

Durban's perfume rods, plastic covers and

by Trusha Reddy
Wednesday, 09 March 2005

Sajida Khan is a soft-spoken, dignified but intense Durban resident who opposes the World Bank's methane-to-electricity project at the Bisasar Road Landfill. Her passion is fighting - and almost palpably winning, now - against awesome forces, including environmental racism, global warming and international economic power.

It is a story that needs telling. But not before another - more personal - story, one which merges seamlessly with the history of the municipal dump whose closure Khan has been fighting for years.

In 1980, Bisasar Road Landfill in the Indian suburb of Clare Estate officially opened its gates to rubbish-dumping trucks. I was just three years old at the time and living in the suburb next door. During the course of my entire childhood, the Bisasar Road landfill was a regular topic of discussion, as my mother and I made trips to visit my grandmother nearby.

Clare Estate was the bridge between our familial residences. I vividly remember the preparations, as we hit that short stretch. Car windows had to be rolled up. Nostrils had to be squeezed tight with tiny, pincer-gripped fingers. Breaths needed to be held. The stench was reminiscent of my public school toilet on a really hot Durban day.

I would also marvel at the big houses on the hill lining the road on the opposite side of the dump (we lived in a block of flats). They stood majestically like something out of Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby, in sharp contrast to the huge stinking dump right in front of them. A few houses were owned by one of the wealthiest Indians in Durban, my mother used to boast, as if they were members of our own family.

I could never quite work out why rich people would live right across from a refuse dump. Little did my premature mind comprehend that everyone, including the rich Indian, could only live in an area designated under apartheid's Group Areas Act. Since Clare Estate had a large quarry, it was deemed unsuitable for white people. Indians were allocated that area.

A few years after the opening of the dump at the site of that quarry, I remember my mother excitedly telling me that the Bisasar Road facility would be shut and transformed into a park for the community. As a child whose life was spent riding a bike around our tar-covered parking lot the idea of a park in our vicinity was just too thrilling.

Perfume and toxics

It's now 2005 and I'm 27 years old. We live in a non-racial democratic South Africa today. But Clare Estate's notorious dump is still there, although approaching it, I notice something very different.

The stench has changed markedly, into a kind of 'mutant funk', as comedian Jerry Seinfeld describes the combination of body odour and perfume deodorant. Bisasar Road landfill now exudes the stink of dump rot mixed with an artificial sickly-sweet smell, emanating from long 'perfume rods' lining the road on the outer rim of the landfill. These rods were installed to merely mask the fumes arising from the dump; but the effect is quite nasty. Again I pinch my nose.

This time, instead of driving past, I enter one of the Gatsbyesque houses on the hill, Khan's residence. The city councilor

in the area had just announced to the media that the landfill was, finally, to be closed. So again, as in my youth, I felt almost ecstatic at the thought of this old dream now coming true.

But there is more to the story than met the nose.

Khan welcomes me warmly into her home. Her lounge is framed by glass doors overlooking the entire landfill below, and beyond to the informal shacks and formal homes directly adjacent to the landfill, and a technikon campus at the bottom end of the dump. Just out of eyesight are two primary schools, a secondary school and a home for the safety of abandoned children, all in close proximity to the Bisasar Road dump.

Apartheid's racist rationale for the location of the dump in an Indian residential area, even one with nice homes like Khan's, was obvious enough. But the location of dumps is a class issue as well: low-income, powerless people ultimately bear the consequences of over-consumption by higher-income groups.

'You should have come earlier', Khan tells me. 'They were dumping sewage. Humph, the smell!' According to its original permit, Bisasar Road Landfill was a domestic waste site. Yet Khan reports that the dumping of sewage sludge is a daily occurrence, and is apparently included in Durban Solid Waste's contract. This is a violation of water law, which requires sewage sludge to be transported and disposed off in such a way as not to cause any odour or health hazard.

