

A Mere Mural on the Wall?

Christian Adams, a fisher leader, highlighted the experiences of small-scale fishers in South Africa facing large-scale challenges in the era of the Blue Economy. Edited excerpts

On the long struggle for legal recognition of the small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector

SSF includes indigenous, traditional and artisanal fishers. They were subjected to extensive criminalization in South Africa and have fought a long struggle for legal recognition. They were recognized for the first time only in 2007, when the Equality Court ordered the then minister of fisheries to develop a policy to ensure they get acknowledged in the Marine Living Resources Act of 1998.

The industrial sector in South Africa has had a close relationship with the fisheries authorities since the apartheid years. They have a co-management relationship and are involved in the scientific working groups that advise the minister on the quantum of fish, the total effort they are allocated as well as the areas they wish to fish in. In contrast, we in the SSF sector still do not have any co-management structures, nor are we involved in decision making. This despite a very progressive policy and getting legal recognition over 10 years ago. We have begged for co-management and for our local ecological knowledge to be included in decision-making processes.

The political will to implement the underlying principle of equity is still lacking. This results in a disjuncture between ground realities and our SSF policy that is based on the principles of human rights, equality and non-discrimination. I see the need to challenge these power imbalances, to shift the paradigm towards sustainable, human rights-based governance of fisheries. That is key to achieving successful implementation.

This requires pressure on those in power to demonstrate the political will to implement the 2007 court order. To recognize the importance of the SSF sector, that it deserves preferential access to fulfil its potential to contribute to food security and poverty alleviation. What will that take? Nothing short of an overhaul of the current general fisheries policy, equitable and preferential apportionment of resources to the SSF sector, as well as specific measures to provide the necessary co-operative governance and social development support. However, the small-scale directorate is under-resourced and does not have the requisite staff. This

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After a participatory process, we celebrated the gazetting of the Policy for Small-Scale Fisheries in 2012, amended to a statute in 2014. However, since then, progress to implement our visionary human rights-based policy, drafted in accordance with the SSF Guidelines, has been painfully slow.

On reforms in governance for equitable co-management

For the successful implementation of the SSF Guidelines and our Policy for SSF in South Africa, we really need a paradigm shift in the governance of fisheries. If we look historically at the position of SSF, both in South Africa and globally, it can be seen that the sector has been marginalized. The large industrial fisheries have been prioritized for access to marine resources, for access to ocean space as well as getting the bulk of the budget for the management of fisheries.

This interview with Christian Adams (cjadams1976@gmail.com), a long-standing leader and activist in the SSF sector in South Africa, and a founder member of the national fisher organization, The Collective, and the current Chairperson of the Steenberg's Cove Multi-Purpose Primary Small-scale Fisheries Co-operative Limited, was conducted by Jackie Sunde (jackiesunde25@gmail.com), a researcher with the One Ocean Hub Small-scale Fisheries Research Team at the University of Cape Town, South Africa



Mural fishers protest outside the Cape Town High Court, South Africa, February 2022. The political will to implement the underlying principle of equity is still lacking

results in a lack of co-ordination across various departments, red tape and unreasonable bureaucratic delays for fishers.

On the need for co-management

The current top-down paradigm allocates the lion's share of resources to the commercial sector, including the high-value species in the nearshore areas. This leaves the SSF sector with little more than crumbs. At the heart of this failure is the reluctance to respect the principle of co-management in the policy for SSF, as also the regulations and the devolution of power required. From the outset the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) have refused the fishers' request to implement a co-management approach. This, then, strengthens the top-down approach, with the department developing permit regulations and requirements that are inappropriate for the small-scale sector. It also means that the fisheries staff are not available in the rural areas where they are needed; the fishers are forced to travel to the large centres to get their permits and the licences to operate.

On safety at sea

The SSF sector is required to have their boats surveyed annually. Fishers need to ensure that they have up-to-date safety gear on board. In addition, they must have a radio licence. These requirements are onerous for small-scale fishers. However, they go to extreme lengths to get the necessary certification under a system managed

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by a different authority, while the fisheries authorities say they have nothing to do with this system. South Africa has a shortage of adjudicators in the national radio licensing system; it is nearly impossible for fishers to get the necessary documentation. The allocation of an actual radio call site sign is managed by one national office inland, over 1,000 km away from the sea. Given the high prevalence of power outages in South Africa, it is extremely

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Fish cleaning at St Helena Bay harbor, South Africa. The current top-down paradigm allocates the lion's share of resources to the commercial sector, including the high-value species in the nearshore areas

go to sea as a result of these regulatory requirements.

