

In 2010, The World Bank lent Eskom 3.75 billion dollars to build the Medupi power station. Some of the material conditions under which the loan was granted were that Medupi would install Flu-gas Desulfurization (FGD) and that Eskom would meet South Africa's air quality emissions standards and legislation. Both conditions were touted as being some of the advantages of Medupi: it would be a “cleaner”, supercritical coal-fired power station different from Eskom's dirty plants in the Witbank region and a central condition to The World Bank's loan to Eskom.

However, over the past three months and with approval from The World Bank, Eskom has been seeking to exempt itself for most of its fleet of coal-fired power stations from South African air quality regulations and is delaying FGD at Medupi for several years. The overall effect of Eskom's machinations is that Medupi will not be bound to limits in terms of the amounts of particulate matter (PM), sulfur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, mercury, arsenic, chromium, nickel, other heavy metals, acid gases, and hydrocarbons that can be emitted. The primary reason Eskom gives is that obeying South Africa's environmental regulations will be too costly.

Earthlife Africa Jhb's Project Coordinator, Tristen Taylor, states, “Neither The World Bank nor Eskom seem to be particularly concerned about the health impacts of Medupi being exempted from air quality standards or from FGD being so delayed that the likelihood of it ever being installed enters the realm of miracles. This violates the contract the Bank and Eskom made with the people of Lephalale: they promised to prevent dangerous and possibly lethal pollution, but now prefer excessive profits instead. In effect, The World Bank and Eskom lied to us all.”

groundWork and Earthlife Africa Jhb have attempted to have The World Bank, Eskom and the Department for Environmental Affairs institute and implement the laws of South Africa in terms of emissions from Medupi [1]. This has been unsuccessful to date. Both organisations call on the Department for Environmental Affairs and The World Bank to stop Eskom from going ahead with its plan to make Medupi an uncontrolled and unregulated source of preventable pollution.

By not instituting known and commercially viable pollution abatement measures, The World Bank and Eskom are passing on the real costs of generating energy from coal to local communities, agriculture and business who will have to endure the damage caused. The real tragedy is not only that these negative impacts (see details below) are preventable but Medupi was designed to incorporate FGD and to meet air quality standards. Eskom simply wants to increase its profits, and The World Bank seems to be content for its money not to be used for pollution abatement. One might surmise, at this stage, that The World Bank's overriding concern is profiting from the loan no matter the cost to people's health or the environment.

groundWork's Environmental Campaigner, Rico Euripidou, states, “Not meeting SA's weak air quality emissions and ambient air quality standards--which are generally lower than globally accepted standards--will have profound health impacts on local communities already over-burdened with HIV/AIDS, TB and sub-standard services.”

The pollutants that Medupi will generate will have negative impacts on people's lives and health. Particulate matter emitted during coal combustion generates small particles less than 2.5 micrometers (PM_{2.5}) which travel deep into the airways. This leads to asthma, decrements in lung function, emergency department visits and hospital admissions for infections and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Inhalation of PM_{2.5} has also been linked to cardiovascular disease and death.

Sulfur dioxide (SO₂) emitted by coal burning power plants leads to inflammation and hyper responsiveness of the airways, aggravates bronchitis, decreases lung function, and increases hospitalizations for asthma and other respiratory conditions, and asthma emergency department visits in susceptible individuals, particularly among children and adults over 65.

Oxides of nitrogen are by-products of fossil fuel combustion and react with chemicals in the atmosphere to create ozone (smog) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂). NO₂ exposure among asthmatic children can increase wheezing, cough, and decrements in lung function. Exposure to air pollution (containing SO₂, PM, NO₂, and ozone) during pregnancy can cause low birth weight.