

## CHAPTER 5

### *Climate change in South Durban, South Africa*

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South Durban Community Environmental Alliance

South Durban is a significant place for environmental education and action because it is home to South Africa's largest chemical industry cluster. There are two major oil refineries (SAPREF, owned by BP and Shell, and Engen, owned by the Malaysian oil company Petronas), the AECI chemical complex and two of the largest papers mills in the country are located in this area.

The South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) has historically addressed health issues that have arisen from the presence of these industrial sites. Research has shown that there are many health risks from the level of industrial pollution in the area. A startling 32% of children in the area have some form of asthma, with Settlers Primary School alongside Engen having the highest incidence at 52%, which is the highest level of asthma in the world for children.

Durban is home to nearly 5 million people, and South Durban has a population of about 350,000. During the Apartheid era, poor people of colour were deliberately settled in segregated areas (black, Indian, and coloured) alongside industry, unaware of the health impacts this would cause their families; while the white upper class lived further away. This housing pattern has generally been continued in more recent years, although richer people have tended to move away from South Durban entirely.

Climate change is increasing extreme weather events in South Durban, which poses new challenges for environmental education in the area. The SDCEA thus works on a number of climate change-related initiatives.

In February of 2009 we produced a book for the average citizen about climate change in the area, called *Climate change for the people of South Durban* (researched and compiled by Lisa Ramsay), which gave an explanation of climate change that was easy to read and understand. This book was distributed to schools, communities, NGOs, and others in the local area. SDCEA conducted advocacy and awareness-raising leading up to COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, including protests and political action. This process was continued with an emphasis on local problems and strategies in preparation for COP15 and COP17, which was held in Durban. The SDCEA has facilitated workshops with children in primary and high schools, government groups and numerous community groups on climate change and its impacts in Durban.

Much of the discussion about climate change at the national and international levels is largely based on science discourse, whereas our book and workshops focus on grassroots stories which students and people in the community can more readily relate to. On page 19 of our book we include local stories about pollution and water problems (Figure 5.1).

Climate change is bringing about changes in weather that affect South Durban's coastal environment. In March 2007, a huge flood happened in the area and November 2008 also brought devastating storms. There is an informal settlement in South Durban where destruction from these storms was highest.

Changes also include increased temperatures, flooding and drought, which pose agricultural and food security challenges such as changes in food crops, loss of crops, and reduced access to water. Access to fishery resources and the capacity of small-scale fisheries is being reduced; changes in fish populations and migration are being noted.

One example of climate change impacts in South Durban involves urban farmers who are farming on land that belongs to the former Durban airport, which was moved in 2009 to a new site on the other side of the city. The farmers were using water from a canal for irrigation, but this canal dried up in 2010 so they began to draw water from a borehole, and because of declining rainfall they have needed to do this earlier and earlier in the year. The farmers are also starting to grow crops which require less water, but these are not major food crops (e.g. parsley, thyme, and coriander), so they are not getting much return from their work. This means even more challenges for food security. They used to grow beans, carrots, cauliflower, and spinach. There is also lots of flooding at unusual times, which compromises newly sown seeds. SDCEA provides community empowerment to farmers through education workshops, and we visit farms to discuss practices and changes over the years.

Another example of climate change's impacts is shown by the story of a fisherman named Mohammed. Over a 10-year period fish populations have been changing in terms of quantity and location of fish species. Mohammed is starting to fish in the evenings rather than in the morning. This is exacerbating conflict with government as fishermen have been denied access to the harbour and piers where

they have traditionally fished under security legislation. This, together with climate impacts means they cannot catch enough fish to make a living.

SDCEA believes people have the power to change and influence their local government, and also to influence processes further up in government where voices are fewer. We are providing community-based leadership to challenge governance and enact change, which is important because of the inherent power system that exists around climate decisions. Decisions made by a select few in the West affect millions of individuals.

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**FIGURE 5.1: Stories from South Durban**

**Clarabelle Mthembu**

Clarabelle began suffering from chronic asthma when she was seven years old and living in Clairwood with her mother and three siblings. In 1966 her family was forced to move to a single room in Lamontville under the Group Areas Act. They later moved to J-section in Umlazi and there her symptoms continued. When her asthma was especially bad, her mother would take her to a doctor, but Clarabelle was treated only with cough medication.

After attending meetings about health and the environment as an adult, Clarabelle connected the onset of her asthma problem to living in Clairwood near the oil refineries: “It’s only now that I’m grown that I’ve been going to these workshops, I’m

taking note of the pollution,” she says. “I realize that’s where it all started, but, at that time we did not know.”

### **Patience Green**

Patience Green also offers us a story of the poor health and suffering associated with life in south Durban. Ten years ago, Patience’s son Fazel, died of leukemia at the age of 14. Although doctors avoided saying what had caused his cancer, Patience observed that other children living close to the refineries were diagnosed with the same problem. Patience’s main concern now is for her other son and her two year old grandson who both suffer from chronic respiratory problems.

### **Siga Govender**

Siga Govender is one of 14 local farmers who plant crops on the 180 hectares of farmland near the Durban International Airport that was allocated to them under the Tricameral Parliament during apartheid.

Siga once grew marigolds two to three times per year to support local cultural festivals, but he stopped when heavy rains made the marigolds turn black and the crop became too much of a financial risk. A heavy storm in March 2007 and additional flooding in March and June 2008 left his crops underwater and the homes of his labourers badly damaged. The land was submerged for extended periods and crucial soil nutrients were leached out, forcing him to bear the extra costs of labour and fertilizer to replace what was lost.

Excerpted from: Climate Change for the People of South Durban (Book researched and compiled by Lisa Ramsay for the SDCEA, “Touching Tomorrow” series, edition 3, 2009, Chapter 8, pages 19 – 24).

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