

What's energising SA's shift from renewable to nuclear?

It's about what the politicians want, says expert from Germany, world's No 1 in renewables

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A GERMAN think-tank believes lack of political will could be among the reasons South Africa has not embraced renewable energy to solve its energy crisis despite its potential.

The South African government, which is in favour of nuclear energy to power the country, is still nursing a blood-letted nose after the Western Cape High Court judgment in April declaring nuclear agreements with Russia, the US and South Korea unlawful and unconstitutional and setting them aside.

Critics have said nuclear build costs could run up to R1 trillion, money taxpayers could ill afford in these harsh economic times.

Markus Steigenberger, deputy executive director of Agora Energiewende (German for energy transition), an economic think-tank, criticised Eskom for not signing the 37 outstanding agreements with

independent power producers (IPPs) for the supply of renewable energy.

He had just returned to Berlin from South Africa where he gave presentations at workshops in Joburg and Pretoria last week at the invitation of the Cape Town-based Centre for Environmental Rights.

In an interview with Independent Media in Berlin last week, Steigenberger said he had gone to South Africa to get a "better view" of the government's energy policy and to share Germany's energy policy with stakeholders.

For Eskom not to have signed the IPPs was "very harmful to the renewable energy industry", he said.

Public Enterprises Minister Lynne Brown has said renewable energy was expensive, costing R2.14 per kilowatt hour to produce.

Eskom would reportedly only be able to charge consumers about 84 cents per kilowatt hour, and the power utility had indicated it would only sign the IPPs when the cost of energy

was 77 cents per kilowatt hour or less.

But Steigenberger said renewable energy was "very, very cheap" compared to "dangerous" nuclear energy and blamed the "current political situation for the stalemate".

"There is a lot of discussion now about whether South Africa should deploy more renewable energy or whether there should be more nuclear

Do politicians want it? This is the key question

and coal. That discussion is very harmful to the renewable energy industry," he said.

"I was told that some German company operating in the renewable energy sector is considering closing its office in South Africa. Others too are also contemplating pulling out of South Africa."

Steigenberger said the industry was fairly new, but it faced devastating challenges.

He said South Africa could learn from Germany about renewable energy. Germany is regarded as the world's first major renewable energy economy, with 1.5 solar photovoltaic systems, 23000 wind turbines distributed over 357 000km² and 350000 people employed in the sector.

"One of the things South Africa could learn from Germany is that you can operate a power system with very high share of wind and solar. Eskom and the SA government are afraid of having too much weather-dependent energy on their system. They think this will put stability at risk and result in blackouts," Steigenberger said.

"What we have learned in Germany, Denmark, Spain and Portugal is that you can have a very stable power system with wind and solar. There is no reason to be afraid of wind and solar."

"The challenge we are facing now is expanding our grids. We have very little land in Germany. In South Africa

you don't have land shortages. But, all in all, the German people and decision-makers, the politicians and government, all agree that we want energy transition.

"The question is: 'How exactly do we implement that?' That's where we have a lot of struggle," said Steigenberger.

He added that renewable energy was the most reliable system, citing interruptions of 12 minutes per year of systems in Germany.

This country had so much potential for renewable energy compared to Europe: "But the question is: Do politicians want it? This is the key question."

And so it would seem, considering that in August last year Eskom irregularly awarded Tegeta Exploration and Resources, a Gupta-owned company, a R7 billion coal contract without a tender. President Jacob Zuma's son Duduzane owns 12.8% of Tegeta.

Mkentane is on a two-month fellowship with the *International Journalists' Programme*.