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Op-ed

EMPOWERING SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES FOR A SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE BLUE/OCEANS ECONOMY IN SOUTH AFRICA

By Dr Samantha Williams

Small-scale fisheries (SSF) are a vital yet frequently overlooked sector both globally and within South Africa. Despite progressive policy frameworks, the lived realities of many small-scale fishing communities reveal persistent structural inequalities that continue to marginalise their voices and limit their benefits from marine resources. South Africa's Blue/Oceans Economy framework embodies a vision that balances ecological stewardship with economic growth and social inclusion. For South Africa to realise a truly sustainable and equitable Blue Economy, governance reforms must translate policy ideals into meaningful empowerment and inclusive participation, especially where it matters most.

The gazetting of the Small-Scale Fisheries Policy in 2012, along with subsequent amendments to the Marine Living Resources Act in 2016, marked a significant milestone for the SSF sector. These policies explicitly recognise the unique character of SSF, emphasising community-based rights, human rights, food security and the safeguarding of customary practices. With nearly 150 small-scale fishing communities, consisting of tens of thousands of fishing households, this highlights the sector's significant socio-economic role and rich cultural heritage.

Central to reformed policy processes was the shift from individual rights allocations to collective, community-based resource management. This reorientation reflects a global consensus that effective and sustainable fisheries governance hinges on empowering local actors as stewards of their marine environment. With the growth and acceleration of the Blue Economy, a global initiative aimed at using ocean resources for economic growth, South Africa too, aims to harness its ocean wealth to unlock billions in GDP and create millions of jobs. In doing so, the country adopted a fast-tracked strategy called Operation Phakisa, which would speed up growth and development of South Africa's maritime sector.

According to its goals and ambitions, this strategy's starting point "represents that new spirit of moving faster in meeting government's targets. South African Government's starting point was that South Africa is surrounded by a vast ocean which has not fully taken advantage of the immense potential of this untapped resource". The ambition is admirable and there is no question that South Africa must grow and transform its economy. However, the critical question remains: for whose benefit? If the Blue/ Oceans Economy merely perpetuates the ongoing narrative of exclusion, particularly for coastal communities still recovering from apartheid-era marginalisation, then the objective of establishing a just and sustainable future will have been compromised.

With regard to policy reform in the SSF sector, the 2012 Policy for Small-Scale Fisheries was supposed to address some of the challenges faced by the sector. It promised legal recognition, equitable access

to marine resources and a new era of co-management between communities and the government. However, more than a decade later, progress in implementing the objectives of the policy has been slow. Central to these challenges are access rights, lack of basic infrastructure and boats and facilities that would make SSF rights and work viable. Institutional and capacity constraints, as well as inconsistent implementation of policy objectives, continue to hinder progress in the sector and such gaps will exacerbate existing inequalities for many communities.

While South Africa's Oceans Economy Master Plan (OEMP) acknowledges the significance of small-scale fisheries (SSFs), actual investment priorities continue to favour large industrial sectors such as offshore oil and gas, shipping and aquaculture. These industries are capital-intensive and profit-driven. Small-scale fisheries, by contrast, offer something different, which includes local food security, cultural heritage, ecological knowledge and sustainable use of marine resources. These contributions are not always considered, but they are essential to the well-being of communities in South Africa.

Extensive research in South Africa and worldwide has demonstrated that SSFs are not only about livelihoods, but equally about its values. In many communities, the ocean is regarded as sacred. This is where people go to pray, to heal, to reconnect with their ancestors. When companies like Shell proposed seismic activities off the Wild Coast it not only threatened marine ecosystems, but coastal culture alike. In acts of resistance, it was local communities and their partners who opposed these activities and emphasised that their resistance is linked to an entirely different vision of what the ocean means and who it belongs to.

If the Blue/ Oceans Economy is to be more than a buzzword, it must centre justice as much as jobs. It is also essential to foster meaningful dialogue that acknowledges existing power imbalances and strives to share power genuinely. This, therefore, leads us to consider what essential steps are required to genuinely integrate small-scale fisheries into South Africa's ocean future. First, it is essential to ensure that policy commitments result in access to resources. This involves finalising community-based rights, reducing management barriers and providing sufficient support to community co-operatives to enable them to prosper.

Second, and linked to community development and support, is infrastructure. In small-scale fishing communities, investments in processing facilities, cold storage, transportation networks and market chain support are essential to sustaining livelihoods and enabling growth.

Third, environmental protection is imperative and directly impacts human well-being. Climate change will also disproportionately affect small-scale fishers and therefore, marine spatial planning should actively involve SSFs and safeguard their fishing areas and resources from large-scale developments.

Finally, we need a holistic governance approach. The lack of coordination, overlapping mandates, inefficiencies and conflicting priorities undermine sustainable development goals. Enhancing collaboration and integration across government, the private sector, civil society organisations and local SSF communities are essential. Such an integrated governance model for SSFs will strengthen policy coherence, improve decision-making and ensure that social, economic and environmental objectives in an ocean economy are inclusive and sustainable. Realising this transformative agenda requires political will, adequate resourcing and an unwavering commitment to inclusive governance.

Dr Samantha Williams is attached to the School for Public Leadership at Stellenbosch University. This article is an extract from a paper entitled "Empowering small-scale fisheries for a sustainable and inclusive blue/oceans economy in South Africa", which was published by the Inclusive Society Institute following the Institute's participation at the Academic Council for the United Nation's System (ACUNS) that was held in Nairobi, Kenya in June.