

Africa/ South Africa

On the brink

Traditional fishing communities in South Africa are struggling to find a secure future in the sector

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Coastal communities in South Africa have a very long history of harvesting marine resources such as fish, shellfish and rock lobster or *kreef* for their livelihoods. It is estimated that 30,000 subsistence or artisanal fishing people depend on these resources to survive and another 30,000 are employed seasonally in the fishing industry. South Africa exports a large quantity of fish (about 40 per cent) to countries in the North and this makes fishing a highly profitable industry from a commercial perspective.

In most communities men have traditionally been the ones to go to sea whilst women have played significant roles in shore-based activities: making and repairing nets, preparing bait and processing and selling fish. Along some areas of the coast, women collect mussels and other shellfish off the rocks. Women are the primary seasonal workers in the fish processing factories along the Cape West Coast. Of late, they are also playing an increasing role in the administration and representation of fishing associations on the West Coast, where women chair at least three associations. Here they play critical roles in assisting fisher people apply for permits and quotas and in lobbying the Department of Marine and Coastal Management (MCM), the government department responsible for fisheries management.

The fishing industry has been shaped considerably by the discriminatory legislation and practices during the white-dominated apartheid regime. Black people were excluded from getting quotas in their own right and had to work for white fishermen or companies. White-owned fishing companies flourished. Gradually the larger companies acquired smaller companies and extended their control. A handful of powerful white-owned companies came to dominate the industry. The influx control laws, job reservation, and Group Areas Act further excluded Black communities from getting full access to the sea and its resources.

After the election of South Africa's first democratic government in 1994, efforts to transform the fishing

industry by introducing policies ensuring equitable access to marine resources, were initiated. This was in the face of considerable pressure from large companies fearful of losing control over the industry.

The Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQ) system was introduced. Although quotas were not new, this scheme was to enable people from previously disadvantaged communities to apply for quotas to fish. Other policies included giving incentives to companies that could show that they were transforming their employment practices to provide more opportunities for Black and women workers. The new system intended to allocate quotas to companies of different sizes and, in this way, to enable a certain amount of smaller 'new entrants' to establish companies.

However, despite these policies, some communities and people who have fished all their lives, have been left without equitable access to fisheries resources. There appear to be several reasons for this:

Corruption: The fishing industry has a history of corruption, with influential people using their connections to ensure that their friends and families benefited from quota allocations. Allocations were also made for political purposes. Allocations were made to certain Coloured communities and leaders but not others. Later, in 2000, the government tried to introduce systems to ensure a more equitable distribution. However, a lot of mistrust remains, especially since many people who have never fished before have received quotas, whilst the access of many real, *bona fide* fishing people who have fished for years and depended on fishing for survival, has declined.

High costs: A big problem for fishing communities is the cost and complex procedures involved in applying for a quota. The criteria used to decide quota allocations are also seen as problematic.

Paper quotas: A further problem is that of 'paper quotas'. Because of the high value of quotas, many new entrants who were allocated quotas sold them to other fishing companies. This has enabled these fishing companies, even overseas-owned companies, to increase their power and control over the industry.

Failure to prioritize bona fide fisher people: The government has decided that, in the case of certain

high-value species of fish and shellfish, quotas for these species will be allocated only to larger enterprises operating as businesses and not to small, subsistence fishing groups, thereby depriving the latter of access to these resources.



Impact of global trade: Pressures from South Africa's trading partners in the North, such as from the countries of the European Union, coupled with the government's current export-oriented economic policy, have affected decisions about quota allocations, ostensibly in order to promote investment in the industry. These policies are being implemented at the expense of the income and food security of local fishing communities.

Local fishing communities are thus facing social and economic crises as a result of the restricted access to fishing resources. Many fisher people who used to be active now sit at home. In other cases, the limited quota allocations mean that households have a greatly reduced seasonal income. In certain cases people turn to poaching (catching fish without a license/ quota) as a means of short-term survival. They are attracted by the large sums of money that are paid for protected species. In some instances, local people poach in return for payment in drugs. Powerful drug cartels use the lucrative trade in valuable marine resources as a way of obtaining finance.

In communities where poaching is rife, problems, such as drugs and gangsterism, are on the increase. Linked to the high levels of poverty, gangsterism and drug abuse, is an increase in rape, sexual abuse and trafficking in women and children.

For communities that do not poach, the economic future is precarious. Given the seasonal nature of incomes, households find it difficult to pay their house rents and there is increasing food insecurity and poverty. Fishing communities are relatively excluded from economic development in their regions and have expressed their frustration at the lack of information on alternative economic initiatives, for example, on how to access the tourism market.