

Locating environmental justice in the internal anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, c.1970s-1994¹

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This article forms part of a wider long-term research project that focus on environment in the apartheid era in South Africa (1948-1994). The research involves various different strands which each has its own aim and includes producing a detailed analysis of both governmental and non-governmental environmental governance during this period; determining the direct and indirect environmental impacts of uncontrolled economic growth, and the environmental toll of apartheid policies in homelands and black townships; investigating the environmental impact of militarisation and the numerous South African military endeavours in the Southern Africa region in the 1970s and 1980s; detailing and evaluating the quality and quantity of “khaki” (i.e. military) conservation, and writing the history of environmental concern and activism within the anti-apartheid movement. The research is guided by the belief that looking at the apartheid-era through the lens of the environment enables researchers to uncover many unexplored injustices associated with this specific political system. In addition, this research adds to the developing literature and understanding of the environmental toll of repressive governance on a more general level.

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In 1990 Albie Sachs, the African National Congress legal expert, wrote:

It is not just playing with metaphors to say that we are fighting to free the land, the sky, the waters as well as the people. Apartheid not only degrades the inhabitants of our country, it degrades the earth, the air and the streams. When we say *Mayibuye iAfrica, come back Africa*, we are calling for the return of legal title, but also for restoration of the land, the forest and the atmosphere. The greening of our country is basic to its healing.²

Much was made in the 1990s of the green element in the struggle against apartheid in a series of publications that appeared in the important transitional years between 1990 and 1994, and

¹ The financial assistance of the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland that enabled the author to conduct archival and oral research in South Africa and the United Kingdom is gratefully acknowledged.

² Albie Sach as quoted in J. Cock, “ANC policy goes green”, *Mayibuye*, Jul 1992, p. 29.

in the period immediately after the African National Congress (ANC) came to power in May 1994. The vast majority of these publications came from a small number of academics, journalists, environmental and political activists closely associated with both the new wave of “radical” environmental activism (that dated back only to 1988) and to the internal anti-apartheid movement amongst mostly white liberals.³ Many in this select group were involved in attempts by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector to convince the anti-apartheid organisations of the need to incorporate the environment into the struggle agenda, which attempts were only successful by 1989 when Earthlife Africa (ELA) managed to convince delegates at the Mass Democratic Movement-organised Conference for a Democratic Future,⁴ held in December 1989, to adopt an environment-related resolution that read: “All South Africans have the right to a clean and healthy environment, and the preservation and rehabilitation of the environment forms part of the process of liberation.”⁵

Close cooperation between radical NGOs and especially the ANC and some trade unions such as the South African Chemical Workers Union and the Food and Allied Workers’ Union followed soon afterwards as they joined hands in a number of high-profile environmental campaigns such as those against Thor Chemicals and mercury pollution in Cato Ridge in Natal, gill netting and Taiwanese trawlers operating in South African territorial waters, the use of agrochemicals in Tala Valley in Natal and so forth.⁶ This state of affairs together with the massive policy development initiatives that followed between 1990 and the 1994 elections ensured that the freedom struggle acquired a green tint in the dying years of the apartheid era.⁷

³ See, for example, the various chapters in J. Cock and E. Koch (eds), *Going green: people, politics and the environment in South Africa*, Cape Town, 1991; M. Ramphele and C. McDowell (eds), *Restoring the land: environment and change in post-apartheid South Africa*, London, 1991; D. Hollowes (ed.), *Hidden faces. Environment, development, justice: South Africa and the global context*, Pietermaritzburg, 1993. See also E. Koch, D. Cooper and H. Coetzee, *Water, waste and wildlife: the politics of ecology in South Africa*, Johannesburg, 1990. For more information on “new environmentalism” in South Africa see P. Steyn and A. Wessels, “The emergence of new environmentalism in South Africa, 1988-1992”, *South African Historical Journal*, 42, May 2000, pp. 210-231.

⁴ This was a historic conference that brought together 4,600 activists from the broad anti-apartheid movement.

