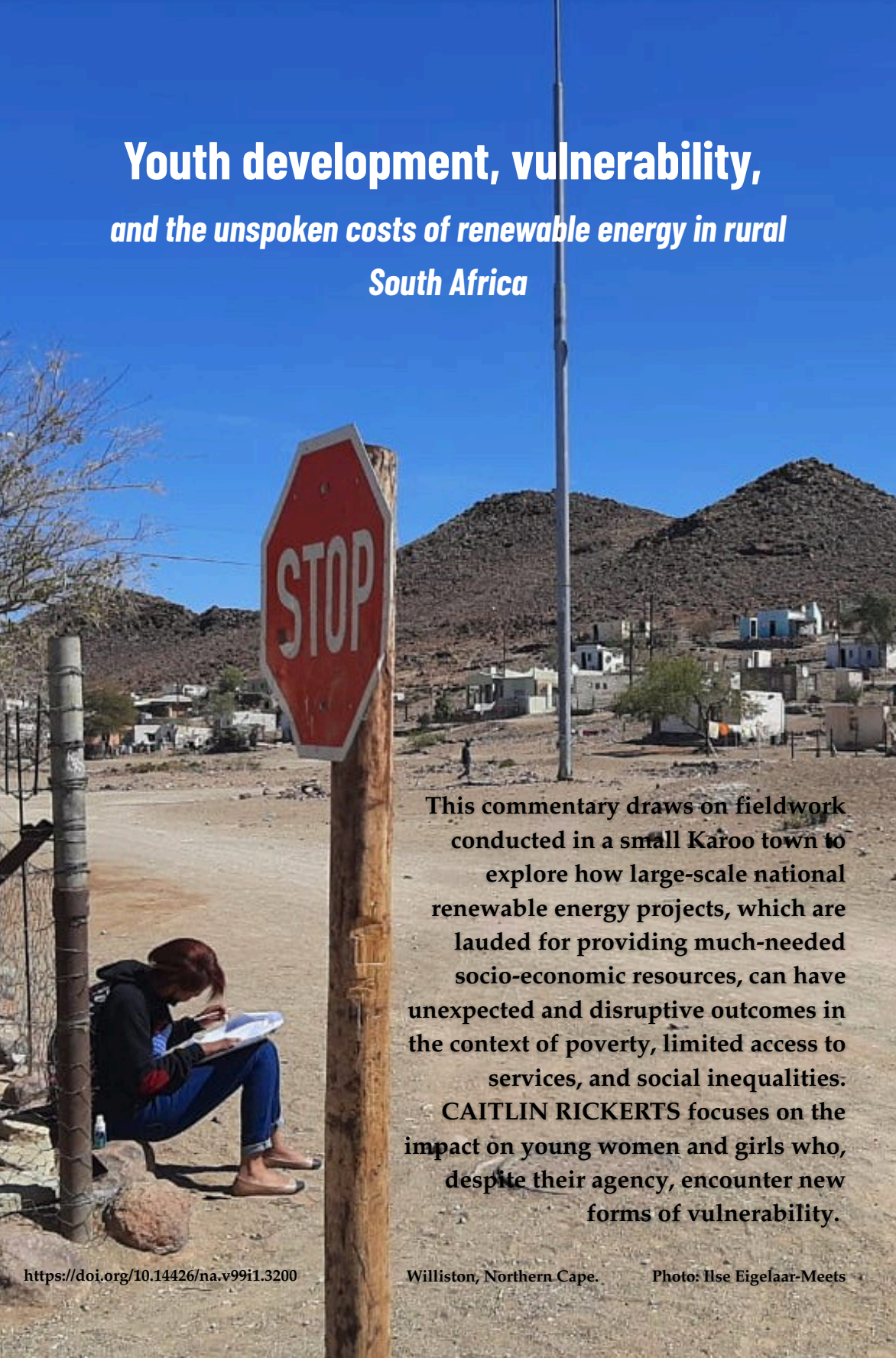
Youth development, vulnerability,

and the unspoken costs of renewable energy in rural South Africa



This commentary draws on fieldwork conducted in a small Karoo town to explore how large-scale national renewable energy projects, which are lauded for providing much-needed socio-economic resources, can have unexpected and disruptive outcomes in the context of poverty, limited access to services, and social inequalities. CAITLIN RICKERTS focuses on the impact on young women and girls who, despite their agency, encounter new forms of vulnerability.

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Williston, Northern Cape. Photo: Ilse Eigelaar-Meets

Introduction: 'The girls here are Gift of the Givers'

> ***Student: Miss, do you know we have Gift of the Givers here?***
> ***Ann: Oh, yes! It's an organisation that provides you with…***
> ***Student: No, Miss. The girls here they are [the] Gift of the Givers.***
> ***Ann: The girls here?" (Pauses, confused.)***
> ***Student: They are having sex with these men that they don't know.*** (Interview, Ann,[1] teacher, August 2024)

This exchange during my fieldwork[2] highlights how young people in the Northern Cape, where many Karoo towns remain marginalised within the broader economy, experience development efforts. It points to the complex, often troubling ways in which global and national development agendas, such as South Africa's renewable energy programme, become entangled with local socio-economic realities. While statistics might convey a town strained by poverty, youth unemployment, and high dropout rates, as in many Karoo towns, they do not fully capture the layers of life lived under these conditions. The excerpt above offers a glimpse into the layered, emotional, and at times disorienting experience of doing fieldwork in a place where the consequences of development can ripple through the lives of learners in deeply personal and troubling ways. It illustrates how structural constraints restrict agency.

