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Reaching for sustainability: ecological modernisation and environmetal justice in South African energy policy and practice

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Abstract

Sustainable development is one of the major discourses of the twenty first century. In many instances sustainable development has been synonymous with the discourse of ecological modernisation. Ecological modernisation, as a discourse, has been proposed as an entreating means to reach the ideal of development that is sustainable, but has by and large only been tested within developed nations. There is, however, a prominent academic debate centred on the potential social and environmental justice concerns that may emanate from the promotion of ecological modernisation in environmental policy. This research project aimed to understand the degree to which ecological modernisation has been embraced in South Africa, and the environmental justice implications of this adoption. This was in an attempt to build an environmental justice policy framework for ecological modernisation in a bid to address environmental justice concerns. South African energy policy and practice was investigated in order to do this. Civil society hold an esteemed position in ecological modernisation, and as such in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of civil society activists who are involved in a range of campaigns for environmental justice. Their insights and solutions to potential environmental justice concerns that would result from using ecological modernisation were investigated. This was done in an attempt to build a list of environmental justice principles that can possibly be used to inform policies based on ecological modernisation in order to ensure just development. These criteria address the role of government, the role of society at large, as well as industry, and for the most part seek to understand if the disparate power dynamics that exist amongst these three actors can potentially be addressed. South African energy policies were analysed for evidence of these justice principles. It was found that South African energy policies do not address environmental justice in any measure that would truly allow for justice to be put into the practice of governing the environment. Therefore, by incorporating these environmental justice principles into ecological modernisation, ecological modernisation can potentially be stronger in approach to sustainable development than it presently is.

Key words: Sustainable development, ecological modernisation, environmental justice.