



Strategies for addressing conflicts arising from blue growth initiatives: insights from three case studies in South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa has vigorously embraced the concept of the ‘blue economy’ and is aggressively pursuing a blue growth strategy to expand the ocean economy, create jobs, and alleviate poverty. However, many of these ‘blue initiatives’ are leading to conflicts amongst various stakeholders with different histories, relationships with resources and areas, worldviews, and values. Investment in the ocean economy is being prioritized by government and planning, environmental assessment, and decision-making processes are being fast-tracked. Consequently, historical inequities as well as environmental and social justice considerations are not being given due consideration. Communities are not being effectively consulted. This has resulted in tensions and conflicts amongst proponents of these projects and local communities living in areas affected by these initiatives. We examine the drivers of conflict and then explore the strategies that local communities and their social partners have employed in these case studies to challenge contentious developments, defend coastal and marine areas, and make their voices heard. The cases involve conflicts over air quality in an expanding marine industrial zone at Saldanha Bay, prospecting and mining applications in the vicinity of the Olifants Estuary in the Western Cape, and the expansion of the Richard’s Bay Port, mining activities, and conservation initiatives in KwaZulu-Natal. The barriers and potential opportunities to opening up deliberative spaces, shifting values and views, and co-producing knowledge, in contexts that are characterised by structural inequality, poverty, and power asymmetries, are discussed.

Keywords Blue economy · Blue growth · Conflicts · Coastal communities · South Africa · Strategies

Introduction

The concept of the ‘blue economy’ has been enthusiastically embraced by politicians and pro-growth proponents. The concept of ‘blue economy’ or ‘blue growth’ has been associated with the notion of sustainable development which promotes the idea of balancing social, economic, and ecological goals in development (Eikeset et al. 2018). The Third International Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (Rio +20) acknowledged the potential of oceans to contribute to national economies and revitalise coastal economies and proposed some form of international co-operation around blue economy strategies (Senaratne and Zimbhoff 2019). Amongst the prominent narratives underpinning support for blue growth strategies include ‘opportunities for

growth, development and job creation’, ‘social equity’, and ‘protection of threatened and vulnerable species’. As such, blue growth narratives and strategies are said to promote ‘triple-benefit’ solutions or ‘triple bottom line’ objectives that tackle economic development, environmental sustainability, and social equity/justice, where everyone (i.e. coastal communities, the environment, and the economy) is meant to win (Voyer et al. 2018).

However, despite enthusiastic adoption of the blue economy by various stakeholders and politicians in many countries, the concept, narratives, and vision remain ill-defined and contested (Silver et al. 2015; Eikeset et al. 2018; Voyer et al. 2018). In addition, while the notion of ‘triple-benefit’ goals of blue economy strategies is enticing, implementation of these blue growth initiatives has led to environmental and social injustices, tensions, and conflict amongst different actors and sectors (Fisher et al. 2018; Tafon 2019; Bennett et al. 2019; Österblom et al. 2020). This is not surprising since governance of these marine resources and spaces usually involves a constellation of actors and sectors with

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competing and conflicting interests, claims, values, and worldviews and unequal power relations amongst actors (Chuenpagdee and Jentoft 2009; Voyer and van Leeuwen 2019; Bennett et al. 2019). Poor and marginalised communities are usually left out of the planning and decision-making process or when included have limited voice and no power to influence decisions (Bond 2019; Bennett et al., 2019).

There is an increasing literature critiquing the blue economy concept, narratives, and strategies at the global scale (Eikeset et al. 2018; Adjei and Overå 2019; Bennett et al. 2019; Cohen et al. 2019; Österblom et al. 2020; Ertör and Hadjimichael 2020). Various scholars argue that these accelerated blue growth plans and strategies, embedded within current neo-liberal economic paradigms and power asymmetries, do not promote fair and equitable outcomes, nor do they produce sustainable jobs and deliver local benefits (Silver et al. 2015; Österblom et al. 2020; Ertör and Hadjimichael 2020). In fact, there is increasing evidence that these initiatives often exacerbate economic inequality and loss of access to resources and lead to displacement of communities and cultural impacts as well as environmental damage and biodiversity loss (Bennett et al. 2019; Bennett et al. 2021; Bond 2019; Cohen et al. 2019; Tafon 2019). Furthermore, those with financial means to invest in blue economy initiatives tend to be influential and well-resourced actors, mainly driven by economic interests (Cohen et al. 2019). As ocean territories and resources have been allocated and reallocated to private investors, the rights of local resource users to access and control the ocean space, resources, and coastal land have been undermined (Barbesgaard 2018; Childs and Hicks 2019; Jentoft et al. 2022; Bennett et al. 2019 and Bennett et al. 2021). This has been termed ocean, coastal, and/or blue grabbing (Bennett et al. 2015; Bavinck et al. 2017; Barbesgaard 2018) and refers to the commodification and privatization of ocean spaces and common pool resources. These government-supported ‘blue growth’ initiatives often negatively impact poor coastal communities and deprive groups such as small-scale fishers and farmers of their rights to resources and fair share of ocean benefits (Adjei and Overå 2019; Bennett et al. 2015; Cohen et al. 2019; Österblom et al. 2020; Bennett et al. 2021). These inequities together with the general exclusion of local communities in planning and decision-making processes regarding the allocation of ocean resources and spaces have led to rising tensions, conflicts, and even violence (Bavinck et al. 2014; Tafon et al. 2022).

This paper examines the conflicts arising from the implementation of blue economy initiatives, using three case study examples from the coast of South Africa. The cases involve conflicts over air quality in an expanding marine industrial zone in Saldanha Bay, conflicts linked to prospecting and mining applications on land near traditional fishing grounds, and conflicts arising from coastal communities

being ‘squeezed out’ by expansion of the Richards Bay Port, mining expansion, and conservation initiatives. The paper explores the strategies that local communities and actors employ to challenge blue growth proposals, plans, and decisions that threaten their environments, livelihoods, and culture. The barriers and potential opportunities to open up deliberative spaces, shift values and views, and co-produce knowledge, in contexts that are characterised by structural inequality, poverty, and power asymmetries, are discussed.

Methods informing the study

The data that informed this paper has been gathered by the authors who are all involved in research on various aspects of the blue economy in each of the case study sites (see Fig. 1). In the case of the Olifants Estuary and Saldanha Bay, the researchers have been involved in research and providing technical support to the communities for several years and thus, long-standing relationships exist with community members and some of the organisations and stakeholders concerned with blue economy projects and plans in the area. While research has been conducted on community access and benefit sharing in relation to mining in the Richards Bay Area (Mbatha and Wynberg 2014), research with the Dube community has only commenced in the past 4 years.

In the case of the Olifants Estuary case study, data was gathered from participation in six community meetings conducted over the 5-year period 2018–2022 and attendance at the Olifants Estuary Management Forum (OEMF) meetings usually held four times per year¹ where stakeholders discuss issues related to management of the estuary and surrounding environment including mining applications and operations. In cases where the researcher could not be present at the OEMF meetings, minutes of the meeting were reviewed. In addition, individual meetings were held with community members during this 5-year period to discuss responses to mining applications in the vicinity of the estuary. Informal discussions were also held with local fishers from the Ebenhaeser, Papendorp, and Doring Bay communities in relation to their views on the mining proposals and plans for the area.

