

Putting poverty and inequality reduction at the heart of SA's green economy transition

Dr Andreas Scheba, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, *Ms Setsoheng Mayeki*, Research Assistant and *Dr Amber Huff*, Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies (U.K.) and ESRC STEPS Centre discuss how South Africa's green economy can positively contribute to the country's quest to reduce poverty and inequality.



Homeless men in Cape Town CBD.
Credit: HSRC Communication and Stakeholder Relations

This article argues that the reduction of poverty and inequality must be at the centre of South Africa's green economy transition. Therefore, HSRC researchers and social scientists/humanities more generally, have an important role to play in contributing practical and policy-relevant knowledge that can bring the concerns of marginalised groups to the fore of sustainability debates. The article reports on recent activities within a British Academy Newton Mobility grant project, which aimed to address and provide answers to the questions of how green economy initiatives can work better for the poor in South Africa.

The rise of the green economy

The green economy has become a buzzword globally. In South Africa, it has firmly taken root among local policy makers, civil society organisations and business associations, who frequently refer to it in their public speeches and official communication. Recently, it has become an indispensable element of major national policy frameworks and strategies, making it the official path to sustainable development in the country.

The Medium Term Strategic Framework, National Strategy for Sustainable Development and Action Plan, New Growth Path, National Climate Change Response, National Development Plan and Green Economy Accord all point to our government's commitment to a green economy transition.

Politically, the green economy has gained traction during the global economic crisis in 2008. Amidst heightened levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, international organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Bank and OECD have promoted the idea of 'green growth' as a way to revive growth, create inclusive economies, generate jobs and develop new green industries, all while reducing environmental damages and protecting our planet's invaluable natural resources. These global and national political commitments have brought about new considerable sources of finance and other public support that aim to unlock opportunities for achieving sustainable and inclusive growth.

Green economy in a context of poverty and inequality

But how well do green economy initiatives contribute to overcoming major challenges of poverty reduction, employment creation and achieving a more just, equitable and prosperous world for all? What are the risks of green economy initiatives actually reinforcing existing inequalities and socio-economic exclusions that are so prevalent in a country like South Africa? There are many reasons for remaining cautious. Countless examples exist around the world where well-intended environmental policies resulted in livelihood losses and increased hardship to the poor, while enriching an elite minority. Such processes of 'green grabbing' have occurred in all kinds of sectors (water, forests, energy, land, waste) and geographical regions, crossing urban and rural divides. Against this backdrop, how do we ensure that green economy initiatives actually work for and not against the poor in South Africa? How can we put concerns of marginalised groups at the forefront of the green economy transition and build a productive society that is truly inclusive, equal and sustainable?

Tackling these questions through a new partnership

These questions were at the heart of recent activities organised by Dr Andreas Scheba from EPD in the HSRC and Dr Amber Huff from the Institute of Development Studies/STEPS Centre, as part of a British Academy Newton Mobility grant partnership project. From 29th May until 6th June, Dr Huff and Dr Scheba conducted training workshops, public seminar + roundtable, group discussions and a stakeholder engagement workshop that built capacity within the EPD unit, and initiated new partnerships with external green economy stakeholders and academic research institutions. During the first two days, a small but dynamic group of young researchers within EPD participated with other researchers from UCT and CSIR in a training workshop where conceptual and methodological tools were discussed to engage in sustainability research. The workshop provided an open platform where interactive learning from each other's experience/ knowledge in the field took place. The diverse background and knowledge base of the participants led to great discussions, new insights and widened participants' perspectives.

The public seminar and roundtable discussion, that brought together a diverse group of researchers, government officials and civil society members to discuss South Africa's green economy vision and practices, reaffirmed the project's primary premise of strengthening social science research in sustainability debates. Participants highlighted the important task of bringing to the fore the different viewpoints, values and meanings of the 'green economy' among the public, the complex interdependencies within socio-ecological relations, and how institutions, power, and politics shape the costs and benefits of changing resource use

and consumption. Participants articulated the clear need for inter- or transdisciplinary research that can cut across traditional academic boundaries, and communicate with a range of stakeholders to co-create useful and policy-relevant knowledge that can help to overcome the grand challenges of the 21st century.

Some of the themes discussed in the public seminar also came to the fore in the stakeholder engagement workshop titled "Bamboo and sustainable development in South Africa" that was hosted in Durban. The commercialisation of bamboo has experienced growing interest in South Africa and other African countries as a promising way to promote local economic development, climate change mitigation, and landscape rehabilitation. The South African Green Fund, our country's major public finance initiative to kick start the green economy, provided R161 million (R97 million non-recoverable grant and R64 million recoverable grant) to the Green Grid Beema Bamboo project in Kwa-Zulu Natal to demonstrate the environmental and financial benefits of commercial bamboo cultivation for bioenergy. However, the project and other similar bamboo initiatives have faced many challenges including local conflicts over land, complex and plural governance arrangements, heterogeneous communities with varied interests, financial and technical challenges of setting up and operating the plantation, management of labour, environmental risks and trade-offs, market uncertainty and underdeveloped policy and regulatory framework. When participants came together in groups to discuss these challenges, the key lesson was that managing social, political and economic dynamics will be decisive in shaping the outcomes and success of a green economy initiative like this.

Researching the green economy within its social, political and economic context

As the green economy is an emerging phenomenon in South Africa, there is an important opportunity for the HSRC and social scientists in general, to shape the design and implementation of the transition. As the STEPS Centre at the University of Sussex has highlighted for several years now, there are many pathways to sustainable development, each relying on different processes and leading to different outcomes. The imperative for us is then to engage in the complex sustainability debate, and open up discussions about what different people mean and want from the 'green economy' and how policies and practices become embedded in specific social, political and economic contexts. The challenge is to go beyond a narrowly technical understanding of the green transition and recognise the inevitable trade-offs, conflicts and institutional configurations that influence opportunities and losses created by green growth in specific places, as well as across scales. Practical and policy-relevant knowledge, informed by social science research using multiple-methods and sound theory, has thus an indispensable role to play in assisting marginalised groups to voice their concerns and participate in the design, implementation and benefit-sharing of South Africa's green economy transition. Especially as HSRC researchers, our task must be to put the objective of an inclusive economy that actually reduces poverty and inequality in all their forms and guises at the centre of sustainable development discussions, and provide policy-makers and the public with the right tools to realise this vision.