Gift of the Givers[3] is a well-known humanitarian organisation associated with aid and relief; here the phrase takes on a dark, ironic twist. Rather than receiving assistance as development typically implies, the girls are the ones being 'given' or giving themselves in transactional encounters shaped by vulnerability and limited options. Their agency, though present, is deeply constrained, exercised within a context of structural inequality and precarious survival.

This article examines how large-scale national renewable energy projects, while framed in terms of progress and sustainability, can produce uneven and sometimes disruptive effects in rural towns. It demonstrates that while women and young girls exercise agency, their decisions are influenced and often limited by structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, and entrenched gender inequalities (Farmer, 2009). Although quantitative data and structural analysis are important to understand broader structural issues, they should be supplemented with in-depth qualitative engagement, as lived experiences and contextual nuances are crucial for grasping the full complexity of social realities.

Firstly, the article points out the tension between structural constraints and agency, showing how choices are shaped within limiting socio-economic and gendered contexts. Secondly, it advocates for qualitative research that brings lived experiences to the fore, surfacing the textures, contradictions, and nuances that are often flattened or obscured by quantitative methods. This article draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in a small town in the Karoo, where renewable energy development has accelerated in recent years. Using a case study approach that includes semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and document analysis, I examined how the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP), often regarded as one of South Africa's most successful green energy initiatives, unfolds in daily life in relation to learners' development within this small Karoo town.

... persistent poverty, unemployment, and various social ills remain deeply entrenched despite all the development happening.

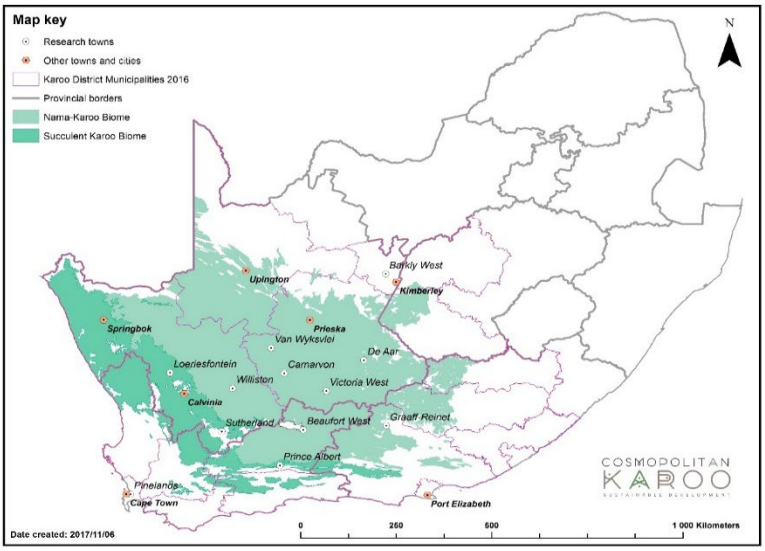
The town in question remains deliberately unnamed, signalling that the dynamics explored here are not isolated but emblematic of broader patterns across small towns in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. In these settings, the expansion of renewable energy infrastructure may promise national advancement, in terms of energy security and addressing climate change commitments, yet it also brings unexpected and under-acknowledged forms of social disruption, unsettling local rhythms and reshaping everyday life in ways that escape the dominant narratives of sustainability.

Karoo '*dorpies*' and the Northern Cape

Development can be broadly understood as improving the quality of life, reducing poverty, and fostering sustainable progress. However, in places like the Karoo (see Figure 1 below), rural, historically marginalised and shaped by the legacies of colonial exploitation and apartheid-era oppression, persistent poverty, unemployment, and various social ills remain deeply entrenched despite all the development happening around the towns (Walker & Vorster, 2024; Borchardt, 2023;

Malope, 2022). While this article draws on fieldwork from one town in the Karoo, many of its other small towns, which also host renewable energy companies, have similar characteristics, highlighting the realities in which these developmental dynamics are unfolding, often more quietly and mostly undocumented (Mabele et al., 2024).

Figure 1: Situating the towns within the Karoo



Source: DSTI/NRF-SARChI in The Sociology of Land, Environment and Sustainable Development (2017)

The following section offers a closer look at the structural and historical characteristics of small towns in the Northern Cape, foregrounding the socio-economic conditions that shape how development is experienced on the ground. This is illustrated in Walker and Vorster (2024), which explores the social conditions of Loeriesfontein in 2019, Sutherland in 2017, and Vanwyksvlei in 2016.[4] Like many towns in the Northern Cape, these settlements emerged as service hubs for the sheep farming industry, which by the late 1800s had become predominantly controlled by white owners (Walker & Vorster, 2024). These historical foundations continue to influence patterns of inequality, access, and opportunity in the present, making them critical sites for understanding the uneven impacts of contemporary development initiatives such as renewable energy expansion.

