



# STRENGTHENING ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

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#PowerTracker: Investigating renewable  
energy in Southern Africa

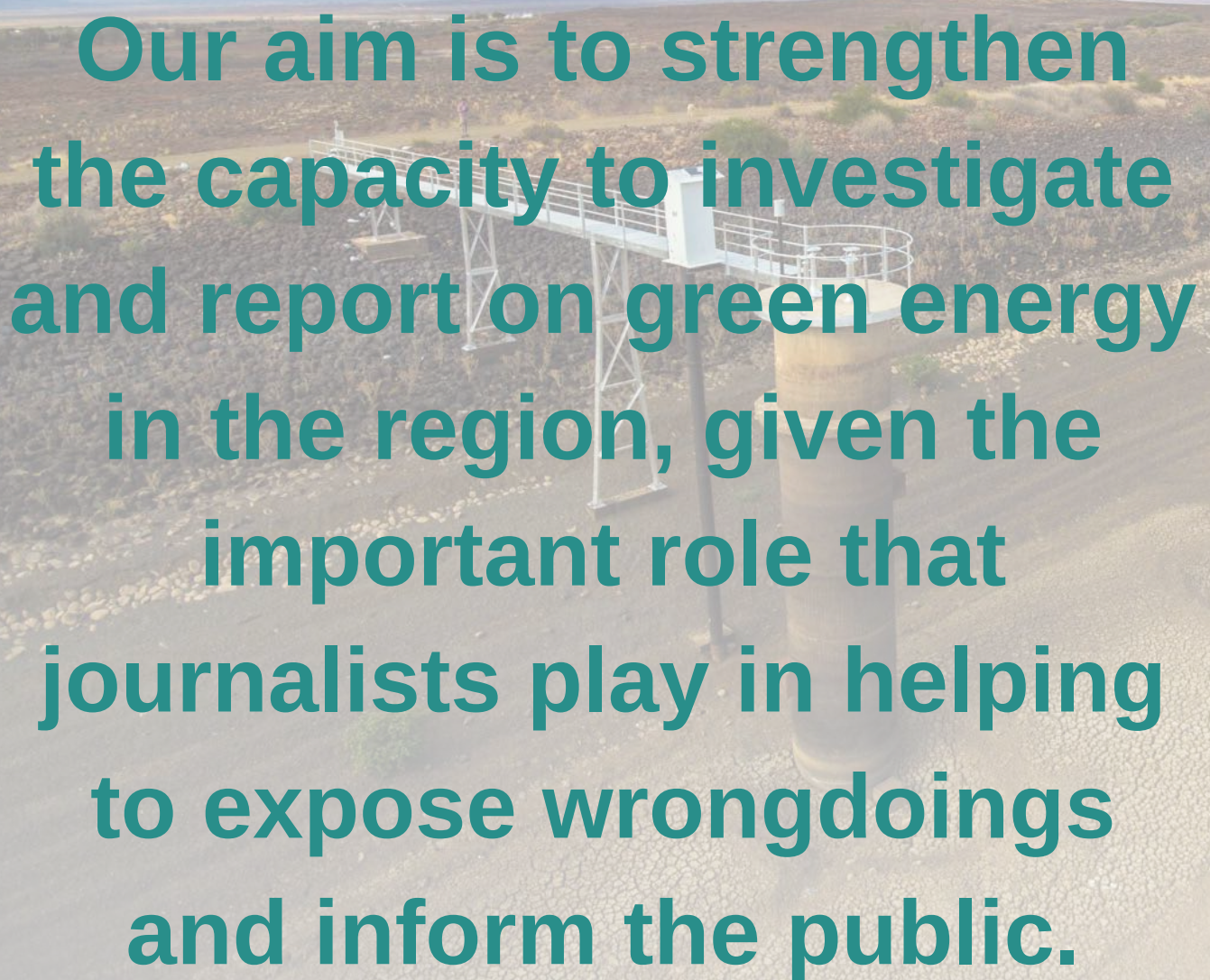


**OXPECKERS**

Investigative Environmental Journalism

**cij**

OPEN	CLIMATE
REPORTING	
INITIATIVE	



Our aim is to strengthen the capacity to investigate and report on green energy in the region, given the important role that journalists play in helping to expose wrongdoings and inform the public.

