

A timely basket of changes

Christian Adams, Ntsindiso Nongcavu, Dawie Phillips, Lindani Ngubane and Neville Luyt

THE FINAL adoption of the new small-scale fisheries (SSF) policy is on the horizon, only awaiting endorsement from the Western Cape government and thereafter the National Council of Provinces.

As Coastal Links SA, an organisation that represents some 4 000 small-scale fishers countrywide, we wish to place on record our firm support for the SSF policy.

With our partners, such as Masifundise and the Artisanal Fishers Association of SA, we took the government to the Equality Court in 2005, when small-scale fishers were completely excluded from the long-term fisheries allocation that year.

The court found the allocation to be discriminatory and ordered the formulation of a policy for the small-scale fisheries sector. The policy was formulated through a substantially inclusive process. To date, it has been endorsed by Nedlac, the national cabinet, all political parties in the portfolio committee on fisheries and in the National Assembly, Cosatu and a range of other civil society organisations.

This new SSF policy is intended to address the constitutional imperatives of redress, equality and development. It recognises our historic reality that included land-grabs from the majority of citizens through violent dispossession and instruments such as the 1913 Land Act. It acknowledges that the majority of poor fishers were forcibly removed from their locations near the ocean through the Group Areas Act and were condemned to working lives of virtual servitude, without a prospect of progress.

The policy attempts to address these historical conditions, to make a clear break with the past and to change the dreadful socio-economic conditions imposed on many South Africans during apartheid and before.

With a Gini coefficient of 0.7, the highest in the world, we are morally bound to promote policies that alleviate poverty and empower fellow-South Africans. Presently, 10 percent of the population continues to earn more than 50 percent of the household income of the country, while the poorest 40 percent and the poorest 20 percent account for less than 7 percent and 1.5 percent, respectively, of household income. These patterns pertain in fishing communities.

The policy gives legal recognition to the country's 30 000 small-scale fishers, for the first time in our history. Whichever way you look at it, this represents a monumental forward movement for traditional fishers along our coastline.

It also focuses on rights and responsibilities. The rights are critical, but so is the responsibility to preserve marine resources, to work in co-management systems and to act against poaching.

The policy shifts the framework for fisheries allocation from the destructively



PLAYING CATCH-UP: The new policy represents a monumental forward movement for traditional fishers, say the writers.

The small-scale fisheries policy envisages improved and sustainable marine resource co-management, where communities themselves are given more responsibility for managing marine resources

competitive individual quota system to a collective community system.

Preferential fishing zones for small-scale fishers will be demarcated, where they will be able to harvest or catch multiple species throughout the year. These zones will be out of bounds for big commercial fishing companies.

The SSF policy does not restrict small-scale fishers from fishing outside these zones, as some have incorrectly asserted. The fishers can do so with permission from the envisaged co-management committee from the area where the migratory

fish are located.

The policy makes provision for legal entities in communities, through which fishers can gain greater access to training, equipment and markets. It envisages improved and sustainable marine resource co-management, where communities themselves are given more responsibility for managing marine resources.

A basket of fish would be allocated per area, based on need and the availability of resources, as determined by scientific research.

We refer to the words of Hahn Goliath,

from the Doringbaai fishing community, who makes the following points in a letter to the media. "Once the SSF policy is implemented, fishing communities will receive greater financial benefits throughout the value chain as the pre- and post-harvest activities currently undertaken by others will be done by the community themselves." He adds: "This will help ensure that the maximum value of the resource remains within the community, and will indeed make the 'basket of rights' financially viable for communities."

Cold storage and other infrastructure will be provided in terms of the SSF policy to enable a greater inclusion of poor fishers into the system. This will help regulate the supply and ensure that traditional fishers can fetch a price that is more favourable to them.

These initiatives are all aimed at redressing past inequities and developing a framework where thousands of previously marginalised fishers can break out of an economic relationship of exploitation.

As fishers, most of us have to contend with a set of difficult challenges each working day. We have to rise at 1am to secure a boat to fish from, usually for a fee of R200. The vessel is usually owned by an apartheid beneficiary, and a notice informs us that we board at our own risk.

The boat-owner takes half your catch. He pays for petrol costs from the proceeds and pockets the rest as profit. Our half of the catch has to cover the R200, transport, fishing tackle and protective clothing such as oilskins, boots and gloves. We are forced into this very exploitative relationship for reasons of history.

We have followed the media coverage following the recent linefishing allocations. We support the right of deserving fishers to receive allocations, but note that amidst the genuine grievances there is also a chorus of indignation from quarters who are desperately trying to cling on to the allocations that they received as a result of the discriminatory practices of the past.

It is worth pointing out, once again, that more than half of the 455 people allocated long-term fishing rights in 2005 either did not use them or used them minimally over an eight-year period. In addition, several of the rights-holders did not use people listed in a register drawn up by the Department of Fisheries. Where those listed were used, they were, in the main, badly treated.

Then, the allocations were done mainly on old apartheid lines, with the majority being non-deserving beneficiaries. Many in this group were historically privileged, already resourced, had access to other sources of income and were not traditional fishers. Some were black professionals with no historical links to fishing communities.

We also need to make the point that large numbers of deserving linefishers negatively affected by the recent allocation will be covered by the SSF policy when it is implemented.

Much of our media have failed to explain a lot of these details to readers and listeners, opting instead for portraying the story in the conventional framework of binary opposites, with villains and victims, good guys and bad guys.

It is our collective responsibility to cut through the noise and chart a new path, one step at a time.

While we understand that there is some unhappiness, we should not be tempted to throw out the baby with the bathwater. The SSF policy needs to be protected and comprehensively implemented.

We look forward to being part of this process.

• Adams is national chairman of Coastal Links SA. Nongcavu, Phillips, Ngubane and Luyt are, respectively, the Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, KZN and Western Cape provincial chairpersons. Coastal Links SA has branches and committees in more than 60 coastal communities across the country.

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