

INTERVIEW

REVENUES AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

SINEGUGU ZUKULU

Sinegugu Zukulu is an environmental activist. He grew up in the coastal area called AmaDiba, in Bizana, Mpondoland, Eastern Cape, and was one of the few of his generation who went to university. There he studied, amongst other things, environmental law, and has returned to his home where uses his skills and knowledge in a number of community development projects. As a child he would visit his aunt in Xolobeni, part of Amadiba directly by the sea, and the site of recent major struggles over mining rights. From the mid-2000s there have been several attempts by large international companies to secure mining rights in Xolobeni and surrounds, but these efforts have been met by serious opposition from large sections of the local communities. In reflecting on mining, agriculture, and local tourism, Zukulu suggests that rural development is best led from the bottom-up, rather than linked to top-down economic projects facilitated by the state and aimed at generating revenue for elites and the national fiscus. Sinegugu was interviewed by William Beinart.

William Beinart: Why has there been such great opposition to mining in Xolobeni?

When you look at the government's approach to development, it leans more towards favouring the investor and is under their control – a top-down approach.¹ For development to be meaningful it should be driven by a bottom-up process. If government or anybody else has an idea, it is important for that idea to be taken to the community. The old system of traditional leadership was a bottom-up process and this is the system that people understand. Mpondoland was annexed in 1894, but people were never moved off their land and they never abandoned their traditional governance system. There has been much top-down legislation, but for day to day running of their lives people still went to the traditional gatherings,

imbizo. They would debate whatever issue was on the table. Traditional leaders continue to rule through consensus. And whenever they tried to use top-down approaches, they were challenged. That was one of the triggers of the Mpondo revolt [1960], when [paramount chief] Botha [Sigcau] tried to impose his rule, because people hated this top-down approach.

Coming back to development, if you look at the Constitution, and the laws, they propagate a participatory democracy where people on the ground are able to debate whatever is being proposed. Of course, this should not be a box ticking exercise, but a public participation process, which gives people space to debate. It is critical to understand that where the traditional governance is still operating properly, any development proposal should be using that channel, which is understood by the people and gives people an opportunity to interrogate the proposed development, to look at it through their own prism and decide whether it would fit with their way of life. Failure to do that leads to bad decisions about development, which is where the government fails and most of the top-down decisions are challenged. Overlooking the governance of the people, and the customary laws of the people, leads to bad decisions that become unconstitutional and challengeable.

If we are looking at mining, it is going to interfere with underground water where people rely on springs and streams. It's going to interfere with rangelands, the grazing areas for their livestock. It is going to interfere with the quality of air. At a small scale, this is what quality of life means to people. At a global scale, Sustainable Development Goals require that you take care of those things. They require that you allow the people to have a say and take care of the values and of the essence of life and livelihoods within these areas.

If we allow Shell to explore for oil and gas, there is a risk of our ocean being polluted by oil spills.² They fail to consider the livelihoods and practices of people who live by fishing from the ocean. Their eyes are on the dollars they would make. And when you look at that development, there is no way that the oil and gas economy could take care of the day-to-day needs of all the coastal communities. Even if you have [exploitation] in Morgan Bay [over 200km south-west], the oceanic ecosystem is fluid, and oil would end up here in AmaDiba. This kind of imposed development is not at human scale and it is not meant to benefit local people. It's set to benefit mainly the shareholders and the government from taxes. No one has looked at the value of the livelihoods that we derive from the ocean because they are blinded by the needs of investors, who do not have the interests of local communities at heart. Extractive development does not measure its real costs, the negative impact, not only on livelihoods but from pollution, such as the case of Ogoniland in the Niger delta.³

Politicians don't understand why we keep on opposing these things, because they don't have two ears and one mouth.⁴ They suffer from what I would call a 'Father Christmas syndrome'. He comes at night

loaded with gifts; you take that, should be excited and enjoy them without asking questions. They expect us to accept whatever is coming from them. But that is fundamentally wrong. Any development that is meant for the local people should be discussed by the local people, who should have free and informed consent, because they will live with the consequences of that development.

When talking of a traditional leadership system, people think we are pro-traditional leaders. That's a mistake. A system of governance is different from the leader. The leadership system is not about what the leader says and what the leader does. The system gives a democratic process for the people present in the gathering to make a decision, which is then given as a mandate to the traditional leader. But traditional leaders, like any other politicians, can be corrupt, just like in AmaDiba, where Chief Baleni became a director and supporter of the South African subsidiary of Minerals Commodities Limited (MRC), the Australian mining company that initially secured mining rights in Xolobeni.⁵ If the governance system is working, the traditional leader may not in any way impose his or her beliefs. If he's somebody who is greedy, or who has got a business mind and wants to invest or wants to be a director that is fine. But the decision needs to be taken by the people as to whether they welcome that or not. In AmaDiba you have a chief who became a mining company director by manipulation and maneuvering by the proponents of the mining.