In the case of Saldanha Bay, data was collected as part of several engagements with stakeholders involved in the GCRF Mine Dust and Health Network (www.minedust.org, EP/T003588/1) from 2018 to 2023. These included 5 discussion sessions with all stakeholders, as well as individual ad hoc meetings with various community representatives and community members. In addition, two focus groups were organised with vulnerable groups from low-income

¹ During the COVID-19 restrictions, only 1 meeting was held in 2020 and 2 meetings were held in 2021.

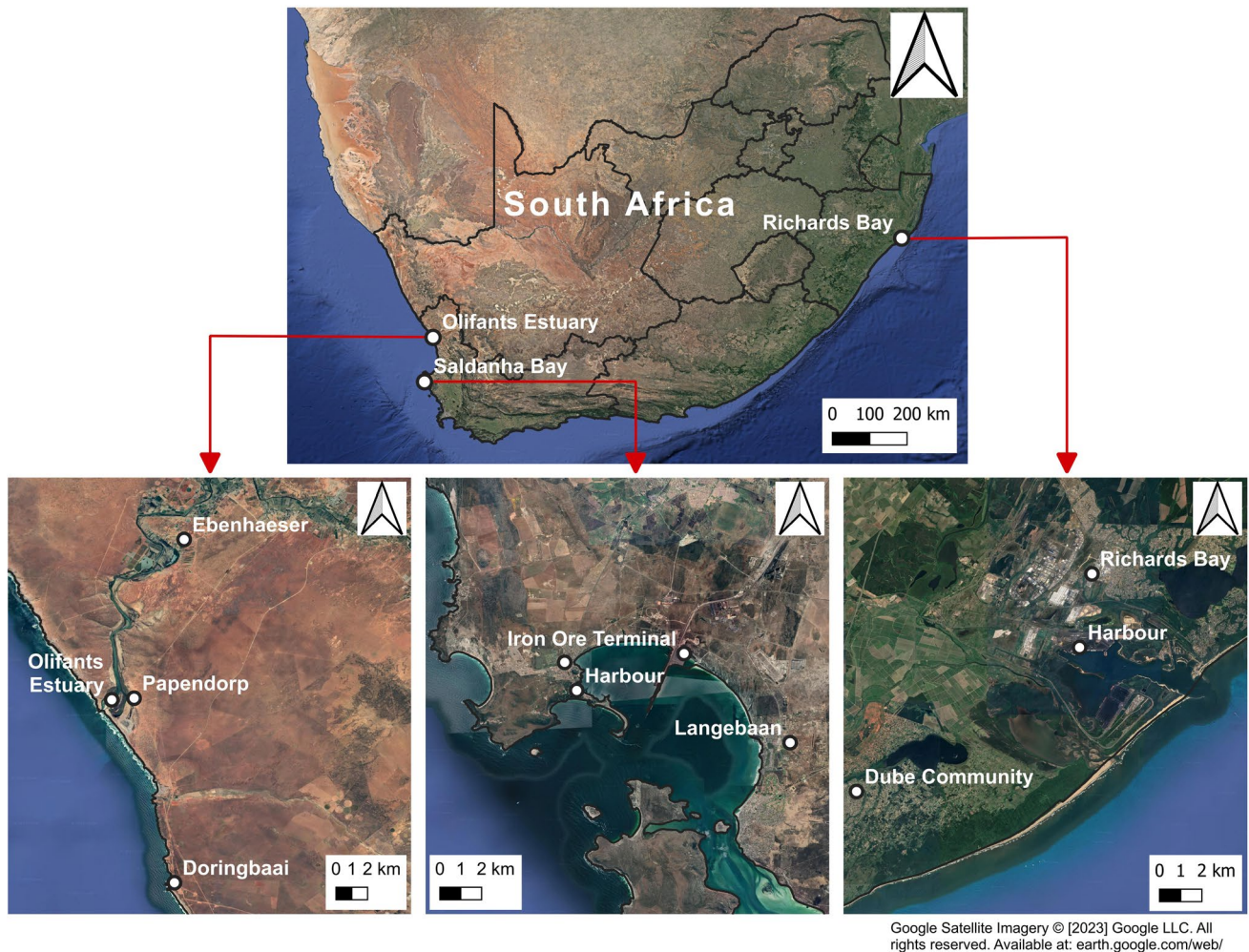


Fig. 1 Location of case study sites

communities, including unemployed youth, who were identified as being missing from the previous events. Several hundred people have taken part in the engagements and interviews over the last 5 years.

Research on the impacts of blue economy activities within coastal communities around Richards Bay has been ongoing for over a decade (Mbatha and Wynberg 2014). The data collection process for this study focused on the Dube community located within the wider Richards Bay area. This research was initiated through long-standing relationships with small-scale fishers and other local stakeholders who have been affected by blue economy activities, including mining, for a long period of time. Building on these existing relationships was important for establishing trust between researchers and community members since coastal-related conflicts are extremely politically charged in this area. Pilot visits were conducted in 2021 before fieldwork commenced in order to introduce the research project to local communities and to gain support for the study from relevant local

leaders. Researchers also engaged with non-governmental organisations operating in the area, as well as private sector organisations during the pilot phase. Data that informed this study was largely drawn from semi-structured interviews with local knowledge holders and workshop attendance, as well as key informant interviews with local non-governmental organisations and stakeholders involved in blue economy activities, i.e. mining and port development.

Transforming ocean conflicts—rhetoric and reality

Ongoing debates in the natural resource governance literature suggest that both scarcity and an abundance of natural resources can catalyse or fuel conflict (Mildner et al. 2011; Fisher et al. 2018). Various scholars have offered an analysis of how an abundance of resources, especially where extractive resources are concerned, perpetuates the current

economic paradigm and power structures and leads to conflict (Le Billon 2001; Mildner et al. 2011; Fisher et al. 2018). In such contexts, powerful economic players including foreign investors, supported by national government, drive the narrative and processes and local communities are often not consulted and bear the burden of environmental and social harm resulting from these projects (Masie and Bond 2018; Bennett et al. 2019; Tafon 2019;). Consequently, tensions and conflicts amongst proponents of these extractive industries and those living adjacent to marine environments and reliant on ocean resources for food and livelihoods have arisen (Masie and Bond 2018; Tafon 2019). However, these conflicts are taking place in a variety of different contexts and at various scales and are made more complex by a host of historical, socio-economic, political, and increasingly environmental change factors (Fisher et al. 2018; Tafon et al. 2022). There is thus an increasing consensus amongst scholars that conflict is multi-faceted, multi-causal, and multi-level and involves multiple actors (Bavinck et al. 2014; Tafon et al. 2022).

