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**The ‘green economy’: a sustainable development path or a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’?**

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**Introduction: the crisis in nature**

The starting point of this paper is the crisis in nature. The focus is on ‘nature’ rather than the ‘environment’ because that is usually viewed as something lifeless and external which can be reduced to a set of unrelated issues. The central question this paper addresses is whether the green economy with its promise of ‘green growth’, ‘green jobs’, expanding markets and technological innovation can address the crisis in nature and provide us with a new sustainable development path, or is it a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’, as Eduardo Lander(2011) has suggested, the ‘wolf’ being a form of green neo-liberal capitalism which will deepen inequality and promote the further destruction of nature.

The crisis in nature is deepening. We have clearly reached the limits of using nature as a sink for our waste products or as a safe source of the raw materials we need for economic activity. I would emphasize ‘safe’ because fossil fuel corporations are using their growing wealth and power to assert an ‘extreme energy ‘ agenda; this includes using far riskier energy sources and extraction methods such as shale gas extraction through fracking, tar sands, deep sea drilling and so on.

The aspect of the crisis in nature that is receiving most attention at present is climate change. A new report warns that fossil fuel use is leading towards a catastrophic overheating of the planet, with temperature increases of four or even six degrees Celsius (Leahy, 2013). But despite almost 20 years of multinational negotiations there is no binding agreement on the reduction of carbon emissions. In fact carbon emissions are rising which means climate change is intensifying and having devastating impacts-particularly on poor people- in the form of dislocation through more extreme weather events such as droughts and floods, rising food prices, water shortages, crop failures and so on. Scientists agree that Southern Africa will be the worst affected.

It has been claimed that addressing the crisis in nature, and specifically the shift to the new energy regime which the reduction of carbon emissions requires, amounts to a set of changes as dramatic as those of the Industrial Revolution. In *The Great Transformation* Polanyi wrote, “land is only another word for nature” (Polanyi,1944:72) and described how the Industrial Revolution threatened the destruction of both nature: “the denudation of forests, the pollution of rivers...” (Polanyi, 1944:133), and of the cohesion that for him defined ‘society’ For Polanyi “the major tragedy attendant on the Industrial Revolution was brought about not by the

callousness and greed of profit –seeking capitalists –though there was inhumanity enough in the record – but by the social devastation of an uncontrolled system, the market economy.”(MacIver, 1957:xii). These are prophetic words because the dominant attempt to address the crisis in nature in the current moment is the further marketisation of nature under the rubric of ‘the green economy’.

### **Making visible the crisis in nature**

Addressing the crisis in nature depends firstly on a process of social recognition. Like the stars at noon, much of nature is hidden, and much damage – especially in the form of toxic pollution - is relatively invisible, and not directly available to our senses. This invisibility has been brilliantly captured by Rob Nixon in his conceptualization of such destruction as a form of ‘slow violence’(Nixon, 2011). “Violence is usually understood as an event or action that is immediate in time, and explosive in space, but much of the degradation of nature involves a violence that extends over time, is insidious, instrumental, undramatic, accretive and relatively invisible” (Nixon, 2011:2). Even the extensive impacts (and the official recognition) of the dramatic, ecological catastrophes of Bhopal and Chernobyl were slow to develop

An illustration of this is a particular area, known as Steel Valley near Vanderbylpark. Here the ‘catastrophe’ was obscure, slow moving and long in the making as the steel mill polluted the groundwater with a toxic mix of heavy metals (including some which were carcinogenic). The penetration of the ‘slow violence’ of this toxic pollution was extensive, permeating the landscape, moving slowly and invisibly through the soil and the underground water and – in many cases- was driven inwards and somatized in the form of genetic defects, cancers and kidney failures among animals and humans. The case of Steel Valley also illustrates how much of the crisis in nature is due to corporations intent on externalizing environmental costs – in this case the largest steel producer in the world, Arcelor Mittal. The unprecedented concentration of such corporate power is a defining feature of our times.

This is the context in which there is no agreement on what is involved in addressing the crisis in nature, but much attention is focused on the content of a ‘green economy’.

### **Different conceptions of the ‘green economy’**

The central idea is to reduce carbon emissions but nowhere is the ‘green economy’ precisely defined. It has been suggested that, “this is deliberate. ...because by keeping the definition open or vague enough, you can promote biofuels, or nuclear energy or carbon trading or financialization of natural resources, or geo-engineering etc. as green economy measures” (Quintos.2012).