It is not only sewage sludge that contravened the law and caused offence, Khan argues. Medical supplies and industrial waste from Mondi (the paper mill), Hulett's (sugar factory) and other industries in the nearby industrial area of Springfield are also regularly dumped there. In February 2001 a large shipment of rotten eggs exceeding 22 000 tons was also dumped, Khan recalls. 'When combined with the stink of the sewage sludge, this made life extremely uncomfortable for the residents.'

To exacerbate the situation, according to Bryan Ashe of the NGO EarthlifeAfrica, South Africa's dumps only became landfills in the 1990's when new laws were being introduced. This meant, in effect, that rubbish was never recycled, treated and extracted, because dumping was the cheapest option for industries. That, in turn, has given rise to the challenge of extracting the methane that is formed by the rot of decades' worth of garbage.

Closure - or a new threat?

Most importantly from the perspective of Khan and her neighbours, I ask, might Bisasar finally be closed? Khan ridicules the newspaper article I had read. According to her, the source cited for the announcement, one Councilor Bechoo, is the source of community outrage, because he refuses to support efforts to win full closure of the dump. In fact, Bechoo was asked by the community to retract his statement and they were expecting to see it in the next edition of the newspaper.

Khan explains that the closure was officially declared a 'pro-forma closure' or 'partial closure'. Raymond Rampersad, Head of eThekweni Cleansing and Solid Waste, was quoted by the Daily News as saying the landfill was going through 'various stages of closure. That means it will only be shut down in about seven years, with a limited area remaining open for the recycling of specific non-smelly wastes such as builder's rubble and garden refuse.' Khan sees the council's move as 'playing for time', part of a deliberate attempt to mislead the public.

A new dumpsite for the catchment area's waste is proposed in Buffelsdraai, but it will only be ready to accept Bisasar's volume in 2012. Buffels Draai is also located much further away from the city centre and thus Bisasar would remain a

'transfer site'. According to Khan, the rubbish that cannot be compacted will be left there to rot.

Khan's own research revealed that neither the local nor national branch of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry had received a permit application from Durban Solid Waste (DSW) to close the dump, even though the local water system is affected by such a decision.

Khan recalls the council's long history of false promises to the community that it would close the dump. After reneging on a promise to close the dump in 1987, the council announced, 'The remaining life expectancy of the dump tip site is nine years.' The town clerk then led the community to believe that the dump would indeed be turned into a recreational and sporting site. However, in 1996, the city again broke its promise, and another operator's permit was granted, without community consultation.

Public reaction was swift, as people blocked the site entrance of the dump, held demonstrations and marches, and circulated a petition to council that gained 6000 signatures. But nothing worked, so Khan decided to take legal action on behalf of the residents and schools.

As the battle raged, a wealthy white-dominated suburb to the north of Durban was quickly closing its landfill. Umhlanga, situated at the shore's edge and expanding into rolling sugarcane-covered hills, was 'earmarked for up-market property development,' according to Bryan Ashe. The rubbish tip, along with waste from other closed landfill sites elsewhere in Durban, was rerouted to Bisasar Road. Attempts to increase dumping in the African township of Inanda were met by community protests, including the stoning of Durban municipal trucks. Bisasar again received an added inflow.

Khan shows me the area the council said it would return to the community after the partial closure: two small strips of land on the Bisasar Road dump's outer edge. I ask about plastic covering that was lining some of the terrain. She urges me to inspect it carefully. Indeed, nursery plants are still intact in plastic pots, lying on plastic sheets rolled out several weeks earlier.

According to Khan, these are meant to create the public impression, however tenuous, that the soil is rehabilitated and that plants are indeed growing there. They stand in stark contrast to other, wilting plants in the same area but that are submerged in Bisasar Road soil. Khan explains that the proposed plan to turn the area into a recreational zone is also ridiculous, because after a dumpsite is closed, it cannot be used for another 30-50 years due to decommissioning requirements.