Several large collaborative interdisciplinary projects on conflict have documented key insights and lessons learned regarding root causes and drivers of conflict and contextual factors that exacerbate or reduce conflict as well as governance processes that enable a shift from conflict to co-operation (Bavinck et al. 2014; Berry et al. 2018). Another key focus has been on how to transform conflicts and build resilience (Ratner et al. 2013; Fisher et al. 2018; Matin et al. 2018; Tafon et al. 2022). A common theme throughout much of the resource conflict literature is the need for appropriate and effective governance approaches, in particular inclusionary and democratic processes, that are mindful of power imbalances and provide an enabling environment for interested and affected parties to interact and deliberate on contentious issues (Scholtens and Bavinck 2018; Flannery et al. 2018; Kelly et al. 2019). However, there is an emerging realisation that conventional conflict resolution approaches and techniques will not resolve deep-rooted conflicts which are characterised by structural inequalities, inequities, and injustices and are usually hidden (Tafon et al. 2022). A current collaborative research project, OCEANSPACT², seeks to understand and transform ocean conflicts by adopting a more radical approach of agonistic knowledge co-production and conflict transformation into ‘constructively co-produced’ and ‘institutionalizable’ yet contestable and provisional knowledge-action (Tafon et al. 2022). In their framework, assessing root causes, promoting meaningful knowledge co-production amongst actors, and governance

approaches that support both top-level and local contributions are seen as key actions to transforming conflicts and moving towards sustainability (Tafon et al. 2022).

While the promotion of meaningful co-production of knowledge through ‘iterative collaborative processes has the potential to create an environment for transforming interactions amongst conflicting groups and fostering respect for different knowledge sources and values, getting ‘everyone to the table’ and having diverse voices heard may not be feasible in contexts where historical injustices have not been addressed, marginalisation of poor communities persists, and power differentials between actors remains skewed in favour of privileged actors. This paper examines the realities and responses of coastal communities confronted by a rapidly expanding blue growth agenda in three cases in South Africa and explores the strategies they adopt to counter and challenge processes and decisions that disregard their rights and potentially undermine their livelihoods and way of life.

South Africa’s blue economy initiative—an increasing site of conflict

According to protagonists of South Africa’s blue economy agenda, its 3500-km coastline and resource rich waters have the potential to create thousands of jobs and boost the country’s economy (Potgieter 2021). The country’s oceans are said to have the potential to generate as much as R177 billion towards the gross domestic product (GDP) and provide up to a million employment opportunities although this claim is being increasingly questioned (Potgieter 2018; Masie and Bond 2018; Bond 2019). In 2014, the South African government introduced Operation Phakisa as the country’s blue economy strategy aimed at increasing employment opportunities, promoting social equity, and alleviating poverty by 2033 (Findlay 2018). Derived from the local language Sesotho, ‘Phakisa’ translates into ‘hurry up’ in English and highlights the urgency for delivery of fast results to grow the economy, create jobs, and alleviate poverty. Inspired by Malaysia’s ‘big fast methodology’, Operation Phakisa is an expansive multi-sectoral program involving marine transport and manufacturing, coastal and marine tourism, offshore oil and gas, construction, and aquaculture to marine spatial planning. While coastal marine mining is not explicitly included in Operation Phakisa and the more recent Ocean Economy Master Plan (DFFE 2022), the rapid increase in prospecting and mining applications and operations in the marine environment qualifies as a blue growth sector in every respect and has been included in our analysis.

² For further information on the OCEANSPACT project, see <https://oceanspact.eu/index.php/partners/sodertorn-university>.

Increasingly, Operation Phakisa projects and the *modus operandi* regarding their approval and implementation are being severely criticised and challenged by communities, local residents, researchers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community-based organisations (CBOs) across South Africa. In particular, South Africa's rapid pursuit of economic growth and foreign direct investment are at odds with South Africa's international climate change commitments, social justice, and environmental sustainability imperatives that underpin South Africa's Constitution, as well as various environmental policies and laws (Bond 2019; Masie and Bond 2018; Potgieter 2018; Rogerson and Rogerson 2019; Isaacs 2019). Masie and Bond (2018:320) have criticised Operation Phakisa for adopting planning methodologies that are 'helter-skelter, non-consultative, elite, navel-gazing, and ultimately unrealistic... devoid of awareness of the capitalist crisis bearing down on South Africa's two oceans'. Other critiques highlight that the fast-track methodology underpinning Operation Phakisa has undermined the effectiveness of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), failed to incorporate the values and views of local communities, and centre social justice and equity considerations in decision-making (Satgar 2018; Sunde 2022).

Fishing communities are concerned about the rapid increase in mining due to their dependence on coastal and marine resources and their need to gain access to their fishing grounds. The recognition of the rights of small-scale fishers was only formalised in 2012 when a policy for small-scale fishers in South Africa was promulgated (Sowman and Sunde 2021). The allocation of rights to this sector of fishers has been slow due to various legal and other bureaucratic delays (Sowman and Sunde 2021), and by mid-2023, fishing rights had been allocated to fishers in three of the four coastal provinces although the outcome of the rights allocation process remains contested.

As the effects of South Africa's blue economy proposals and plans become more apparent, conflicts amongst different stakeholders have become more acute, as local communities become more aware of their rights and challenge government decisions. This paper explores the underlying causes of conflict, the actors involved, and the strategies adopted by local communities in response to blue economy proposals in three coastal sites in South Africa. In the following section, we provide an overview of three cases from South Africa where tensions and conflicts have arisen due to blue economy proposals and plans as well as the decision-making processes that have failed to address values, rights, and priorities of local communities. In each case, we outline the context, the drivers of conflict, and the main actors involved in addressing the conflict. Thereafter, we explore the strategies that different actors have employed to challenge the proposals and decisions that they regard as environmentally unsound and socially inequitable.

Case study findings

Mining in and around the Olifants Estuary, West Coast, South Africa

Case study context

The Olifants River Estuary is located on the west coast of South Africa approximately 350 km northwest of Cape Town (see Fig. 1). It is one of the largest estuaries in the country and comprises a unique and productive ecosystem and is considered an area of high conservation value (Turpie and Clark 2007). The people now residing in Ebenhaeser and Papendorp have a long history of fishing in the Olifants River (Sowman 2009). Today, approximately 120 fishing families rely on fishing for food and as a source of livelihoods (Williams 2013). This community was forcibly removed from their farmlands near the town of Lutzville in 1926, and due to poor soils and lack of water at the resettlement sites, many people became increasingly reliant on fishing as a main source of food and livelihoods (Sowman 2009). Fishers use simple row boats and gillnets to catch fish, mainly mullet (*Liza richardsonii*), commonly known as 'harders'. For many of the people of Ebenhaeser and Papendorp, fishing in the estuary is not only a source of food and livelihood but is integral to their lives, culture, and their identity (Sowman 2017).

Over the past 25 years, traditional small-scale fishers at the Olifants estuary have been facing threats from government scientists and conservationists to close the gillnet fishery. However, with support from researchers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (hereafter social partners), the community reached an agreement with government in 2013 to continue fishing in the estuary and to work with government and other stakeholders to declare a community conservation area. The process of demarcating and declaring this conservation area is still underway but has been delayed due to various administrative and legal barriers.