⁵ As quoted by F. Khan, “Environmentalism in South Africa: sociopolitical perspective”, *Macalester International*, 9, 2000, p. 167.

⁶ For more details see Steyn and Wessels, “The emergence of new environmentalism...”.

⁷ Especially important were the policy initiatives by both the apartheid government and that of the ANC. The apartheid government’s initiatives include the publication of the important 1991 *Report of the Three Committees of the President’s Council on a National Environmental Management System*. In terms of the ANC the most important was perhaps the work undertaken by Canada’s International Development Research Centre in partnership with the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African National Civic Organisation between 1991 and 1995. This led to the publication of a four volume set entitled *Building a new*

The purpose of this article is to examine the ways in which environmental issues figured in the internal struggle against apartheid between c.1970 and 1994 in order to determine if the anti-apartheid struggle actively promoted environmental justice in the country. The research was guided by three questions: firstly, did the mainstream anti-apartheid movement actively promote environmental justice in South Africa? Secondly, can the adoption of the environment on the struggle agenda from 1989 onwards be viewed as fighting for environmental justice? Thirdly, who were actively involved in struggles for environmental justice in apartheid South Africa, and what did they focus on?

The article is organised in an unorthodox fashion and starts off by focusing on environment in the mainstream internal anti-apartheid movement between 1988 and 1994. Attention is directed to three organisations, each representing one of the three main political orientations within the broad struggle against apartheid. The organisations are the ANC, founded in 1912 and representing the dominant Chartist view;⁸ the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), founded in 1959 and representing Pan-Africanism,⁹ and the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo), which was founded in 1978 and was the main Black Consciousness¹⁰ organisation active in South Africa at the end of apartheid. This section argues that the green hue acquired by the mainstream internal anti-apartheid struggle in the dying years of apartheid, though an important development, can only be viewed as being part of environmental policy development and does not constitute evidence of the struggle fighting for environmental justice for people of colour in the country. The article then projects attention backwards and starting with the Black Community Programmes launched by the Black Consciousness Movement in 1972, identifies and discusses initiatives amongst people of colour in South Africa that falls within the broad definition of environmental justice. The main argument of this article is that credit for fighting for environmental justice in apartheid South Africa does not lie with the dominant anti-apartheid organisations; much rather, it is to be found in the

South Africa of which two volumes, namely Vol. 2: Urban Policy and Vol. 4: Environment, Reconstruction and Development were very important and formed the basis of the ANC's environmental policy from 1994 onwards.

⁸ This refers to the 1955 Freedom Charter which stood for a multi-racial, democratic South Africa.

⁹ The PAC broke away from the ANC in 1959 because of their cooperation with white, coloured and Indian groups. They supported the universal Pan-Africanist slogan: "Africa for the Africans".

¹⁰ Black Consciousness emerged at the end of the 1960 amongst black student leaders, of which Steven Biko is the best known, and stood for the cooperation between black, coloured and Indian with the aim of instilling pride and self-worth amongst these communities. They opposed cooperation with white people in general, but white liberals in particular.

initiatives of small, locally-based organisations and individuals who set out to transform the lives of those in its immediate environments for the better.

It is important to note that the term environmental justice, within the context of apartheid South Africa, requires a much wider definition than what is normally used in the literature to identify struggles that falls within the American environmental justice movement, where this term originated. Apartheid with its plethora of legislation that legalized racism in literally all aspects of people's lives led to the creation of what Ducre calls racialized spaces. This he defines as:

Historic practice and spatial designation of a particular area for racial and ethnic minorities as a means of containment and social control. This practice serves to reinforce preconceived notions of Otherness or, result in the creation of culturally inferior Other.”¹¹

The only difference in apartheid South Africa was that those who lived in these racialized spaces were not racial and ethnic minorities but in fact constituted the vast majority of the South African population.

