A timely basket of changes

Christian Adams, Ntsindiso Mongcavi, Dawie Phillips, Mbaleni Ngebane and Neville Layt

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

As Coastal Links SA, an organisation that represents some 400 small-scale fishers throughout the country, we wish to place on record our firm support for the SSF policy.

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

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 substantial inclusive process. To date, it has been endorsed by Ndelisi, the national cabinet, all political parties in the portfolio committee on fisheries and, in the National Assembly, Constit and a range of other civil society organisations.

This new SSF policy is intended to address the constitutional imperatives of equity and development. It recognises our historic reality that included land grants from the majority of the population of the country, through violent dispossession and instruments such as the 1913 Land Act. It acknowledges that the majority of our people, who are mostly poor, were forcibly removed from their locations near the ocean through the Group Areas Act and were condemned to working the waters of servitude, without a prospect of progress.

The policy attempts to address those historical conditions, to make a cleaner break with the past and to change the destructive socio-economic conditions imposed on many South Africans during apartheid.

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. Progress of 0.25 percent of the population over the past 10 years amounts to no more than 0.05 percent of the disposable income of the country, while the poorest 49 percent and the poorest 25 percent accounted for less than 7 percent and 1.5 percent, respectively, of household income. These patterns persist in fishing communities.

The policy gives legal recognition to the country’s 30,000 small-scale fishers, for the first time with access to regulatory frameworks. While 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 promote marine conservation, to work in co-management systems and to combat poaching.

The policy shifts the framework for fisheries allocation from the destructively competitive individual quota system to a collective community system. Preference for fishing zones for small-scale fishers will be demarcated, where we 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 alleged. The fishers can do so with permission from the envisaged co-management committees 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 sustainable and 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 Fikhid Goldh, 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 through the value chain as the pre- and post-harvest activities currently undertaken by others will be done by the community themselves.”

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.

Goldh 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 thrash a price that is more favourable to them.

These initiatives are all aimed at redressing past injustices 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 different challenges each working day. We have to rise at dawn to secure a boat to fish from, usually for a fee of R100. The vessel is usually owned by an apostle benefactor, and the fisher informs us that we have to fish 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. We will half of the catch has to cover the R100 transport, fishing tackle and protective clothing such as oilskin, boots and gloves. We are forced into this very exploitative relationship for reasons of history.

We have followed the media coverage following the recent line fishing 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 claw 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 400 people allocated long-term fishing rights in 2005 did not use them or misuse them initially over an eight-year period. In addition, several of the rights holders did not use the fishery, not only to protect other resources, but for reasons of history.

The allocations were done mainly on old apartheid lines, with the majority of poor fishers forcibly removed from their locations near the ocean through the Group Areas Act and condemned to working the waters of servitude, without a prospect of progress.

We also need to make the point that the 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 has failed to explain a list of these details to readers and fishers, opting instead for portraying the story in the sensational, confrontational, binary opposition, with villains and victims, good guys and bad guys.

This 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 complemented in every way.

We look forward to being part of this process.

Adams is national chairman of Coastal Links SA, Mongcavi, Phillips, Ngebane and Layt are, respectively, the regional chairmen of the Eastern Cape, Northern Cape and Western Cape provincial chairpersons. Coastal Links SA has branches and committees in more than 60 coastal communities across the country.
A timely basket of changes

Christian Adams, Ntsindiso Nongcawu, Dawie Phillips, Lindani Nqubane 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 across the country, we wish to place on record our firm support for the SSF policy.

Our partners, such as Masafisheries and the Artisanal Fishers Association of SA, took the government to the Constitutional Court in 2002, 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 substantial public process. To date, it has been endorsed by Ndebele, the national cabinet, all political parties in the portfolio committee on fisheries and in the National Assembly, Coasa 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 includes 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 confined to working lives of virtual servitude, without a prospect of progress.

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

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, 80% of the population continues to earn more than 60% of the household income of the country while the poorest 40% and the poorest 20% account for less than 7% and 10% respectively of household income. These patterns persist in fishing communities.

The policy allows legal recognition to the country’s 100,000 small-scale fishers, for the first time. It is a breakthrough move at the time when, if 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 act in an accountable way.

The policy shifts the framework for fisheries allocation from the destructively competitive individual quota system to a collective community system.

Preferred fishing zones for small-scale fishers will be demarcated, where we 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 benefits would be allocated per area, based on need and the availability of resources, as determined by scientific research.

We refer to the words of Maf Timol, from the Doringbaal 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 addressing past injustices 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 6am to secure a boat to fish from, usually for a fee of R300. The vessel is usually owned by an apartheid beneficiary, and the 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 R300, transport, fishing tackle and protective clothing such as oaklets, boots and gloves. We are thrust into this very exploitative relationship for reasons of history.

We have followed the media coverage following the recent live fishing auctions. We support the right of deserving fishers to receive allocations, but what we don’t understand is that amongst the genuine grievances there is also a charge of influence 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 all 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 the funds allotted to them by the Department of Fisheries. Where those funds were used, they were, in the main, badly trusted.

Then, the allocations were done mainly on old apartheid lines, with the majority of poor fishers being non-deserving beneficiaries. Many in this group were historically privileged, already resourced, with 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 fishers negatively affected by the recent allocation will be covered by the SSF policy when it is implemented.

Much of our media has failed to explain a lot of these deals to readers and listeners, opting instead for portraying the story in the conventional framework of binary oppositions, 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 complemented by ongoing efforts.

We look forward to being part of this process.

• Adams is national chairman of Coastal Links SA, Nongcawu, Phillips, Nqubane and Luyt are, respectively, the president, executive director and Western Cape provincial chairperson. Coastal Links SA has 50 fishing groups and communities in more than 60 coastal communities across the country.