

# Facing Change with Courage

Despite grim changes that threaten fishing livelihoods, fisherwomen in South Africa are emerging as strong leaders to face the challenges head-on

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from Masifundise Development Trust, with thanks to **Rosie Shoshola** and **Sarah Niemand**

Over the past decade women in fishing communities in South Africa have faced many new challenges. The finalisation of the Long Term Rights allocation in 2005 excluded many fishers and resulted in countless households being left destitute. During this period, women were forced to find alternative ways to put food on the table. Their children had to be fed, and, when their partners or husbands were angry and despondent, they had to be comforted and supported. With the increasing use of alcohol and drugs, women became victims of domestic violence. This is the context in South Africa, when fisherwomen have emerged as strong leaders to challenge legislative and political change that threatens their traditional livelihood.

The following brief biographies are descriptive of the lives of two such leaders, Sarah Niemand and Rosie Shoshola, and their roles in building community support to hold on to their way of life—a way of life that nurtures and sustains them, and those they love. They relate how women are becoming more aware of the need to unite and fight for change, with many becoming active members

of the organization, Coastal Links. They also describe how these women today find themselves facing a new challenge—the threat of climate change, and their struggles to cope with it.

Sarah Niemand was born in Buffeljagsbaai, a small fishing community situated about 150 km from Cape Town, and can trace her family's involvement in the kelp and fishing industry back four generations. The community was founded in the early 1930s by Johannes Swam, previously a farm laborer, and his wife, Sofia. Arriving in 1933, they settled in a makeshift hut for several years, until, in 1939, Swam was able to collect enough wood from the wreckage of the Yugoslav freighter, *Avala*, wrecked at Quoin Point near Buffeljagsbaai, to build a small timber house, using only a hammer, a saw and a plane for tools, thatch for the roof, and tar to seal the planks of timber. The sea washed up further treasures such as driftwood with which Swam made his first dinghy. With this, he began fishing independently. Over the years, more than twenty timber homes came up, all built from driftwood; some still stand in Buffeljagsbaai today, although sadly, the Swam house was demolished last year.

A Coastal Links branch was established in Buffeljagsbaai in 2006 after a community member heard about the work of Coastal Links along the coast. Soon, Coastal Links learnt that many fishers were unsuccessful in their Long Term Rights application. To deal with this and other issues, representatives from Buffeljagsbaai began attending workshops, street marches and also assuming leadership positions within Coastal Links, and later, on the Masifundise Board. Despite these positive developments, there is no doubt that the community at Buffeljagsbaai is under threat. In 2004, it experienced a 'mini tsunami' with the waters reaching and flooding their homes, and, in some cases, sending furniture adrift. The next year, 2005, saw the same thing happening again. Other changes are also visible. For example, the fishers are observing foreign species in their waters. Worse still, Eskom, the electricity supply agency, and the South African government have earmarked Bantamsklip on the Overberg coastline in the Western Cape as the site for

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Rosie Shoshola points out that women are becoming more aware of the need to unite and fight for change, with many becoming active members of Coastal Links

a nuclear power station. Fishers fear that a nuclear power plant at a site merely three kilometres from Buffeljagsbaai will have an incalculably negative impact on the coastal communities in the Overberg region.

But despite the challenges, the women in Buffeljagsbaai are in no mood to give up. Sarah Niemand, the current Coastal Links community leader, is determined that Buffeljagsbaai be recognized as a place where traditional fishers live. Nominated in 2010 as Overstrand Women of the Year, Sarah played a vital role in lobbying to ensure that the Buffeljagsbaai fishers were included in the Equality Court ruling in 2007, which recognizes the rights of small-scale fishers in South Africa. Today, there are about 1,500 beneficiaries of the subsequent Interim Relief measure. To ensure that more members of the community are able to earn a decent living, the women have also started a Coastal Links Women's Group. With help from the Overberg Health Department, they were able to source training in fabric painting, mosaics and a range of other crafts. Some of their products are sold at the Beach House in Hermanus, a very popular tourist destination, and at various local markets. The group also purchases permits to harvest *alikeukels* (giant periwinkles). When weather conditions makes it impossible to go to sea, the women collect and pickle, curry or grind these large sea snail-like creatures to make *alikeukel frikkadels* (fish cakes), which they serve on home-made rolls to tourists. The income from this trade has sustained many families during difficult times.

