

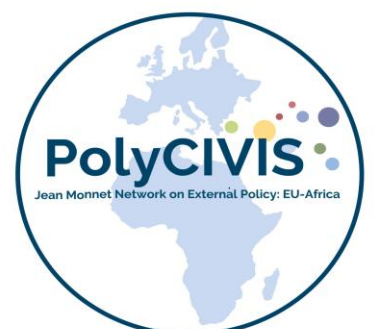
South Africa's Loadshedding as a Polycrisis

Public Concerns and Policy Solutions

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By Leon Tinashe Gwaka

The Polycrisis & Policy Brief Series is coordinated by the *Policy Work Package* which is part of the PolyCIVIS Network. The PolyCIVIS Policy brief series aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for policymakers, at various levels and to foster dialogue among stakeholders on effective policy responses.



Executive Summary

South Africa's loadshedding¹ crisis is not a standalone technical issue, it is part of a broader *polycrisis*, where governance failures, economic instability, and social inequality intersect. While official narratives often emphasize technical and/or external causes, public discourse, especially on social media, reveals widespread distrust in government institutions and Eskom's leadership.

This policy brief draws on a qualitative analysis of X posts (formerly Twitter) posts to highlight how citizens interpret and respond to the crisis. Commonly cited causes include corruption, mismanagement at Eskom, underinvestment in infrastructure, and political instability. These concerns reflect deep dissatisfaction with institutional accountability and service delivery. Beyond causes, citizens frequently emphasize the wide-ranging consequences of loadshedding including disruptions to small businesses, job losses, declining investor confidence, and threats to essential services such as healthcare and education.

Furthermore, citizens express strong concern over the unequal impact of loadshedding. Tweets frequently reference inconsistent power cuts, exemptions for privileged areas, and the disproportionate burden on small businesses, students, and low-income households. These perceived injustices fuel public frustration and erode social cohesion.

Yet, policy responses have remained largely technocratic focused on generation capacity and grid reform while ignoring the lived realities of those most affected.

Key messages

This brief argues for a holistic and people-centred approach that recognizes loadshedding as both a symptom of intersecting crises such as governance failures, infrastructure decay, and climate vulnerability and a catalyst that deepens challenges in health, education, livelihoods, and social trust. Key recommendations include:

- ❖ Improving transparency and fairness in loadshedding schedules.
- ❖ Addressing spatial and socioeconomic disparities in impact.
- ❖ Strengthening citizen engagement through inclusive, digital channels.
- ❖ Linking energy resilience to broader social development goals.

¹ The scheduled electricity blackouts implemented to protect the grid

By centring citizen perspectives and addressing the structural conditions that both fuel and are worsened by loadshedding, South Africa can chart a path toward a more equitable, trusted, and resilient energy future.

Methodology Note:

This policy brief is based on findings from the peer-reviewed study:

Gwaka, L.T. (2025). *"We have a lot to say about loadshedding": Exploring citizen engagements and perceptions on power cuts in South Africa*. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 122, 104019.

The study analyzed **4,392 tweets** posted on **X** (formerly Twitter) during January 2023, a period marked by intensified loadshedding in South Africa. Data were collected using targeted search queries (e.g., "loadshedding + Eskom + South Africa") and pre-processed using standard text-cleaning techniques.

The analytical approach combined topic modeling (Latent Dirichlet Allocation, LDA) to identify dominant themes in public discourse and narrative analysis to interpret sentiment, attribution of blame, perceptions of injustice, and political expression.

While tweets included in this brief are purposively selected for illustrative purposes, they reflect themes substantiated by the original empirical analysis.

(1) Introduction

South Africa's loadshedding crisis is more than a failure of energy infrastructure, it is part of a broader polycrisis shaped by long-standing governance weaknesses, economic instability, and entrenched social inequalities. Loadshedding has become a daily reality for millions, with effects rippling across households, businesses, schools, and healthcare systems.² It deepens public frustration and magnifies existing disparities. Though the crisis has intensified in recent years, it is rooted in a longer history of uneven energy access, particularly in areas historically marginalized under apartheid.³ Since 2007, South Africa has faced successive waves of loadshedding, escalating to 476 GWh in 2008, resurging in 2014–2015, and culminating in a sustained, unprecedented phase from 2018 through the 2024 elections, exposing deep, persistent structural weaknesses in the energy sector.