The racialization of space during the apartheid era and in particular the designation of black people¹² as “visitors” to so-called “white” cities, in turn subjected both rural and urban black communities to widespread environmental injustice. Because the apartheid government did not regard black people as permanent inhabitants of cities until the 1980s, little to no planning went into black urban communities leaving them overcrowded and degraded with massive shortages in housing and basic services and infrastructure. Black rural communities, on the other hand, became equally neglected and overcrowded. With more than 60% of the total South African population squeezed into just 13% of the country's land, black rural communities were already severely overpopulated and the soil eroded *before* apartheid was implemented from 1948 onwards. The situations in bantustans¹³ merely deteriorated after that date in no small part due to the absence of development and job opportunities in these territories, but also due to forced removals that saw the forced removal of over 3.5 million

¹¹ K.A. Ducre, “Racialized spaces and the emergence of environmental injustice”, S.H. Washington, P.C. Rosier and H. Goodall (eds), *Echoes from the poisoned well: global memories of environmental injustice*, Langham, 2006, p. 112.

¹² Readers should note that race is a complicated issue in South Africa. During the apartheid era there officially existed 4 races: white people, black people, Coloured people (i.e. mixed blood) and Indians. In this article the term “people of colour” is used to refer to black people, Coloured people and Indians collectively. The term “Africans” are not used to denote black people since all races in South Africa are in fact Africans.

¹³ Bantustans were territories set aside for black communities in South Africa. Ten were created in the areas where specific black ethnic groups historically resided. Each Bantustan catered for a specific black ethnic group.

people between 1960 and 1983 alone which in turn created even more overcrowding and resource overexploitation in the fragile bantustan environments.¹⁴ In addition, the bantustans were government by ethnic authorities who had neither the resources nor the inclination to develop rural communities which left huge areas without access to even the most basic of infrastructure and services.

Given this state of affairs along with the widespread environmental injustice that rural and urban communities inhabited by people of colour had to endure, in the article the terms environmental justice is used to refer to programmes and initiatives that aimed at remedying the dismal natural and human environments in which people of colour had to live during the apartheid years. The research was guided in particular by Bryant's description of environmental justice which, in his view, focuses

Either on ameliorating potentially life-threatening conditions or improving the overall quality of life for the indigent or people of colour...The challenge is to overcome political and social inertia and make political and social change possible for a more equitable and environmentally just society.¹⁵

During the apartheid era overcoming social inertia to tackle environmental problems with communities inhabited by people of colour was particularly important and this article argues that herein lays the "real" South African environmental justice movement during the apartheid years. Overcoming the political inertia, on the other hand, was not a success during the apartheid years, mainly for two reasons: firstly, the apartheid regime resolutely refused to relinquish their hold on power and allow the free participation of all South Africans in political process until 1990. A second and equally important factor was unwillingness of the mainstream anti-apartheid organisations to recognise that improving the dismal and hazardous natural and human environments, in which the vast majority of their supporters had to live, was important. For the anti-apartheid organisations the struggle was about obtaining political rights and control over the government, and not ensuring that township environments were healthy. It will become clear in the next section that even after the internal anti-apartheid organisations acknowledged that the environment was an important political issue from 1989 onwards, they did little concrete to improve the hazardous human and natural environments in which people of colour had to live. They were not alone in this

¹⁴ L. PLatzky and C. Walker, *The surplus people: forced removals in South Africa*, Johannesburg, 1985, p. 9.

¹⁵ B. Bryant, "Introduction", B. Bryant (ed.), *Environmental justice: issues, policies, and solutions*, Washington, D.C., 1995, p. 6.

neglect: political parties ignored the environmental plight of people of colour in equal measure in the apartheid era.

