

## Comment

# Is the White Paper black enough?

The much-awaited White Paper on South African fisheries (excerpted on page 41 of this issue of SAMUDRA), in the making for over two and a half years, and released on 19 June, was expected to mainly address the anomalies in the country's fisheries, especially the distribution of marine resources, which is highly skewed in favour of whites. At the outset, the White Paper seeks to ensure inter-generational equity and long-term sustainability, and pledges to act as the custodian of all marine resources, which will be treated as a national heritage. Unlike in the past, the rights to utilize living marine resources will also be allocated in a fair and equitable manner. The new policy is seen as contributing to the long-term vision embodied in the Macro Economic Strategy of the country's Department of Finance, namely, the creation of a competitive, fast-growing economy that generates enough jobs, and redistributes income and opportunities in favour of the poor.

The White Paper acknowledges the concentration of access rights in the hands of a few whites. It considers this a testimony to unequal opportunities and sees in it a strong argument for the future broadening of participation. The White Paper seeks to dismantle the existing system of permits and quotas. It proposes that access rights be converted into "real rights", which could be purchased through a transparent and competitive process, against the payment of an appropriate fee based on quota, catch or effort.

The new policy moots short-term leasing of rights to those who are not keen on acquiring permanent rights. But it is not clear who would really benefit. It seems that both blacks and whites could profit. The whites, however, stand to gain more, since they have well-entrenched interests in the industry and have the financial muscle to successfully participate in the lease market.

From the point of view of the Macro Economic Strategy, however, no attempt has been made to discuss if the existing fishing capacity could be restructured to provide more employment. It only states that subcontracting under fair conditions could be considered to benefit both the "big" and the "small". The competitive process envisaged for transferring the Total Allowable Catch rights could perhaps frustrate the original objective of fair and equitable distribution of rights. It will prevent economically vulnerable groups from getting a foothold in the industry and could hinder the redistribution of income and opportunities to the poor. This process will only benefit the rich blacks.

Further, the suggestion to reduce the number of fishers will only affect the disadvantaged blacks and coloureds. The White Paper also makes the fundamental mistake of confusing fishers with fishing capacities. Fishing capacity can be reduced without displacing labour if technology is judiciously selected. What is needed is a phased redistribution of fishing capacities through an appropriate combination of capital and labour in the choice of fishing technologies, along with the "unbundling" of access rights to benefit the black community.

In addition to quota, catch and effort, granting territorial use rights in fisheries should also be considered, especially in the case of species like rock lobster and abalone. Such rights could be given exclusively to the artisanal fishers (or subsistence fishers, as they are called in the White Paper), who depend on the coastal resources for their livelihood. Given their relatively smaller number, it should be possible to grant such permanent rights to legitimate claimants to the coastal resources. Granting them long-term rights, subject to better conservation and management measures, could go a long way in improving living standards as well as the law and order situation in the coastal areas.

In any case, from the point of view of restructuring access regimes, there is no guarantee that the blacks will be automatically empowered, even if the so-called real long-term rights are transferred to them. Given the scope for a lease market for such rights, control can still be exercised by the whites in different forms, thus defeating the original purpose of restructuring fishing rights. What is urgently required is a system that can not be misused, in devious new forms, to perpetrate the existing inequitable power relations in fisheries. The system should be more responsive to the structural dimensions of black poverty and the lack of economic opportunities for blacks.