The current discourse on the green economy involves two versions: what I want to call a moderate and an extreme version. For the last 3 years the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) has promoted a ‘moderate’ vision of a low-carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive ‘green economy’. Its latest formulation is far more extreme. It focuses on bringing the efficiency of the market to bear on nature and its reproduction. The emphasis is on

providing capital with incentives to change by arguing that economic growth and profits could be even bigger with a green economy.

This formulation goes much further than commodification in the sense of putting a price on natural products such as timber. It includes the ‘financialisation’ of the functions of nature which are termed ‘ecosystem services’. It implies that nature should be measured and valued according to the ‘services’ it provides (for example, the capacity of wetlands to filter water, the capacity of forests and soil to capture and store carbon and so on). “In this way nature’s services can be costed, offset, and traded on markets, via credits, similar to carbon trading” (Ashley, 2012:5).

The commodification of nature is not new but this approach is going much further in two senses: it involves pricing nature’s ‘services’, privatizing them and converting them into financial products such as ‘biodiversity bonds’. In this extreme version the green economy is about moving speculative ‘green’ trading schemes like carbon funds and biodiversity offsets to the centre of the financial services industry. So what is new is that the commodification of nature has combined with a growing historical trend of financialisation of the economy – in other words, drawing into financial circulation aspects of life that previously lay outside it. i.e. creating a market for new financial products, “with all the greed and fraud we have seen in financial speculation recently” (Leach, 2012). It means the expansion of the market into all aspects of the natural world; an attempt by capital – in the name of protection - to effect the last enclosure of the commons – that of Nature itself.

This extreme version of the ‘green economy’ is being actively promoted by the powerful forces Susan George has called ‘the Davos class’, an alliance of government leaders, philanthropists and corporate executives who form the “nomadic, powerful and interchangeable” global elite created by capitalist globalization” (George, 2010:7). The concept of the green economy originated in the World Economic Forum, and is strongly supported by the European Commission and the World Bank. The Environmental Commissioner for the environment summed up the thinking when he said, “We need to move from protecting the environment from business to using business to protect the environment”. Or as Richard Branson expressed it at the Rio+20 conference, “our only option to stop climate change is for industry to make money from it”. (<http://www.spiegel-de/international/business/richard-branson-discusses-climate-change-business-opportunities-a-839985.htm>).

The key documents published in 2011 promoting the extreme version are the UNEP’s preparatory report for the Rio+20 conference, *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable development and Poverty Eradication* (2011). A lengthy document (630 pages) it has been described as “a radically conservative vision” (Brockington, 2012). The three other influential documents are the UNEP’s *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB, 2011)*, the World Bank’s report on *Inclusive Green Growth: the pathway to sustainable development (2012)* and the European Commission’s *Innovating for Sustainable Growth: a Bioeconomy for Europe (2012)*.

The two key features of these document are:

**(i)The promotion of marketisation**

All four documents – with different emphases – maintain that markets are the solution to the climate crisis and the means of promoting sustainable development. TEEB implies that environmental destruction is based on market failure because environmental ‘costs’ have not been factored into the financial cost of final products. ([www.teebweb.org](http://www.teebweb.org)) The TEEB solution is to ensure that biodiversity and ecosystem functions (commercially dubbed ‘ecosystem services’) are assigned a financial value with a view to promoting efficiency and ensuring the real costs of environmental damage are recognised and met “( Hall and Zacune, 2012:8).

In the UNEP view the fundamental cause of the current ecological crisis has been ‘the misallocation of capital.’ “During the last two decades, much capital was poured into property, fossil fuels and structured financial assets with embedded derivatives, but relatively little in comparison was invested in renewable energy, energy efficiency, public transportation, sustainable agriculture, ecosystem and biodiversity protection, and land and water conservation.” (UNEP,2012:18) .These are presented as ‘market failures. Therefore, through providing “incentives based on the market’ it should “be possible to reorient capital investment in the direction of green investments and green innovations “ (Lander, 2011:6).

**(ii)Decoupling economic growth from environmental damage.**

The UNEP argues that it is a myth that there is an inescapable trade off between environmental sustainability and economic progress. The claim is that “There is now substantial evidence that the greening of economies neither inhibits wealth creation nor employment opportunities. On the contrary, many green sectors provide significant opportunities for investment, growth and jobs” (UNEP,2011:6). Technology is crucial in this variant of ecological modernization; it asserts that technology can ‘dematerialize’ economic growth from environmental damage.