Despite its systemic nature, most policy responses remain narrowly technical, focusing on grid upgrades and renewable energy transitions while neglecting the political and social dimensions. Similarly, academic and policy literature often overlooks how the public experiences and interprets loadshedding, not merely as a technical issue, but as a reflection of institutional dysfunction, corruption, and injustice, as well as a factor reshaping South Africa's long-standing societal challenges such as crime.

This policy brief draws on the concept of transformative public policy, an approach that seeks not just to manage crises, but to reshape the systems that produce them. The aim of the brief is to make a case for emphasizing root causes, promoting social justice, and centering citizen voices in policy

design. In the context of loadshedding, this means understanding energy insecurity not only as a logistical problem, but also as a failure of governance, accountability, and inclusion. By analyzing public discourse, particularly citizen voices on social media, this brief examines how loadshedding is framed as a governance and equity issue. Citizens' concerns reveal a growing disconnect between technocratic solutions and lived realities. The brief argues for a shift toward people-centered, transparent, and just energy policymaking, grounded in the principles of transformative public policy. Loadshedding, in this light, is not just about keeping the lights on, it is about reimagining power, both electrical and political, in ways that serve all South Africans.⁴

(2) Background and analysis

Loadshedding was initially introduced as an emergency measure to manage South Africa's aging electricity infrastructure and declining generation capacity. What began as an occasional inconvenience has since become a chronic crisis, with rolling blackouts disrupting nearly every aspect of daily life.⁵ Eskom, the state-owned utility, has faced severe operational, financial, and managerial challenges over the past two decades. Maintenance backlogs, corruption scandals, procurement inefficiencies, and even sabotage have severely undermined its ability to provide reliable electricity. As a result, public trust in Eskom and in broader governance structures, including the African National Congress (ANC), has eroded.⁶

Over the years, loadshedding has become a recurring theme in the State of the Nation Address (SONA). Since the rise of President Cyril Ramaphosa in 2018, the tone of these

² Rakotonirainy et al., 2019

³ Gwaka, 2025a

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Erero, 2023

⁶ Everatt, 2024

addresses has shifted from optimism about national economic development to a focus on managing national crises, particularly those related to energy and infrastructure. Between 2018 and 2024, South Africa experienced repeated cycles of loadshedding. Following the 2024 election, there was a brief period of electricity stability before blackouts resumed.⁷ While there are signs that government efforts have occasionally curbed the crisis, the persistent recurrence of loadshedding suggests a failure to resolve its structural causes.

At the same time, social media platforms, especially Twitter (now X), have become critical spaces for understanding the broader societal impacts of loadshedding.⁸ Citizens use these platforms not only to express frustration and demand accountability, but also to highlight how electricity disruptions compound existing crises in healthcare, education, food security, and economic livelihoods. Posts often reveal how power cuts disrupt hospital operations, affect learning environments, spoil agricultural produce, and strain small businesses. Government leaders, departments, and entities such as Eskom also use X to communicate schedules, justify outages, and engage with the public.⁹ Analyzing these digital interactions helps trace the ripple effects of loadshedding across multiple sectors, offering valuable insight into how energy insecurity intersects with and intensifies other systemic challenges.

To deepen our understanding of how loadshedding is publicly experienced and politically framed, this brief presents a curated analysis of tweets from citizens. These social media insights reveal four key dimensions of the crisis: perceived root causes (e.g., governance failures), effects of loadshedding (on households, businesses, and essential services), its intersection with

other societal issues (e.g., crime and inequality) and public suggestions (i.e., policy change).¹⁰ Together, these digital expressions offer a window into the lived realities of energy insecurity and highlight critical entry points for transformative policymaking.

Loadshedding as a generational challenge

In South Africa, loadshedding epitomizes a polycrisis: a generational crisis marked by the interaction of multiple long-term failures across governance, infrastructure, and economic planning. Its impacts are not only immediate but also deeply intergenerational, shaping the life trajectories of young people and undermining long-term social and environmental sustainability. For many South Africans, especially the youth, uninterrupted electricity is no longer a norm but a fading memory. As one tweet laments:

"To think there are South African teenagers who've never known life without load shedding. Sixteen years ago, @Eskom_SA said to fix the problem they needed to double the cost of electricity over three years..."