Households in these towns typically feature informal backyard structures and pit latrines, with limited access to piped water (Walker & Vorster, 2024). The average household size is 3.5 in Loeriesfontein, 4 in

Sutherland, and 5.7 in Vanwyksvlei, all of which are above the national average of 3.3 (Walker & Vorster, 2024).

Of the residents employed in these towns, 30% in Loeriesfontein, 37% in Sutherland, and 61% in Vanwyksvlei earn R1,000 per month or less (Walker & Vorster, 2024). While 64%, 78%, and 80% of households in these towns respectively have at least one government grant, this is the main source of income for 46% of households in Loeriesfontein and 37% in Sutherland (Walker & Vorster, 2024). Furthermore, 20% of households in Loeriesfontein, 15% in Sutherland, and 15% in Vanwyksvlei reported experiencing food insecurity[5] (Walker & Vorster, 2024). These statistics paint a sobering picture of rural vulnerability, raising critical questions about the adequacy of current development interventions and the long-term sustainability of livelihoods in these communities.

Less than half of the residents of these three towns have completed matric, while among those aged 15-18 years old, 33% in Loeriesfontein, 40% in Sutherland, and 30% in Vanwyksvlei are not attending school, indicating alarming dropout rates (Walker & Vorster, 2024).

But this does not come out of nowhere. The Northern Cape Department of Education has faced ongoing difficulties that have overshadowed its achievements, leading to significant interruptions in students' learning (Martin, 2016). The South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) noted that the Northern Cape Department of Education failed to deliver on promises made in December 2024, leaving schools unprepared for the start of the 2025 academic year (SADTU, 2025). While many schools did not receive essential funds, some received only 27%, which was still insufficient for basic supplies, leading schools to start the academic year without stationery or feeding schemes for learners and raising concerns about how utilities would be paid (Rahim, 2025).

The Democratic Alliance criticised the Northern Cape Department of Education for its poor financial management, pointing to R3.9 billion in unauthorised, irregular, fruitless, and wasteful expenditure (Van der Lith, 2025). While the Northern Cape Department of Education disputes these claims, operational challenges are clear. Delivering quality education and preventing learners from dropping out becomes especially difficult when the provincial department fails to fulfil its commitments.

Teenage pregnancy statistics are also concerning; 33% of women aged 20-29 years in Loeriesfontein, 46% in Sutherland, and 48% in Vanwyksvlei had their first pregnancy before the age of 20 (Walker & Vorster, 2024). South Africa has one of the highest teenage pregnancy

rates globally, driven by factors such as poverty, transactional relationships, limited reproductive services, lack of parental guidance, peer pressure, and misinformation (Mbongwa et al., 2024).

In the 2023/24 financial year, 122,000 teenagers, including 2,716 aged 10-14 and 119,587 aged 15-19, became parents (Abrahams, 2024). In the Northern Cape specifically, every quarter there were 900 pregnancies among 15 to 19-year-olds, of which 20 were girls from 10 to 14 years old (Sobuwa, 2023). Pregnancy in this age group has profound implications for both the young girl's future and their role in the broader economy, as it may perpetuate cycles of poverty (Van Niekerk et al., 2024).

These challenges are compounded by other health risks facing young people in the region. In a study by Louw et al. (2024) that screened 3,001 primary school children across eight study sites for Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) found that of the 395 participants diagnosed with FASD, the Northern Cape had the highest prevalence, ranging from 15.71% to 20.36%, compared to Free State, Western Cape, and Eastern Cape rates that ranged from 5.15% to 11.02% (Oliver et al., 2025).

While these small towns have attracted investment through renewable energy initiatives and associated local SED commitments (Walker & Vorster, 2024), residents often perceive these interventions as primarily advancing national agendas rather than addressing local needs, revealing a persistent disconnect between externally driven development efforts and community priorities (Walker & Vorster, 2024; Borchardt, 2023; Malope, 2022).

Beneath these broad development ideals lie fractured realities that expose the limits and sometimes the harm caused by top-down development. The Karoo is often imagined as a vast, empty landscape, a perception that has historically enabled the imposition of large-scale projects with little consultation. In reality, it is home to communities with long, complex histories shaped by colonial violence and dispossession, apartheid-era forced removals, racialised poverty, and uneven access to services. Today, renewable energy companies are among the most visible actors in these communities, contributing to local development in various ways.

From apartheid legacies to energy policy reforms

South Africa's post-apartheid transformation programmes, which aimed to address broader development goals alongside local community development, have been marked by both optimism and complexity. Following the transition to democracy in 1994, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) set out to undo

centuries of racialised inequality by ensuring basic services, redistributing wealth, and alleviating poverty (Republic of South Africa, 1994). This was later abandoned in favour of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, which sought to stimulate economic growth and create jobs (ANC, 1997). The RDP and GEAR strategies targeted housing, sanitation, water, electricity, and education, as access to these had been primarily reserved for white urban and industrial centres, while rural and black communities remained severely underserved (Republic of South Africa, 1994; ANC, 1997).