Similarly the World Bank is emphasizing ‘a green growth framework’ which stresses giving capital incentives to change. “Green growth is about making growth processes resource-efficient, cleaner and more resilient without necessarily slowing them” (Hallegatte,2011:3) “If the environment is considered as productive capital is makes sense to invest in it and environmental policies can be considered as investment” (Ibid).

In this process ‘nature’ is reduced to ‘natural capital’, and a further source of profit. “The importance of ‘natural capital’ (soil, water, air, flora and fauna) and the ecosystem services resulting from them is stressed. “Ecosystem goods and services from natural capital are worth trillions of US dollars per year” according to the Natural Capital Declaration, a commitment by the finance sector for Rio +20. ([www.naturalcapitaldeclaration.org](http://www.naturalcapitaldeclaration.org). Accessed 19.6.2012) Similarly, Lord Fink, a British hedge fund manager has called on his fellow financiers to

recognize that there was a 18 trillion US dollar business opportunity awaiting people who could realize the value of carbon locked in tropical forests..” (Cited by Brockington, 2012:417).

The model for this financialisation of nature is Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD). This involves privatizing and leasing or selling off much of the world’s forest resources. It consists of isolating and measuring the capacity of forests to capture and store carbon dioxide in order to issue certificates for greenhouse gas emission reductions that can be commercialized and acquired by companies in developed countries that cannot meet their emission reduction commitments. REDD represents a precursor to a full blown Green Economy.

This approach strips nature of any aesthetic value or social value as a source of livelihoods. It follows that “ now a forest is valued not just for its beauty or its importance to a community for livelihoods, but for its underground potential for carbon storage, its solar absorption, its soil and water as potential for biofuel production, its trees as a source of carbon credits, and its biodiversity as a source of global conservation funding, species offsetting or tourism revenue”. (Leach, 2012).

Originally REDD included forests and plantations but its scope has been expanded to include GMOs, trees, soils and agriculture.” REDD is the pillar of the Green Economy REDD plus carbon credits, agrofuels and export crops are driving huge land grabs.” ([www.cacim.net?http://www.openword.in](http://www.cacim.net?http://www.openword.in) accessed 20.6.2012)A new scheme developed by the World Bank called ‘climate smart agriculture’ is designed to introduce soils and agriculture into the carbon market as part of REDD. “Climate smart agriculture will put a dollar value on the carbon in dirt so it can be sold on the market and polluters can buy dirt offsets that will allow them to continue to pollute. Climate smart agriculture is a resource grab of monumental proportions.For those who can afford it – the finances, fund managers, speculators and banks – markets in dirt will be a field day. “ (Rachel Smoller of BiofuelWatch,cited by Petermann and Langel, 2012).

The European Commission promoted bio-economics as a key component of the Rio+20 agenda for a green economy. The bio-economy is intended “to pave the way to a lower emission, resource efficient and competitive society that reconciles food security with the sustainable use of renewable resources for industrial purposes and environmental protection. “ (EC,2011:11) cited by Hall and Zacune, 2012:12) The aim is to create new products and markets. “Specifically the bio-economy approach aims to replace fossil fuels with biomass-based feedstocks, primarily sourced from crops, forests and the seas. Biotechnology, including nanotechnology and synthetic biology is also integral since this is the means by which substantial quantities of biomass( biological materials from living or recently living organisms) – which can include waste but also harvested biomass such as wood fibres, grass, bamboo, soybeans, corn or algae for example – may be converted into a diverse and comprehensive range of products including bio-plastics, new drugs and bio-energy.(Hall and Zacune, 2012:3).

There are very different responses to the crisis in nature in the South African context.

### **The South African government response to the crisis in nature**

The South African government's response to the crisis in nature is the creation of a green economy containing elements of both the 'moderate' and 'extreme' versions. The New Growth Path (NGP) of 2010 promised a move away from the carbon intensity of the minerals-energy complex towards a 'green economy' marked by renewable energy and green jobs. While the NGP Framework identifies the 'green economy' as important, it does not define it (NGP Framework, 2010:13). Green jobs are defined very loosely as "work in agricultural, manufacturing, research and development, administrative and service activities that contribute substantially to preserving or restoring environmental quality." (Opening address by Deputy Minister of Economic Development, Hlengiwe Mkhize, Economic Development Department Training Workshop on Green Jobs, Johannesburg. 19.11.2012)

Overall, the South African government's climate change policy is rooted in a green neo-liberal capitalism. This is evident in how it is marked by a pro-corporate, high-carbon development, prioritization of profit generation, a reliance on market mechanisms and technological innovation in expensive, high-risk schemes such as Carbon Capture and Storage and nuclear energy. The latter is low carbon only at the point of generation. The rest of the production chain is both energy and carbon intensive, costs are excessive, safety cannot be guaranteed and nowhere has a safe storage option for high level nuclear waste been identified.

