

IMPACT STORY

ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP:
Research that Supports Livelihoods
and Cultural Rights of Women in
Small-Scale Fishing Communities
in the Eastern Cape, South Africa



Photo: Luke Kaplan

For the past three years, Buhle Francis, a Hub early-career researcher at Rhodes University, South Africa, has been working with women in small-scale fishing (SSF) communities in the Eastern Cape. She is undertaking pioneering collaborative research at the nexus of environmental justice, gender equality, ocean livelihoods, and inclusivity in ocean-related decision-making processes.

Buhle's research demonstrates the Hub's support for developing relationships between academics and coastal communities in which value flows in both directions.

Buhle's work started in 2020 during South Africa's level-5 COVID lockdown, when movement was completely restricted. A large group of Hub researchers in South Africa decided to start a WhatsApp group to keep in touch with fishers and find out how they could be supported during that time. The WhatsApp group gradually led to the emergence of a knowledge-solidarity network among small-scale fishers, researchers, and civil society called the Coastal Justice Network.

During the strictest lockdown conditions, Buhle conducted interviews by telephone with women in the fishing communities. They disclosed that they did not feel free to express their views in the larger WhatsApp group, so a WhatsApp group exclusively for women was created. Buhle followed up with in-person interviews when lockdown conditions were relaxed.

Research and support during a time of exceptional challenges

The women shared their livelihood concerns around lockdown restrictions that prevented them from carrying out fisheries work (such as buying and selling fish or working in processing factories) or accessing the ocean. Apart from Covid restrictions, the women noted traditional limitations on their roles in the fishing value chain to post-harvest fishing work and the seasonal nature of such work.

Buhle facilitated a conversation among two communities of women about a menu of possible projects that could complement their livelihoods. Sewing emerged as a priority – a marketable skill that could fit in around their household and fisheries work.

The two communities collaborated with Buhle on a project proposal for the Hub's Flexible Fund. In Gqeberha, the Oomama no Lwandle ("Women in the Ocean") sewing project included 26 women, most but not all of whom were also part of the Eastern Cape Black Fishers' Association.



Hub funding provided a rapid response during the global pandemic to the self-identified and prioritised livelihood needs of these women. Education in sewing skills and access to equipment has allowed them to secure a safety net to their livelihoods. Photo: Buhle Francis

In Hamburg, the Sophakama ("Let's Rise") sewing project comprised 22 women from the Siyazama Aquaculture and Siyaphambili Primary Fishing Cooperatives.

Hub funding provided each group with eight sewing machines and an overlocker (a serge sewing machine). They also received training from the Keiskamma Art Project on how to sew and also manage and care for the machines. The trainers came to each of the towns and taught in Xhosa, the women's primary language. Two women from each group were then brought to Rhodes University for a train-the-trainers session in October 2022. Women in both groups have since trained other women in their communities.

The Chairperson of the Sophakama sewing project, Thembakazi Paliso, said: "We divided ourselves into two training groups. Within two weeks, we learnt to make handbags, cushions, cushion covers, aprons, and reusable sanitary pads."

Each sewing group has created a seven-member committee and obtained registration as a cooperative. These are required to access government support, which may enable the continuation of these enterprises after Hub funding. To support the launch, the Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC) at Rhodes University made a large order for

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cushions and cushion covers from both groups. The initial income generated under the project for each group is expected to be around 15,000 Rands (1,400£).

Supporting self-identified priorities

Hub funding provided a rapid response during the global pandemic to the self-identified and prioritised livelihood needs of these women. Education in sewing skills and access to equipment has allowed them to secure a safety net to their livelihoods. Even after the lifting of lockdown restrictions, this remains crucial to fill gaps between fishing seasons and increase economic

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Dr Buhle Francis
Hub early-career researcher





Large cosmetics companies hire women to harvest seaweed but do not provide contracts, neither taking responsibility nor providing support when harvesters are injured on the job. Photos: Luke Kaplan

viability during the season. Such additional livelihood options are particularly important for single mothers in fishing communities, as they can stay near their children while doing sewing work.

The project demonstrates that skills can be quickly developed with access to equipment and training. Ntombizanele Ntshokoma from the Sophakama sewing project was trained as a trainer.

