

PLAAS POLICY BRIEF 57: SINK OR SWIM? HOW COVID-19 AND THE RESPONSES TO IT HAVE AFFECTED SMALL-SCALE FISHERS

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AFRICAN
FOOD SYSTEMS

POLICY BRIEF

Sink or swim?

How Covid-19 and the responses to it have affected small-scale fishers

This policy brief reports findings from research investigating the impacts of Covid-19 regulations and mitigation measures on small-scale fishers in the Western Cape, South Africa. The researchers conducted 47 in-depth interviews, held 5 focus groups, facilitated the production of 14 food diaries in 4 primary field sites of Struisbaai, Langebaan, Veldrift and Lambert's Bay.

Key messages

- Small-scale fishers in South Africa are a marginalised, vulnerable group. In this context, the impacts of the Covid-19 outbreak and the lockdown regulations issued by the government in response to it have highlighted the lack of resilience among small-scale producers and traders within the national food system in South Africa, including in times of crisis. Under the pandemic, small-scale fishers have struggled due to a major loss of markets, falling incomes and mounting socio-economic insecurity.
- The dominance of long supply chains in the fishing sector as well as dependence on exports and the hospitality sector as a major buyer of catches have deprived local communities of an important source of nutrition just when they needed this most. Locally caught yellowtail was sold elsewhere and fishing communities were increasingly forced to eat cheap, processed food.
- Despite being recognised as 'essential service providers' under the pandemic, travel and accommodation bans prevented small-scale fishers from making a living. In this regard, the regulations and exemptions produced by the government failed to consider the complex nature of the national food system.
- Although the government supported small-scale farmers in the form of vouchers for inputs, subsidies and grants under Covid-19, it provided no such relief to small-scale fishers.
- In general, national decision-making around the policies and regulations that should be adopted in relation to fishing and the implementation of these measures was undertaken in silos without engaging the small-scale fishers whose interests were at stake.
- The practice of processing snoek (smoking, drying, etc.) is declining in fishing communities on the West Coast, undermining the status and role of local women who previously made a living this way.
- A general lack of cold chain storage and processing facilities is preventing local fishing communities from adding value to their catches and depriving them of revenues.
- The measures adopted by the government in response to the pandemic have indicated little care for the contributions made by small-scale fishers to socio-economic development and a clear bias in favour of industrial fisheries in South Africa.



Although officially recognised as 'essential service providers' these small-scale fishers were prevented from plying their trade by limits on the number of passengers allowed to ride in each vehicle, which made travel unaffordable, and accommodation restrictions which prevented them from staying at distant fishing sites.

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Context

Small-scale fishing is an extremely important source of livelihoods in rural coastal communities in South Africa, promoting development and playing a significant role in ensuring food and nutrition security at the local level. However, the interests of small-scale fishers and their communities have long been undermined and marginalised by the state. At present, small-scale fishers in the Western Cape are in a precarious position as they await the implementation of the Small-scale Fisheries Policy of 2012 by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE). An audit of the department's first attempt to implement this policy, in 2019, found that the process had been wholly inadequate and riddled with corruption. Under present renewed efforts to implement the policy, small-scale fishers have been told that they should apply for recognition all over again and must, in the meantime, obtain Interim Relief permits to continue their operations while they await the outcomes of these applications.

In this context, the lockdown rules and restrictions introduced by the government from March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated the precarious nature of small-scale fishers' livelihoods and also highlighted the flaws in the system of governance for the fishing sector. In particular, the support offered to small-scale fishers by the government – that is, the distribution of 10,000 food parcels in early and mid-May 2020 – has been quite insufficient.



The Research

From the start of the Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, the research team led by PLAAS, which comprises academic researchers and civil-society activists, remained in regular contact with small-scale fishing communities, documenting the impacts of the pandemic and the government regulations which were issued in response. For a year from October 2020, the team undertook research at several field sites – interviewing people, maintaining food diaries and hosting social dialogues – while also monitoring national and global trends in the fishing sector. As well as generating general findings and a number of key policy recommendations, the research produced a number of in-depth case studies.

The case of Struisbaai

Many of the small-scale fishers who operate in Struisbaai sell their fish through a digital platform, Abalobi Marketplace, which connects small-scale fishers with buyers for their catches. Prior to lockdown, Abalobi Marketplace used to supply restaurants and furnish the stock for door-to-door sales in Cape Town. However, under a hard lockdown imposed by the government in March and April 2020, restaurants were forced to close. In addition, a wide-reaching export ban was instituted which banned trade in high-value species of fish and seafood. An immediate result was an oversupply of fish caused by falling demand. In response, Abalobi connected small-scale fishers with Grey's Marine fishing company, which led to highly nutritional fish, which may otherwise have gone to feed the local community, being channeled into the formal, industrial sector which already dominates the market in South Africa.