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As mentioned in the introduction, the environment was only adopted into the broad struggle agenda in 1989 when ELA finally managed to convince the ANC that the environment was a political issue and an anti-apartheid issue because of the widespread detrimental impact of apartheid policies on the human and natural environments of people of colour in South Africa. ELA was only founded the year before, in August 1988, by a diverse group of students from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, who felt that the mainstream environmental movement, with its firmly apolitical nature and conservation focus, did not address the “real” environmental problems of the country. Inspired by the political philosophy of the German party Die Grünen, ELA incorporated politics on their environmental agenda from the outset, and thereby became an important “legal” space (i.e. not banned) for white anti-apartheid activists following the unprecedented clampdown on anti-apartheid activities by the government in 1988 when 31 anti-apartheid organisations were banned. According to two founding members, Greg Jacobs and Peter Lukey, the ELA provided a new “legal” home for anti-apartheid activists to voice their opposition to the apartheid system, while the environment became a new unexplored frontier on which to oppose the regime. ELA, from its inception, therefore actively campaigned for the demise of the apartheid system which, in their view, was the cause of most of the environmental problems in the country. Convincing the mainstream anti-apartheid movement and activists that the environmental movement also cared about the plight of people of colour was not an easy task. The reason for this was rather simple: the South African environmental movement was dominated by conservation issues up till the 1990s with wildlife conservation initiatives being the most popular. In addition, over the years the white environmental NGOs had showed themselves unwilling and unable to address those issues important to people of colour such as poverty, lack of housing, provision of basic services and land. This neglect of the environmental concerns of people of colour, coupled with the participation of some environmental NGOs in activities in which people of colour were denied access to their traditional land and resources, ensured a negative attitude amongst people of colour towards most of the environmental NGOs in South Africa by the end of the 1980s. It also did not help that white South Africa in 1989 clearly cared more about the plight of the black rhinoceros

with Rhino Pledge Day succeeding in raising more than R1.5 million.¹⁶ Obed Musi summed up the attitudes of people of colour very well in a comment in the *Cape Times* at the time:

If I never hear a word about the black rhino and its preservation again, it will be too soon. Here's the country in a mess and all that can be done is to collect... [money] to preserve an animal that to me is as useless as the dinosaur...¹⁷

By December 1989, however, the ELA's negotiations with anti-apartheid activists and organisations finally paid off. The Conference on a Democratic Future, as mentioned earlier, adopted an environmental resolution in their final body of resolutions, and the ANC issued the organisation's first statement on the environment. This was issued by Max Sisulu, the head of the ANC's Department of Economics and Planning, and in this statement the ANC laid the blame for all the environmental problems in South Africa on the apartheid system and stated that the system not only involved the manipulation of racial groups, but also of natural resources. Widespread overgrazing, soil erosion and land deterioration were seen as "inevitable destructive consequences of apartheid". It adopted a stance against nuclear energy in the belief that the country had enough coal and solar resources to produce sufficient energy for the whole country. The organisation also supported the new trend to involve communities in wildlife conservation, which it saw as a way to counter poaching.¹⁸

Already by October 1990 the environment appeared in the ANC prototype Bill of Rights with Article 12 focusing on Environmental Rights noting in particular the right of every South African to a clean environment and the need to promote sustainable development policies to ensure future development.¹⁹ Nelson Mandela reaffirmed the ANC's commitment to the environment when he stated at the launch of the important book *Going green*, edited by Jacklyn Cock and Eddie Koch, on 20 August 1991 that

¹⁶ Interview: G. Jacobs and P. Lukey, Johannesburg, 5.3.1998; M.S. Steyn, "Environmentalism in South Africa, 1972-1992: an historical perspective", M.A. dissertation, University of the Free State, 1998, pp. 157-158, 161-164; Koch, Cooper and Coetzee, *Water, waste and wildlife*, p. 2; C. Walker, "The Rhino and Elephant Foundation", *African Panorama*, 40, 5 (1995), pp. 50-54; F. Khan, "Contemporary South African environmental response: an historical and socio-political evaluation with particular reference to blacks", M.A. dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1990, pp. 47-60, 98.

¹⁷ *Cape Times*, 14.11.1989 as quoted in Khan, "Environmentalism in South Africa", p. 168.

¹⁸ E. Koch, "ANC puts its policy on ecology", *The Weekly Mail*, 1-7.12.1989, p. 10; Khan, "Contemporary South African environmental response", pp. 69-71; J. L'Ange, "Who's the greenest of them all?", *Femina*, February 1991, p. 47.