However there are contradictory elements such as President Zuma's recent announcement on the rejection of the government's market based approach to land reform. As Rural Development and Land Reform Minister Gugile Nkwinti said, "You can't redress social injustice by using a market mechanism because those things don't talk to each other". (Cited in *City Press* 17.2.2013)

Many triumphalist claims are made about the Green Economy as a "major new thrust for the South African economy which presents multiple opportunities to create jobs and value –adding industries. (DTI, 2011:17). However it is often treated as "something separate and therefore different or additional to a mainstream future South African economy" (Trollop and Tyler, 2011:12). The 'real economy' remains carbon-intensive and environmentally destructive. As Naidoo points out, "while the NGP's (and the broader's state's) commitment to 'greening the economy' focuses on the potential of environmental concerns to meet the needs of the market (through job creation and more efficient production processes), the existing deleterious effects of capitalist development on the environment continue largely unaddressed"(Naidoo, 2011:10).

Official policy documents demonstrate an incoherence and aspirations towards reducing carbon emissions are contradicted by government practices which involve massively expanded coal-fired and nuclear energy. These practices reflect the continuing power of the 'minerals-energy complex', the alliance of the mining and energy sectors which have dominated South Africa's industrial development. For example, the parastatal Eskom is building more coal-fired power stations, Medupi and Kusile (the world's third and fourth largest). The World Bank's \$3.75

billion loan to Eskom to enable it to do this has increased the price of electricity for domestic consumers, worsened our contribution to carbon emissions and climate change and allows continued subsidised supply of the world's cheapest electricity to large corporations, such as BHP Billiton, and the export of their profits abroad.

Furthermore the government's commitment to protecting nature is in question in cases such as the urging of ANC Secretary-general Gwede Mantashe for the inhabitants of the Xolobeni area on the Wild Coast to accept titanium mining, despite considerable opposition from local people. (Bennie,2011; <http://fever-red.co.za/articles/articledetails.aspx?id=38248>. Accessed 24.10.2012)

Overall government commitments to addressing the crisis in nature generally, and to reducing carbon emissions, specifically are vague and insubstantial. The real commitment is to economic growth, It perpetuates market-led economic growth models which benefit large corporations at the expense of job creation and the social needs of the majority.

### **The response of labour**

Evidence of the support of the labour movement for 'the green economy' is the signing of the 'Green Economy Accord' in November 2011 which launched a 'green partnership' and binds government, business and labour to creating thousands of jobs by building a green industrial base. The trade union federation, COSATU said, "We have made a commitment through the NGP to create 5 million jobs in the next ten years. And this agreement on green jobs will make a very critical contribution to the realization of that target." (Vavi,cited in Economic Development Department, 2011;5).

However various elements in the broad labour movement have expressed skepticism about the three aspects of the green jobs discourse. Firstly, that aspirational claims are made which seem inflated and are not supported by empirical evidence. Furthermore, that insufficient attention has been paid to job losses and to the quality of green jobs (in terms of labour standards and wage levels.) Lastly, that green jobs are at present driven more by the interests of the market rather than by social needs. The President of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) has pointed out in relation to the renewable energy sector, "green jobs can be as indecent as blue or brown jobs.....It can use cheap labour, exploit women and children, use labour brokers and be dangerous in terms of occupational health and safety" (Cedric Gina, Opening Address to International Conference on Building a Renewable Energy Sector in South Africa. Johannesburg 4.2.2012) .

While capital 's view of a green economy emphasizes growth, competitiveness and efficiency, the labour movement is committed to a 'just transition' to a new energy regime. However a point of contention among unionists involves the substantive content of a 'just transition', with

positions on the changes this involves ranging from simply a ‘paradigm shift’ to a ‘regime change’.

Two broad approaches to this notion of a ‘just transition’ may be identified within the global labour movement.

(i) The minimalist position emphasizes shallow, reformist change with green jobs, social protection, retraining and consultation. The emphasis is defensive and shows a preoccupation with protecting the interest of vulnerable workers. e.g. the ILO

(ii) An alternative notion of a just transition involves transformative change; an alternative growth path and new socialist ways of producing and consuming. e.g. NUMSA

COSATU is somewhat ambivalent, but in 2011 adopted a strong Climate Change Policy Framework of 15 principles, of which the most contested were:

\* Capitalist accumulation has been the underlying cause of excessive greenhouse gas emissions, and therefore global warming and climate change.