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Thabo Molelekwa, South Africa

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Sharon Tshipa, Botswana

Phathizwe Zulu, Eswatini

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## What is #PowerTracker?

The first iteration of the #PowerTracker training and professional support programme was a nine-month project, culminating in a series of data-driven investigations by Southern African journalists who investigated the financing and feasibility of renewable energy projects. It was created and run by Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism, with the support of the Centre for Investigative Journalism's Open Climate Reporting Initiative (OCRI).

## Why #Powertracker, why now?

The world is switching to less polluting, renewable power sources, such as solar, wind, geothermal, biomass and hydropower, and billions are being pledged to build renewable-energy resources. #PowerTracker investigates where this investment in renewable energy ends up, and how it is being used.

The #PowerTracker investigations demonstrated the need for tracking and interrogation of these projects, and have the potential to positively impact communities as we transition to cleaner energy resources.

## The team behind #PowerTracker

Oxpeckers, in collaboration with OCRI, worked with a team of trainers, experts and a data analyst to bring #PowerTracker to life. Southern African journalists were invited to apply to participate in the programme, and out of more than 50 applications, five grantees from Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, South Africa and Zimbabwe were chosen.

**Oxpeckers:** Fiona Macleod, Nompumelelo Mtsweni and Roxanne Joseph

**OCRI:** Adeolu Adekola and Akintunde Babatunde

**Trainers:** Dr Mary Stewart (CEO, Energetics) and Adam Oxford (Director, Area of Effect Media)

**Data:** Nompumelelo Mtsweni and Erofil Grapsa (data analyst)

## What the data shows

#PowerTracker data consists of original and unique datasets that are built by our team, and used to drive and complement the investigations. They include the capacities of various energy projects, countries where they are based, how much carbon emissions these projects are reducing, who is funding them, how much they cost, and many other details.

## Sources

#PowerTracker data was sourced from several different places, including media reports, company reports, academic research, government and other monitoring organisations.

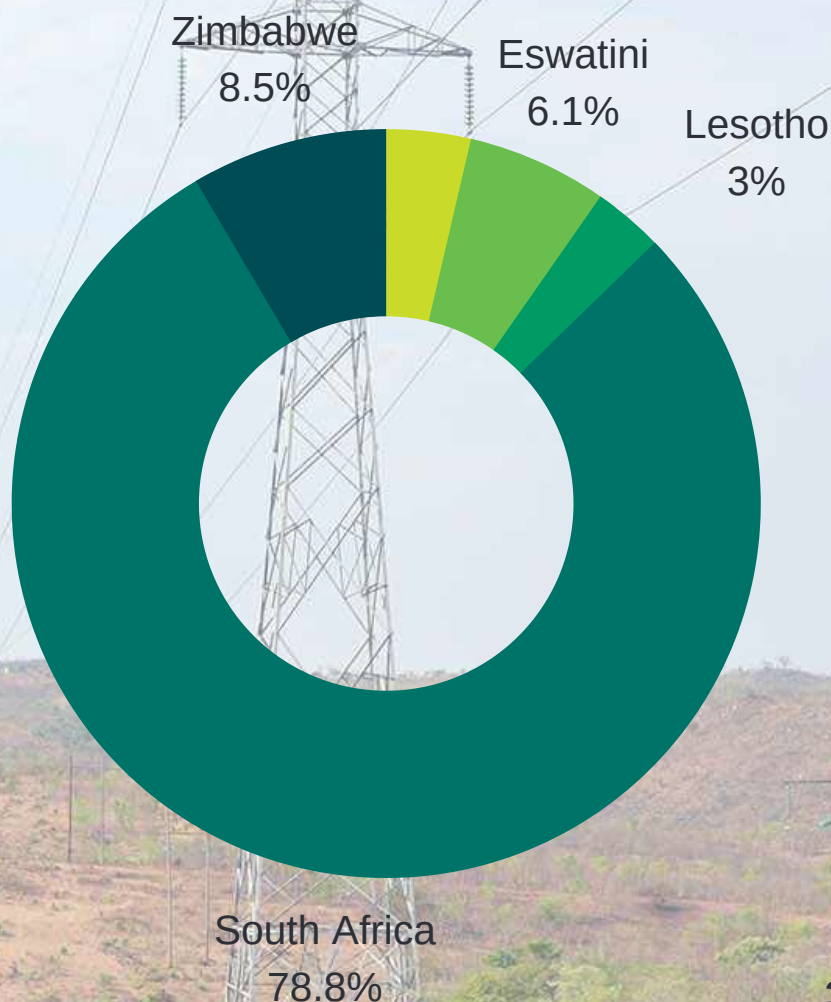
## Findings

#PowerTracker journalists collected 155 data points on renewable energy projects in Southern Africa