¹⁹ LBM, ANC Luthuli House, Box 74 Folder 20: ANC Constitutional Committee, *A Bill of Rights for a new South Africa: a working document*, October 1990, article 12.

the ANC sees the preservation and the rehabilitation of the environment as part of our liberation struggle. This is why what are called Third Generation Rights or more popularly – Green Rights – are included in our proposed Bill of Rights. Like all other human rights they are inalienable.²⁰

This commitment to the environment from the ANC during the transitional phase found its most definite expression in the inclusion of environmental issues in the 1992 ANC Policy Guidelines for a Democratic South Africa. In this document the ANC committed itself to fulfilling the right of all South African citizens to a safe and healthy environment, and to a life of well-being. Their guiding principles were sustainable development; equitable access to environmental resources; public participation in all planning decisions which affect the development and management of natural resources; public rights of access to information and the courts on issues of environmental concern; an integrated approach to environmental issues, and global cooperation in environmental policy and management.²¹ The proverbial cherry on the cake that proved just how green the ANC was, was their inclusion of the environment as a key element of the all-important Reconstruction and Development Programme programme that formed the basis of the ANC's 1994 election manifesto and their post-election development programme.²²

The Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) also started to make some pro-environment noises during the transitional phase. They published their first environmental policy in October 1990 which, though widely attributed to Barney Desai, was in fact written by the South African academic and activist Farieda Khan. The document acknowledged that black South Africans regarded environmental considerations with indifference and hostility and addressed specific issues such as alternative energy, toxic waste and air pollution. Emphasis was further placed on the need for a balance between environmental planning and the provision of basic needs.²³

²⁰ LBM, ANC Luthuli House, Box 70 Folder 37: President Nelson Mandela, Speech at launch of *Going Green*, 20 August 1991.

²¹ LBM, ANC Botswana Mission, Box 1 Folder 10: ANC, *ANC policy guidelines for a democratic South Africa as adopted at National Conference 28-31 May 1992*, pp. 23-24. This statement on the environment included in the policy guidelines came from what Max Sisulu called the “environmental workers” and was formulated at a series of meetings and brainstorming events in the first few months of 1992. It formed part of the tasks of the ANC Department of Economic Planning that was headed by Max Sisulu. LBM, ANC Luthuli House, Box 74 Folder 20: Letter from Max Sisulu on Environmental Policy Development in the ANC, 24.3.1992.

²² ANC, *The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP): a policy framework* (1994), available at: <<http://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02039/04lv02103/05lv02120/06lv02126.htm>>, section 2.10 “The Environment”.

²³ L'Ange, “Who's the greenest of them all?”, p. 48; Koch, Cooper and Coetzee, *Water, waste and wildlife*, p. 13; Informal conversations between author and Farieda Khan; B. Desai, “An environmental policy for the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania”, South African History Archive, *History in the making: documents reflecting a changing South Africa*, 1, 3 (Jan 1991), pp. 46-49.

In environmental terms, the PAC was much more cautious than the ANC. They did accept sustainable development in principle, but “with the understanding that a prerequisite for sustainability is that disparities in social, economic and political development be ended.”²⁴ The environment was given a further boost when the new national executive council of the PAC, elected in December 1990 at the organisation’s second national congress, included for the first time a Secretary for Environmental Affairs, which position was filled by Dr Solly Skosana.²⁵ The PAC never really moved beyond their concern for poverty relief and land reform, and their environmental policy remained essentially sceptical about sustainable development despite the fact that they, along with the ANC, sent an official delegation to the 1992 Earth Summit and had addressed the official deliberations. At the Earth Summit the ANC endorsed the main principles and guidelines of Agenda 21 in their paper, while the PAC used the opportunity to present their energy policy which, like all liberation movement organisations, included a strong denunciation of the use of nuclear energy by the South African government.²⁶

In the official narrative of environmental activities and concerns of the anti-apartheid movement, there is no record of any positive environment-related initiatives pursued by the Azapo. Much rather, Azapo is as a rule singled-out for their insensitive attitude towards the natural environment which stems from a widely quoted statement made by Dr Gomolemo Mokao, an Azapo Vice President in the former Transvaal, who wrote in an article in September 1990 in the magazine *Frontline* that “we have better things to do than run along with the bandwagons of ignorant white people who need an interest to fill their time”.²⁷ Significantly, Mokao’s motivation for not supporting green issues is always left out in discussions, including the widely consulted article by L’Ange that most authors prefer to cite. In the original article Mokao explains his opposition to green issues by stating: “Now at the

²⁴ Desai, “An environmental policy for the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania”, p. 47.