The cumulative frustration, powerlessness, and even conspiracy fears expressed online underscore how deeply embedded loadshedding has become in the national psyche:

"Watseba 🇿🇦 Loadshedding in South Africa *za is the New World Order* 🌍 *kea le jwetsa! These constant power cuts are a preparation for new laws from one Government. We can't live like this and be subjected to such inhumane treatment from Eskom. Ons is moeg maan 😞*"

"*This rolling out of power cuts from 6 September 2022... Four months of EVERY DAY, ALL THE TIME should make the whole country*

⁷ Eskom, 2024

⁸ Gwaka & Smit, 2018

⁹ Gwaka, 2025a

¹⁰ *ibid*, Gwaka, 2025b

wanna jump! Jump at #Eskom, jump at the #ANC—it's been 14 years of this bullshit of #loadshedding #blackouts #powercuts."

These voices point to a public no longer simply coping with an energy supply issue but living through a sustained crisis that reflects and deepens broader social, political, and psychological exhaustion. The generational dimension of loadshedding demands urgent policy responses that are not only technically effective but socially restorative and future oriented.

Root-causes of loadshedding in South Africa

Public discourse increasingly links loadshedding to structural issues in South Africa's energy governance specifically the dominance of the state in electricity generation, distribution, and retail. Many citizens view the state monopoly, embodied by Eskom, as a core contributor to the energy crisis. For example, citizens tweeted:

"Let the free market do its thing. #Eskom #Loadshedding"

"There you go demanding the whole country be run like Eskom. ANC socialist policies are directly responsible for loadshedding. Give consumers choice in energy provider, kick state off your electricity bills."

These tweets reflect a broader sentiment that limited competition, lack of consumer choice, and overreliance on a single, failing utility are root causes of South Africa's energy insecurity. While market liberalization has progressed in electricity generation through Independent Power Producers (IPPs), citizens highlight the absence of reform in the retail and distribution sectors, where Eskom and municipalities remain sole providers. The call to "give consumers choice" signals growing public demand for deep structural reform that includes opening up the energy market, enabling retail competition, and reducing state dominance in service delivery.

Another defining feature of loadshedding as a polycrisis is the *cascading nature* of its impacts where one problem exacerbates others, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of failure. In this case, loadshedding is not only a result of infrastructure vulnerabilities but also a contributing factor to them. Extended

blackouts have been linked to a rise in cable theft and vandalism of electricity infrastructure. Conversely, this vandalism further undermines grid stability and prolongs or intensifies loadshedding. This cyclical relationship deepens the crisis and reflects the failure of both technical planning and institutional coordination. As captured by citizen voices on social media:

"@Eskom you're part of the problem on cable theft... that loadshedding schedule between 1am and 5am has left more than five houses without cables... yep, me included."

"Because there's so much loadshedding, thieves have all the time in the world to steal the cables. They already know Eskom's schedule—when the electricity goes off and when it's coming back."

"@Eskom_SA @SAPoliceService Incompetence is one of the main reasons for constant loadshedding."

These tweets reveal how policy blind spots such as ignoring the social consequences of predictable blackout schedules can compound vulnerabilities and invite further disruption. The cascading effects of loadshedding underscore the need for integrated, anticipatory policies that account for both technical systems and social realities.

Loadshedding effects

The effects of loadshedding extend far beyond inconvenience, they expose and amplify deep inequalities across society. Online conversations reveal a pervasive sense of injustice and anxiety. Small business owners report crippling financial losses due to unreliable electricity. Students and educators raise concerns about disrupted learning. Healthcare workers highlight the

risks power outages pose to patient care. In rural areas and informal settlements, where access to backup energy and communication is limited, these challenges are often more severe.