Remember also that AmaDiba covers people who are affected by mining on the coastal stretch, who have been very vocal and united, but people inland have not really been affected. It is also noteworthy that there are longstanding chieftaincy battles in the area, with many residents of the coastal areas supporting headwoman Duduzile Baleni's leadership and wanting to split from Chief Baleni. There are songs that have been composed to tell the chief that they are unhappy, sung in his presence. I also am part of the Madiba clan; chief Lunga Baleni is my uncle. So, I know that he has been confronted with those questions as to why he is the director of the mining company. He has explained that he was told that if he doesn't form a trust to take royalties from the mining company, they would go to the king [of Eastern Mpondoland as a whole]. This was the ploy to get him involved, so he agreed to establish a trust that would take the benefits and become a trustee. But there has been a lot of manipulation and limited understanding of how these things happen and in the end he received no direct benefits through these structures as the mining operations did not happen. However, the fact that he's a director was never approved in a public meeting. He was convinced to become a director in private meetings.

The majority of the people of Xolobeni are very solid and united; they've made a clear choice about their economic activities – ecotourism and agriculture – as alternatives to mining. These do not destroy the integrity of the ecosystem for the people on the land. They don't take away the land. Once you start mining, you have to fence off the land and say: this is the mining area.

William Beinart: But to what degree does agriculture still sustain people's livelihoods in rural Eastern Cape?

If you look back to the Mpondo uprising [Nonqulwane 1960], you will know that the whole struggle was to protect the land because land is the source of livelihood. Grazing land for the livestock is the biggest portion of the land and one of the arguments advanced is the importance of food production, so that people can be self-reliant in terms of the food. Families rely on land to produce food and for young people to access markets with surplus produce.

One example is sweet potatoes and amadumbe. One bakkie takes a load to Durban market from Sigidi every week. I am doing research on this and found that seven bakkies come to the villages around here, Sigidi area [south of the Mzamba area], Mtolani, Mpindweni and others to buy sweet potatoes. A bakkie load is about R100,000 so that's R700,000 in a week. There is high demand for sweet potatoes from Mpondoland in Durban and they are selling to informal traders who in turn sell to the rural people from Zululand and the Eastern Cape who work in Durban. The value of R100,000 includes the profit made by the bakkie traders so that it does not all come to the community. The sweet potato season is from March to August or September.

This is grown on the land that the government wants to mine. People say: 'Look, our land is fertile; we make so much money'. I remember interviewing one lady, Mrs. Dlamini in Sigidi village, who said 'to get work in the mine, you will be required to produce a piece of paper, a certificate, to say you are qualified in something; even if you're going to be a security guard, you must have been trained; to be a truck driver, you must be qualified'. 'But when we grow sweet potatoes', she said, 'this land does not demand any piece of paper. The only thing that you require is the indigenous knowledge from your parents. So, we should not give our land away'.

The option for mining is not for everyone, but farming the land, keeping your livestock, growing your own crops, gives food to everyone and allows for interdependence. Many people are dependent on one another: when you don't have something to cook, and your children are starving, you go to somebody and ask; we see that as very acceptable. And the land allows everyone who's willing and has energy to produce and to make money. Many families say the education fees for their kids are being paid using this land. Some of those graduates have chosen to come back and farm with their university degrees. That's how lucrative the production is here.

There are many other crops: amadumbe (taro), a staple winter crop that is eaten by the people and the surplus sold; maize, which is very important as a livestock feed as well as a staple for the people; chickens,

pigs, cows, sheep and goats. They also share your harvest. Winter is the biggest vegetable producing season – cabbage, spinach, carrots, tomatoes, brinjals. Vegetables are grown more in small gardens next to the house. In bigger fields: maize, potatoes, amadumbe and pumpkins – they mix crops. Fruit trees are usually at home in front of the house: peaches, oranges, lemons, bananas. We have a programme to help people understand agro-ecology; we are working against the tide of the westernisation of farming with the GMOs, with the Roundup weed killer and all that. We trying to raise awareness so that people go back to organic farming.

In all of these coastal villages in AmaDiba, we do not have running water; electricity only arrived at my home last year. There are still lots of places which have never seen electricity. The Eastern Cape premier, Mabuyane, came up here to a funeral in Bizana last week. He said the people of AmaDiba are opposing all sorts of development, which they know will help in bringing service delivery. But our question is: why should we sacrifice our land in order to have service delivery, to which we are constitutionally entitled? Other people get service delivery without having to give away their land.

