

Brief Overview of Tralso's engagement with the Dwesa Cwebe Community

By Zipho Xego

Tralso is an NGO established 1991 in response to South Africa's agrarian challenge in structuring state intervention to construct a viable smallholder economy alongside the agribusiness industry. Tralso started working with Dwesa and Cwebe communities in the early 1990's. Our work around agrarian transformation emphasizes the search for solutions that demonstrate productivity and marketability; continuity of knowledge, yet an embrace of contemporary information, methods and information technology; economy of labor and energy inputs, geared to context and local realities; and safety together with environmental sustainability. In time the organization developed a focus on servicing land rights in the former Transkei and now works with the seven villages of Ntubeni, Mpume, Ngoma, Ntlangano, Mendwana, Hobeni and Cwebe through their CPA's and Land Trust, even though Tralso's early engagement was through individual villages. The communities of Dwesa Cwebe comprise the descendants of people who were removed from the Dwesa forest.

Dwesa Cwebe Land struggle

Tralso has been involved in the Dwesa Cwebe land struggle, before the claim was lodged, during negotiations and after settlement of the claim and continues to support the Dwesa Cwebe communities. Colonial and apartheid dispossession in Dwesa Cwebe presented itself in different forms. Initially, it was not just about dispossession of land, but included various forms of denial of rights of access to a range of resources that local people needed for livelihoods, and of which they had previously enjoyed. Cwebe village approached Tralso for assistance with their land claim after being referred to by Umtata ANC offices. Tralso mobilized the seven communities towards the formal lodgment of the claim following the famous forest invasion by Dwesa and Cwebe communities that took place in Cwebe and Mendwana. A series of workshops and community meetings were organized by Tralso's in preparation for the land claim. The

hand over process took place in June 2001. The major concern was access to the resources inside the forest and the sea. They were also opposed to the militaristic conservation approach by the Eastern Cape Conservation. Grazing and access to the forest was also a major concern for Cwebe. Tralso commissioned a yearlong participatory research programme aimed at servicing the land claim. This programme resulted in strong relations between the claimants and Tralso. Community capacity was substantially consolidated through strategic support which helped facilitate two agreements

1. With The Eastern Cape Nature conservation on joint management of all resources.
2. DLA on the transfer of the land

About a decade after the settlement agreement it became apparent that a massive human rights crisis undermined any attempt at establishing a successful smallholder agricultural programme. Consequently, Tralso (part of Tshintsha Amakhaya alliance)¹ then undertook a human rights focus at Dwesa Cwebe in collaborative association with LRC and the fisherman of Hobeni, who are the key actors in a potential constitutional court challenge around customary rights. In this process our main role has been in mobilizing the community. We have been active in organizing meetings and workshops with communities in Dwesa and Cwebe. This has helped facilitate engagement between the different stakeholders involved.

Two of the main problems are that after 10 years, the land has not been transferred to the community and the community does not have access to the forest and marine resources. There are a range of other legal and political problems including governance and financial accountability of state and community institutions.

Of recent, Dwesa Cwebe has withstood the worst of a vicious perpetration of human rights violation at the hands of the state officials who have cynically disregarded and

¹ Tshintsha Amakhaya is an alliance of nine NGO's in land and agrarian reform.

blocked the implementation of a land settlement. Tralso has documented the systematic beatings, wanton arrests, shootings and killings of people who dare enter their ancestral land to access forest and marine resources. As part of the Tshintsha Amakhaya alliance Tralso has produced a community video documenting the human rights violations of the fishing communities in Dwesa-Cwebe. This video will be shown in one of the panels tomorrow.

Conclusion

The people of Dwesa Cwebe were promised title deeds, development support and regulated and sustainable access to natural resources as well as co management of the conservation areas. These are people, who for centuries have had access to marine resources, forests, medicinal plants, timber and so on. Just as they had won the land claim, there was a virtual clampdown in terms of access and people started getting shot. Since when is the meaning of land reform death, torture, beatings, arrest and complete closure of access to natural resources? Since when does transfer of ownership occur through police arrests for trespassing, instead of transferring a title deed? Unfortunately these are questions I don't have answers to but would wish someone could answer. Tralso believes that secure land rights pave the way for economic freedom and that, in our rural context, this remains impossible if the lack of land rights, human rights and appropriate state support continue to undermine the necessary foundations for sustainable development.