The economic implications of loadshedding are also substantial. Repeated power outages deter investment, slow productivity,¹¹ and deepen unemployment, particularly impacting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that lack the capital for backup systems. Global institutions have warned that the energy crisis could erode South Africa's long-term economic prospects if not urgently addressed. Yet, policy responses have largely focused on supply-side fixes: expanding generation capacity, integrating private-sector producers, and restructuring Eskom. These approaches often fail to address the wider economic and social disruptions faced by vulnerable groups.

Social media commentary illustrates these lived experiences and mounting frustrations:

"The cold chain is critical in managing food waste. But these past weeks we've lost hundreds of thousands due to Eskom loadshedding. It's never easy for small-scale farmers! #umgibefarmersupport #Notofoodwaste"

"Loadshedding is gonna be the end of us. During the day there's no electricity, early morning there's none either. We entrepreneurs are trying to work—we have overheads and we're trying to earn a living. @Eskom_SA @PresidencyZA give us electricity or money."

"@MaraEnslin @Eskom_SA That's exactly why they're doing this—it's about making life as difficult as possible for the public. And @CyrilRamaphosa said loadshedding was over, never to return. De Ruyter was obviously NOT the problem."

These voices reflect more than frustration, they reveal how loadshedding intersects with

livelihoods, education, food security, and trust in government. The cumulative effect is a crisis that undermines the very systems people rely on to survive. Recognizing and responding to these multi-layered effects is essential for crafting policy that is not only technically sound but socially just.

While recent reforms aim to address technical and structural issues in the energy sector, they often neglect the human dimension of the crisis. Energy policy discussions frequently exclude the lived experiences of affected communities, reducing citizens to passive recipients of top-down decisions. This exclusion fuels public resentment, mistrust, and disengagement. As evidenced by digital discourse, there is a growing call for policies that acknowledge social inequalities, promote fairness, and meaningfully involve citizens. The tweets below highlight public frustration with the unequal and opaque implementation of loadshedding:

"Some areas haven't had power cuts in weeks. We get it three times a day. What logic is this?"

"If we're being honest, according to @Eskom_SA, some suburbs and towns are more equal than others. Choose wisely where you decide to buy or build."

"Loadshedding is not the problem. Inequality in loadshedding is."

These sentiments reflect a deeper critique that beyond the blackouts themselves, it is the inequitable distribution of disruption and the sense of being systematically overlooked that most powerfully fuels public discontent.¹²

Loadshedding has become a site where broader political frustrations and social divisions are expressed. Citizens increasingly link the energy crisis with electoral choices, governance failures, and even xenophobic undertones. This politicization of the crisis

¹¹ There are varying estimates e.g., Codera analytics reported that: Nova Economics estimates imply loadshedding subtracted 1.15 percentage points from annual average GDP growth. The South African Reserve Bank (SARB)'s latest estimate is that load-shedding has reduced economic growth in 2023 by around 1.8 percentage points.

¹² Rakotonirainy et al., 2019

reflects a loss of faith in institutions and a deepening of social fragmentation.

"Keep on voting for your useless and corrupt ANC. They trained us to normalize #Stage2 rolling blackouts, now #Stage4 is becoming our new normal. But keep voting for the #ANC 🙄"

"#Eskom #Loadshedding If there's anything good about loadshedding, it's its effectiveness in dealing with noise nuisance in flats inhabited by locals, foreigners, and neighbors in general. For this reason, loadshedding must be permanent from 9pm to 3am."

These tweets reveal how the crisis is not just experienced materially but also interpreted through political and social identities. This poses risks to social cohesion and signals the need for more inclusive, community-aware policymaking.

Amid widespread frustration, citizens are also seeking accountability, long-term planning, and structural solutions. There is visible skepticism toward leadership and deep uncertainty about whether Eskom or the government can deliver meaningful change. At the same time, local innovation (e.g., Cape Town's efforts) is seen as a hopeful alternative.

"So guys, honestly, what's the plan? @Eskom_SA Please share your short-term and long-term plans to deal with loadshedding."

"SA does not have money to refurbish coal plants. We need renewable energy to avoid loadshedding so that Eskom can fix itself."

"The City of Cape Town's drive to end #loadshedding and move away from #Eskom's grid has received yet another boost, with the completion of its landfill gas wellfield and flaring system at Vissershok."