\* A new low carbon development path is needed which addresses the need for decent jobs and the elimination of unemployment

\* We reject market mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions

While endorsed by all 20 affiliated unions, there are nevertheless differences between them. The National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) one of the biggest COSATU affiliates representing almost 300,000 workers in energy intensive industries, is skeptical of the ‘just transition’ approach and argue that the shift to a low carbon economy, and particularly the development of renewable energy, is being dominated by green capitalism. (Interview, NUMSA official Johannesburg 7.2. 2012)

According to the NUMSA President, “...the language of ‘just transition’ needs a class analysis... It must always be clear that capitalism has caused the crisis of climate change that we see today. There is an urgent need to situate the question of climate change in a class struggle perspective”. (Opening address by NUMSA President Cedric Gina to the Numsa International Seminar on Climate Change and Class Struggle 4.12.2011). NUMSA believes a “just transition must be based in worker controlled democratic social ownership of key means of production and means of subsistence... Without this struggle over ownership and the struggle for a socially owned renewable energy sector, just transition will become a capitalist concept, building up a capitalist “green economy”. (Statement from NUMSA Central Committee issued on 14.12.2011).

A very different perspective informs the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) representing some 500,000 mineworker. This is obviously particularly sensitive to the threat of job losses in

the move to a low carbon economy and some shop stewards have expressed faith in new technology to reduce carbon emission, especially Carbon Capture and Storage.

In a statement which clearly prioritises political over environmental considerations, Zwelinzima Vavi, the General Secretary of COSATU said recently, "we will not support any form of capital accumulation that breeds inequalities – even if those forms of capital accumulation are green". (Vavi,2011:2).

In the same way that the labour movement could be seduced by the promise of green growth and green job, there is a danger that environmentalists will be seduced by this notion into thinking that the Green Economy will protect nature.

### **The response of the environmental movement to the crisis in nature**

Some environmentalists focus on the green economy narrowly as the means to reduce South Africa's present 550 million tonnes of carbon emissions, but this approach is hotly contested. At present there is no single, collective actor that constitutes the environmental movement in South Africa and no master 'frame' of environmentalism encoded in any blueprint. Environmental struggles have no coherent centre and no tidy margins; they constitute an inchoate sum of multiple, diverse, uncoordinated and fragmented struggles and organizations.

This fragmentation involves a fault line which divides the 'movement' into two main streams: those organized around the discourse of sustainable development, and those organized around the discourse of environmental justice. Both of these are powerful discursive strategies, especially in relation to apartheid practices.

During the apartheid regime environmentalism operated effectively as a conservation strategy that neglected social needs. For many black South Africans dispossession was the other side of conservation as they were forcibly removed to create national parks and 'protected areas' and in the process lost the land, and livelihoods which often defined social identity (Walker, 2008; Carruthers, 2005). The notion of environmental justice represents an important shift away from this traditional authoritarian concept of environmentalism which was mainly concerned with the conservation of threatened plants, animals and wilderness areas, to include urban, health, labour and development issues (Cock, 1991,2006). The discourse of environmental justice provides a radical alternative, both to the traditional view and to the dominant emphasis on sustainable development. It questions the market's ability to bring about social or environmental sustainability.

Within this 'stream' a growing anti-capitalist discourse identifies the green economy as a 'false' solution to the crisis in nature. It is viewed as the driving notion in a green neo-liberal capitalism that is based on privatization, deregulation, free trade, unlimited growth, new technology and supposedly self-regulating markets.

The strongest element is the climate justice movement. Globally justice is a strong theme among activists who claim that a wide range of activities contribute to an ecological debt owed to countries in the global south: the extraction of natural resources, unequal terms of trade, degradation of land and soil for export crops, loss of biodiversity and so on. Locally it is demonstrated that it is the poor and the powerless who are most negatively affected by pollution, resource depletion and increasing ‘land grabs’(especially in Zambia and Mozambique) who bear the brunt of climate change.

Overall there are sharp lines of contention around five ‘wedge’ issues among organizations of different shades of ‘green’: the role of technology, the value of the UNFCCC process, the expansionist logic of neo-liberal capitalism, how our relationship to nature should change, and – most importantly - the reliance on market mechanisms to address the crisis in nature. .