Since about 2014, mining for heavy mineral sands on coastal land and on beaches to the north of the Olifants estuary by an Australian mining company, Mineral Sands Resources (MSR) operated by Tormin in South Africa, has gained pace. A decision to allow an expansion of the current Tormin mine in 2018 led to an appeal to the Minister of Environmental Affairs. As the appeal was not upheld, an environmental NGO, Centre for Environmental Rights (CER), lodged an administrative appeal against the decision to approve the expansion of the Tormin Mine and a judicial review in the high court to set aside the Minister of Environment's refusal to uphold the appeal and grant environmental authorization. While these activities were taking place north of the Olifants estuary, fishers raised concern regarding the impacts of mining on beaches, on marine habitats, and fishery resources, as well as access to coastal areas.

A further prospecting application by MSR in April 2016, on land adjacent to the north bank of the Olifants Estuary, measuring approximately 40,000 ha in extent and bordering on the estuary for approximately 15 km upstream meant that MSR would potentially hold mining rights for nearly 80 km of coastline. In addition, a large area of this coastal land has been categorised as a critical biodiversity area (CBA). Despite appeals from NGOs, local communities, and researchers, the Minister of Environmental Affairs has supported the expansion of prospecting and mining along this coast and in the vicinity of the sensitive Olifants Estuary. These approvals by both Ministers of the Departments of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) and Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) have angered the fishers who are particularly concerned that prospecting and mining activities will affect their environment, local livelihoods, and plans for conservation.

Then, in May 2022, diamond mining activities commenced on a beach in the vicinity of Doringbaai, a coastal town south of the Olifants estuary, which is an important fishing and recreational area for fishers and local people living in Doringbaai and the Olifants River communities. They were aggrieved that they had not been consulted and were concerned about the impact of the beach and nearshore mining activities on the environment, their livelihoods, access to resources, and way of life. They expressed concern at community meetings and during informal discussions with one of the researchers that there had been no environmental impact assessment (EIA) process and that they had not been consulted before the decision was taken to reissue mining rights for a further 30 years. Other NGOs and researchers were equally concerned and began gathering information to challenge this decision. In November 2022, fishers from Doringbaai and the Olifants Estuary joined Protect the West Coast, a not-for-profit organisation, as co-applicants and lodged a semi-urgent interdict to stop mining at Doringbaai until the decision had been reviewed (PTWC and 4 others vs the Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy and 7 others 2022). This matter was due to be heard in the Cape High Court in August 2023, but an out-of-court agreement was reached just prior to the court hearing. The court order required that certain conservation-worthy areas, including a portion of the sensitive Olifants Estuary in the vicinity of the river mouth, would be protected from mining. The agreement also confirmed that an updated and amended Environmental Management Plan (EMPr) including a fishery specialist study would be conducted that addressed the interests of small-scale fishers in the area. The fishing communities and other stakeholders would also be given an opportunity to comment on the draft EMPr prior to finalisation.

Despite this court, the ongoing ad hoc approval of an increasing number of prospecting and mining applications along the west coast of South Africa has angered local

fishing communities who are of the opinion that their concerns are not being heard and their rights are being disrespected. The weak socio-economic circumstances of the Olifants River fisher communities, where poverty is deep and unemployment is high (Williams, 2013; Sowman 2017), mean that some residents are vulnerable to projects that promise jobs and improved socio-economic conditions regardless of environmental and social impacts. While a few community members do support mining, our research shows that an overwhelming number of fishers are against mining on the beaches and in the vicinity of the Olifants Estuary. There are thus some tensions between community members who support mining and those against mining.

Key actors and relationships amongst actors

The key actors involved in this mining conflict are the local fishing communities living at Ebenhaeser and Papendorp, who depend on the estuary for food and livelihoods and have a strong cultural connection to the estuary and coastal environment (Sowman 2021). They have been working collaboratively with researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT) for several years on different issues related to the fishery (Sowman 2009, 2017; Rice 2021), as well as with various NGOs including Masifundise Development Trust (MDT), Abalobi, the Legal Resources Centre, and more recently Protect the West Coast, and have built strong and trusting relationships with these social partners over an extended period of time. Then, there are various environmental departments at provincial level, namely Cape Nature and the Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning (DEADP) as well as the local environmental officer within the local municipality who have expressed concerns and written objections regarding the prospecting and mining applications. Local farmers and recreational users, although less organised and vocal, have also expressed concerns about mining in the vicinity of the Olifants Estuary at various community workshops and meetings with EIA consultants over the research period.

On the other hand, the mining companies as well as national government regard mining as an opportunity to improve the regional and local economy and provide jobs for rural communities and are supportive of expansion of mining in this region (DMRE 2022). These include the mining companies, certain departments in the local municipality, the national and provincial DMRE, and the Minister of Environmental Affairs. Local fishers and farmers are largely distrustful of government especially given the high levels of corruption that has been exposed over the past 10–15 years, often referred to as ‘state capture’ (Madonsela 2018; Chipkin et al. 2018) as well as the slow pace of socio-economic reform in rural areas.

Current status and strategies employed to challenge decisions

The conflict has largely been between the local fishing communities working with their social partners and the mining companies and their consultants who are supported by the DMRE and the Minister of Environmental Affairs. The conflict between these groups was evident at a public meeting in 2020 in Ebenhaeser, when fishers became angry with the environmental consultants and mining representatives and eventually stormed out of the meeting. Fishers with support from researchers and NGOs have written objections to DMRE and lodged appeals with the Minister of Environmental Affairs to these various prospecting and mining applications. One of the appeals for prospecting on the northern bank of the Olifants estuary was upheld and the Minister of Environmental Affairs required the applicants to do further studies and conduct meaningful public participation. Although the communities were dissatisfied with the quality of the additional reports and the participation process, the appeal delayed the decision, forced the consultants to recognise the community as a key stakeholder, and enabled the community to strategize on next steps. They have also voiced their concerns at various national fisher forums, on various social media platforms, at workshops, and conferences including at the 4th World Small-Scale Fisheries Congress, held in Cape Town in November 2022.

In the case of diamond mining on the beach near Doringbaai, fishers have sought legal advice and prepared affidavits and joined an NPO and PTWC, in their application for an interdict and review of the decision to renew mining rights for a further 30 years without environmental authorisation (Protect the West Coast (PTWC) and 4 others vs Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy (MRE) and 7 others 2022). However, there have also been some tensions within the communities as some members supported prospecting and mining due to its potential for job creation. However, as more information about the actual number of jobs and skills required for these jobs and the impacts of mining became known, communities have become more united in their opposition to mining.

Richards Bay case study

Case study context

Located on the Indian Ocean coast of South Africa, Richards Bay is one of the central business districts of the uMhlatuze Local Municipality in the KwaZulu-Natal province. The town and surrounds are zoned as an industrial area and are home to heavy-duty industries including (i) a mining company, Richards Bay Minerals (RBM) (a subsidiary of the Australian trans-national mining company Rio Tinto) which

is mining titanium off the coast of the Richards Bay area); (ii) Transnet (a parastatal managing the Richards Bay port/harbour); and (iii) Foskor (an industry responsible for producing phosphates and phosphoric acid). These industrial developments are taking place adjacent to marginalised rural coastal communities who have lived in the area and relied on the coastal and marine environment for generations.