Factors inhibiting small-scale fishers

John Grandfield, a small-scale fisher from Struisbaai, travels to Lambert's Bay or one of the other towns on the West Coast each year to take part in the snoek run. However, from March 2020, fishers such as John Grandfield suddenly found themselves unable to make a living from this annual event. Although officially recognised as 'essential service providers' these small-scale fishers were prevented from plying their trade by limits on the number of passengers allowed to ride in each vehicle, which made travel unaffordable, and accommodation restrictions which prevented them from staying at distant fishing sites. As a result, John Grandfield, who usually remits significant earnings from the weeks-long snoek run to his family on the South Coast, was unable to make the annual trip in 2020.

Where the formal and informal meet

Jacobus Gertse is a fish trader or marketer in Struisbaai. He sells and trades fish through local informal markets and also supplies commercial companies, industrial fisheries and exporters. Jacobus does not work on contract, but sells his fish to the highest bidder. Under Covid-19, as the export market closed, he was forced to adapt and began searching for alternative local markets. However, these markets could only offer low prices, which undermined his business model and his household's financial stability. The case indicates why the export market is often favoured over the local market, even in times of crisis.

A West Coast case

On the West Coast, small-scale fishers catch a multitude of species between April and June each year, including snoek. However, in 2020, the snoek run took place during a government-imposed hard lockdown and the demand for the fish crashed. In response, the government encouraged small-scale fishers on the West Coast to sell their fish to industrial fishing companies, who are vertically integrated systems their processing, marketing, and distributing fish to the domestic and international markets. Small-scale fishers, who lack the cold storage facilities to keep their catches until they are offered a good price, were forced to sell their fish as soon as they were landed, regardless of price. This case indicates the relationship of dependence between the informal and formal markets in South Africa and the economic dominance of the industrial sector.

Small-scale fish processors on the West Coast

Rosie Shoshola, who runs a small fish cleaning and processing business in Lambert's Bay, makes most of her annual earnings during the snoek season. The price of her snoek remained constant throughout the hard lockdown, but demand dropped greatly, particularly as the tourist market in usually bustling Lambert's Bay fell away. Rosie was also forced to lay off members of her eight-strong crew of processors due to restrictions which limited the number of people allowed at each processing station on the harbour to five. Meanwhile, those who kept their jobs earned less as profits fell. Rosie herself was unable to save anything in the 2020 snoek season, as she usually would, damaging the financial viability of her household.

Findings

The research shows that decisions taken by the South African government in response to the pandemic have negatively affected small-scale fishing communities. The Covid-19 crisis has also exposed the lack of resilience in this part of the food system. The loss of the key export and local restaurant markets undercut demand for fish, resulting in oversupply and a sharp drop in prices. The sector was unable to withstand the shock to the system, with particularly severe implications for small-scale primary producers.

Although fishing was recognised as an essential service on 26 March 2020, small-scale fishers were prevented from making a living in a number of ways. Restrictions on movement across provincial borders prevented fishers from travelling to more distant fishing grounds and taking their catches to market. Restrictions on accommodation prevented fishers from staying overnight near distant fishing grounds, which had the effect of forcing them to travel more often and with fewer passengers – thus increasing the cost and time of travel.

The export ban deprived fishers on the West Coast of a crucial market for their most valuable species and, thus, a large proportion of their annual incomes. At the same time, there appeared to be no contingency plan in place for small-scale fishers in case of crisis; and the government failed to implement effective measures to protect their needs and interests.

Due to the export ban and the loss of the local restaurant market, fishers were forced to seek new markets. In this quest, the informal sector, which consists of small-scale food producers, processors and traders who make a living outside formally recognised commercial market chains, increasingly came to depend on buyers in the formal sector, which consists of big fishing companies and supermarket chains. They often had little choice but to sell their excess fish to these buyers, even if the prices on offer were low. At the same time, in a number of areas such as Struisbaai, there was an apparent increase in the number of small-scale buyers, many of whom came from inland areas to purchase small amounts of fish for relatively low prices.

In relation to the social reproductive role of women, school closures under lockdown and a concomitant loss of school nutrition schemes led to children spending more time and consuming more food at home. This created an additional burden for women as the caregivers in the household. Meanwhile, despite the implementation of a special Covid-19 relief grant of R350 a month, small-scale fishing families struggled to meet their food security needs.