²⁵ LBM, PAC London Mission, Box 32 Folder: PAC Tanzania miscellaneous 1987-93: Press release by the PAC National Congress.

²⁶ LBM, PAC UN Mission, Boxes 1, 31 and 67; D. Cooper, “South Africa after UNCED?” in Hallows (ed.), *Hidden faces*, pp. 33-34; R.P. Wynberg, “Exploring the Earth Summit: Findings of the Rio United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: implications for South Africa”, M.Phil. dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1993, pp. 16-17. It is noteworthy to add that the South African government was not invited to 1992 Earth Summit and were only allowed to send an observer team after much negotiation with the organisers.

²⁷ G. Mokao, “The greens leave me cold”, *Frontline*, Sept 1990, pp. 28-29. See also L’Ange, “Who’s the greenest of them all?”, p. 48.

height of vogue, the green movement agitates on behalf of flora, of fauna, of the entire animal kingdom with but one exception: black mankind.’’²⁸

Unlike the ANC, Azapo took a long time to be convinced of the value of including the environment on their political agenda. Their cynicism about the motivations of groups such as ELA meant that, unlike the ANC and the PAC, they did not enter into relationships with environmental activists and organisations. These relationships were very important to the ANC and the PAC during the transitional phase and the environmental activists played key roles in environmental policy making process within both organisations as well as help them prepare for the 1992 Earth Summit.²⁹ The absence of strong ties with the environmental movement, as well as Azapo’s non-involvement in Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, however, did not mean that this organisation was anti-environment in the final years of apartheid. Indeed, from the consulted archival sources it is clear that Azapo started to pay attention to environmental matters from 1992 onwards. By September 1992 Azapo documents already refer to the existence of an Environmental Affairs secretariat within the central organisation which were headed by Sol Raphalalani.³⁰ Azapo’s leader, Oupa Ngwenya, had by then also dwelt on development issues in an address to the Youth Summit Conference held in June 1992.³¹ Like the PAC, Azapo’s environmental concerns centred round the land issue and land reform and repossession were therefore essential in their view in transforming apartheid South Africa. Azapo did go a bit further and requested its branches to form committees to combat “dirt” in their immediate vicinity, discuss environmental degradation, promote awareness about environmental issues amongst individual members, and to campaign for better living and working conditions.³² Whether this call was ever really headed is impossible to tell from the consulted documents.

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²⁸ Mokao, “The greens leave me cold”, p. 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.28-29. See also contents of LBM, ANC Lutuli House, Box 73 Folder 19 and Box 74 Folder 20 both of which contain environmental documents for the period 1991-1994.

³⁰ LBM, Azapo/BCMA collection, Box 10: Meeting of the Secretaries, 20.9.1992. Unfortunately no date is provided for the establishment of the Environmental Affairs secretariat and this document is the first reference to its existence in this particular archival collection.

³¹ LBM, Azapo/BCMA collection, Box 14: Oupa Ngwenya address to the Youth Summit Conference, 13.6.1992.

³² For more information see the environment-related documents in LBM, Azapo/BCMA collection, Box 11: Conferences and workshops, undated.