Since 1976, the Richards Bay Estuary has become South Africa's largest cargo handling port and includes associated industrial facilities such as a coal multi-purpose terminal, as well as a small craft harbour. The bay continues to function as an estuary of high biodiversity value and has been described as a unique and productive ecosystem that supports complex food webs and functions, including vital spawning grounds for a diverse range of marine fish and estuarine organisms (Van Niekerk and Turpie 2012). Under Operation Phakisa expansion plans, developments including marine aquaculture development, a ship repair terminal, and a dry-docking facility—all within the geographical boundaries of the Richards Bay harbour—have been developed.

Over the past decade, the livelihoods and way of life of coastal communities in the Richards Bay area have faced uncertainty and insecurity due to the rapid industrial expansion as well as plans to expand the harbour and extend mining operations. The extension of mining operations south of Richards Bay is an issue of grave concern to the Dube community, who have relied on rich coastal and estuarine resources in the Richards Bay area for food and livelihoods for generations. Commercial agriculture, subsistence farming, some tourism, and small-scale fishing are key livelihood activities of this community. In the 1970s, a portion of the estuary was converted into a deep-water harbour, now the port, while the remaining estuarine area was left undeveloped. Although the Dube community has a long history of fishing in the estuary, on the lake and in coastal waters, since the establishment of the port, they are limited to fishing in the lake only, as access to their traditional fishing grounds has been restricted due to developments related to the port, increased fishery regulations, and coastal mining. The environmental authorization for these developments in the harbour has been approved with great speed and without adequate public participation and consideration of the environmental and social impacts on resource-dependent communities. Interviews with members of the Dube community conducted in 2022 revealed that they have never been consulted about the port and extension of coastal mining activities.

RBM has been mining north of Richards Bay since 1976, but since there is a limited amount of area left to mine, they are expanding their operations to the south of Richards Bay, in the Dube and Mkhwanazi areas. Research conducted by Mbatha and Wynberg (2014) demonstrated that the cumulative impacts of RBM mining have been detrimental to local

livelihoods and the benefits promised by RBM have not been realized. The impacts and implications of this extension southwards threaten access to resources as well as the livelihoods and way of life of the Dube community. There is a lot of uncertainty about whether mining expansion will result in the relocation of local communities and how their rights will be protected. For example, the community utilizes sacred mountains within the mining lease area as burial sites as well as for specific rituals and cleansing ceremonies. In addition, the indigenous trees and plants are a source of edible and medicinal leaves, fruit, and herbs. As expected, the uncertainties regarding community resettlement have caused tensions and resulted in community mobilisation and activism within the community against the developers leading to threats against local activists. The murder of a prominent activist opposing the Dube relocation in 2018 highlights the dangers facing community members and raises questions about local people challenging plans and decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods.

Key actors and relationships amongst actors

There are three categories of actors involved in the Richards Bay conflict. The first category is government: i.e., the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE), the parastatal agency Transnet (who are responsible for the port and its expansion), the national fishery authority DFFE, and the provincial conservation agency, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. The second category is the private sector including RBM and developers of a commercial aquaculture project. The small-scale fishing community at Dube is the third group of actors and most likely to be impacted by the proposals and expansions. However, at this stage, it is not clear how their traditional fishing rights will be affected by the expansion of these blue economy activities. There are coalitions between national government departments and the private sector who both support industrial development in the area. While RBM obtained the rights to mine the area from the government during the apartheid era, they are required to negotiate with the Dube traditional authority and community regarding the proposals and explain how the community will benefit from mining. This has not occurred yet, and the community remains in the dark regarding how the mining proposals will impact their livelihoods. The community is poor and rural and lack the resources, capacity, and skills to engage with those managing blue economy projects and those in decision-making positions.

Current status and strategies employed to challenge decisions

Conflict in the Dube area between coastal communities, the mining company, Transnet, and government is

mounting as blue economy interventions are being implemented and expanded. The Richards Bay harbour is one of the strategic Operation Phakisa projects in the KwaZulu-Natal province as it is significant for mineral exports, but the Dube community is increasingly insecure about the implications of the port expansion and mining and aquaculture developments on their land ownership and livelihoods secured on the coast, as well as use and benefit from these coastal resources. Fishery managers have excluded the community from fishing in the estuary and have labelled them as 'illegal fishers' while the community claim to have a long history of fishing in the area. Local people are fearful of challenging these blue economy plans and decisions in view of the threats and dangers experienced by community activists. These impacts have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable coastal communities and in particular those facing relocation and reliant on resources for their livelihoods.

The Dube community is a poor, rural community that has lacked capacity, resources, and external support to engage with and challenge government and private sector actors regarding blue economy plans and activities that affect their lives and livelihoods. In this area, there is poor civil society presence. Although a local fishery co-operative has made efforts to mobilise and organise community members, local people have indicated that it is difficult to sustain these efforts because of poverty and marginalisation and also due to fear of intimidation and violence. Thus, the community has not been very effective in having their voices heard and influencing planning and decision-making.

In 2021, the community reached out to one of the authors who had started working in the area, requesting information and assistance with access to public participation processes and links to NGOs working with small-scale fishers in the area. At about the same time, an NGO, operating in Durban known as South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), opened an office in Richards Bay and started working with communities affected by blue economy interventions. Our research team has engaged with SDCEA on various issues regarding blue economy initiatives and recently explored possible interventions to support the Dube community. Based on SDCEA's long history of advocating for the rights of marginalised communities living in the industrial area south of Durban, lessons learned from challenging environmentally harmful developments in this area are being shared with communities in the Richards Bay area. SDCEA has organised several workshops and community exchange visits in the area in order to raise awareness and build solidarity and trust amongst communities concerned about expansion in the Richards Bay area. One of the authors has worked with SDCEA to facilitate engagements with the community and provide research inputs that can strengthen the activism work done by the NGO.

Saldanha Bay case study

Case study context

Saldanha Bay and Langebaan Lagoon are situated on the west coast of South Africa approximately 120 km north-west of Cape Town (Fig. 1). The Saldanha Bay-Langebaan Lagoon system consists of a natural deep-water port at Saldanha Bay, with the Langebaan Lagoon extending 17 km to the southeast. Saldanha Bay Municipality has a population of approximately 100,000 people (Statistics South Africa 2012) and includes the towns of Saldanha Bay, Langebaan, and Vredenburg, and the area is recognised for its conservation, tourism, fishing, and industrial importance. The southern section of the lagoon system includes the West Coast National Park, parts of which were declared a Ramsar site in 1988. The Langebaan Lagoon also has a long history of supporting small-scale fishing communities (Sunde 2014). The Bay also hosts a sea-based Aquaculture Development Zone (ADZ) as part of the Operation Phakisa initiatives which is set to undergo further expansion (Clark et al. 2020).

Industrial development in the area increased significantly with the construction of a deep-water export port between 1973 and 1976. The port was intended to create a regional node for economic development with the opening of the bulk iron ore terminal in 1976. In the last decade, diversification of the Saldanha economy has been a priority with the listing as the region as one of the presidential priority development regions (The Presidency 2012) due to its strategic location to serve the oil and gas sector along the west coast of Africa. With the launch of Operation Phakisa in 2014, Saldanha Bay was identified as one of the government's Strategic Integrated Projects (SIPs) with the aim to fast track development and growth which will result in further industrialisation of this area (South African Government n.d.).

