The blue oceans economy

South Africa's coastal cities sit on immense ocean value, so why are municipalities still treating the sea as scenery, not strategy?

Little boxes: Container terminal at the Port of Durban

Credit: Media Club South Africa

BY TIANA CLINE

Every year between June and July, billions of sardines swim north towards the coast of KwaZulu-Natal, drawing dolphins, sharks and tourists to Durban's doorstep. It's one of the largest marine migrations on the planet, yet in South Africa's coastal municipal planning offices, the ocean barely registers as an economic asset. Four of our largest cities are on one of the world's most productive ocean systems and not one of them has a formal blue economy strategy to show for it.

Elijah Ramulifho is the programme manager for the Sustainability and Resilient Cities programme at South African Cities Network (SACN). His team is currently researching the blue economy and whether local coastal cities have integrated ocean-linked economic thinking into their planning. While most people are familiar with the idea of an "oceans economy", which encompasses the economic activity that uses ocean resources, from fishing and shipping to maritime transport, tourism and offshore energy, the blue economy adds another element.

Ramulifho says the oceans economy is governed by the principles of SDG 14, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal that addresses life below water and is shaped by the same three-pillar logic that underpins sustainability. "The blue economy is about using the ocean in a way that keeps the economy, society and the environment in balance, not sacrificing one for the other," he says.

SACN's research focused on Cape Town, Gqeberha, eThekwini and KuGompo City. The Port of Durban is one of the busiest in Sub-Saharan Africa. Gqeberha has two functional ports, the Port of PE and the Port of Ngqura, and the Port of Cape Town dominates global trade routes and is the world's largest handler of fresh fruit exports. All four are within or alongside systems that generate significant economic activity from the ocean. "But none have a blue economy strategy," says Ramulifho. "There's so much work that is happening, driven by appetite from the private sector and at a national level, but at local government level, there hasn't been much integration into city planning."

Operation Phakisa, launched in 2014, projected that South Africa's oceans economy could contribute up to R177bn to GDP and create one million jobs by 2033. Even though private sector activity continues across ports, tourism and logistics, at local government level, the planning frameworks that would connect these activities to city strategies and residents don't exist. Ramulifho says it's a structural problem complicated by a jurisdictional one. Cities have urban planning authority over the land within their boundaries, but not over the water. Marine spatial planning is governed at a national level. The challenge is that the port infrastructure, the logistics zones, the tourism precincts and job-generating activities are all within city boundaries, even though the resource they depend on is governed by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment. "How can we then ensure that there is convergence between the two government instruments?" asks Ramulifho. "When we develop our urban space, we take consideration of both the inland sectors and the ocean side."

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One of the insights from SACN's ongoing research is that a blue economy strategy cannot be a template. Each of the four cities has a fundamentally different relationship with its coast. eThekwini's coast is warm – the Indian Ocean currents carry heat down from the north, creating conditions that have made Durban's beaches some of the most visited in the country and that sustain phenomena like the sardine run. Cape Town's coast is cold, dominated by the Southern Ocean and therefore suited to a different planning logic. Meanwhile, the Eastern Cape coastline is "one of the most dangerous coastlines in the world", says Ramulifho. "You have a very shallow, steep coastline and then immediately after that, you have a very steep drop into the deep ocean." This not only shapes what species are present, it changes which recreational activities are viable and what port infrastructure can be developed. "You can't have marine tourism spatial planning in an area that is not conducive to tourist attraction," he adds.

Although SACN's forthcoming research has not found a city with a formal blue ocean economy strategy, it has identified pockets of activity where ports, tourism and aquaculture are already showing what could be possible if municipalities assume leadership. Gqeberha is one of the more interesting cases. The deep-water characteristics of Algoa Bay, combined with the presence of two ports, have created conditions for ship-to-ship offshore bunkering, where vessels refuel at anchor without entering port. The depth of the Port of Ngqura means it can accommodate larger ships than most South African ports. The Coega Special Economic Zone, near Gqeberha, has also allocated a portion of its land to aquaculture development, creating a direct link between the ocean economy and local job creation. In Cape Town, the V&A Waterfront precinct attracts over 5mn tourists annually, while Durban's port generates back-of-port logistics and supply chain employment.

The problem, however, is that this is all happening in silos. "Cities need to take ownership and start participating in these initiatives," says Ramulifho. Private sector and national actors are driving activity, but city government is largely absent as a strategic actor, which means there is no framework to spread the benefits of ocean economic activity to residents, no policy environment actively attracting investment and no mechanism to connect environmental management with economic planning.

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"There is still a lack of awareness in cities about what the oceans can contribute to GDP and job creation," he adds. "Without that knowledge, you don't have the ammunition to promote your city to investors."

South Africa has 3 000km of coastline spanning three ocean zones. It has active ports, a growing ship transit route and an established coastal tourism economy. What it does not yet have at city level is a framework for turning any of that into sustained, inclusive and environmentally sound economic development. SACN's work is the first step towards closing that gap. "We don't have city strategies for the blue economy and there is still a lack of awareness about what the oceans can contribute," says Ramulifho. "But once cities understand that value, they can plan for it, invest in it and make sure it delivers jobs, growth and sustainability for their residents."