The city also tries to divide the African and Indian people in the area, she says. African people moved into the area when the Apartheid laws relaxed. They live in informal shack housing, some surviving by scavenging off the dump because of the high unemployment rate. The city's main concession to them was to build a few pit latrines and chemical toilets on the edge of the settlement, abutting the road. These don't appear hygienic or, for women, particularly safe.

The immediate short-term interests of very desperate poor people are thus being posed against those of the other neighbours, although it is the lowest-income people who will no doubt suffer the most severe health and safety problems in the medium-term if the dump remains open.

As she stands up, Khan bats away a nagging fly. 'If you cook you have to close everything,' she points out. At the beginning of 2003, DSW management gave residents insecticides 'Baythroid' and 'Bayt' to combat the debilitating fly problem. Complains Khan, 'This will cause even more harm to the environment.'

'Khan's sister emerges from the kitchen to interrupt our conversation, warning that she is going to be late for her appointment with the doctor. Clutching a bag of medication and her car keys, Khan apologises and ushers me to the front door. Khan was diagnosed with cancer in 1996. Her nephew died of leukemia.

In fact, seven out of ten households in this downwind area of Clare Estate have reported tumour cases, and it is entirely probable that dump emissions are the culprit. According to studies, the limits of waste emissions considered potentially hazardous were exceeded at Bisasar Road many times over: hydrogen chloride by 50%, cadmium by 200%, and lead by more than 1000%. Limits for suspended particulate matter were also exceeded.

As the waste decomposes, there are additional concentrations of methane, benzene, toluene, trichloroethylene and formaldehyde. Further cause for worry comes from a New York State Health Department Study, which shows that women living near landfills have a four-fold increased susceptibility to cancer.

Having hoped so deeply for a new beginning and the end of the toxic dump, I leave feeling more than a little deflated. Beyond the fakery of perfume rods and plastic covers, I want to find out why Bisasar Road has suddenly become what the World Bank actually terms an 'environmentally friendly' pilot project, for the creation of a global greenhouse gas market.

Climate crisis

My next port of call is municipal waste official Lindsay Strachan, whose title is Manager of Engineering and Projects. Strachan has been intimately involved in the methane-to-electricity project, and is based on site at the Bisasar Road Landfill. 'It's where the action is', he insists.

Strachan enthusiastically launches into the mantra of climate change doom that we are all getting accustomed to hearing in the media. There is every reason to be alarmed, he convinces me:

Â· 'Continental shelves are breaking off the size of Manhattan.'

Â· 'The president of the Maldives is worrying about his island going under.'

Â· 'Rising sea levels means the waves are a meter higher.'

Â· 'The increase in temperature gives rise to hundreds of types of diseases.'

So what can be done? The global establishment is divided:

Â· the US, Australia and a few other retrograde countries simply refuse to address global warming;

Â- the manic-growth industrial zones of China and India - as well as slow-growing South Africa - are not prepared to adopt more energy-efficient economic development strategies; and

Â- most of the global elites endorsed a deal hammered out in Kyoto, Japan, in December 1997, that had taken ten long years of deliberation, like an elephant birthing a mouse.

The Kyoto Protocol, which formally came into effect on February 16, is indeed a mere mouse in the evolution that our global society must urgently make, merely to survive. China, India and South Africa are not even pushed to change anything, as Kyoto now stands.

According to Heidi Bachram of the Oxford-based NGO network Carbon Trade Network, the Kyoto Protocol contains 'inadequate targets to reduce (greenhouse gas) emissions'. A key UN scientific advisory board, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirms that Kyoto's targets for reducing emissions (5.2% by 2012) are miniscule compared to the 50 -70% reduction required to merely stabilise the existing concentrations of gas in the atmosphere.

Nevertheless, the signing of Kyoto and its even slower ratification by 156 countries are hailed as successes. Many environmentalists endorse it, because it is considered at least a first step towards more substantive change.

Even though South Africa ranks amongst the top twenty greenhouse gas polluters in the world, it was considered a 'developing' country, and hence was not listed by Kyoto as a target country for emissions reduction. Strachan explains, 'Our dustbins need to be filled before they can be emptied.'