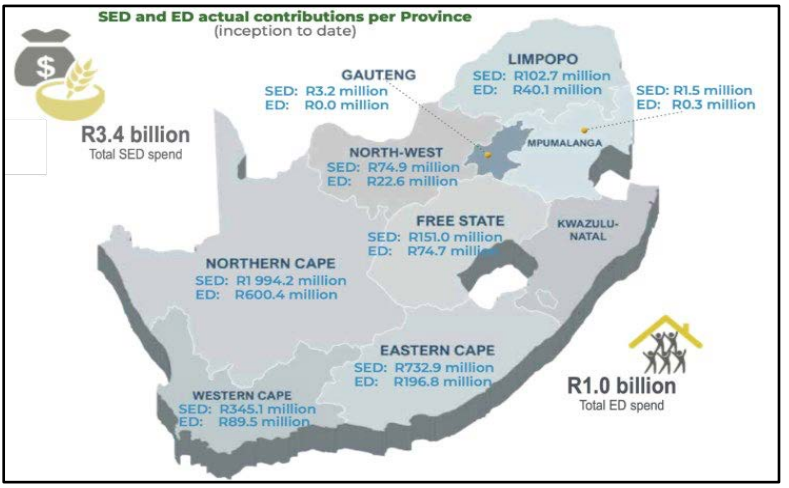
The post-apartheid government introduced energy reforms to help redress these historical inequalities and promote inclusive development. The 1998 *White Paper on Energy* aligned with the RDP and GEAR strategies, underscoring the need to diversify the energy mix by investing in renewable sources (DME, 1998). This involved permitting independent power producers (IPPs), privately owned energy companies, to contribute to the national electricity grid (IPPO, 2025). The move to include private companies was designed to dismantle the monopoly of South Africa's state-owned electricity utility, Eskom, attract private capital, and accelerate a green energy transition in response to climate change agreements, while also enhancing the development outcomes for local communities (Borchardt, 2023; Malope, 2022). This means that development is no longer guided solely by government policy but now also involves private companies with contractual obligations to support the broader development initiatives.

The Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP), launched in 2011 by what was then-called the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, National Treasury, and the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA), requires successful bidders to spend a portion of their revenue from electricity sales to Eskom on local socio-economic development (SED) and enterprise development (ED) within towns that host these IPPs (Montmasson-Clair & Ryan, 2014). The goal is to ensure that host towns, often rural, impoverished and historically marginalised, can benefit from hosting large-scale renewable energy infrastructure. However, a significant gap exists between developers and local communities or governments. There is no formal requirement for IPPs to collaborate on development initiatives, either with local municipalities or with one another, nor are they obligated to mitigate the negative impacts their presence may have on host towns (Mabele et al., 2024).

SED and the geography of renewable energy

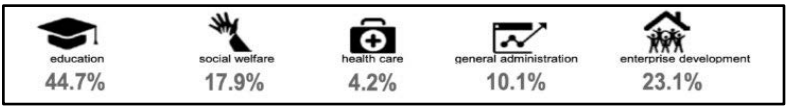
Rather than treating corporate social responsibility as a voluntary initiative, the South African national government integrated these contributions into a Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) scorecard system administered by the government that assesses bidders for electricity generation projects across seven key development areas (IPPO, 2025; Eberhard & Naude, 2016). Projects score higher if their benefits are realised within a 50km radius of the project site,[6] typically within small, rural towns, where their SED and ED funds are required to be spent locally (see Figures 2 and 3 below).

Figure 2: REIPPPP – independent power producers' contributions to SED and ED by province, 2025



Source: IPPO (2025, p. 24)

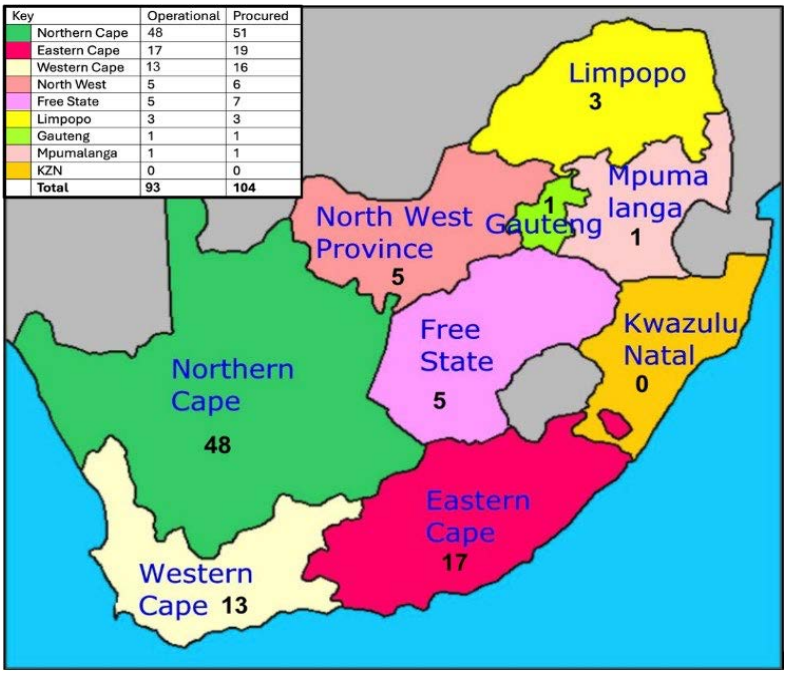
Figure 3: Proportions of funds spent by REIPPPP companies on different activity categories of SED and ED projects from inception to June 2025 as a percentage of the total



Source: IPPO (2025, p. 24)

This has brought large-scale investment into rural areas in provinces with long-standing inequalities, such as the Northern Cape, Western Cape, and Eastern Cape, in which solar and wind resources are abundant. By 2025, 104 IPPs had been procured across seven bidding windows, with the Northern Cape hosting the highest concentration of 48 operational projects, followed by the Eastern Cape with 17 and the Western Cape with 13 (see Figure 4 below) (IPPO, 2025).