Here's what they discovered:

- 💡 South Africa has received the most funding, so far
- 💡 Botswana's focus is on biogas energy sources
- 💡 Lesotho is putting its efforts into solar energy
- 💡 Approximately \$6.5 billion has been allocated to renewable energy projects in the region, to date

and more.



## Limitations

The datasets are based on what #PowerTracker journalists were able to access and verify at the time of publication. Some of the information may be outdated. Not all the information on Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) have bid windows, and not all of the projects tracked have detailed information.

## Sources

The datasets are open-source and are available to the public for use on our Get the Data section of the Oxpeckers website.

## Contributions

If you spot a mistake in the data or would like to make a contribution, please contact us on [oxpeckerspowertracker@gmail.com](mailto:oxpeckerspowertracker@gmail.com)





# Gone with the wind: Lesotho's \$15 billion energy pipedream

Sechaba's investigation looked at a wind farm hailed as Africa's largest renewable energy project and the solution to Lesotho's hefty electricity costs has vanished from Lesotho's planned projects. This left behind unanswered questions and politicians who alleged that they did not have any knowledge that the government had a stake in the company earmarked for its construction.



“Throughout the many years, important stories like these fell through the cracks because of a lack of funding and mentorship.”

## What is your advice for other journalists investigating renewable energy in Southern Africa?

It is important to understand the types of financing and funding sources involved in these projects. Is the money coming from a loan, grant or equity? One should also conduct a background check on funders, as this will lead to greater transparency and accountability.

## What impact has your investigation had so far?

The story was widely shared and sparked local debates on Twitter. It was also an important opportunity for local media to be empowered and upskilled, and Sechaba's outlet was commended by one of the company directors [featured in the investigation], who called the reporting “fair and balanced”.

# South Africa (M)ainstreams wind and solar power

Thabo investigated various renewable energy contracts concluded with companies by the South African government. He collected and analysed data to determine how much money was distributed and what progress has been made so far.



Through the programme, Thabo realised the importance of financial literacy, and the need for a good understanding of climate finance in particular. He plans to continue with his work on #PowerTracker and will be visiting affected communities in Mpumalanga, South Africa.

“The people on the ground (e.g. mining communities) are left out of [South Africa’s Just Energy Transition Plan], but they suffer the consequences of this transition.”

## How do the outcomes of COP27 relate to the findings of your investigation?

To be a low carbon society, South Africa needs far more than the initial funding pledged—it will need an estimated \$98 billion over the next five years, to enable a Just Transition. The country’s investment plan includes the green hydrogen and new electricity sectors.

## What impact has your investigation had so far?

The investigation was widely shared and republished by several local media outlets. It also led to increased awareness of climate change and its impacts, and gave Thabo access to high-level climate and finance experts.

# Zimbabwe changes gear for electric cars

Debra investigated the Zimbabwean government's plan to roll-out an incentive-based electric vehicle programme, across the country. She looked into the sustainability of the programme, taking into account how much emissions these types of vehicles are emitting.



One of the major challenges she faced was not getting enough information from government officials, especially when it came to funding sources and estimated costs associated with the project. Her experiences with data journalism were of particular use to the investigation, and her work going forward.

“Data enriches the article, bringing out an analysis and contextual component that most articles lack.”

## What lessons did you learn from being part of #PowerTracker?

When it comes to writing about such complex issues, data is an important addition to an investigation. Debra says that after the training offered, she felt more confident when working with big datasets—most noticeably in assessing the finances and funding models of Zimbabwe's electric vehicle programme.

## What impact has your investigation had so far?

The investigation was published by multiple local media outlets across the region, and despite difficulties accessing information from the government, Debra sees the opportunity to continue her work on the topic.



# Biogas power raises hot air in Botswana

Sharon's investigation focused on a biogas project in Botswana. She spoke with workers on the project, with a particular focus on the gender divide.