The example of cannabis/dagga shows that the government is not serious about helping rural areas to develop. They know that these coastal communities have always been key producers of cannabis. Under the colonial government, people were being harassed and arrested for growing it, but they never stopped. Under the new dispensation, the democratic government was even more repressive than the apartheid government: the police hired helicopters to spray the dagga fields with Roundup, knowing well that it is carcinogenic, and they will not only kill the dagga but will also pollute the grasslands and the rivers, putting lives in danger. What kind of a democratic government does that to its own people? Civil society has fought for the recognition of cannabis for medical reasons; they had to go all the way to the Constitutional Court. Now the government is coming up with legislation to give licenses through a complicated and expensive process that generally excludes the rural poor who have been cannabis custodians all along.

They know very well that the people have endured persecution over dagga for a hundred years, the poor rural people, and have paid school fees of their children from dagga. If they were serious about development, they should have given a blanket permit to Mpondoland to produce this dagga. They can sell it to those people who do research and make income to be emancipated from the yoke of the oppression that they've undergone. But the so-called development is top-down and not about the people. It's about how to make more money using these rural landscapes for the central government. You need to have a licence and pay tax.

Local people are doing a lot of dagga farming, but taking a risk, because in terms of the law, you are

allowed only four plants for your own consumption. It is still illegal to sell, you can only grow and use it yourself. Some are selling to their own customers. They're doing the market analysis and those guys who are taking it seriously are well off, they are making good money and they're able to take wives and to build a homestead of good quality. So, the market is there. And the market will always be there but the government doesn't want to go the extra mile to legalize it fully. This has got so much potential for people to improve their livelihoods. It would emancipate people, but there isn't any serious, clear commitment to improving the lives of people. Instead, government is focusing externally on big ideas that are not at the scale of the local people.

The same thing applies to electricity. The reason why we are not expanding solar energy is that government is not prepared to help people to produce electricity independently from the sun, because it will not be able to collect revenue. Development is about enabling the central government to collect more revenue and redistribute that. It's about the politicians buying shareholdings, so that they are able to have businesses, or it's about the cuts they make. We have seen this trend in other African countries, where the mining companies are being told that 51% shareholding must belong to nationals [who are politicians].

So the fight with government is about economic emancipation. The tenderpreneurs, the elite who are connected to politicians, and the big companies are not really working for the masses of people, but for the few who are politically connected.

William Beinart: You have been very involved with driving eco-tourism initiatives in the region. Can you explain how this works and how it generates local revenues?

With ecotourism, tourists and hiking groups come for homestays along the entire coastline. Young people in the community have become guides who are able to give tourists some experience of the area. They are building a community lodge at the Kwanyana river where they want to create jobs and generate income. All the villages have a kind of a working document on ecotourism development.

Tourism is attractive, because tourists will come there for the beautiful landscape, waterfalls, the sparkling clean water, green rolling hills. If you allow extractive industry to operate, all of those things, they are gone. We are speaking of human scale development. Top-down development requires certain skills that community doesn't necessarily have. There's no guarantee of trickle-down development from mining. Home Stay rents go directly to the people – R2,000 or R3,000 tax free, or about R350 per person, per night sleeping on a mattress on the floor.

You would expect a democratic government and a liberation movement, such as the ruling party, to

agree with the principles of the Freedom Charter – that the people shall govern and that the land shall belong to those who work on it. The community is demanding now that the people should be the primary beneficiaries of the development that happens. The land should also be able to provide for the people who live in the city. The challenge, first and foremost, must be to provide for those who live in it. There is actually enough land for everyone. The kind of development that the communities are pushing for is more sustainable; it promotes the sustainable development goals that are being promoted by the United Nations.

NOTES

1. For a similar analysis, see Healy, H. 2022. "Struggle for the sands of Xolobeni – From post-colonial environmental injustice to crisis of democracy" *Geoforum*, 133, 128–139.
2. In December 2021, the Eastern Cape High Court handed down an interim injunction preventing Shell from conducting any seismic exploration activities off the coast of South Africa's Eastern Cape province. This case was covered on the web.
3. Long term oil extraction by Shell and other companies has led to extensive pollution in this part of Nigeria. See Amnesty International, 'No clean up, no justice: Shell's oil pollution in the Niger Delta', www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/, 18.6.2020.
4. The idiom suggests that people should listen twice as much as they speak. Not to have two ears/one mouth means that politicians talk more than they listen.
5. The South African government requires that 26% of new mining operations should be in the hands of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) beneficiaries. The chief of the AmaDiba area, Lunga Baleni, became a BEE beneficiary in his own capacity.