Generally, those organizations with a reform agenda(for example, the World Wildlife Fund) accept market based solutions such as carbon trading, place a heavy reliance on technologies such as Carbon Capture and Storage, and view the UNFCCC process and the South African government’s negotiating position in positive terms. This is the object of intense criticism by those organizations with a transformative agenda(for example Earthlife Africa and Groundwork) who stress that market based solutions such as carbon trading are one way in which capital is attempting to appropriate the crisis and make climate change a site of capital accumulation. They are particularly critical of REDD as “unsustainable’ and ‘unjust’. REDD is supported by some environmental groups who maintain it contributes to forest preservation, while others claim it involves the further commodification of nature and will benefit corporate investors while damaging the livelihoods and cultures of forest-dependent communities.

While both labour and environmental activists are divided, embryonic linkages are emerging between the labour and environmental movements (for example in the Climate Jobs Campaign and the recent campaign against increased electricity prices) could generate a new kind of solidarity, larger, deeper and more powerful than anything we have yet seen.

The spaces in which these linkages are emerging involve a focus on jobs, energy,water and food.

#### (i)The Climate Jobs Campaign

Unemployment is deepening globally and South Africa has an unemployment rate of 25.5% (Statistics SA, 2012). To link the unemployment and ecological crises, and to address the fear that ‘green jobs’ are market driven, progressive forces, largely from the labour and environmental movements, are organizing around the notion of ‘climate jobs’ . A ‘million climate jobs campaign’ was launched in 2011 by forty civil society organisations . It is modeled on a British trade union campaign and is taking hold in the local labour movement. It is structured on the argument that if we are to move in a ‘just transition’ to a low carbon economy using renewable energy instead of coal, it will be workers who will have to build wind, wave tide and solar power. It is workers who will have to renovate and insulate our homes and

buildings and build new forms of public transport. It is stressed that the lives of working people could improve in the process. Research findings were launched at COP17 which demonstrated that 3.7 million climate jobs could be created to address both the unemployment crisis and the climate crisis in South Africa. Climate jobs are defined as “decent, people and publically driven jobs that reduce the causes and impacts of climate change. They are based on 3 principles, ecological sustainability, social justice and state intervention.” The campaign is mobilizing around the concentration of corporate power in the entire food value chain for example, demonstrating how localization could create nearly half a million new jobs in the Gauteng area alone.

(ii) Campaigns against electricity price increases.

Thousands of South Africans suffer from energy poverty meaning they lack access to clean, safe and affordable energy. Even for those households that are connected to the electricity grid, the cost of electricity is so high that many poor households rely on the additional use of paraffin, wood or coal for lighting, cooking or heating with all the attendant effort (particularly for women who have the responsibility for administering household consumption) and health hazards (especially smoke inhalation).

Energy is at the centre of debates on a just transition to a low carbon economy. Sweeney has argued that this means a “decisive shift in power towards workers, communities and the public – energy democracy. “This can be built around three broad objectives namely the need to **resist** the agenda of the fossil fuel corporations, the need to **reclaim** to the public sphere parts of the energy economy that have been privatized or marketized and the need to **restructure** the global energy system in order to massively scale up renewable energy and other safe low-carbon options, implement energy conservation, and ensure job-creation and true sustainability.” (Sweeney, 2012:2) The COSATU policy framework on climate change states, “All’ South Africans have the right to clean, safe and affordable energy.”

In 2013 co-operative action on this issue focused on the parastatal Eskom’s request for a 16% increase in yearly electricity tariffs for the next five years. This is to contribute to the costs of its coal –based power station projects, Medupi and Kusile and other capital spending projects. NUMSA, FAWU and SACCAWU as well as the environmental justice organisation Earthlife issued a combined press statement that, “Proposed increases will pose an economic and social disaster, for South Africa as the hikes will lead to job losses, factory closures, and general increases in the cost of consumer goods. “ (Press Statement issued 28.1.2013) This co-operation draws on research by NUMSA which has established that the price increases would boost the price from 61c per kilowatt-hour to R1.28 per kilowatt-hour, a 110 per cent increase. (Cited in *Business Report* 20.2.2013) Resistance has involved not only large scale protest actions, but a policy engagement in the form of submissions to the National Energy Regulator of SA (NERSA).

This co-operation means taking advantage of available political opportunity structures including engagement with the state in what Miraftab (2006) calls the ‘invited spaces’ of formal

political structures as well as the ‘invented spaces’ of grassroots capacity building and campaigning. More specifically it involves linking four repertoires of action: capacity building workshops with grassroots communities, targeted protest actions, policy interventions and research. The success of this co-operation is evident in NERSA’s granting of only an 8% tariff hike.