"The reality is that no one knows how to solve the energy crisis. Those who do are not at @Eskom_SA. There is a deliberate attempt to sabotage Eskom so it can be privatized for the benefit of elites. Stage 6 is here and soon Stage 8."

These tweets reflect both despair and urgency. Citizens are demanding not just electricity but clear communication, decentralized innovation, and a break from the cycle of reactive crisis management.

(3) Policy Recommendations

The polycrisis nature of loadshedding calls for a shift in policymaking from technical quick fixes to a holistic, citizen-centered strategy that addresses structural issues and rebuilds public trust. This includes acknowledging loadshedding as a polycrisis and recognizing the interlocking economic, political, and social dimensions of the crisis, not just its technical failures. In addition, policymakers can improve public engagement by treating social media as a vital source of insight and civic participation. Further, there is a need to ensure transparent auditing and fair distribution of outages as well as addressing inequalities in access to alternative energy sources.

Loadshedding in South Africa is not just an energy supply challenge, it is a polycrisis rooted in governance failures, social inequality, and public disengagement. While some citizens have resigned themselves to loadshedding's persistence, they continue to demand fairness, transparency, and action. Policy responses must reflect these expectations.

Policy recommendations

(i) Ensure Transparency and Accountability <i>Lead actors:</i> Eskom, National Energy Regulator of South Africa, Presidency <i>Time horizon:</i> Short-term <i>Example actions:</i> Publish real-time loadshedding schedules and audits.
(ii) Address Inequality in Impact <i>Lead actors:</i> Municipalities, Department of Energy <i>Time horizon:</i> Short- to Medium-term <i>Example actions:</i> Subsidize off-grid solutions for vulnerable communities
(iii) Engage Citizens in Policymaking <i>Lead actors:</i> Presidency, Local Governments <i>Time horizon:</i> Medium-term <i>Example actions:</i> Create community advisory panels and digital feedback loops
(iv) Incorporate Digital Discourses <i>Lead actors:</i> Presidency, Government Communication Information System, Department of Communications and Digital Technologies <i>Time horizon:</i> Ongoing <i>Example actions:</i> Integrate Twitter discourse analysis into energy planning
(v) Promote Equity and Spatial Justice <i>Lead actors:</i> Eskom, Department of Cooperative Governance, Municipal Councils <i>Time horizon:</i> Medium-term <i>Example actions:</i> Audit and reform exemption patterns across suburbs
(vi) Link Energy and Social Policy <i>Lead actors:</i> Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Department of Energy, Department of Social Development <i>Time horizon:</i> Long-term <i>Example actions:</i> Embed energy resilience in development strategies.

(4) Conclusion

Loadshedding in South Africa is not simply an energy supply problem, it is a crisis of equity, governance, and inclusive development. Beyond technical failures, the crisis reflects a convergence of multiple pressures including but not limited to chronic underinvestment, fragile institutions, political contestations, and entrenched social inequalities. Adopting a polycrisis lens reveals how these overlapping factors interact to amplify the severity and duration of loadshedding, making it more

than a series of temporary power outages. While infrastructure and capacity constraints remain central drivers, governance fragilities and unequal access to energy have significantly shaped outcomes, public responses, and societal trust in institutions.

Citizens are not merely passive victims of these disruptions. They have actively shaped the national narrative through digital platforms, raising urgent questions about justice, fairness, and accountability. Yet, despite this civic engagement, systemic

issues persist. Even if loadshedding were resolved tomorrow, underlying challenges such as inequitable access, weak institutional safeguards, and eroded public confidence would continue to undermine energy justice and sectoral resilience.

This policy brief argues that addressing loadshedding solely as a technical or managerial issue is inadequate. Policymakers must recognize its polycrisis nature to design responses that go beyond power generation

fixes, embedding transparency, social equity, citizen participation, and integration with broader development goals. A polycrisis perspective adds analytical depth by highlighting the interlocking nature of South Africa's energy challenges and the persistence of systemic risks beyond the crisis itself. Any meaningful turnaround must tackle both immediate supply concerns and these deeper structural fractures to achieve a resilient, just, and inclusive energy future.

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Author

Leon Tinashe Gwaka, Center for Technology, Innovation, & Competition, Penn Carey Law, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA

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