Figure 4: Renewable energy IPPs operational by province in South Africa, 2025



Sources: numbers: IPPO (2025, p.16);
map: https://www.southafrica.to/provinces/provinces.php

The large open spaces, high solar radiation, and strong wind patterns in the three provinces make them particularly suitable locations for renewable energy projects (IPPO, 2020; 2021a; 2021b). However, the economic profile of the Northern Cape is less promising, given its stark socio-economic challenges. Its economy, historically centred on livestock farming and shaped by colonial land dispossession, has failed to deliver inclusive growth.

The intersection of these factors means that renewable energy development often arrives in towns shaped by a history of dispossession, economic precarity, and underdevelopment. In such settings, the large amounts of SED and ED funding, as seen in Figure 2 above, can have significant symbolic and material impacts.

But with its predefined key development areas − education; social welfare; health care; general administration; and ED − as shown in Figure 3 above, it risks reinforcing top-down, short-term, and politicised models of development (IPPO, 2025). Of the five categories, education has the highest percentage of spending (44.7%). However, the way private

corporations define, implement, and experience development on the ground depends on the existing structural challenges and specificities of these towns, highlighting the importance of aligning development with the local community context.

The following section will unpack how development projects funded by IPPs in terms of their REIPPPP bid commitments play out on the ground in my study site.

Development on the ground

Classroom at the school located within the study site. *Photo: Caitlin Rickerts*

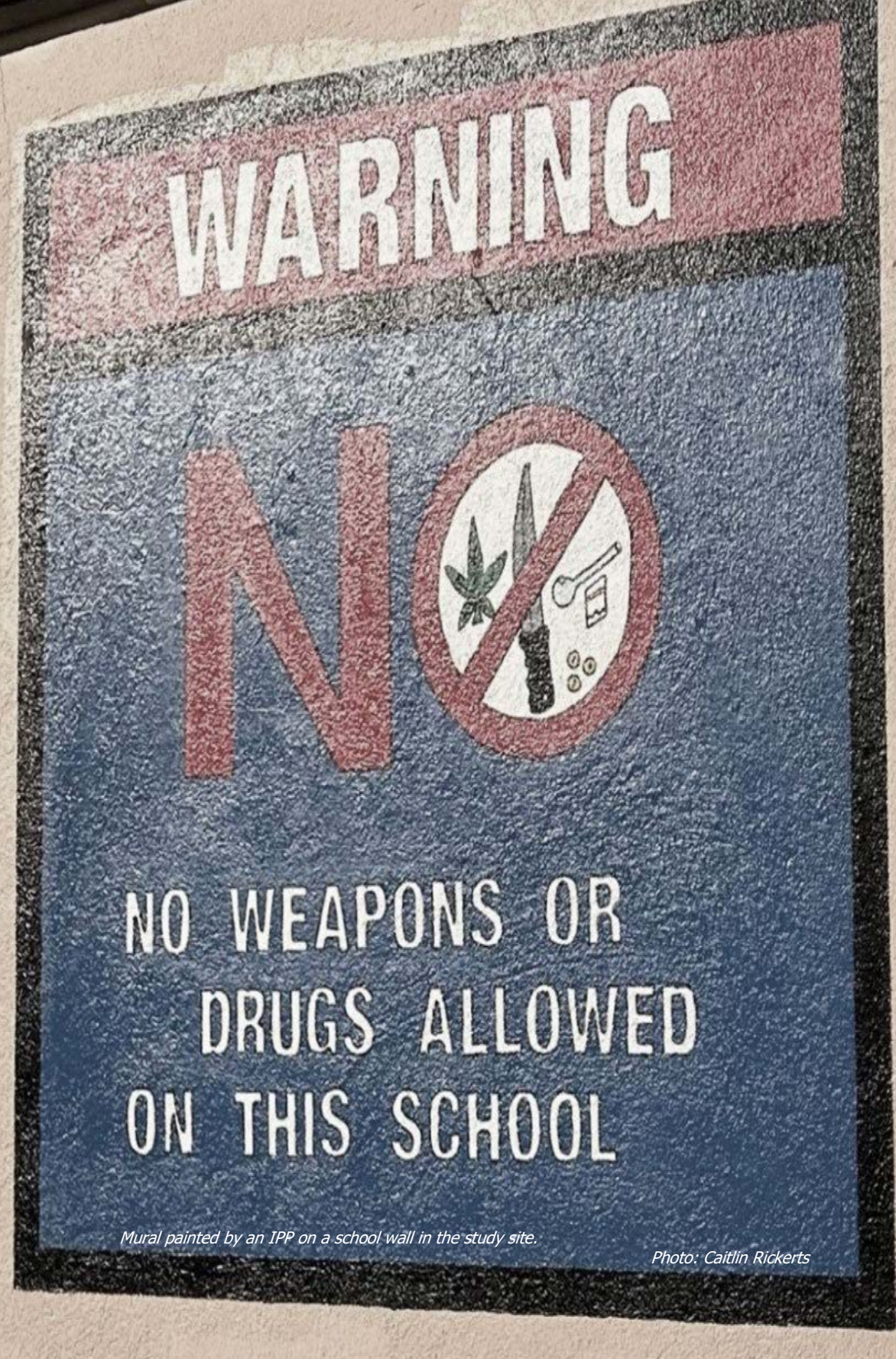
Development projects funded by IPPs are most often channelled into donations or outsourced to consultants tasked with implementing pre-designed programmes. For learners, this takes the form of education-related donations such as stationery, books, school uniforms, bursaries for higher education, e-learning tablets, and smart whiteboards. This gave teachers some hope and a sense that development had finally arrived (Ann, Wade, Emily, teachers, interviews, August 2024; Peter, Jackie, teachers, interviews, April 2025). Technologies, such as e-learning tablets, could enable more engagement in the classroom. However, their maintenance and supply challenges highlight their 'meantime'[7] nature,