This kind of joint action has important potential for building transnational solidarity networks involving labour and environmental activists. The implication is that labour needs to move away from both the traditional, national level organizational form, as well as broadening the conventional focus on jobs and workplace issues to embrace environmental issues. In South Africa this could build on the tradition of ‘social movement unionism’ which involved an active engagement in community struggles. Similarly, environmentalists need to extend their traditional focus on threatened plants, animals and wilderness areas to address social needs. But if the labour and environmental movements adopt the green economy as a developmental goal Susan George warns that it will mean the “triumph of the Davos class and of neoliberal ideology” (George, 2010:202).

There are a number of reasons why we should fight against this triumph:

### **Critiques of the green economy as a solution to the crisis in nature.**

(i) The notion of ‘green or sustainable capitalism’ is being subjected to growing criticism. (Harris-White in Panitch and Leys, 2006; Kovel, 2001; Foster, 2009). These critiques are rooted in the understanding that *capital’s logic of accumulation* is destroying the ecological conditions which sustain life. ‘No serious observer now denies the severity of the environmental crisis, but it is still not widely recognised as a capitalist crisis, that is a crisis arising from and perpetuated by the rule of capital, and hence incapable of resolution within the capitalist framework’ (Wallis, 2010:32).

It follows that the green economy is not an alternative development path, but an attempt to avoid fundamental change; “a sophisticated effort to demonstrate that it is possible to resolve .....the planet’s environmental crises without altering the existing power structures, nor the relations of domination and exploitation” (Lander, 2011:4). Or, as Conant has written, the Green Economy is “the green-tinted regurgitation of a failed and unjust economic system predicated on the expansion of the controversial REDD offset scheme to every square meter of the Earth – including oceans, soils, agriculture and biodiversity”. (Jeff Conant, Global Justice Ecology Project Communications Director. Press release 7.12.2011 Durban)

(ii) The unchanged commitment to economic growth in both the moderate and extreme versions of the green economy means ecological catastrophe; without an end to the economic growth which is destroying ecosystems, it is virtually impossible for the crisis in nature to be addressed. As Maude Barlow expresses it, “Let’s be clear, no amount of talk of green futures, green technology, green jobs and a green economy can undo the fact that most business and nation

state leaders, as well as UN and world bank officials, continue to promote growth as the only economic and development model for the world. Until the growth model is truly challenged, great damage to the earth's ecosystems will continue. “  
<http://www.canadians.org/rightsofnature>.”

(iii) The Green Economy is claimed to be the means of reaching the goal of ‘sustainable development’ but this is an empty notion which functions to calm general fears while providing a cover for continued neo-liberal capitalism.

The definition of ‘Sustainable development’ as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987) was the outcome of the Earth Summit that took place in Rio in 1992. It was an attempt to give new life to the concept of development, eliminate poverty and provide a balance between economic growth and environmental protection. It has failed dismally to do so and the concept has been much criticized for the vagueness that as enabled it to be incorporated into neo-liberal approaches. (Giddens, 2009; Bond, 2002; Sachs, 1999)

However, as Lander writes, “The concept of sustainable development was extraordinarily effective both politically and ideologically. It responded in terms that seemed to take into account the criticism of the development model, while in fact reinforcing it. It functioned like a tranquilliser in that created the illusion that effective measures were being taken in response to the diagnosed crisis. By not questioning the logic of capitalist accumulation and the model of industrial society as the fundamental causes of the destruction of the conditions that make life possible, it provided new legitimacy to neoliberal globalisation which began to present itself as sustainable despite its overwhelmingly devastating dynamic ”(Lander, 2011:3).

If the green economy is a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” as Lander (2011) suggests, the wolf is green capitalism, but the sheep is the discourse of sustainability. The discourse of sustainability has been appropriated by neo-liberal capitalism. (Cock, 2010). Capital increasingly emphasizes the advantages sustainability offers, such as the creation of new products, expanding markets, cost savings and increased legitimacy and community goodwill.

(iv) REDD has been pushed by those who wish to use the world’s forests as carbon offsets, and protested by indigenous peoples and forest dependent communities who face potential forced relocation if their forest homelands are ‘protected’ under the REDD scheme. REDD as one instrument in the growth of carbon markets is a driver (along with the fuel crisis and the food crisis) of the dramatic rise in land acquisitions (land grabs) across Africa which will aggravate the already severe challenges of rural poverty and hunger. (Hall, 2011)

(v) In reducing ‘nature’ to ‘natural capital’ our relationship to nature is further distorted. This is happening when the global battle for natural resources – from land, food and water to energy and precious metals – is intensifying.