From the preceding discussion it is clear that documentary evidence, both archival and contemporary, does corroborate the claim that the freedom struggle against apartheid acquired a green tone in the dying years of the apartheid regime. However, does this really prove that the mainstream internal anti-apartheid movement, as was claimed in the post-1994 period, fought for environmental justice? Or, stated differently, did the mainstream anti-apartheid organisations really actively participate in initiatives to improve the dismal human and natural environments in which people of colour had to live during the apartheid era? So far the available documentary and oral resources on the struggle indicate that the short answer to both questions is NO. In addition, there is further no evidence that the ANC, PAC and Azapo were actively involved in any of the environmental struggles that emerged at the time when they finally adopted the environment into their political agendas. The struggle against the widespread soil and water pollution caused by Thor Chemicals, a mercury recycling plant situated at Cato Ridge in KwaZulu-Natal is a good case in point. This environmental struggle was launched in April 1990 by ELA, the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, residents from Fredville (the local township situated next to plant), farmers from the Tala Valley and Greenpeace USA. Their struggle received no direct support from any of the mainstream anti-apartheid organisations despite it being a “classic case” for the environmental justice movement in the sense that both the workers (who were mostly black people) and the residents of the local black township were exposed to abnormally and dangerously high levels of mercury pollution with the consent of the South African government.³³

The sad truth is that the mainstream anti-apartheid movement in South Africa cared very little about improving the human and natural environments in which people of colour had to live during the apartheid era. Their struggle was for political rights and the hope was that everything else would be fine and fall into place after this goal was achieved (history has showed that this was not necessarily the case in the post-apartheid period where the environment is concerned).³⁴ Against this backdrop of neglecting to address environmental issues, the work of those individuals and organisations that worked to overcome the social

³³ Soil and water samples taken in the area in February 1990 showed that mercury levels were as much as 1,000 times higher than what was permitted by law, while the organic content in the mercury was well above 30%. Steyn, “Environmentalism in South Africa, 1972-1992”, pp. 184-186; Commission of Inquiry into Thor Chemicals, *Report of the first phase*, Cape Town, 1997, *passim*.

³⁴ For a discussion on the continuities between how the apartheid government and the ANC government viewed and governed the South African environment, see P. Steyn, “The lingering environmental impact of repressive governance: the environmental legacy of the apartheid era for the new South Africa”, *Globalizations*, 2, 3, Dec 2005, pp. 391-402.

inertia towards the environmental concerns of people of colour in order to affect real social change becomes very important. Space limitations does not permit a comprehensive discussion, therefore the section that follows will only provide a brief overview of the most important initiatives.

Perhaps the most important contribution in helping people of colour overcome their political and social inertia during the apartheid era was the work done by the Black Consciousness Movement. Black Consciousness (BC), which emerged in the late 1960s, placed a very strong emphasis on instilling pride and self-worth amongst people of colour, and in the upliftment and promotion of self-reliance within these communities. Their views found concrete expression in 1972 in the founding of the Black Community Programmes (BCP) which set out to actively transform the living environments of rural and urban communities inhabited by people of colour. Arguably the most successful of these programmes were launched in 1973 in Zinyoka, situated next to King Wiliamstown in the Eastern Cape, where Steven Biko and Dr Mamphela Ramphele established the successful Zanempilo health clinic. The latter in turn led to the establishment of numerous other programmes within the broader Zinyoka community that focused in particular on the development of self-reliance. The BCP, however, came to an end in October 1977, a month after the death of Steven Biko in police custody, when the apartheid government declared all BC organisations, including BCP, illegal.³⁵

The BCP philosophy along with the 1976 Soweto uprisings in turn inspired some concerned individuals to start addressing rural and community development. Of particular importance was the founding of the Environmental and Development Agency (EDA) in 1976 by a group of white graduates with the aim to directly participate in community development work in the bantustans by offering technical advice on agriculture, technology, health and education. This was not done from a distance; much rather EDA staff went to live in rural black communities and actively trained community members to do their own development work.³⁶ One such individual that was trained as an EDA fieldworker was Japtha Lekgetho, a former school teacher from Dobsonville in Soweto. Lekgetho went on to found the National Environmental Awareness Campaign (NEAC) in Soweto in 1978. NEAC originated when Lekgetho appealed to the Soweto youth in 1978 to help him clean a stretch of polluted land in Soweto

³⁵ L. Hadfield, "Biko, Black Consciousness, and 'the System' eZinyoka: oral history and black consciousness in practice in a rural Ciskei village", *South African Historical Journal*, 62, 1, 2010, pp. 78-99.