She explained: “Most women in our group never had an opportunity to sew in their life, and in two weeks they were able to produce items for sale. We can see that this project is sustainable.”

By providing innovative and flexible funding to establish such ocean-economy diversification projects, the Hub is changing the lives of coastal communities. Dolly Mkatha, Chairperson of the Oomama no Lwandle sewing project, said: “I have no words to thank One Ocean Hub for this project, because it has made a difference for our livelihoods and those of our children.”

Buhle noted the importance of action-research that responds to self-identified needs rather than imposing goals: “Rarely have other research projects been so flexible and relevant to the communities they do research with. Often, research may be knowledge-extractive, leaving communities with no tangible benefits other than the knowledge that their struggles and issues have been made known globally. Instead, by creating such opportunities for the communities that we do research

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with, we build trust and, in turn, create opportunities for the researcher.”

Progress in transdisciplinary ocean governance research

Throughout the sewing project, Buhle deployed creative research methods, observing and interviewing women as they worked at sewing. She learnt about gender equality issues within the SSF sector and the livelihood challenges and

capacity-building needs of women in SSF communities. Buhle is currently working on two academic papers on the insights arising from this project.

Further, the project built deep trust, which led the women to share more of their concerns, including around seaweed harvesting. In South Africa, seaweed has distinctive cultural connections but is also designated as a high-value product, thus requiring permits to harvest. Until recently, only companies have been able to get permits. Large cosmetics companies hire women to harvest seaweed but do not provide contracts, neither taking responsibility nor providing support when harvesters are injured on the job.

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Buhle reached out to women involved in seaweed harvesting and, with them, developed a new research project, “Grandmothers of the sea: Protecting women’s rights through art and fair benefit-sharing from seaweed harvesting in the



Photo: Luke Kaplan



Hub funding provided each group with eight sewing machines and an overlocker (a serge sewing machine) Photo: Buhle Francis

face of climate change.” Through their seaweed harvesting practices, these women have long histories with local ecological knowledge of the ocean.

For generations they have relied on the ocean as a rural safety net and a source of food security, not to mention a site of spiritual and cultural sustenance. Now, they feel they are being exploited by large corporations with little benefit coming to them, at the same time that South Africa is experiencing massive and unprecedented climate emergencies such as flooding and droughts. These working conditions make adaptation to new climatic conditions particularly difficult, requiring sophisticated and strategic responses.

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Buhle received a British Council Scotland SGSAAH EARTH Scholarship for her work, which enabled her to move to Glasgow for three months to deepen her research collaboration with law researchers at the University of Strathclyde.

The co-designed study is focused on protecting the human rights of SSF women in the Eastern Cape by building capacity, legal empowerment, and meaningful climate adaptation strategies. It expands on Buhle’s post-doctoral research on the nexus between climate change, livelihoods, and governance by integrating legal research on human rights and the ocean with art-based empowerment.

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The project will:

- identify how to fairly and equitably share benefits from seaweed harvesting;
- clarify conditions for the protection of these women’s human rights to a healthy ocean, livelihoods, and culture;
- advance legal empowerment through novel arts-based research approaches; and
- co-develop climate change adaptation strategies based on secure marine livelihoods.

These projects show that academic research can respond to a community’s analysis of their own needs and, in the process, produce robust research that benefits from the community’s expertise. The Hub is proud to support researchers such as Buhle who are exploring how relationships between academia and communities can bring tangible benefits to both.

Key publications:

1. B Francis and D McGarry, “Grandmothers of the Sea: Stories and lessons from five Xhosa ocean elders” (forthcoming 2023). In: T Shefer, V Bozalek and N Romano (eds), *Hydrofeminist thinking with ocean/s: Political pedagogical possibilities*. Routledge.
2. B Francis, E Morgera, D McGarry, and I Senekai “Grandmothers of the sea: Protecting women’s rights through art and fair benefit-sharing from seaweed harvesting in the face of climate change” (forthcoming 2024, journal TBD).
3. B Francis, “Livelihoods for women in small-scale fishing communities: Lessons from Eastern Cape in South Africa” (forthcoming 2024, journal TBD).

