of equity features in the address – not surprisingly drawing attention to problems associated with the implementation of commitments. There is an appeal to apply the principle of equity within the context of Sustainable Development. A question which may be prompted by this is whether or not thoughts and statements in the President’s address would have emerged if climate change had not attracted the attention that it has.

The consequences of climate change – extreme weather events, coastal erosion and flooding, etc – exacerbate a problem with which the world is faced in any event. Sustainable development, seen as being under threat by climate change, could, on reflection, be seen as an unachievable goal in the light of a number of other phenomena including rampant population growth. Historic attempts to limit population growth have had a number of consequences, some of them negative, including social problems and the widening of the economic gap between the developing and the developed world, with developing countries becoming more dependent on foreign investment and, in some cases, aid. In this situation developing countries become vulnerable to exploitation, possibly analogous to inequities that are supported by resistance to climate change commitments by the wealthier nations.

This is particularly true of Africa. Population growth forecasts for Africa remain high in relation to global trends, and youth dominate in numerical terms significantly. Africa possibly has one of the highest threats of political violence. Economically, Africa has vast mineral and agricultural development potential, making it attractive, despite – or perhaps because of – the prevailing demographic and political environment for investment that could rapidly become exploitation. That this investment will be from countries with very poor track records in terms of climate change and other



## **Andy Smithen**

graduated as a civil engineer at the University of Natal in 1977 and joined the then Department of Agricultural Technical Services’s Division of Agricultural Engineering. In 1978 he became involved in soil erosion research and in 1981 obtained a Masters degree in agricultural engineering. In 1986 he joined Gencor’s Trans Natal Coal and progressed to the position of Manager: Environmental Management. In 1992, he was transferred to Gengold in the same capacity. In 1995 he joined SRK Consulting where he is currently a partner in Environmental Department, a position in which he has been exposed to many aspects of environmental and social impact assessment and management and sustainable development.

environmental issues is no longer a likelihood but a reality. The principle of equity sought by President Zuma may be very difficult – and progressively more difficult – to enforce in this situation, particularly as marginalized communities become more marginalized as a result of, amongst other things, climate change.

---

*As the President correctly points out, a strategy that is not ambitious is doomed to failure.*

---

While the thoughts expressed in the previous paragraphs suggest a negativity in terms of the COP 17 initiative, they should not detract from the sentiments expressed by the President in terms of the need to ensure that past initiatives become the building blocks for an implementable strategy. As the President correctly points out, a strategy that is not ambitious is doomed to failure. This is emphasized by reference to the gap between target emission levels and the levels required by science. Essentially, the question must be whether or not we can reduce levels to the extent that it will make a difference. This question is compounded by the increasing rate at which climate change will occur while it is being debated. Whether or not we have an adequate understanding of the levels required by science is, in itself, questionable. Despite these complications, it is important that the call for an ambitious programme is heeded.

In this respect, the President alludes to a link between climate change and other environmental concerns several times in his address. The focus cannot be on climate change in isolation. If it is argued – and it may well be argued – that we are fighting a losing battle against climate change, we cannot lose sight of the attention that still needs to be applied to environmental concerns in the broadest sense. These include those brought about or accelerated by climate change, leading to the required adaptation by communities.

There may be an analogy to the science of economics, and the laws of supply and demand, in this deliberation. Environmental degradation and the associated loss of resources is the subject of numerous research topics, conferences, policy formulations and political rhetoric. This is as it should be and represents attention to the supply side of the equation. A similar situation exists with respect to the demand side except that it probably does not appear to the same extent in political rhetoric. Political utterances suggesting curbing population growth are unlikely to produce the same results as the promise of benefits to the ever increasing population. In this respect, while political will to change things, enforce emission targets, or promote adaptation to change is essential, its impact is hindered by political objectives. Clearly, such objectives are influenced by the economic and strategic considerations of the countries involved. Avoidance of this situation is only possible through an awareness of what the President calls “the common good”. What is required is a realization at a global, national and even personal level that promotion of the common good is linked very strongly to the promotion of self-interest. This will require a change in strategic thinking in a number of countries and organizations.

Alternatively, acceptance of an authoritarian approach in a multilateral context may be beneficial, if not achievable, to implement a degree of demand side management. It may be impractical to propose this as a panacea, but this impracticality must be seen in the context of the dangers of oversimplification inherent in focusing on a single issue, even one as complex as climate change, at the expense of attention to the broader issue. The broader issue includes more tangible problems.