Needless to say, Strachan avoids extending the metaphor: South Africa's wealthy communities have already overflowing dustbins, and low-income black people are left to rummage through these, in desperate search of thrown-away items of even minimal value. This is a particularly poignant issue in Bisasar Road, given how many people nearby survive by scavenging at the dump.

Still, Kyoto worries Strachan: 'What are we going to do about carbon trading, emissions reductions. Do we do something like Kyoto advises? Our president is saying, "Where is this project? Where is any project? Where's anything? Where can you show that X tons are being reduced by SA?"'

But Kyoto has a catch that concerns more probing ecologists. The emissions 'reductions' may actually occur in a form that leaves the world without any substantive reduction. To attract US support, which then never materialised, Kyoto negotiators agreed to the idea of market-based emissions trading.

The compromise is the Protocol's Achilles Heel, for it allows a major polluter to continue emitting carbon dioxide, but with an offset in the form of a carbon 'sink', or some other contribution to lowered emissions elsewhere. This strategy, says Bachram, 'is likely to undermine these already weak targets and exacerbate global injustice in the process'.

Strachan sees carbon trading through more optimistic eyes: 'Let's have a flexible mechanism. Make it such that if profit makes you thrive, let's make it profitable to reduce emissions.'

This flexible, profitable mechanism allots carbon credits to projects like Clare Estate's Bisasar Road methane-to-electricity conversion. The credits can be purchased by industrialised countries and corporations, as a way of avoiding the reduction of their own emissions. Hence if a polluter over-pollutes it can buy credits from a polluter who had under-polluted.

But likewise, if a polluter (like Russia) under-pollutes (because of post-Soviet deindustrialisation), it has an incentive to sell credits - which are called 'hot air' - to an over-polluter. This means that there will be a tendency to pollute up to the maximum Kyoto allows, rather than achieve declines in leaps and bounds, which we all must do if we are to avoid heating up the atmosphere. In other words, the permissible ceiling for carbon emissions will, with this mechanism, become a floor.

In late 2004, when I began looking more deeply at this complicated world of economics and nature, the Mail & Guardian newspaper (10-16 December 2004) declared the merits of emissions trading: 'Carbon credits are a triumph of capitalism, creating a commodity from nothing - clean pockets of air that gain value through being certified. They have created a market that will be worth between \$10- and \$30 billion by 2008.'

The UK was the first country to establish a national market in greenhouse gases. Though the British Treasury provided more than R2 billion worth of incentives for emissions trading, the New Labour government shirked its commitment to increase energy supplied by renewables by 20%.

With this sort of official support, the carbon trade lobby has succeeded in getting the market off the ground. According to Strachan, 'In the last two years there was suddenly this birth of carbon traders. They never existed before, something like 400 000 carbon trading companies in the world. It's unbelievable.'

One such firm is even run with the support of the former South African tourism and environment minister, Valli Moosa, who in November was elected the president of one of the world's most important ecological agencies, the IUCN. The carbon trading lobby certainly appears formidable, especially with the World Bank playing a central role.

Banking on the carbon market

The Bank introduced its Prototype Carbon Fund (PCF) in 1999 in order to provide investment outlets for industrial country governments and corporations, ostensibly on behalf of 'Clean Development Mechanisms' (CDMs) in the Third World. A quick \$180 million (more than R1 billion) was injected to finance projects such as the methane emissions extraction next to Khan's house. Her catastrophic fate, and those of others in similar projects, was to be used as the clincher in thousands of business deals being brokered around the world.

Strachan is excited. Ahead of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, he says, there was already 'a big rush to get South Africa on the map'. Durban, in particular, decided 'to take the lead', with Mayor Obed Mdlaba and City Manager Mike Sutcliffe at the helm. City officials soon realised that their own goldmine could be unearthed from landfills like Bisasar Road.