The decision of the DFFE only to provide one round of food parcels to registered small-scale fishers created conflict in communities, with many unregistered people receiving no benefit as a result of the rules. The gift and the partial way in which it was distributed highlighted the inequalities and injustices in the system of governance for this sector. Local municipalities also failed to provide sufficient food and other aid to fishing communities in difficulty.

The nature of the decisions and actions taken by the state under Covid-19 indicated the extent to which the government favours the formal food system and large industrial concerns. Support for the informal fishing sector was virtually non-existent; and even official mitigation efforts indicated the government's bias towards the big producers and retailers – for example, the state-donated food parcels consisted primarily of highly processed commercial food products.

The idea of a “food commons” within communities can be a quite romanticised notion. However, it is notable that, in response to the pandemic and the associated food shortages and income losses, some food commons did emerge in communities. In Langebaan, for example, nearby farmers delivered loads of oranges and other citrus fruit to be distributed in the community. In addition, a number of wealthier, white areas of the community came together to distribute food parcels and other supplies to the poorer areas.

Way Forward

Recognition: In order to build a more equitable and resilient small-scale fisheries sector in South Africa, it is important to recognise the crucial role played by the sector in providing local food and nutrition security.

Localisation: A more localised food system should be supported and prioritised, with the assistance of the state, the Western Cape provincial government and local municipalities.

Women-centered: Women's position as important food system actors must be supported, which means promoting trade and local processing rather than the sale of fish to industrial processors.

Value-adding: This requires the development of cold storage infrastructure and processing facilities. For example:

- There is a cold storage container that remains locked and lies in disrepair at Struisbaai harbour. This could be redeveloped and enhanced for the benefit of small-scale fishers.
- Fishers at Lambert's Bay have mounted a campaign which argues that all fish purchased at the harbour should be cleaned and flecked by members of the local community, creating jobs and providing an opportunity for value-adding activity. If the fish is purchased without the benefits of this value-added service an additional charge would be incurred which would boost the community coffers.

Recognition and equity: The Small-scale Fisheries Policy of 2012 produced by the DFFE needs to be implemented in an equitable and just way, recognising *bona fide* small-scale fishers in the Western Cape.

Cooperatives: The development of cooperatives under the 2012 policy should be supported through adequate training and mentorships. The effective establishment of such bodies would help to improve the resilience of small-scale fishing communities and value chains in times of crisis. In addition, the basket of species allocated to the small-scale fishers in their fishing quotas must be sustainable and sufficiently commercially viable to foster economic growth and job creation at the local level.

Recommendations

Local municipalities must **make land and infrastructure available** to support fishers in their efforts to sell fresh fish and fish products directly to local tourists.

Local provincial and national state institutions must **procure food from small-scale fishers**, entering into agreements to supply local feeding schemes at schools, clinics and homes with the key species caught by small-scale fishers, including snoek, yellowtail, harders and Cape bream.

The national Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment should prioritise and support the small-scale fisheries sector by:

1. **Providing infrastructure** such as cold storage and processing facilities at harbours so that fishers can create and benefit from value-adding opportunities.
2. **Prioritising women** as owners and users of facilities and equipment for processing.
3. **Implementing the Small-scale Fisheries Policy of 2012** in an inclusive and transparent manner so that the sector can develop and succeed.
4. **Creating cooperatives** under the policy with adequate training and mentorships to ensure their success.
5. **Supporting small-scale fishers** to obtain insurance and social security for themselves and their cooperatives.
6. **Distributing fishing quotas** on a preferential basis to small-scale fishers whose livelihoods depend on marine resources. In this regard, the bias towards the commercial and industrial fisheries sector needs to end.
7. **Allocating a realistic basket** of species to small-scale fishers in their fishing quotas. These should include commercially viable species and species which can readily be caught using the gear and boats to which small-scale fishers have access.
8. **Creating locally based digital platforms** to stimulate local markets through which small-scale fishers can sell directly to consumers.

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Agrarian Politics podcast, Episode 9: Women, fish and Covid impacts on African food systems <https://www.plaas.org.za/women-fish-and-covid-impacts-on-african-food-systems/>

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About this research

This policy brief is an output of a three-country study in Ghana, Tanzania and South Africa on 'The impacts of Covid-19 responses on the political economy of African food systems'. To learn more about this project, visit its page here: <https://www.plaas.org.za/african-food-systems-and-covid-19/>

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