The iron ore terminal (IOT) currently has the capacity to handle approximately 60 million tonnes per year, and plans are in progress to upgrade the infrastructure to increase the throughput tonnage to 80 million tonnes. Additional ore exports including lead, zinc, copper, and manganese as well as zircon and rutile from heavy mineral sand mining have also increased exponentially from the Multi-purpose Terminal (MPT) over the last decade. South Africa holds approximately 78% of the world's identified manganese resources (Steenkamp et al. 2018) and handles 15% of the total manganese exports from South Africa.

The combination of conservation, tourism, fishing, and industrial development has resulted in years of conflict between different stakeholders. This conflict is particularly evident in the air quality space with the iron ore terminal being one of the most contentious issues as a result of the dust generated by the transport, handling, and stockpiling of the ore. The different sectors operating in the town are

regarded by many actors as incompatible. For many, industrial activities make the region an unattractive tourist destination, while health concerns from poor air quality make the town an unsuitable place to live. The fishery and aquaculture sector have raised concerns about water contamination from the ore (Clark et al. 2018) and other shipping-related discharges. Many stakeholders are concerned that environmental and health issues are not being taken seriously and not being incorporated into decision-making (WSP 2018).

A number of community members have organised themselves as the Red Dust Action Group with the main aim of getting the polluter (Transnet) to pay for the damage to buildings caused by the dust from the iron ore that is transported, stockpiled, and handled in the port (Red Dust Action Group 2021). In addition, several community members believe that their health is also negatively impacted by the port operations, despite dust from iron ore not being regarded as toxic. The recent proposal to increase throughput of other minerals from the Multi-Purpose Terminal has resulted in additional conflicts due to a distrust of the environmental authorisation process and what many residents believe to be inadequate monitoring of dustfall and ambient concentrations of particulate matter (WSP 2018).

Low-income communities in the region who are dependent on the jobs generated from the port activities are more likely to be severely impacted by the dust generated from the handling and transporting of the ore. They are exposed to the dust in an occupational setting, as well as potentially along the railway lines running through their communities in the low-income settlements. Members from these poor communities are least likely to voice any concerns, as they are dependent on employment from the port. Lack of participation stems in part from not being informed about proposed developments and also from a lack of confidence to attend and participate in meetings to address air quality concerns. The more affluent residents and stakeholders from other industries (e.g. aquaculture) are the most likely groups to voice their concerns about future development plans.

Key actors and relationships amongst actors

The key actors in the Saldanha Bay air quality space include the government, industry, conservationists, and local communities. The government includes the three spheres of government involved in driving the BE strategy and those departments monitoring and enforcing environmental legislation and regulations. These spheres include the Saldanha Bay local municipality, the West Coast District Municipality, and provincial Western Cape Government as well as the national departments of DFFE and DMRE. With regard to the management of air quality, the roles of national, provincial, and municipal government are well-defined in the National Environmental Management: Air Quality Act

(DEAT 2004). However, an important change was made to the regulations in 2014 when the designated authority for approving all atmospheric emission licences (AELs) for all state-owned enterprises was changed from the municipal level to the national level. This change was viewed by many in the community as the national government taking further control of driving economic growth in the area.

The application for environmental authorisation from Transnet in 2017 to increase storage of manganese ore at the Multi-Purpose Terminal from 90,000 to 200,000 t added fuel to the conflict amongst key actors. The national DFFE ruled that an EIA was not necessary as there was no additional infrastructure being constructed and that only an AEL was required (Malaza 2017). DFFE approved the AEL based on the Air Quality Impact Assessment (AQIA) conducted by an environmental consultant (WSP 2017). A number of concerned residents and local businesses such as the Bivalve Shellfish Farmers Association and the Saldanha Bay Water Quality Forum (SBWQF), an NGO involved in water quality monitoring as well as representatives of local and provincial government, raised objections in response to the AQIA (WSP 2018).

Current status and strategies employed to challenge decisions

The conflict around dust generated by the iron terminal has been ongoing for years. The recent increase in other ores that are potentially more toxic (e.g. manganese) has aggravated the conflict. The AEL was issued in 2019 despite receiving extensive comments on the AQIA from various parties (WSP 2018). This prompted the opposing parties to lodge an appeal against the provisional approval for the increased manganese storage with the Minister of DFFE. The appellants included a wide range of actors and local residents, as well as the local Saldanha Bay Municipality and the West Coast District Municipality. The Minister upheld the grounds for appeal and set aside the provisional AEL in January 2020 (Creecy 2020).

However, the withdrawal of the AEL has resulted in stockpiling of the ore on privately owned land next to the port. This has led to an increase in the number of applications for approval for smaller quantities of ore storage by different operators. Concerns regarding the cumulative impact of the handling and storage of the ore are not being taken into consideration. Transnet has again applied for increased storage of manganese ore on the MPT (Jones and Armstrong 2022), and a number of stakeholders have raised concerns about the increase in open stockpiling of manganese ore (Jones and Armstrong 2022).

The local residents and organisations that are aware of these applications and associated impacts are well-networked and are very involved in the public participation processes that are mandated by law. The same people are also

very actively involved in the Environmental Stakeholders Forum which is a requirement as part of the Environmental Management Plan (EMP) dustfall monitoring plan for the Iron Ore Terminal. However, many of them expressed concern regarding the inadequacy of public participation process for the AQIA undertaken in 2017. In addition, many workers involved in handling and storage of iron ore and other minerals as well as other marginalised groups, such as the small-scale fishers, are largely unaware of the applications and processes underway and the potential impacts of these activities on the environment and health.

Various strategies are being employed by concerned citizens working with researchers and NGOs to address the conflicts over deteriorating air quality in the Saldanha Bay area. Researchers are working closely with the municipal officials, some local residents, and the port authority (Transnet) to determine how cumulative impacts of the increased quantities of ore shipments can be assessed and to improve the monitoring capability and reduce the potential exposure on people and the environment in the region. The GCRF Mine Dust and Health Network (GCRF MDHN, www.minedust.org) organised a stakeholder event (including Transnet), in March 2022, to raise awareness and explore strategies to address the environmental and health concerns. However, representation from workers at Transnet and the poorer communities, including local fishers, has been limited. Two recent workshops with researchers from UCT in the Health Sciences, Environmental and Geographical Sciences, and Chemical Engineering Departments and youth from the area provided a forum to raise awareness regarding the environmental and health concerns associated with an increase in mine dust and the platforms that exist to learn more about plans and projects for the area, as well as procedures for submitting comments and objections.

The dialogue initiated by the GCRF MDHN has created a mediated safe space for stakeholders to take part in an initiative that relies on credible data and information with the express goal of solving the dust problem. This dialogue is still developing but is clear from these initial engagements that different stakeholders have diverging ideas of what the solutions might entail. Despite the differences, there appears to be a willingness to engage and find a mutually agreed-upon strategy facilitated by independent researchers to address the conflict.