suggesting that such development could be more impactful if better aligned with local needs and capacities (Fischer, 2018).

For local residents and parents, particularly those from low-income households or historically marginalised communities, the benefits of IPP-led development remain fleeting, short-term, or inaccessible (focus groups 1-5, November 2024). Although bursaries for higher education are available, many learners struggle to meet the academic requirements needed to access higher education, suggesting that although the opportunity exists, the chance to benefit from it remains out of reach, rendering the opportunity aspirational rather than attainable. Even when learners have access to the materials required for homework and classroom participation, practical challenges remain: they often arrive at school without having completed their homework or without bringing the donated stationery they need (focus group 7, April 2025). The benefits of these efforts may therefore be perceived as 'band-aids' due to their temporary, misaligned, and meantime nature (Redfield, 2018; Fischer, 2018). As Redfield (2018) notes, band-aid interventions are those that address visible problems with temporary solutions, while failing to tackle underlying structural issues.

Yet what is not so temporary is the transformation of the social fabric that occurs during the construction phase of renewable energy projects that are expected to contribute to SED locally. It is within this context that the phrase "*the girls here, they are Gift of the Givers*" must be understood.

This dynamic cannot be reduced to development policy alone, but it is undeniably shaped by the broader context of poverty, unemployment, gendered power imbalances, and the intensified precarity that accompanies the influx of single[8] male workers during renewable energy project construction. The few jobs provided by the IPPs are mostly low-skilled for the men in the town, while most of the construction work involves bringing in outside men, reshaping local social dynamics in subtle and uneven ways. These shifts can exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly for young women navigating constrained environments with limited access to resources, role models, or alternative opportunities. Within this context, some young women engage in transactional relationships not merely as passive victims, but as actors making strategic, if fraught, choices. For some, this period is framed as a temporary phase of low-skilled 'sex' work, through which they seek to assert influence and extract value from men's control over sexual economies (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003, p. 9).



Mural painted by an IPP on a school wall in the study site.

Photo: Caitlin Rickerts

Bullying; FASD; poverty; neglect; substance abuse; school dropouts: These themes recurred in the conversations, but teenage pregnancy stood out, not always spoken about directly, but emerging indirectly, like a shadow that carried with it not only stigma, but history, where the shame of the pregnant teenager's mother, who herself gave birth as a teenager, lingered (Ann, teacher, interview, August 2024; focus group 6, April 2025). It revealed the generational disempowerment that women often carry into the fabric of the family, reinforcing the urgent need for both women and learners to be heard and given the space to forge their own lives.

Some participants showed little awareness regarding teenage pregnancy, suggesting that this issue is frequently concealed among peers and only acknowledged by adults when the pregnancy is at an advanced stage (Adam, school principal, interview, August 2024). Others tolerated it with resignation, claiming that sex amongst teenagers is normal (Peter, teacher, interview, April 2025). A few participants highlighted cases of learners who already have children, expressing concern that this trend could adversely impact their future educational and work opportunities (Ann, teacher, interview, August 2024).

The word “prostitution” surfaced in the conversation. Typically, the term refers to sexual exchange involving direct cash payment (De Zalduondo, as cited in Leclerc-Madlala, 2003). But in a small town where poverty is widespread and resources are scarce, the lines feel less clear. All I could ask, quietly and curiously, was “who? And how?”’

“The young girls in high school,” almost every interviewee said when the topic arose (Ann, Emily, teachers, interviews, August 2024; Peter, teacher, interview, April 2025). Others noted that some of these girls may look like they are in high school but could be even younger (focus group 2, November 2024). Participants shared a difficult and layered account, beginning with observations about how the arrival of new men, brought in to work on nearby IPP construction sites, was compounding the challenges already faced by local learners.