³⁶ South African History Archive (SAHA), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, AL 2457, U2.2: EDA, *Rural woman meet*, 1985; *Link*, 12, March 1979.

and 5,000 young people turned up to participate. The piece of land was thereafter transformed into a park called Domeno and was the first green, open space in Soweto. NEAC's objectives were the promotion of environmental awareness amongst Soweto inhabitants (by 1980 he had already set up more than 30 environmental clubs amongst the youth in this township), the organisation of waste removal services (Operation Clean Up), the establishment of clean and safe play areas for the youth, and the general beautification of Soweto through the planting of trees.³⁷ Lekgetho was also an outspoken critic of the apartheid system and in interviews and publications repeatedly emphasised the link between apartheid and the dismal conditions in black townships, with statements such as "blacks have always had to live in an environment that was neither beautiful nor clean. We have not had proper housing, roads or services because the authorities would not accept that we were a permanent part of the city scene".³⁸ NEAC's influence remained essentially limited to those areas in Soweto where they were active due to a lack of funds, but did serve as inspiration for other like-minded organisations that were established in the 1980s. These include Abalimi Bezekhaya (1982) who worked in black and Coloured communities in the greater Cape Town area, the Africa Tree Centre (1984 - Edendale), Natsoc (1984 - the Cape Flats), Ecolink (1985 - Gazankulu, KaNgwane and Lebowa) and Khanyisa (1988 - Langa, Guguletu and Khayelitsha).³⁹

The 1980s also saw the "discovery" in South Africa of the environmental risks involved in asbestos mining and in particular for the communities located next to asbestos mines. Despite the fact that asbestos had been mined in the country since 1906, environmental laws pertaining to this industry were not enforced until 1985 when the magisterial districts of Barberton, Carolina, Hay, Kuruman, Pietersburg, Postmasburg, Prieska and Vryburg were declared dust control areas for the first time. The Mafefe district in Lebowa, on the other hand, was only declared a dust control zone in 1989. The Johannesburg-based National Institute for Occupational Health did much to publicise the detrimental health impacts of asbestos on miners and neighbouring communities, and after their 1988 study found that 40% of the total respondents of their health survey of the Mafefe district had pleural changes, the government were left with no other option than to start with the rehabilitation of these

³⁷ For more information see contents of entire folder labelled DCD 2412 27/2/3/2/1 Vol. 5 located in the South African National Archives (SAB) in Pretoria.

³⁸ J. Lekgetho as quoted by J. Cock, "Ozone-friendly politics", *Work in Progress* 66, May 1990, p. 29.

³⁹ C. Cooper, "People, the environment, and change", *South African Institute of Race Relations Spotlight*, 5, 94, October 1994, pp. 12-13, 25-26, 38-40, 52-54, 58-59; Khan, "Contemporary South African environmental response", pp. 106-108, 110-112, 121-122.

communities. The example of Mafefe, in particular, was very important and at the time this community became symbolic of the disproportionate environmental risks many people of colour had to face on a daily basis in their immediate living and working environments due to apartheid policies.⁴⁰

From the preceding it should be clear that during the apartheid era there were some individuals and organisations, of all colours and races, who actively worked towards improving the local environments of some communities inhabited by people of colour. Their work might not have covered much of South Africa, but in the areas that they worked in, they made a real difference in improving the quality of lives of the local communities. It is in their work that the struggle for environmental justice in apartheid South Africa can be located, and not in the activities of the mainstream anti-apartheid organisations such as the ANC, PAC and Azapo.

⁴⁰ M. Felix, "Risking their lives in ignorance: the story of an asbestos-polluted community", Cock and Koch (eds), *Going green*, pp. 33-43; P.H.R. Snyman, "Safety and health in the Northern Cape blue asbestos belt", *Historia*, 33, 1, May 1988, pp. 31-52; J. McCulloch, *Asbestos blues: labour, capital, physicians and the state in South Africa*, Oxford, 2002, *passim*.