



# Responding to load shedding

There can be no scientist based in South Africa who has not felt impacted by load shedding in a variety of ways. For many of us, as is the case with others, the disruptions have affected our home lives, our travel to and from work, and our leisure activities, as Marchetti-Mercer notes in a Commentary in this issue. There are also distinctive challenges for scientists – load shedding affects all university activities, the functioning of laboratories and field trips, and the viability of storage of samples, to name a few.

In keeping with the vision and mission of our Journal, we have a responsibility to highlight issues of broad concern, not just across academic disciplines but also for the public at large, and for policymakers. The problem of load shedding in many ways encapsulates both the potential and the challenges implicit in the Journal's commitment to multidisciplinary and to being a forum through which scholars from a range of disciplines can interact, debate, learn, and develop strategies to address problems of common concern. The series of commentaries featured in this issue is by no means comprehensive, and is very far from the last word on an issue for which, as in some definitions of 'wicked problems'<sup>1</sup>, may not ultimately be solvable to the satisfaction of all. Nevertheless, we are pleased that our call for commentaries yielded responses from a range of disciplines and perspectives. Load shedding is a technical problem to which there may be a range of technical responses and solutions, an opportunity for those with resources to work around, but with probable negative knock-on effects, a problem with complex and contested socio-economic antecedents and costs, a challenge to important climate-related research and action, and an opportunity for broader methodological reflection on issues of health research and monitoring. This list is definitely not exhaustive, and we hope to receive more submissions on load shedding in the future. It is an issue which brings together the range of disciplines represented in this Journal, from politics to engineering, and from sociology to climatology. There is no one understanding and experience of the problem, and there is no single way forward. Load shedding also requires scientists to engage with a range of groups and publics outside the academic community, and, in this way, it becomes an issue of science communication and engagement as well.

In the weeks leading to the writing of this Leader, it has become increasingly clear (not that it was not before), that load shedding is by no means the only problem demanding complex thinking and solutions. There is the omnipresent existential threat of climate change and environmental breakdown, well covered by many contributions to

the Journal, and in *Rock|Water|Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa* by Lesley Green, the 2023 ASSAf Humanities Book Award winning book, which was reviewed in a special issue of the Journal late in 2022. There have been gas explosions in the streets of Johannesburg, and the horrific deaths of over 70 people in a fire in the same city. Many of those who died were migrants living precarious lives before the tragedy itself, vulnerable to criminal exploitation, and living, like so many others, at the wrong end of a vastly unequal society, where terms like 'housing shortage' and 'crumbling infrastructure' take on an embodied meaning much more consequential than for those of us who are more privileged. One of the ironies of load shedding is that the inconvenience and loss to productivity it has caused has given some (albeit much more limited) experiential weight to the most privileged in our society of daily, ongoing, problems experienced by poor and marginalised communities. The question of access to clean, reliable energy, just like that of access to clean water and other resources, is nothing new for many in our country and on our continent. And the threats to our existence, as we have seen recently, have an immediacy for those people who come to the attention of the more privileged only sporadically, commonly when there are headlines showcasing acute events rather than the daily struggles of life on the margins.

In the most recent Leader in this Journal, we discussed issues of unequal access to developing scientists and contributors to researching and debating solutions to complex problems. Those of us who have the privilege to be scientists and researchers should not be constrained in our work by political interference or a narrow understanding of what kinds of thinking may help make things better in our country and our world. But this relative freedom, which goes along with being protected from much of the hardship experienced by many in our country and world, must be balanced by a commitment to using our privilege to help find solutions for all. It is a good thing, as our commentaries on load shedding exemplify, that there are many ways to address difficult problems, and that there are debates and contestations. As a Journal, we hope to continue to be a forum for those debates. We believe that contestation is key to opening new ways of thinking and addressing challenges.

## Reference

1. Lönngren J, Van Poeck K. Wicked problems: A mapping review of the literature. *Int J Sustain Dev World Ecol.* 2021;28(6):481–502. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504509.2020.1859415>

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