While IPPs may intend to support local development, their presence has also introduced new vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to young people’s agency. Some girls now linger around shops and open spaces, seeking to draw the attention of these men. Participants spoke in hushed tones about how the allure of gifts, cell phones, attention, money, and alcohol pushed these young girls toward making uninformed decisions about their bodies, their health, and their future. This was conveyed with a blend of outrage, despair, and acceptance (Adam, Ann,

Susan, teachers, interviews, August 2024; Peter, Jackie, teachers, interviews, April 2025; focus groups 1-5, November 2024).

In the context of severe poverty, where parents themselves are often caught in cycles of unemployment and substance abuse, these girls are not only exposed to risk, but they are also, in some cases, described as 'working' and contributing financially to their households (focus groups 2-4, August 2024). Yet, one interviewee in her early twenties, in a quiet moment, told me:

> ***I was at the shop with my friends when this construction worker came up and asked me to come to his guesthouse. I told him no, but he wouldn't stop asking until I walked away. Eventually, he moved on to my friend.*** (Emma, university student, interview, November 2024)

It became more difficult to think of this as straightforward prostitution. It is not always the case that girls simply avail themselves. Instead, these men exploit their limited agency. A mural painted on one of the school's walls by an IPP emphasises that no drugs or weapons are allowed on the school grounds. Yet, ironically, in the community, a much darker reality is unfolding, where transactional relationships are becoming the norm, as sex is exchanged not just for basic needs but also for consumption driven by modern allure (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003).

While many residents expressed concern about the deeply unsettling effect of IPPs on the town, these changes were often described as the *new* normal, something beyond their control (focus groups 2-4, November 2024). What began as an inquiry into the intersection of development and youth wellbeing gradually shifted into something more complex. I found myself in a space where the boundaries between opportunity and risk, between progress and exposure, blurred with ease, especially for those with the least protection and voice. In this town, the normalisation of these dynamics obscures the limited choices and structural constraints that shape young women's agency.

Within this context, some young women engage in transactional relationships not merely as passive victims, but as actors making strategic, if fraught, choices.

Vanwyksvlei 'donkey bar'. *Photo: Stephanie Paula Borchardt*

Reports of rape also surfaced, alongside accounts of 'girls' falling pregnant by 'these men' who would soon return to their families elsewhere, some of whom were married, some significantly older. In one incident, a girl "took her small sister with … and these guys raped the small child" (Ann, teacher, interview, August 2024). In a follow-up interview with Ann, she told me:

> ***… one of the children at our school, [a] 14-year-old, is pregnant, and she said she was raped by one of these people [construction men] … a person she does not know. There are [a number of] people in [the town], everyone knows everyone.*** (Interview, April 2025)

When residents shared these stories, I asked gently, "What is being done about it?" Their responses carried a tone of weariness, as if the weight of repetition had dulled the urgency. In some households, the boundary between protection and complicity was hard to trace, blurred by circumstance, silence, and the complexity of care in constrained settings.

In a focus group discussion with members of the South African Police Service (SAPS), officers reflected on encounters that deepened my understanding of the complexities involved (focus group 4, November 2024). One officer recalled seeing a girl of high school age leaving a guesthouse. The officer then took her home to tell her mother, only to be met with, "Leave her, she is working". With encounters like these, officers expressed feeling helpless. While the common consensus is that these girls are selling their bodies, a more hopeful part of me considered an alternative; perhaps in some cases, the girls are doing 'proper work' − laundry, washing dishes, or cleaning the house. But we won't know. The ambiguity, the silences, the denials − that is precisely the problem. In the case of the 14-year-old who was raped and is expecting the child of a man she does not know, residents pointed to her father's position in the town as a reason why no charges have been made, hoping that the story would not spread and reflect badly on the parents (focus group 6, April 2025).

These narratives and perspectives came to me through people who clearly care. In their voices, I heard frustration, sadness, helplessness, the 'what-if-this-was-my-child' response. When I probed about the development efforts of the renewable energy companies during my interview with Ann, the high school teacher, her voice trembled: "Yes, they've made donations. They're doing things for us. But that's not the whole story" (interview, August 2024).

This led to the difficult conversation about transactional sex, pregnancy, and rape, a conversation that would repeatedly surface in my subsequent interviews and focus groups (Adam, Susan, Emily, Jennifer, interviews, August 2024; Emma, interview, November 2024; focus groups 1-2; 4, November 2024; focus group 6, April 2025).

Although I did not have direct conversations with these young women, every individual I engaged with casually mentioned transactional relationships. For these girls and their families, poverty and vulnerability are intrinsic aspects of their daily existence, and this was simply another means for them to navigate a life where they can engage in capitalist consumption.

...poverty, limited access to services, and social inequalities influence how these resources are received and experienced....

Development, especially when fast-moving, does more than provide infrastructure or material contributions. It reshapes the social fabric, introducing new forms of aspiration and risk. It brings people in and sends others out, unsettling established rhythms. In some cases, it creates conditions in which young girls, already navigating poverty, silence, shame, and constrained agency, find themselves increasingly exposed.

The arrival of men hired to construct nearby renewable energy sites left behind more than infrastructure. Their presence became entangled in stories of unintended consequence, babies who mark the passage of disruption, and accounts of trauma, sexually transmitted infections, betrayal, and abandonment. These experiences compound the already difficult realities faced by residents during the construction phase of IPP projects, a time that, in theory, should be filled with hope and promise. Instead, and perhaps unintentionally, these projects can usher in new forms of social disruption that remain under-acknowledged in dominant development narratives.

