Working for the rights of small-scale fishers

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EDGAR rises at 4am each day and walks down to the coast where he meets fellow fishermen Rasta, Johnson and Sandile. They huddle around their tiny little boat in the chilly autumn morning, talking about the prospects of going out to sea.

All three men come from generations of West Coast families who have relied on the ocean for their livelihoods. But the odds are increasingly stacked against them.

Overfishing, global warming, the rising cost of living and the enduring monopoly ownership and control of marine resources are among the factors that push the country’s 30,000 small-scale fishers onto the margins.

‘Urgent action is required to address the plight of the fisherfolk,’ said Naseegh Jaffer, Director of Masifundise, an NGO that advocates sustainable livelihoods for small-scale fishers.

‘Last June, cabinet adopted a progressive policy for the sector. It is imperative that this policy be rapidly and comprehensively implemented in order to improve the living standards of poor fishing communities,’ he added.

He outlined the long, arduous journey that led to the adoption of the SSF policy. ‘The journey began in 2002, when small scale fishers gathered at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) to discuss fisheries policy.

‘The discussions that ensued triggered off an unprecedented civil society process to address small-scale fishing in South Africa.’

‘The next major trigger happened in 2005, when the government adopted long-term fishing policies that made no provision for small fishers,’ Jaffer explained.

‘The following year, Masifundise took the matter to the Equality Court, which ruled, in 2007, that a new policy must be developed and that an interim relief package for small-scale fishers be formulated and implemented,’ he said.

‘This process dragged on for five years until the policy was finally adopted by cabinet, in June, last year,’ said Jaffer.

A significant majority of Masifundise’s policy proposals have been included.

‘Its implementation would see a major facelift in the management of the small-scale fishing at national level.

‘Benefits of the new policy include the following:

- the formal recognition of artisanal fishing communities;
- a move to collective fishing rights, away from the individual quota system that excluded the majority;
- the demarcation of exclusive fishing zones for small-scale fishers, where they will be able to harvest or catch multiple species throughout the year.

‘The potential for ongoing sustainable income will be considerably enhanced. These zones will be out of bounds for big commercial fishing companies; improved and sustainable marine resource co-management.

‘In order to advance its objectives, Masifundise works closely with a mass-based organisation, Coastal Links, which it helped establish in 2003.

‘Last year, in November, Coastal Links established itself as a national organisation, representing more than 2,000 small-scale fishers from the Western, Northern and Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu Natal.’

‘The two organisations have developed a mutually dependent relationship.’

Masifundise provides the technical capacity, staff and networks critical for the survival and growth of Coastal Links while the latter brings to the table life experiences and the voices of fishing communities, without which Masifundise’s work would be greatly diminished.

‘Mr George Bongo, chairperson of Masifundise’s board of trustees, said the organisation was doing a great deal of advocacy and empowerment work, aimed at meeting various challenges.

‘Many of these relate to the cumulative effects of centuries of colonialism and apartheid that created huge inequalities, a lack of confidence and self-esteem among marginalised communities and low levels of skills and general education’, he said.

‘It has been encouraging to witness the development of organisational structures led by small-scale fishers whose knowledge, skills and confidence are steadily growing and who are increasingly wielding their collective power in their common interests,’ he said.

Masifundise also focuses on women’s rights and is part of a growing Pan African Network that promotes small-scale fishing rights. This network campaigns for a halt to the privatisation of the seas or ‘sea grabbing’. It further encourages solidarity among progressive organisations on the continent.

Masifundise has built considerable links globally and Jaffer is currently the chairperson of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP).

Masifundise can be contacted at info@masifundise.org.za or 021 683 45 49. Speak to Mansoor Naqshbandi.

We have consolidated our relations across Africa with organisations that have similar objectives to ours, and continue our work at an international level.’