

“Energy is fundamentally political” Interview with Tasneem Essop on the development of decentralised renewable energy systems

Ms Essop, you recently founded the Energy Democracy Initiative in South Africa. What is its goal?

The essential objective of the Energy Democracy Initiative is to support the building of people’s power. All the challenges that we face in the world – poverty, inequality, climate change – are

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connected in some way. The giant transformation we are going to have to go through in the world and in South Africa in particular will require very strong engagement on the part of ordinary citizens.

So the starting point for the Energy Democracy Initiative is the recognition that people have power, that they have agency and that they have to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives. Very often, well-intentioned initiatives, projects and programmes happen on behalf of people without their participation, without their inclusion. I’m a very strong believer in participatory democracy. It is something we fought for fiercely in our country. Currently, I feel that we are losing that element of democracy. Today, democracy is regarded as election time: when you vote for a party, that’s the subtotal of democracy.

Additionally, we will have to deal with climate change. Climate change will increase poverty, make the most vulnerable even poorer and cause even more inequalities. The Energy Democracy Initiative tries to use renewable energy as a hook for bringing all of this together.

What project phases are planned to achieve that goal?

In the end, we would like to have established community-owned decentralised renewable energy systems. The initiative is planning three phases to get there. Each phase takes about a year. You have to invest time to be able to get sustainable results. The first phase is basic training: What is energy? What is climate change? What is democracy? We explore these issues together with participants who are selected by four communities. We call them our “Energy Democracy Champions”.

In the second phase, I will be supported by a science and industrial research council in South Africa. They will do the technical training. During this phase, the Energy Democracy Champions will learn how to plan a decentralised mini-grid system for their community. The entire planning will be done by themselves, not by an external expert who comes and plans on behalf of the community. They will learn everything about planning: What technologies are best for the area? Is it a hybrid of solar and wind? Is it hydro?

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In the final phase, we will do governance training: What form of institution does the community need?

Is it operative? Is it a community trust? We will not make that decision; the community has to decide for themselves. The governance training will also include financial management training, project management training and how to write fundraising proposals.

Eventually, the project will have been planned and will be governed and owned completely from the bottom up by the communities themselves.

Do you anticipate any regulatory obstacles?

There are going to be regulatory obstacles. Right now, in South Africa, there is no regulation that allows for community-owned decentralised renewable energy systems. There are only regulations for household-level generation of energy on rooftops, etc.

“You don’t need permission to build people’s power.”

But there is nothing at the community level. Municipalities don’t have the power to purchase their own renewable electricity. And they are not able to procure that kind of service – generation of electricity. Many regulatory issues are still up in the air in South Africa. There are big battles and even court cases. But I felt that our starting point could not be: There is an obstacle. Our starting point needed to be: We can do this! We will deal with those obstacles when we come to a point at which we need permission for things. But you don’t need permission to build people’s power. You don’t need permission to get communities organised towards an objective like this. You have to be ready when the obstacles are taken away. If we waited another three to five years, we would never get there.

I hope that by the time our four pilots are ready to engage with government, with the municipality and with

the utilities, the communities themselves will have enough knowledge. I hope that after the three project phases, they will be at that table as an equal partner. Energy and all issues around it are fundamentally political. Energy is about power and vested interests. And if you don’t have a strong, organised, powerful community to deal with that vested interest and that power, the whole idea of democracy and energy democracy is meaningless. So yes, I know there are going to be obstacles; the communities know that as well. But we’re getting ready. And we hope that by the time we are ready to roll out, these obstacles will have been dealt with.

“Energy and all issues around it are fundamentally political.”

Tasneem Essop

Tasneem Essop is the Founding Director of the Energy Democracy Initiative in South Africa. She is an expert on climate, energy, poverty and social justice issues. She is also serving her second term as Commissioner in the National Planning Commission of South Africa. Previously, she headed the climate work in WWF International and served as the Head of Delegation for the organisation at the UNFCCC. Before joining WWF in 2008, she held the positions of Provincial Minister for the Environment, Planning and Economic Development and Provincial Minister of Transport, Public Works and Property Management in the Western Cape.



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