And so it was that a \$15 million deal to launch a CDM project was signed with the PCF and given the 'thumbs up', says Strachan, in October 2003. If it becomes operational, landfill gas will be collected from three sites in Durban, and methane (a harmful greenhouse gas) will be converted to electricity, and then supplied to the grid.

No one is against extracting the methane from the rotting garbage. But Durban officials say they won't go to the trouble of doing so without the \$15 million subsidy, because the electricity generated in the process costs so much more per kilowatt hour than Eskom charges for its coal-fired power.

There are a host of technical and environmental objections raised by Khan in her 90-page critique of the World Bank's project, as well as the need to reverse the history of racist dumping which implicate so many wealthy Durban residents in Khan's cancer. But morality aside, the extraction of dangerous methane should be happening anyway, Khan agrees, so long as no further rubbish is brought to Bisasar Road.

And hence what bothers Khan is that the Bank's interests are now in keeping the dump open as long as possible, so they can make more money off rotting and often toxic trash that turns into methane and produces electricity. More cancer in Clare Estate is good for the World Bank's budding business, Khan concludes.

The documents appear to back her up. According to the Bank's baseline study, 'The production of methane can theoretically continue in excess of 30 years. Bisasar is sized and operated to be used for up to 15 more years.' Bisasar Road Landfill averages 4000 tons of waste dumped each day, an amount that 'will continue to increase in the near-term'.

So, if the Bank business plan is followed, not only will the dump not close, but the flowthrough of waste and the emission of toxins will actually increase. Khan's suspicions about the Council's inclination to break promises were confirmed when she looked into the PCF's 'crediting period'. The project opted for a seven-year crediting period, with the expectation of renewing it twice. So, in this scenario the project's lifetime rose to 21 years.

The final nail in the community's coffin came from the World Bank's baseline scenario which indicated that, 'because of the growing waste generation per capita in the municipality, there is no plan to close the Bisasar Road site during the PCF project life.' If the World Bank has its way, Khan may be fighting this dump for the rest of her life.

Community costs and benefits

In response, Strachan is adamant that the community will benefit from the project. Landfill gas comprises 50% methane and the gas wells (some of which were already installed because the gas was currently being flared) will suck out all that gas and convert it to electricity thus making the air safer to breathe.

Khan is not convinced, because the World Bank's own Monitoring Process document for the project reveals that whilst most of the gas emissions will be combusted in the engines for generation of electricity, some of the gas will still be released into the atmosphere and burned in flares.

Furthermore, the Bank concedes that the tools for measuring how much gas can actually be converted to electricity are highly uncertain. Engines and flares combust the landfill's gas with different efficiencies. A Bank document even admitted, 'It is unclear with which portion the gas from project wells is either flared or utilised.'

Although the World Bank says it will monitor this process at monthly intervals, a footnote (the small print) gives away the game: 'Not all methane collected will thus be converted into CO₂ but a small portion will be emitted as methane into the atmosphere.' The community's already damaged lungs will be further clogged with landfill pollution, not merely the scent of perfumed rot.

Strachan also tries to convince me that the electricity generators will be placed on the site where the dispersion model shows it will cause the least harm. But the community is located all around the dump, I point out. His rebuttal is that the combustion process will spew out an equivalent amount of emissions to a rush-hour's worth of traffic on busy Umgeni Road (the major thoroughway at the bottom of the dump).

Khan disagrees, and pulls out a huge stack of reports for reference. She calculates that each year, the generators will pump out 95 tons of nitrogen oxides, 319 tons of carbon monoxide, 323 tons of hydro-carbons and 43 256 tons of carbon dioxide. Carbon monoxide reduces the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood; nitrogen oxides are a respiratory irritant and exacerbated asthma; and carcinogens such as benzene and butadiene could be found in hydrocarbons.

Other dangers abound. Improvement of ground water and air quality are listed as World Bank priorities, yet one report confessed, 'It is difficult to provide the environmental safeguards that assure safety of the local population.' The Bank also concedes that the project might 'adversely effect the value of the land holdings surrounding the landfill site'.