Findings and discussion

An examination of the root causes and drivers of these conflicts suggests that while there are context-specific factors in each case that have exacerbated the tensions and conflicts, there are a number of general root causes that pertain to all cases (see Table 1).

Table 1 Root causes of conflict in 3 case studies in South Africa

Root causes	Evidence from cases
Structural inequalities	Legacy of apartheid persists; marginalisation; and lack of services, facilities, and social protection in all 3 cases; limited education and social support
Social injustices	Govt. encourages extractive industries without adequate consideration of social, cultural, and environmental impacts leading to conflicts, protests, and litigation
Policy mismatches	Contradictions across policy arenas; e.g. govt. supports growth of oil and gas sector despite strong opposition from civil society and commitments to uphold climate change commitments
Divergent narratives of the BE	Govt. claims BE is addressing poverty, unemployment, and inequality; communities claim BE leading to infringement of human rights and social and environmental harm
Political agendas and alliances	Govt. collaborates with private sector to fast track BE projects; main focus is economic growth and increasing revenue flows. Increasing concerns regarding corruption in awarding tenders
Lack of consultation	Public participation is inadequate especially where poor and marginalised communities concerned. Views of local communities seldom are heard and integrated into planning and decision-making
Unequal power relations	Govt. and private sector voices powerful in meetings with communities, decisions taken unilaterally
Knowledge/data disputes	Communities distrustful of Govt. and consultant's data (e.g. in EIAs); govt. fails to take account of local and indigenous knowledge in decisions
Distrust amongst actors	Historical factors mitigate against fostering trusting relations; govt. has not delivered on promises of jobs, employment, and improved quality of life for poor coastal communities

Firstly, the structural inequalities and injustices associated with South Africa's colonial and apartheid past have left a legacy that continues to render marginalised coastal communities vulnerable to plans and decisions that ignore their current socio-economic conditions and vulnerability context (Sowman and Raemaekers 2018). Mining is a major driver of the South African economy (Broadhurst et al. 2014) and despite its legacy of environmental degradation and social injustice, it remains a key focus of governments' economic growth and recovery plan. Thus, the national Department of Minerals Resources and Energy (DMRE) is actively encouraging investors to apply for rights to prospect, explore, and develop these mineral resources and promising jobs and a boost to economic growth through this sector as well as the other blue economy initiatives.

There are clearly divergent narratives across actors regarding the blue economy in South Africa. Government and the private sector are aligned in their narratives regarding the benefits for South Africa and in particular, poor unemployed communities from this fast-track economic growth model (Bond 2019; Potgieter 2021). Local communities, local businesses, and various NGOs are much more cautious and opposed to this economic model especially in relation to the growth of sectors such as oil and gas and mining (Masie and Bond 2018; Bond 2019; PTWC and 4 others vs Minister of MRE and 7 others 2022; Christian Adams and Others versus the Minister and Others 2022; Sowman 2022; Sunde 2022). The focus on oil and gas as a growth sector and the support for mining and industrial expansion does not align with South Africa's global commitments to reduce our carbon emissions, yet government has developed a narrative that defends its growth model and assures the public it will meet its climate targets (Bond 2019; DFFE 2022).

While there is a policy and legislative framework in place to regulate the mining sector and safeguard environmental and human rights, the new amended procedure, referred to as the One Environmental System (Humby 2015) for assessing impacts and fast-tracking approvals, has raised concerns about the adequacy and robustness of these procedures and decision-making processes. An added concern is that DMRE has both the mandate to facilitate the exploitation of mineral and oil and gas resources and the authority to approve or reject the EIA conducted for an application. If civil society is aggrieved by the decision granted by DMRE, they may lodge a formal appeal with the Minister of Environmental Affairs. However, based on the environmental minister responses to prospecting and mining appeals over the last 2 years, it would appear that DFFE is fully behind the blue growth agenda regardless of concerns expressed by local people and potential environmental and social impacts.

Public participation, and in particular involvement of local and indigenous communities in these planning and environmental assessment processes, has been weak. In the case of the Olifants and Richards Bay communities, local people were not directly consulted and only learned about the prospecting and mining applications via their social partners. In Saldanha Bay, while there is an active group commenting on proposals and plans, the workers at the MPT and poorer sectors of society have not been adequately consulted about the increased ore being transported and stockpiled in and around the port, nor have they been informed of the environmental and health impacts of this expansion. The public meetings held to consult interested and affected parties are usually dominated by the applicant and his/her consultants who present the project in a very favourable light. These public participation sessions tend to be information

Table 2 Strategies employed by actors to address conflict in study sites

Strategies	Olifants Estuary	Richards Bay	Saldanha Bay
1. Build trusting partnerships	x	x	x
2. Strengthen networks and alliances	x	x	x
3. Raise awareness and build capacity	x	x	x
4. Community organisation/building solidarity	x	x	x
5. Use formal administrative processes (e.g. to object or appeal)	x		x
6. Knowledge co-production amongst partners	x		x
7. Protest action	x	x	
8. Litigation	x		

giving sessions and do not provide a forum for meaningful engagement and a safe space for communities to raise concerns. Furthermore, consultants and applicants often present information in a manner that is not accessible to local communities who may feel intimidated by the data presented and reluctant to ask questions or voice concerns. Communities are also distrustful of the information provided by consultants and in particular of the benefits promised and their assessment of environmental and social impacts. A deep distrust for applicants and their consultants has developed amongst communities due to the failure to take account of their views and inputs during the planning and assessment processes. This lack of meaningful consultation has angered community members who are of the opinion that their concerns and rights are not being heard and respected. They are also concerned about the government's lack of transparency regarding information about current and future planned blue economy projects and the ongoing allegations of corruption in awarding tenders and approving projects.

The weak socio-economic circumstances and high unemployment in these communities mean that some residents are vulnerable to projects that promise jobs and improved socio-economic conditions regardless of environmental, social, and health impacts. While a few community members do support mining and growth of other sectors (e.g. oil and gas), this research as well as our involvement in various other workshops and forums with coastal fisher groups suggests overwhelming opposition to coastal mining and rampant expansion of the blue economy.

Failure to undertake meaningful consultation with local and indigenous communities prior to decision-making associated with blue economy plans and projects has been identified as a major shortcoming of by various scholars investigating the impacts and implications of implementing such projects and initiatives across the world (Jentoft et al. 2022; Bennet et al., 2021 and 2022; Sunde 2022). Adoption of a blue growth agenda without due consideration of the rights, socio-economic needs, and voices of local communities has exacerbated ocean

grabbing, displacement, and social inequity especially amongst poor and vulnerable communities (Childs and Hicks 2019; Cohen et al. 2019; Tafon 2019; Das 2023). While various papers and technical reports have put forward principles and recommendations for improving participation of poor and vulnerable groups in planning and decision-making regarding the blue growth (Bennet., et al., 2022; Österblom et al. 2020; FAO 2022), translation of these principles and guidelines remains challenging in many countries. The power asymmetries amongst protagonists of blue economy projects and those affected by these developments also reduce the potential for conflict resolution through deliberative and collaborative processes (Bennett et al. 2019; Bennett et al. 2022; Ertör and Hadjimichael 2020; Tafon et al. 2022).

