**Fisher People in South Africa seek justice at People’s Tribunal**

The Fisher People Tribunal took place from 12-14 August 2024 in Cape Town. Hosted by [Masifundise](https://www.masifundise.org/) and [Coastal Links](https://www.masifundise.org/coastal-links/), this event marked the first People's Tribunal in South Africa focused on fisherfolks and their communities.

The Tribunal gathered fisher representatives from 5 provinces, academic and civil society experts, allies and activists to address the urgent issues facing coastal and inland fishing communities. Although relevant government and conservation actors were invited to respond to the accusations against them, they did not attend.

Over the three days, fisher representatives documented and exposed instances of ocean and land grabbing and violations of fishing communities' rights. The six cases presented to a jury of experts highlighted critical issues through charge sheets, testimonies from fishers, Q&A sessions and additional inputs from the fishers.

On the first day, fisher representatives from the four coastal provinces testified in the case titled "The Broken Promises of the Small-Scale Fisheries Policy." They shared first-hand accounts of how the SSF Policy implementation has significantly diverged from its original objectives. The State was criticised for failing to respect, protect and promote the rights of fishers, particularly in implementing the Policy. Key issues raised included inadequate species allocation, lack of community consultation, violations of equality rights through a flawed verification process and the neglect of gender equality, especially in supporting women fishers. These shortcomings have had serious implications for the food security, cultural right, and livelihoods of SSF communities.

On the second day, the Tribunal heard three cases. The first addressed inland fisheries, focusing on the lack of recognition and access to resources at Gariep Dam due to nature reserves and private land ownership. The next two cases featured testimonies on conservation practices in iSimangaliso that led to human rights violations against fishers and the erosion of customary fishing rights in Dwesa-Cwebe, resulting in violence and harassment.

Zandile Mkhwanazi, a fisherwoman from Mtubatuba, KwaZulu-Natal, shared her experience of harassment by conservation authorities in iSimangaliso, "We get arrested when we go to cut Incema (grass). We’re forced to go at night to avoid being caught, but it's dangerous because of the animals."

In Dwesa-Cwebe, harrowing accounts were heard from fishers shot at by rangers despite their recognised customary fishing rights. Thobile Mpunzi, now wheelchair-bound after being shot, recounted, "We were about to go into the ocean when I heard gunshots and realised I had been shot. I asked the ranger why he shot without knowing who we were."

On the final day, the Tribunal addressed the final cases, the "West Coast of Extraction" which highlighted how the entire West Coast of South Africa is being allocated for mining oil, gas and green hydrogen activities, displacing fishers and "Women in Small-Scale Fisheries in Times of Climate Emergency," which examined the devastating impact of the April 2022 floods in KwaZulu-Natal on women reliant on mussel harvesting. This case emphasised the urgent need for policies addressing climate change, gender inequality and economic vulnerability.

After closing statements from the jury and reflections from the participants, the Tribunal successfully concluded. The jury will deliver a verdict, which will be presented at the Fisher People Conference in October this year. In the conference, fisher movement and its allies will be discussing strategic goals and priorities for the future, to advance food sovereignty and climate justice in the context of fishing communities.