Strachan's assurance that CDM projects have very stringent ecological controls is contradicted by PCF projects which are receiving a response similar to Khan's, in Brazil, Argentina and Thailand. In the Brazilian case, for example, a tree plantation that was not indigenous to the area is being grown to help finance a corporation, Plantar, which in turn will burn the trees into charcoal which will be used in an iron smelter to produce more cars. Not only was community consultation deeply flawed, the whole logic simply falls apart under scrutiny.

Job creation was another pro-community rationale for the Bisasar Road experiment. However, there are plans for only 70 new positions (50 unskilled) over the 15-year lifetime of the project, hardly impressive for what may be a R100 million investment.

Part of the community distrust can be traced to DSW's history. For example, Khan points out that DSW is already flaring dangerous gases in Bisasar, instead of redirecting them into nearby gas piping. The city, which prides itself on its advanced attitudes, simply does not require gas capture and flaring from permit holders.

It is just one of the ways that Durban officials show an acute awareness about the costs that landfill operators would incur, and disdain for the health risks to the public.

Consultation turns into intimidation

But the power of the people has yet to be tested, and here a surprise appears to be in the offing.

Strachan assures me that consultation is central to Bisaser Road's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Indeed, in all documentation, the World Bank emphasises the merits of consultation with affected communities.

Khan prepared thoroughly for this particular battle. As she wrote in a letter of complaint to the World Bank, neither the Clare Road City Councilor nor DSW management ever discussed the project's implications. But nor did the Bank take consultation seriously, for the time allocated for objections in late 2004 was a mere 10 days. More disturbing, consultation was to be conducted through the Bank's PCF website. According to Bachram, 'This shows that the PCF is woefully out of touch with the reality of a community living around a waste dump.'

But in jujitsu activist mode, Khan suddenly turned the flawed consultation process to her advantage. She filed a vast formal complaint, filled with technical environmental, health and social analysis. In November, Bank staff came to visit Durban to check on the project. Suddenly the fruits of Khan's labours became visible, as three newspaper articles described her problems, and as she and her supporters - local and even international - began flooding the Bank with complaints which were sufficiently substantive to cause widespread concern in the PCF crowd.

After sensing the rising grassroots anger, Bank officials and their financial backers began to seriously consider withdrawing from the project, Strachen admits. 'Now the World Bank has given us a quick visit last year. We're talking about businessmen as well, we're talking about people who need to assign their money to projects,' he says. 'They were probably thinking, "Consult all you want but hell can't you hurry it up a bit. We only have 60 years on this earth!"'

Perhaps Khan's rebuttal, had she overheard, would be similar in frustration: 'Hell, can't you hurry closing the dump? At least your children have 60 years to live. My cancer-ridden body only gives me just a couple more years.'

Stachan later informed me that the World Bank's 'quick visit' resulted in a deadline imposed on the government to sort out the situation: December 2005. The city may fail to meet the challenge. In a follow-up interview by phone, Strachan confesses to me that the appeals process is 'rotten. We're being held hostage by a single person.'

Does Khan have any alternatives to suggest? One is to use the money going to the cost of the project to close the dump and create a buffer zone. 'The city can afford to pay us replacement value for our homes and for damages, since the estimated costs of the project are greater than R120 million,' insists Khan.

Another idea is to pump the gas to the Petronet gas pipeline running past the site, instead of converting the landfill methane directly to electricity. 'This would cost very little compared to the project cost,' says Khan.

Strachan's rebuttal sounds politically correct, yet doesn't quite make sense: '[What] if something goes wrong with this pipeline? If the land subsides or they do something funny with their pipeline, what happens to our gas? We rather opted for something whereby we sort it out on site, in our own home. That's an onsite solution. Don't send the problem to someone else's backyard and tell them to sort out our methane. We think it's very irresponsible. The world thinks it's very irresponsible.'

