A surprise announcement was delivered to the pebble bed modular reactor (PBMR) nuclear energy project in South Africa’s 2010 budget - it would no longer obtain significant state funds. As a result the project has had to dismiss 75% of its staff, and operates on a skeleton basis at present. It had spent in the region of nine billion Rands of state funds, without having realised any of its plans. Furthermore, the project has been unable, over its lifespan, to attract significant outside investment or potential clients. Given the central importance of energy policy in South Africa in addressing climate change and development concerns, it is more important than ever that projects like the PBMR are evaluated. Policy discussions currently underway to draft the national Integrated Resource Plan 2 are to set the agenda for electricity issues over the next 25 years. This draws further attention to the use of technologies such as nuclear energy given the emphasis on its low carbon claims and ability to ensure security of supply. And while the government appears to have dropped the PBMR for the present, recent media rhetoric suggests that it is still committed to adding on substantial amounts of nuclear power to its future energy mix. This effort seems to being made without first addressing the problems relating to democratic governance, public policy making and promoting the special interests of small lobby groups.
The event was held to stimulate an open, critical engagement exploring the lessons to be learnt in failed governance in South Africa’s PBMR project. The author of the publication, Dr. David Fig, an Independent Environment Policy Researcher & Earthlife Africa trustee, raised the issues above within an appraisal of the country’s checkered nuclear history and its development aspirations. Fig also cautioned that it was somewhat “difficult to monitor the project in a shifting political climate” and thus, that it wasn’t entirely true to say that we had seen a “demise” of the project. He further advised that a number of governance deficits, outlined in the publication, must be addressed before any further expansion of nuclear energy. It is important for “impeccable governance structures” that are managed in way that protects us humans and the environment, this he addressed in the context of detrimental climate change. He raised more specific challenges around the large deficit of trust around the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) in nuclear energy, in which there was no mechanism for challenging poor EIAs other than through litigation. He also highlighted corruption risks such as revolving door syndrome between the National Nuclear Regulator (NNR), industry and government. Ownership issues of the PBMR project were also non transparent and it was difficult for the public to “disentangle ownership from investment”.

Members of the National Nuclear Regulator also participated in the event which was important to a vibrant, interrogative discussion. Peter Bester, Programme Manager: PBMR and Joseph Mwase, Stakeholder & Strategy Relations Executive both from the NNR shared their insights on the challenges presented to them as regulator. Capacity constraints were highlighted, and they acknowledged that further scrutiny was needed on guaranteeing independence from influence. In general, there were a couple of other issues of synergy between the Fig and the NNR representatives including: the need for opennessness and transparency, and the difficulties with ensuring sound processes. The NNR assured that they were only there to set
they used international standards, and to monitor enforcement of which they could not “be lobbied away from safety concerns”.

There were three rounds of questions posed to the panelists by the over 40 people in attendance which were responded to openly and fairly. Natasha Emmett and Isaack Otieno from the Corruption & Governance Programme assisted in the event and publication process. Thanks are given to the governments of Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands for their generous funding provided towards the publication and launch event. The chair was Trusha Reddy of the C&G Climate Change project who closed the discussion with a hope that these kinds of engagements will ensue as South African policy processes to determine the future of nuclear are taking place.