A short trip with federal Councillor Doris Leuthard to South Africa

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From 2 to 5 February a Swiss delegation with Eawag Director Janet Hering was four days on the road with Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard in South Africa. The working visit was focussed on energy and climate policy. Five questions to Janet Hering after her return.

Four days South Africa with inland flights between Johannesburg, Port Elisabeth und Capetown – not a carbon neutral trip. Was it worth the long way?
JH: In my view, international travel by the members of the Federal Council and their delegations has to be considered as an investment in the future. Obviously, the immediate outcomes within the 4 days of the trip are limited. But the meetings and interactions set the stage for future cooperation and engagement. In 2010, South Africa had the third highest level of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per unit GDP in the OECD (exceeded only by China and Russia) [i]. This trip will be more than carbon neutral over the long term if Swiss technology and innovation can help South Africa reduce its GHG emissions. It is important in this context that many key decisions, especially regarding investments in infrastructure like public transportation, are made at the municipal level. Thus it is vital that the Federal Councillor met with mayors as well as with the Minister of the Environment.

Federal Councillor Leuthard returns to Switzerland with a Memorandum of Understanding in support of a project to promote energy-saving street lighting. Is this the "Energy turnaround"according to South Africa?
JH: The visit of the Swiss delegation to the Walmer Township (where the first tall mast (40 m) street light is located) and the subsequent meeting with the mayoral council of the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality included a formal signing ceremony. So it is not surprising that it was the part of the trip that was picked up by the media in South Africa. As the Federal Councillor mentioned in several speeches ,

however, diversifying the energy mix in South Africa and reducing its dependence on coal will be critical for future GHG reductions. Energy conservation will also be an important contributor to this. It is easy to take energy efficiency for granted in Switzerland, but this is not the case in South Africa. It is also important to take into account the social benefits of this project. The tall mast street lights will be placed in very poor locations where the residents live under unsafe conditions. Improved lighting will also increase safety, allowing people to leave their homes at night and expanding opportunities for economic activity. The project will also bring Wifi access to these communities; this is already heavily used by the community where the first tall mast has been built.

You said that you have seen more solar panels on roofs in Germany than in sunny South Africa. What's going wrong?
JH: Germany invested heavily in feed-in tariffs to encourage the expansion of solar energy. This effort has been very successful. In contrast, some of South Africa's fiscal and energy policies resulted in a long period of low (subsidized) coal and electricity prices.1 These subsidies are being reduced and the potential of solar energy (and also wind energy) is beginning to be realized. This potential is also being pursued by industry. For example, solar panels are installed on the roof of the BP Head Office in Cape Town that was constructed in 2005 [ii]. The Swiss delegation met with representatives of the Green Building Council of South Africa [iii],who had visited Eawag's "zero-energy building", the Forum Chriesbach, in 2013. Green construction is clearly a growing trend in South Africa.

Swiss enterprises should invest in South Africa in renewable energies and energy saving technologies. Swiss research should contribute too. This sounds like one way traffic. Are there also fields where Switzerland could learn from South Africa?
JH: The Swiss delegation visited the Nelson Mandela Municipal University (NMMU), where we saw a variety of interesting projects. One of these involved the use of algae bioreactors to treat flue gas from coal-fired power plants [iv]. Although this specific application is not relevant for Switzerland, there are likely to be other opportunities for collaboration with NMMU, in addition to the South African universities (KwaZulu-Natal, Cape Town and Stellenbosch) where Eawag already has contacts and/or joint projects.

Last but not least: Could you also bring in typically Eawag topics like water, wastewater or aquatic ecology?
JH: Like energy, water is a critically-important resource in South Africa. These two issues are often linked, for example, through the demand for water in the coal mining sector. The Swiss company Glencore, which was represented in the delegation, has made substantial investments in treatment systems for mine water [v]. Although Eawag has not focused on the treatment of industrial discharge water, this is clearly of great importance for environmental protection. South Africa is also a hotspot of biodiversity. At NMMU, we saw exhibits based on a research initiative in the study of shallow water ecosystems [vi], which might offer opportunities for collaboration with Eawag.

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