But to act as a front for investors who want to avoid their emissions-reduction obligations is far less responsible, I'm thinking. Instead of World Bank carbon trading, the more genuine solutions would be to impose strict government regulations against excessive greenhouse gas emissions, and introduce community-based power generation systems that use renewable, environmentally-friendly technologies.

Maybe what's obvious simply cannot be put on the agenda, because of these vested interests. I'm learning just how political this process has become. For example, research by Heidi Bachram shows that these sort of projects regularly ignore the problem of over-consumption by 'voracious rich minorities', the people and industries who caused the environmental mess-up that we were in today.

And that leads logically to a manipulated process of blame-shifting to the Third World, as the preferred international elite strategy. As Khan puts it, 'The poor countries are so poor they will accept crumbs. The World Bank know this and they are taking advantage of it.'

Bachram also argues that industries involved in buying credits to offset their emissions will simply continue to pollute, to the detriment of the communities in which their factories are based.

Engen, for instance, is a notoriously bad neighbour nearby in South Durban, and on the night of January 18 the entire residential community of at least 50 000 people was stunned by an enormous explosion at the local refinery. These sorts of companies will continue to emit carbon and encourage unsustainable petrol consumption as long as it is profitable.

Bachram concludes, 'Communities like Clare Estate and South Durban will see no real benefits from emissions trading and in fact will be the victims of even more pollution.' In short, emissions trading represents 'carbon colonialism', she contends. The introduction of property rights to pollute the air means that whoever controls carbon credits effectively controls the atmosphere.

But where there is colonialism, there is also resistance. Khan's detailed rebuttal to the carbon trading project has slowed the process of approval. There are so many flaws in Durban's PCF proposal that she thinks she may win. She has certainly intimidated her opponents, and - like Julia Roberts of Erin Brokovich movie fame - is becoming a quiet kind of role-model heroine for me.

Strachan, meanwhile, is at first philosophical about what appears to be an impending defeat. 'The first project in Africa is literally slipping through our fingers,' he says. 'Stopped in its tracks. Completely.'

So instead of investing in Durban, the Bank PCF team appears to be forging ahead in Latin America, the Middle East and even Uganda, with Strachan helping as a consultant. In Kampala, the municipality will 'rake in R300 million on their project,' he tells me. 'South Africa probably won't be able to say that we spearheaded the CDM market or better still we spearheaded the emissions reductions market. There is disappointment, but such projects will go on elsewhere.'

Because of Khan's appeal, the city is losing R20 000 each day, says Strachan, and he is obviously very frustrated: 'Her objection is 90 pages thick. She was invited by the World Bank to Milan to learn about clean development mechanisms.' In fact, Khan tells me later, two environmental groups - Carbon Trade Watch and the TransNational Institute - funded her 2004 trip so that more people around the world might understand the dangers of carbon trading. It was her teaching the World Bank, not the other way around.

Strachan continues, 'When an objection goes through the minister we have to spend money, time and effort. People are looking at the past. Not the new.'

But what is really new? It's a new project, with new money, and it also may be new feeling for white South Africans to be 'patted on the back' - as Strachan himself put it - by the big financial agencies and corporate players, for being first in Africa to implement a multimillion dollar carbon trading deal.

Perhaps realising that the potential glory is slipping from his grasp, Strachan becomes visibly angry. As for Khan and her colleagues, 'We'd like to put the whingers on one boat and send them off!'

Indeed. Though it is certainly not the last word, perhaps that attitude says it all. For this slur is particularly poignant, as it

was used during apartheid to exclude and degrade people who had been shipped from India to work on white-owned land in the mid-19th century, in order to magnify their utter vulnerability. The insult smacks of that earlier generation of white colonial men who came to South Africa, encountering resistance to their easiest path to profit, prestige and power.

Even if at great cost, the resistance offered by communities - especially courageous grassroots women like Sajida Khan - was finally successful against colonialism and apartheid. We may be watching something quite formidable again.

Trusha Reddy served as an intern at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society in early 2005.

Â