Many are questioning what Naomi Klein calls “the expansionist, extractive mindset, which has so long governed our relationship to nature..” The abundance of scientific research showing we have pushed nature beyond its limits does not just demand green products and market-based solutions; it demands a new civilizational paradigm, one grounded not in dominance over nature but in respect for natural cycles of renewal – and acutely sensitive to natural limits, including the limits of human intelligence”.(Klein, 2011;80) A strong critique of the market approach to ‘save’ nature by creating new opportunities for growth and profit, comes from the indigenous Andean perspective in which Nature is valued for itself, not simply as a resource for human profit. This is taken further in the Bolivian notion of “the rights of nature” now enshrined in their constitution.

In an interview the former Bolivian ambassador Pablo Solon maintained that “we have to end the anthropocentric era that put humans at the centre of all life and act realising that we are one part of this planet. We are living in a system, which has at its centre not humans but nature. We need to preserve the system to preserve ourselves. This means recognizing that as well as human rights, there are also rights of nature that we must respect.. we must create balance and harmony with nature” .[.Http://www.tni.org/interviews/solutions/-eu-crisis-learning-latin-america](http://www.tni.org/interviews/solutions/-eu-crisis-learning-latin-america)

(vi) The reliance on new technology as a mark of green capitalism represents another ‘false solution’ The UNEP report proposes that governments cut environmentally damaging subsidies and use these funds to invest in new technologies. The types of controversial technologies that are promoted by various corporate actors, including biomass incineration, synthetic biology, geoengineering, nanotechnology, nuclear and GMOs are not explicitly endorsed (in this report) but would fit with this approach. Already many corporations are seeking new extreme technological solutions’ to the climate crisis, “including nuclear energy, so –called ‘clean coal’, fracking, ‘natural gas’, hydropower, biofuels, biomass, dangerous Carbon Capture and Storage experiments and engineering schemes such as Genetically Modified Trees to sequester carbon sulphates in the air to shut out the sun, iron filings in the sea to create algae blooms and large-scale solar reflection such as industrial –scale plastic wrap for deserts.”(Bond, 2012:4) Some of these technologies such as the geoengineering scheme promoted by Richard Bransen and Bill Gates for blocking sunlight have their own massive, unforeseen consequences.

## **Conclusion**

This paper suggests that in both its moderate and extreme versions the green economy is a new formulation of a green neo-liberal capitalism based on expanding markets and new technology. Underlying all capital’s strategies –is the broad process of commodification: the transformation of nature and all social relations into economic relations, subordinated to the logic of the market and the imperatives of profit.

This is very clear in South African capital's response to the ecological crisis generally and climate change specifically. The assumption is that the system can continue to expand by creating this new 'green capitalism', bringing the efficiency of the market to bear on nature and its reproduction. This is what Bond calls 'climate –crisis capitalism', namely, "turning a medium/long-term, system –threatening prospect into a short-term source of commodification, speculation and profit" (Bond, 2011:2).

Therefore this is a moment of great danger but also of opportunity. What defines this moment is that we are in the midst of a massive ideological assault – a campaign launched by the powerful of the world to persuade us that green capitalism, packaged as 'the green economy', can solve both the ecological and the economic crises. But addressing the crisis in nature represents an opportunity: to not only address the climate and unemployment crises in our society, but to demand the redistribution of power and resources; to challenge the conventional understanding of economic growth and to mobilize for an alternative development path .

An idea which might resonate for many South Africans is Aldo Leopold's notion of a 'land ethic' – an approach which echoes Darwin's stress on our ecological interdependence, and which resonates with some elements of indigenous cultures which insist on our "oneness with nature". (Mkhize, 2013). While hunting in the American south west early in the last century Leopold shot a female wolf with a pup. He reached her in time to watch " a fierce green fire dying in her eyes". His perspective on nature was utterly changed by this experience and he went on to formulate what he called a 'land ethic. This involves an expansive notion of an ecological community. He wrote, "It changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conquerer of the land community to plain member and citizen of it...it follows that all ethics rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community with interdependent parts' and the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of that community to include, soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land. Something is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, beauty and stability of this biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." (Leopold cited in Cock, 2007:49)

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