Based on our research, it was evident that communities are employing an array of strategies to challenge mining proposals and related industrial expansions which they consider harmful to the environment including their socio-economic environment, cultural heritage, and health. Different strategies are being employed by communities and civil society depending on their resources, capabilities, and skills as well as their networks and strength of relationships with social partners. A summary of the strategies employed by communities and civil society in the three case studies is presented in Table 2.

Where communities and other local stakeholders have developed trusting partnerships with researchers and NGOs in the case studies examined, they are kept abreast of plans and proposed developments and are informed about opportunities for public involvement. In these contexts (Olifants Estuary and Saldanha Bay), social partners are able to communicate via WhatsApp or cell phone to community leaders or members of local forums (e.g. Environmental Stakeholder Forum in SB) or community structures (e. g. local fishing committee) to inform them of new proposals or developments and assist with access to documentation, preparation of objections, and appeals to challenge information presented or decisions they

consider unfair or unsustainable. These social partners are also able to link communities to legal experts who can assist in advising them on their rights and appropriate legal strategies to consider. Where communities are isolated and have not developed strong partnerships and networks (such as in Dube), their ability to participate in these assessment and decision processes has been very limited, and decisions are taken without their involvement or consent—even where customary rights are at stake. These relationships with social partners provide the community with access to information, expertise, resources, and networks. Through these relationships and interactions, communities become aware of their rights and familiar with the procedures for participation in planning and decision-making processes.

The important role of NGOs, researchers, and human rights organisations in working with communities and civil society groups to challenge blue growth that is deemed to be unjust and unsustainable and facilitate conflict resolution has been well-documented by researchers (Bennett et al. 2022; Jentoft et al. 2022; Sunde 2022). Reports from various national and international workshops and high-level panels have also highlighted concerns about the focus on economic growth at the expense of social equity and environmental integrity (Masifundise 2021; Österblom et al. 2020). In particular, several scholars have highlighted the failure to take proper account of social equity considerations in blue growth plans and initiatives and the unfair burden that these projects place on poor communities. (Bond 2019; Cohen et al. 2019; Tafon 2019; Voyer et al. 2018; Das 2023). Proposals and recommendations to place social equity at the centre of blue economy initiatives is key to facilitating fair and equitable outcomes and reducing conflict.

The current environmental regulatory framework for prospecting and mining applications and expansions provides opportunities for interested and affected parties to raise their concerns and provide comments on the environmental assessment reports. Researchers are working with communities to enhance their understanding of the issues and impacts associated with proposals and are encouraging them to draw on their local knowledge to provide a more integrated and place-based understanding of how these proposed developments will impact on local communities and their livelihoods. Through these knowledge exchange and co-production processes (e.g. Olifants and Saldanha Bay), comments and appeals submitted reflect the deep knowledge that local people have about their environment. Through these submissions, the rights, needs, and priorities of communities are also communicated. However, despite these efforts, these concerns are seldom integrated into revised plans and the finalisation of EIA reports in South Africa. Communities and civil society are thus increasingly

forming coalitions with other concerned stakeholders in the area and enlisting assistance from legal NGOs to challenge decisions. Aside from the potential to overturn a decision or delay the start of a mining project, being involved in these legal processes provides a space for communities and their social partners to collaborate, share, and co-produce knowledge and form strong alliances. While litigation is often regarded as the last resort in a conflict situation, in a context of historical injustices, structural inequalities, asymmetrical power relations, and weak public participation processes, legal mobilisation by local communities and their social partners is a necessary strategy in response to governments approach to blue growth. This has been the response of NGOs and local fishers in the mining case explored in the Olifants Estuary case study. The increase in number of legal cases being brought to the courts in South Africa by civil society regarding unsustainable development is indicative of failure of more consultative and deliberative processes to address coastal conflicts (see, for example, Christian Adams and others vs Minister of MRE and others 2022 and PTWC and 4 others vs Minister of MRE and Energy and 7 others 2022)

Communities are essentially having to employ these strategies to safeguard their environments, fishing livelihoods, and cultural heritage. Our research suggests that while conflict can be a catalyst for initiating transformation, in the context of historical and ongoing structural inequalities and injustices, poverty, and exclusion from decision-making processes, communities are forced to challenge several blue economy processes and decisions through strategies such as protest action, networking with other communities, strengthening partnerships with researchers and NGOs, and taking legal action. Through these engagement processes, new alliances are forged amongst groups and individuals who share a common vision for their local environment and who may previously have been at odds regarding environmental marine access and use. However, engagement with the proponents (often inclusive of certain sectors of government) of blue economy projects is not a feasible approach in contexts of structural inequities, poverty, and power asymmetries. Certainly, for local communities to engage in discussions with proponents and their consultants about these projects, without a full understanding of what is being proposed and what the implications of such proposals may be for them, places them at risk of being co-opted into supporting plans and projects that promise benefits and underplay environmental and social impacts.

While the strategies adopted in the cases outlined in this paper are locality specific, they signal a growing social movement of coastal communities working collaboratively with social partners (academics, researchers, NGOs, professionals, legal experts) to challenge blue economy proposals,

plans, and decisions that exclude them and may lead to significant impacts on their lives and livelihoods.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to explore the strategies that local communities and actors employ to challenge blue economy plans and projects that they regard as unsustainable and unjust. We argue that tackling conflict in contexts characterised by a history of structural inequality, oppression, marginalisation, and significant power imbalances requires local communities to employ innovative strategies to challenge processes and decisions, forcing opponents to acknowledge them as key players in the ocean space with rights, needs, and priorities that need to be respected. Only then can communities consider engaging with proponents of these blue economy projects in an equal and meaningful way. Strategies employed by communities in these cases have fostered local partnerships across actors that have not previously worked together (e.g. local fishers and landowners) and forged alliances amongst groups (e.g. local fishers, conservation departments, landowners, local businesses) that share a common vision for the environment under threat. Building networks with social partners including researchers, legal experts, NGOs, and other civil society organisations has enhanced knowledge sharing amongst these partners and strengthened the capacity of local communities to engage more confidently in these processes. Furthermore, challenging plans, environmental assessments, and decisions in the form of protests and submissions of comments as well as media releases often slows down these decisions-processes and enables civil society to strategize with social partners regarding next steps. In South Africa, legal mobilisation has increasingly been employed to challenge unfair processes and decisions. Threatening and taking legal action have required proponents of blue economy projects to acknowledge local communities as key players in the ocean economy and that their rights (substantive and procedural) need to be acknowledged and respected. We conclude that for communities to be heard and empowered to engage in planning and decision-making processes, the various strategies employed in these cases including building awareness about rights (human and environmental), engaging in protest action, fostering trusting partnerships, and forging alliances and networks with social partners, as well as legal mobilisation, can be effective in slowing down decision-making processes, demanding recognition, and levelling the playing fields. These strategies are especially necessary in a context where structural inequality, inequitable access to resources, and extreme power imbalances amongst blue economy actors persist.

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