Her story raised awareness and, she believes, “inspired the uptake of biogas in the country”. With such a strong focus on the names, faces and stories behind the project, Sharon's work aims to improve the image of women as it showed they are capable of constructing functional biogas digesters, proving that they can succeed in a male-dominated industry.

“I learnt never to assume that [officials] will readily share information, even harmless information ...”

## What should a Just Transition (to clean/green energy) in Southern Africa look like?

A Just Transition into the green economy should not cause harm to employees, communities, countries or regions. As with the Biogas Project, it should be inclusive, and take into account all relevant and affected farms, households and institutions.

## What impact has your investigation had so far?

The investigation was widely published and a feature video by China Xinhua News amassed several thousand views within a month of publication. Sharon also participated in a panel in the run-up to COP27, organised by Botswana's Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources Conservation and Tourism.

# Sweet and sour future for sugar power in Eswatini

Phathizwe's investigation honed in on giant sugar mills that supply renewable energy to the national grid. He investigated how these biomass projects are funded, how much energy the companies have produced, and assessed the impacts on nearby communities. The work, he says, cultivated a new interest in the energy sector in Eswatini.



“With data, a journalist can come up with a powerful article. Going forward, I will pay particular attention to this, as there are many more stories to tell.”

## Has COP27 changed the future of cogeneration in the region?

The future of cogeneration in the region is bleak—and carbon taxes contribute to this. However, with the launch of the Africa Carbon Market Initiative at COP27, things could shift quite significantly. With a power grid currently dominated by coal, it's important that South Africa leads the regional transition to renewables.

## What impact has your investigation had so far?

With the help of the programme, Phathizwe will continue to integrate data into future work, and aims to focus on climate change mitigation in particular. His investigation was published in both South Africa and Malawi, and has led to increased awareness of cogeneration, and regional plans to use these types of energy models in the transition to cleaner and greener energy.

### **Gone with the wind: Lesotho's \$15-billion energy pipedream:**

- [Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism](#), September 16, 2022
- [MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism](#) and IJ Hub, September 19, 2022
- [Mail & Guardian](#), September 22, 2022
- Global Investigative Journalism Network newsletter, October 20, 2022

### **South Africa (M)ainstreams wind and solar power**

- [Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism](#), September 22, 2022
- [Mail & Guardian](#), September 23, 2022
- [IOL News](#), October 8, 2022

### **Zimbabwe changes gear for electric vehicles**

- [Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism](#), September 28, 2022
- [Mail & Guardian](#), September 28, 2022
- [Sunday Mail](#), September 28, 2022

### **Biogas power raises hot air in Botswana**

- [Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism](#), October 6, 2022
- [Mail & Guardian](#), October 6, 2022
- Mmegi (print and [online](#)), October 21, 2022
- Xinhua News (online [here](#) and [here](#), and [video](#)), October 22, 2022
- [CAJ News Africa](#), November 2, 2022
- [Gotopnews](#), October 6, 2022
- [Wah!](#), October 2022
- [Daily News](#) (page 6), November 3, 2022
- [Africa in News](#), October 22, 2022

### **Sweet and sour future for sugar power**

- [Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism](#), October 21, 2022
- [Mail & Guardian](#), October 25, 2022
- [Centre for Investigative Journalism Malawi](#), October 31, 2022



## Videos

- [Financing renewable energy projects in Southern Africa \(training\)](#)
- [Investigating renewable energy in Southern Africa \(webinar\)](#)

## Articles and blogs

- [South Africa's energy transition rises in the east](#)
- [Green for good — or greed?](#)
- [Meet the #PowerTracker journalists](#)
- [#PowerTracker journalists tell stories with data](#)
- [Journalists liberate new #PowerTracker data to follow energy investments](#)



Children play near illegal settlements built on a former coal mine. More than \$250-billion is needed to transform South Africa's energy system from coal. Photo © Victoria Schneider/Al Jazeera





# #PowerTracker: Investigating renewable energy in Southern Africa

We would like to thank the Centre for Investigative Journalism's Open Climate Reporting Initiative (OCRI) for its support. Without them, #PowerTracker would not have been made possible.

[www.oxpeckers.org/powertracker](http://www.oxpeckers.org/powertracker)

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