Another small fishing community about 260 kilometres north of Cape Town is Lamberts Bay. Lamberts Bay was once well known for its fresh marine products. It is referred to as the "Mecca of West Coast Rock lobster" (West Coast crayfish). The first crayfish factory was started here more than a hundred years ago by a Mr Lindström in 1918, a time in history when Lamberts Bay was strictly a fishing community of about 7000 fishers, with its own church by the sea. But when the Group Areas Act, an apartheid law, came into effect in the late 1950s, all non-whites were forcibly removed from their coastal homes and forced to settle further inland. This, together with the closure of the fishing factory in 1966, deeply unsettled the Lamberts Bay fishing community, leaving families destitute. In the words of one fisher: "Part of the character of the town died when the fish factory closed down. We, the locals, were used to the smell

of the fish, especially in the factory where certain line fish species were processed into fishmeal. We referred to the smell of the fish as the smell of our money." Today Lamberts Bay has become a tourist holiday destination; its fishing factory is now a potato factory. It is also known worldwide for Bird Island, connected to the mainland by a manmade wall, where sea birds, in particular the Cape Gannet, breed, and seals abound.

However, Lamberts Bay still has more than 300 people trying to make a living from the sea. Prominent among them is Rosie Shoshola. Fishing since she was a young woman, Rosie was born in Lamberts Bay and is one of the few women in the area to own a boat. Most fishers in Lamberts Bay work on small dinghies close to the shore or in the near-shore and use traditional fishing methods, such as hand lines for fish and ring nets for crayfish. Today, however, Lamberts Bay's fishing community faces many threats. Unemployment used to be this community's biggest problem but now even those who have legal access to the sea feel that they are unemployed because their access to the sea is greatly restricted by environmental changes. In discussions about the rapid changes taking place, Rosie expresses deep worry about the decrease in 'sea days'. She describes how unexpected storms are claiming the lives of fishers. But most stirring is her account of how these changes affect her spiritually. Rosie has a deep love for the sea; a spiritual connection with it—the sea, she feels, takes her mind away from worry and anxiety, connects her to her Creator and sets her spirit free. While in recent times, many fishers have looked at alternative livelihoods, pooling their money to trade in potatoes or living off government grants and odd jobs, Rosie is still to find an alternative for her aching soul.

Sarah and Rosie, like many others, fear that soon the sea will no longer be able to provide for them as it did before. They fear that this will ultimately force them to move out and find new ways of living. They are not sure if the aged in their communities will survive the pain of being uprooted and displaced from their rich tradition. They are concerned about the high school drop-out rate—in some communities, children as young as 11 and 12 are leaving school. They claim that hunger is causing the children to become criminals. They also fear that over-fishing by big companies will deplete fish completely.

The women of the fishing communities believe that with a good understanding of the environment and with data which they have collected themselves, fishers would be in a better position to engage with scientists and other experts.

Yet they have not given up hope. Like the other women of their communities, Sarah and Rosie too believe that with a good understanding of the environment and with data which they have collected themselves, fishers would be in a better position to engage with scientists and other experts. Rising water levels, changes in water temperature, increasingly rough seas, the entry of foreign species, fewer sea days and so on—although these changes are depleting fishing livelihoods and wellbeing, Sarah and Rosie are hopeful

that the new small-scale fishery policy will take into account these climate change-related effects and introduce flexibility in terms of fishing times and what species can be harvested.

There is no doubt that the fishers of Buffeljagsbaai and Lamberts Bay will have to adapt to the rapid changes overtaking their lives. And, there is no doubt also that when the changes go against them, the community, as in the past, will once again lean heavily on women like Sarah and Rosie. ❏