On the lack of equitable access to resources

Legal access to resources is one of the greatest challenges. Apportionment of high-value species still favours the more powerful large commercial fisheries. Despite advocating for the transformation of the processes of managing access to resources on an individual quota-based system for over a decade, and ensuring that resources are allocated to traditional, indigenous communities that have historically depended on the resources for their livelihoods, the DFFE continues to first apportion the vast majority of resources along a commercially-orientated fisheries rights allocation system, despite the Equality Court Order of 2007.

On emerging threats to traditional fishing grounds

A primary reason for the continued disparity and failure to address the marginalization of the SSF sector has been the simultaneous emergence of South Africa's Blue Economy policy, known as the Operation Phakisa Ocean Economy. Ironically, Phakisa means 'hurry up, hurry up' in the local Sesotho language.

Just when the SSF Guidelines provided an important international policy framework for the sector and brought it in line with the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the SSF sector is now facing a new threat from the push for an Ocean Economy or the Blue Economy. Thus while our policy for SSF in South Africa was poised to shift the enormous challenges we faced within the fisheries sector, vis-a-vis the prioritization of the large-scale commercial and recreational fisheries sectors, we are now facing an even greater challenge. The priority over fisheries in ocean governance goes to extractive, energy-related activities and marine transport.

I see the systematic exclusion of SSF from the ocean space, coupled with the marginalization of SSF within fisheries governance and management, as linked within a global neoliberal system of

difficult for fishers to contact this office and obtain the necessary radio call sign. All the red tape that fishers have to endure means that fishers cannot get their licences on time and often endure long periods when they are not able to

ocean governance. In South Africa, the same DFFE leads fisheries management, ocean environmental governance and the Blue Economy policies and, ironically, also leads our response to climate change. Thus we have an absurd situation where the DFFE is leading the development of an Ocean Economy Master Plan that has prioritized oil and gas exploration, and is also inviting new sectors to exploit ocean resources, while it simultaneously is supposed to be protecting our ocean environment and promoting small-scale fisheries.

Due to a directive from the Presidential Office, supported by the ruling party, there is a very strong push to implement the Ocean Economy Master Plan, despite the lack of implementation of the Marine Spatial Planning legislation to ensure that any economic development in the ocean is balanced with ecological and social justice. This focus on the economic development of the ocean. The false promise that oil and gas exploration will create employment is further marginalizing small-scale fisheries.

On the ssf sector defending environmental concerns against ocean exploitation

We first heard about the Blue Economy as early as 2010 at the African CAMFA meeting in the Gambia. We realized then and there that it is a neoliberal extractive approach to the ocean and we began asserting the need for 'Blue Justice'. At the Climate Change COP17 meeting in Durban the following year we demanded 'Blue Justice Now'. However, instead of the progressive realization of our rights in the ocean, we have, instead, seen the systematic erosion of our rights. I now feel we risk becoming just a memory, and our children and their children will only know us through murals on a wall.

In the past two years my fisher community has been directly involved in litigation against the minister of minerals and energy and the minister of DFFE. It is a desperate attempt to stop the total onslaught facing us from oil and gas exploration and the expansion of energy-related infrastructure to support the extraction of fossil fuels along the coast. Despite successfully

stopping Shell and an Australia-based company from conducting seismic surveys, through co-ordinated social resistance campaigns and court action on the grounds that this would be a violation of our human rights as small-scale fishers, we are currently facing five applications for environmental authorization for oil and gas exploration off our coastline.

In the past month the DFFE has dismissed our appeals against France-based Total Energies and Shell to stop the drilling of five wells off our coastline. Our sector has been completely marginalized in the Marine Spatial Planning and the Ocean Economy Master Planning processes. These meetings are held online with no data support provided to the ssf sector. The oil and gas sector, the marine shipping sector and the large-scale industrial aquaculture sector have submitted extensive sector plans, elaborating their planned growth and expansion in our ocean. Yet those of us who depend on the ocean and our coastline are being squeezed out.

This drive to turn the ocean into the next frontier for neoliberal capital is drowning out our voices as small-scale fishers who have traditionally depended on the sea and have used the ocean sustainably. The ocean is the material basis of our culture and the home of our ancestors. Despite the struggles we face, we will continue to defend the ocean from destruction. 📢

For more

Southern Africa's Blue Economy: Regional Cooperation for Sustained Development

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781003245179/southern-africa-blue-economy-donald-sparks>

Improvident Law

https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/3805_art_Sam63_E_art12.pdf

Reaffirming Rights

https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/4246_art_Sam75_e_art07.pdf

Social Relations and Dynamics Shaping the Implementation of the SSF Guidelines in South Africa

<https://www.icsf.net/resources/social-relations-and-dynamics-shaping-the-implementation-of-the-voluntary-guidelines-on-small-scale-fisheries-ssf-guidelines-in-south-africa/>