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DEPT OF ENERGY CHALLENGED TO COME CLEAN ON SECRET ELECTRICITY POLICY ADVISORY GROUP

Civil society organisation issues Department with PAIA request for records on secret advisory group

350.org South Africa, a climate justice organisation, today issued the Department of Energy with a PAIA (Promotion of Access to Information Act) request for information on the membership, mandate and minutes of the task team of advisors who have been shrouded in secrecy. The task team is advising the Department on the drafting of the IRP2 (Integrated Resource Plan), which will be deciding South Africa's electricity future for the next 20 years.

The Department has alluded to the team in certain press statements, but has been disinclined to reveal all the members or further information on the team. This has raised serious concerns on the part of a group of civil society organisations who are making efforts to contribute to the Department's very hurried process of drafting the IRP2.

Bishop Geoff Davies of SAFCEI (South African Faith Communities Environmental Institute) participated in SAFM's After 8 Debate on the IRP2 process on Wednesday, and his concern is that it is difficult to be confident that the Department will take civil society input seriously if the advisory task team is made up almost entirely of people from companies with vested interests in South Africa continuing its energy-intensive and carbon-intensive path.

In a letter to the Mail & Guardian on 4th June, the Department's spokesperson, Bheki Khumalo, noted that, "The complex and highly technical nature of [the IRP2] prompted the director general of energy to establish a technical task team made up of experts in the field of energy." From all accounts, this task team is made up primarily of representatives from Sasol, BHP Billiton, Exxaro, Xstrata, Anglo American and Eskom. There is no civil society representation or expertise on the task team, supporting the perception that the process seems chiefly oriented to serve energy-intensive industrial needs, and will not take into account the electricity needs of ordinary citizens, nor the full impacts of South Africa's electricity choices on community welfare, job creation, social impacts on gender and youth, or environmental health and sustainability.

The Director-General, Nelisiwe Magubane, assured listeners in Wednesday's SAFM After 8 Debate that the Department was committed to public involvement in the IRP2 process. Another panellist, Samantha Bailey of 350.org, pointed out that if the Department indeed was so committed, it seemed strange that they were rushing the policy development process with minimal time for civil society input, and that there was no significant civil society representation on the advisory task team.

Various efforts have been made by over a dozen civil society groups to request further time from the Department to properly interrogate the draft policy's modelling assumptions, and they have made recommendations to the Department on how it can more effectively consult with civil society. But as yet, other than a 19-day extension for inputs on the highly technical (and often obscurely- and narrowly-worded) assumptions, no other response from the Department has been received.



Lance Greyling, Chief Whip of the Independent Democrats, pointed out on Wednesday's After 8 Debate that the Department was legally required to consult with civil society. He has been frustrated by both the Department's deficient policy development process as well as Parliament's Energy Committee for not taking its oversight responsibilities concerning the policy drafting process more seriously.

Samantha Bailey of 350.org, who submitted the PAIA request to the Department today, said it is essential that the policy be drafted in a fair, open and transparent manner, without allowing the interests of industry to dominate the decision making process. "The Department keeps saying that this advisory task team are just advisors, but this team seems to have generated the assumptions upon which the scenario modelling will be based, which indicates the critical role they are playing. In addition, no explanation has been given as to how the assumptions were generated or as to how civil society input will be received. And the fact that the Department is hastily pushing this process along while the country is distracted by the World Cup, suggests that they not at all committed to real consultation. This mimics their highly suspicious timing when they released the IRP1 on the 31st of December."

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ABOUT 350.ORG SOUTH AFRICA

350.org an international campaign dedicated to building a global movement to unite the world around solutions to the climate crisis – the solutions that science and justice demand. Its mission is to inspire the world to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis, to create a new sense of urgency and of possibility for our planet. The campaign's focus is on the number 350, as in 350 parts per million, the level that recent science has identified as the safest upper limit for CO₂ concentration in our atmosphere. But 350 is more than a number – it's a symbol of where we need to head as a planet.

Last year on October 24th, 350.org coordinated the largest ever day of global action and pressured the Copenhagen negotiations to aim for just and science-based targets. Of the total 192 countries in the UN, 117 supported the tough 350 ppm target, but that didn't translate into victory because the biggest polluters wouldn't go along. Thus our efforts continue...

In South Africa, one of the main 350.org campaigns is advocating for socially just, low carbon, environmentally and economically sustainable national energy policies. 350.org is also a member of Climate Justice Now! – a global alliance of organisations, communities and individuals in South Africa who are united in promoting just solutions to the impacts of climate change.