Reflection on current development approaches

The accounts from my research may not always be statistically 'verifiable', but they are sociologically true. They illuminate patterns, meanings, and contradictions that statistics alone cannot capture. These narratives reveal how the social fabric of a town can be disrupted, and that this disruption, in fact, does not go unnoticed by its residents. They reveal the constrained choices young people are forced to make. They reflect a world in which the ability to make informed, empowered decisions about one's future is unequally distributed. While tangible donations such as technologies, bursaries, and school clothing or supplies offer support, they are distributed within a constrained and deeply uneven environment. Structural issues such as poverty, limited access to services, and social inequalities influence how these resources are received and experienced. Consequently, their impact may fall short of expected outcomes, highlighting the necessity for more context-sensitive and sustained engagement.

Importantly, this is not something confined to one place. What has been found in this town is undoubtedly mirrored elsewhere, in other small and rural communities shaped by similar development pressures and challenges (Mabele et al., 2024; Malope, 2022; Borchardt, 2023). These are not isolated incidents, but part of a broader set of patterns, some of which are unintended, but none of which are unpredictable. When development interventions overlook the everyday realities of local communities, what emerges is not just an abundance of 'band-aid' and

'meantime development' resources, but a contribution to the various challenges communities are already confronted with.

These consequences are not always visible from a distance and often go unrecorded and under-reported, especially in places without consistent local reporting (Mabele et al., 2024). In many of these small communities, there is no local newspaper, no public platform, and no interest in listening to anyone. The stories I encountered, stories of transactional sex, of invisible pressures shaped by local conditions, of silence, are rarely documented. Not because they are rare, but because they unfold beyond the reach of conventional metrics and everyday visibility.

This is precisely why qualitative, on-the-ground research matters. It is through sustained, in-depth fieldwork that these hidden narratives begin to surface. These stories do not fit neatly into policy reports or development evaluations, yet they are real, and they carry weight. This is what I found: the unspoken, the undocumented, the uncomfortable truths of development as it is lived, not as it is imagined, designed, or reported.

This is not just about development efforts. It is about bodies, about voice, about power. It is about whether development deepens inequality or seeks to repair it, and whether the stories of local communities are valued enough to shape the answer.

Until development is measured not by promises or procurement targets but by the safety, agency, and dignity of those most exposed to its impacts, even the most well-intentioned interventions risk reinforcing the very inequalities they claim to address. These unspoken costs of development, alongside its band-aid solutions, demand a deeper interrogation: how is development conceptualised by these renewable energy companies, and whose realities are excluded from that vision?

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INTERVIEWS

All interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms

Adam – Principal (August 2024)
Susan – Principal (August 2024)
Wade – Primary school teacher (August 2024)
Emily – Primary school teacher (August 2024)
Ann – High school teacher (August 2024; April 2025)
Emma – University student (November 2024)
Jennifer – Local resident (November 2024)

Peter – High school teacher (April 2025)
Jackie – Primary school teacher (April 2025)

FOCUS GROUPS
All focus groups have been assigned numbers.
Focus group 1 – Local residents (November 2024)
Focus group 2 – Parents (November 2024)
Focus group 3 – Parents (November 2024)
Focus group 4 – SAPS officers (November 2024)
Focus group 5 – Local residents (April 2025)
Focus group 6 – Parents (April 2025)
Focus group 7 – Teachers (April 2025)

ENDNOTES

[1] Ann, a high school teacher in the study area, shares a conversation between herself and a student at the school.
[2] This fieldwork reflection forms part of a broader research project on development initiatives funded by independent power producer (IPP) companies in the Karoo.
[3] The Gift of the Givers Foundation is the continent's largest African-founded non-governmental organisation dedicated to disaster response, widely recognised for its exceptional humanitarian work (see https://giftofthegivers.org). The example cited in the article highlights how the name "Gift of the Givers" has been appropriated in a local context, used in ways that diverge from the organisation's intended mission and identity. While the reference is intended to convey the shock experienced by the interviewee, it in no way reflects on the Foundation's extraordinary contributions.
[4] The surveys used by Walker and Vorster (2024) of Loeriesfontein, Sutherland, and Vanwyksvlei were conducted by the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) in the Sociology of Land, Environment and Sustainable Development.
[5] Food insecurity refers to no access to food or adequate food for consumption. The surveys framed this around households reporting hunger, where residents had to indicate whether and how often they had to go without food in the 12 months before the surveys.
[6] The project site is where the solar and wind farms are located.
[7] 'Meantime', in this sense, refers to how certain temporary interventions that provide hope can be replaced with more permanent solutions (Fischer, 2018).
[8] 'Single' male workers refer to the men who are not accompanied by family members.

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Caitlin Rickerts is a Master's student affiliated with the DSTI/NRF SARChI Chair in the Sociology of Land, Environment and Sustainable Development, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Stellenbosch University. Her research explores the intersection of development, youth, and energy transitions in rural South Africa, with a particular focus on how renewable energy initiatives shape opportunities and challenges for young people. Her broader academic interests include rural development, social policy, and the role of energy transitions in shaping youth futures.