

Interview with Solene Smith, Coastal Links leader, Langebaan, South Africa

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Solene, in November 2002, following the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in South Africa, you said to *Yemaya* “my dream is that in ten years time fisher people themselves will be in Marine and Coastal Management. This dream is within our reach, it is possible if we stand together. We can achieve this, if we stand and work together.” What has happened to this dream?

We were so inspired by the fishers that we met at the Summit from all over the world who were organizing and fighting for the rights of small-scale fishing communities. We went home and began to organize at local community levels.

What has changed in your community in the past nine years?

At the time of the World Summit small-scale fishers had been largely excluded from the new fishing rights regime in South Africa, which favoured the large commercial companies. The new policy was also based on individual quotas and this had caused enormous tensions in our communities because a few fishers had got quotas but most had been left out. It also introduced an individualistic and corrupt mindset into the fisheries. In 2004 we launched ‘Coastal Links’, which was a network of community-based organizations representing fishing communities and we began to organize in each of the main fishing towns. In those days we didn’t have a lot of information about the policy and we depended a great deal on Masifundise for training and support. With their help we undertook a range of actions including protest marches and taking the Minister of Environmental Affairs to court. We stood together, however, and this was the key because for the first time fishers up and down were speaking out with one voice. This forced the Fisheries Department to take us seriously and in 2007 the Minister hosted a Small-scale Fisheries Summit where, for the first time, the government acknowledged our rights and

admitted that we had been excluded. This was a real turning point. A Small-scale Fisheries National Task Team was then established to take this process forward. This was when my dream began to come true because for the first time we, as fishers, were represented on this body and we were able to participate in developing a new policy for small-scale fishers.

How have women been involved in this process?

Women have led this process and the new Draft Small-scale Fisheries Policy that has now been put on the table recognizes the role that women play in small-scale fisheries and commits the policy to promoting women’s involvement in the sector. We have demanded a community-based policy that recognizes that fishers’ rights are human rights and that the new policy must contribute towards improving the quality of life in our communities. We, as women, have organized workshops on our own where we have tried to identify strategies for taking our issues forward within Coastal Links. It’s been a struggle and I have had to learn new ways of dealing with conflict amongst the fishers in my community, to give leadership and to insist that the men create opportunities for women to be involved.

What challenges lie ahead for the women of Coastal Links?

We still have obstacles to face: poaching levels are high and we need to work towards excluding the middleman in the marketing process so that women can really benefit. This is a real challenge because the established industry still controls the marketing of most of the fish and until we can change these power relations, very little will change. My dream now is to establish local co-operatives and to enable women to become involved in setting up local fish markets, doing catering with seafood and making crafts with local shells. I also hope that we can establish real co-management in all of our fishing villages and towns. We need to address some of the social problems facing our communities and make sure that the new policy makes a difference. I hope one day I can feel proud to tell my grand-children that I was part of this struggle for fisher’s rights. 