



July Ndlovu

# Where leadership meets decarbonisation

An unmanaged decline in the coal sector risks triggering economic and social dislocation on a massive scale

The global energy transition is not unfolding in straight lines. It is a contested and uneven process in which climate ambition often collides with infrastructure gaps, and global priorities clash with local needs. Few sectors embody this tension more than coal, a fuel still essential to energy access, industrial growth and economic stability in many regions, yet increasingly under pressure to wind down.

This is the central paradox. The world must decarbonise with urgency, but it cannot do so while leaving behind the billions who still lack reliable, affordable energy.

This is where leadership is most needed, and where the coal industry now stands.

For more than a decade coal has been pulled in opposing directions. It has been tasked with delivering affordable power while reducing emissions, criticised in global forums, yet relied upon in national emergencies. It has generated jobs, revenues and development even as it faces accelerating divestment and tightening regulation.

In this environment the industry has had to respond, not only operationally but strategically. It must stay reliable, become cleaner and adapt to a future still taking shape. Whether coal remains part of the global transition, or is unfairly excluded, will depend on the quality of leadership guiding that evolution.

Leadership in this context means embracing complexity, acknowledging environmental realities and defending the socioeconomic role coal continues to play. It means investing in environmental efficiency, methane abatement, dust suppression, water recycling and land rehabilitation, while also building trust with communities, regulators and financial markets.

Most importantly, it means rejecting false binaries: coal or renewables, climate or development, growth or exit. These oversimplify a far more complex challenge.

The task ahead is to lead a transition that is honest, inclusive and disciplined, one that recognises coal as a sector still capable of responsible, purposeful evolution. That evolution is already under way. In many parts of the industry, conversations have shifted from production volumes to post-mining economies.

Climate risk is now firmly on the boardroom agenda, prompting a broader shift in how companies define performance.

ESG metrics, once peripheral, have become central



A well-led transition can deliver energy stability, climate alignment and inclusive growth if approached deliberately, transparently and collaboratively, says the writer.  
Picture: 123RF/Lubos Chlubny



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compromising safety. Investors are pressing for clarity on whether a coal company can meet ESG expectations without falling into the trap of performative compliance.

These are not hypothetical questions. They are the real-world intersections where policy meets people, and where leadership must operate with both technical clarity and moral imagination.

In parallel, investor and stakeholder expectations have hardened. There is little appetite for rhetoric without delivery.

Companies must demonstrate real movement in transparency, in environmental performance, in social reinvestment, and in their contribution to a just energy transition. In this context, leadership shifts from defending legacy to actively designing relevance for the future.

For the coal industry, this means recognising that its future will not mirror its past. It involves working with governments to develop realistic decarbonisation pathways, creating transition plans that support workers as participants in new opportunities, and building constructive relationships with financial

to how value is assessed and sustained over time. Some of the clearest signals about the future of this industry haven't come from high-level strategy sessions but from quiet, honest conversations on the ground. In Mpumalanga, community members speak about their children, not share prices, and ask about what happens when the last truck leaves. Engineers are thinking beyond technical outputs, exploring how to cut emissions without

institutions to support long-term reliable performance. It also requires a consistent commitment to operational excellence, safety, reliability and discipline, while staying attuned to a rapidly evolving global context.

It also requires a clear understanding of what is at stake. An unmanaged decline in coal, driven by global politics but blind to local consequence, risks triggering economic and social dislocation on a massive scale. A well-led transition, by contrast, can deliver energy stability, climate alignment and inclusive growth if approached deliberately, transparently and collaboratively.

This is the work I have sought to lead as the chair of FutureCoal over the past five years, building a global alliance that does not retreat from the challenges facing coal, but leans into them with realism, responsibility and resolve.

Through our sustainable coal stewardship (SCS) framework, we are helping to shape a transition that is practical, inclusive and grounded in the development priorities of the countries we serve.

That is the work ahead. And it is leadership work.

The crossroads facing the industry comes down to decisions on whether to adapt or remain fixed, whether to lead or follow, and whether to plan for the future while continuing to support those who depend on current systems.

Leadership in this context is defined by consistency, coherence and credibility. It involves doing the difficult, often overlooked work of building trust in an industry that continues to face scrutiny, as well as a clear commitment to transition, energy equity, and the idea that legacy sectors remain relevant when they are prepared to adapt.

The future of energy will be shaped by the quality of leadership guiding coal, mining and the wider energy system through this period of change.

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