

# Selling our ocean

*By Rinaani Musutua, published in The Namibian, 22 November 2019*

In May 2018, when it was announced that applications for 96 new fishing rights were open, many poor black Namibians hastily applied after being encouraged to do so by the Minister of Fisheries, Bernard Esau. He said a 'new leaf would be turned', meaning that poor Namibians would be given preference in the fishing rights allocations as a way of making sure that they also benefit economically from their natural resources. We were pleased that the government had finally come to its senses and was ready to provide us with opportunities that would help us get out of poverty. Out of desperation, many of us had sleepless nights and spent money we did not have as we were struggling with registering companies and completing fishing rights applications to make sure that we would not miss this opportunity that comes once in twenty years.

We had high hopes that this was finally the time that we would benefit from our natural resources and that this opportunity would help us get out of the grinding poverty we experience daily. A hostel matron I know was hoping to get fishing rights so that she could build a house at the village to be ready for when she retires. That is the hope that Esau instilled in us.

We have been looking forward to positive results, as Esau had promised. It has been more than a year since we applied for fishing rights and we are still waiting to hear on who the new beneficiaries of the fishing rights are. After the deadline in August 2018, Esau had promised to announce the new fishing rights beneficiaries by November 2018. This was then postponed to the first financial quarter of 2019. We did not hear anything from Esau since then until an article appeared in The Namibian in May 2019. Upon being asked by a reporter when the beneficiaries of the new fishing rights would be announced, he could not give a satisfactory answer as to when the application process would be completed. An article 'Fishing rights nearly hooked' appeared in the New Era in October 2019 in which Esau claimed that 80% of the fishing rights application process had been completed. But he could not give an estimate as to when the remaining 20% would be completed.

After the recent report by Wikileaks's Fish Rot implicating Esau, Minister of Justice Sacky Shanghala, Fishcor chairperson James Hatuikulipi and his cousin Tamson Hatuikulipi in having corruptly sold Namibia's fishing rights under the table to the Icelandic fishing company Samherji, we are starting to believe that Esau delayed fishing rights allocation process on purpose in order to give him enough time to seal deals that would see fishing rights ending up in the hands of politicians and those closely connected to them and foreign fishing companies. Claiming that the process had been delayed in order to ensure that each application is assessed was a lie to make people believe that the allocation process was fair and transparent. What kind

of an example would we set for the future leadership if we changed the constitution in order for the rulers to stay longer in power? They seem to change the law to suit their self-enrichment goals, just as Esau and Shanghala have been changing fishing rights laws. Democracy has truly broken down.

Esau exploited our vulnerability and misery. Encouraging the poor to apply was simply a political campaign to make us believe that the ruling Swapo party was ready to improve the lives of many suffering blacks. The allocation announcement has purposely been delayed until after the election to avoid us getting angry and not vote for them as a result. The false hope that Esau had instilled in us will soon lead to despair when we find out after the election that the majority of poor Namibians who had applied have not been allocated fishing rights. Our dreams of a better life will be shattered.

What Esau and his accomplices did was rob us of our resources that could have taken so many of us out of generational poverty. Our leaders are the cause of our poverty and economic downfall. Such leaders should be removed from office and criminally charged as their unpatriotic behaviour prove that they disregard the poor. Throughout the years, Esau was kept at the fisheries ministry while others were reshuffled. That is because he was taking care of business the way our leaders wanted it to be done as they were benefiting from his corrupt ways of running the ministry.

Our leaders claim that the whites still have extensive control over the country's economy and that it is the source of the suffering that the majority poor black Namibians endure. But we can see that a fifth of our members of parliament own and hold shares in fishing companies. Is this perhaps what the Swapo secretary general, Sofia Shaningwa meant when she told Itula that they would deal with him as they have all the money? The riches of this country are no longer only in the hands of the white minority, but also in the hands of a minority black elite who are gatekeeping to make sure that we don't get economically empowered. While the Europeans built their nations with the resources they stole from Africans, our leaders steal from their own people to enrich themselves and the former colonial masters, instead of attempting to get their fellow blacks get out of poverty.

Namibia's fishing industry is the second biggest income generator for the economy and should play a major role in getting Namibians out of poverty. Recent attempts by government to discuss the credibility of the current fishing right allocation process are merely a political campaign to make us believe that they are concerned but it is quite clear that our leaders are not prepared to share the riches of this country with poor Namibians as they are too busy guarding their lavish lifestyles greedily.

Until we revolt, nothing will be done to make ordinary poor Namibians benefit economically from our natural resources. Our leaders have made this country their personal property and will continue to steal until they empty it - if we allow them to

continue. Will the rest of us end up dying in the Mediterranean Sea while crossing to reach greener pastures, just like many other Africans? Namibians need to make good choices at the ballot box on 27 November.

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