

# Reimagining Coastal Futures: Alternative Livelihoods and Blue Justice in South Africa's Eastern Cape

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**Abstract:** Coastal communities in South Africa's Eastern Cape encounter complex socio-environmental challenges, including declining fisheries, environmental degradation, and socio-economic marginalisation. This paper explores the role of alternative livelihoods to enhance Blue Justice, ensuring equitable access to marine resources while promoting sustainable coastal development. By drawing on interdisciplinary literature and conceptual frameworks that link socio-ecological resilience, environmental justice, and coastal governance, the study examines how diversified economic activities, such as ecotourism, aquaculture, and small-scale coastal enterprises, can help address vulnerabilities in local communities. The analysis highlights the tensions between conservation imperatives, state policies, and local resource dependence, emphasising the critical role of participatory governance and community-led initiatives. By situating alternative livelihoods within a justice-oriented framework, the paper argues that achieving sustainable coastal futures requires integrating socio-economic empowerment with environmental stewardship. This conceptual exploration offers policy-relevant insights for governments, NGOs, and practitioners aiming to balance ecological sustainability and social equity in coastal regions. The findings underscore the need for context-sensitive interventions that recognise historical marginalisation, local knowledge systems, and the agency of coastal communities.

**Keywords:** Alternative Livelihoods, Blue Justice, Coastal Communities, Coastal Governance, Eastern Cape

## Introduction

Coastal regions around the world are increasingly recognised as pivotal areas where ecological, social, and economic dynamics converge. In South Africa's Eastern Cape province, small settlements like Hamburg, located at the mouth of the Keiskamma River, exemplify both coastal vulnerability and potential (Sustainable Seas Trust, 2023). The livelihoods of Hamburg's residents rely heavily on natural resources from fisheries, subsistence agriculture, and limited eco-tourism, rendering the community particularly sensitive to environmental changes and socio-economic stressors (Sowman, 2024).

The concept of the blue economy has gained prominence as a framework for harnessing marine and coastal resources for development. However, critiques highlight the necessity for a justice-oriented perspective, termed "Blue Justice," which centres on equity, inclusion, and participatory governance in marine management (Bennett, Blythe, White, & Campero, 2025).

This study investigates how alternative livelihood strategies can be implemented within a Blue Justice framework to support sustainable coastal development in Hamburg and similar contexts in the Eastern Cape. It seeks to examine livelihood diversification through small-scale aquaculture, eco-tourism, and other non-extractive activities to combine socio-economic empowerment with environmental stewardship.

By positioning alternative livelihoods within the broader discourse of Blue Justice, this study advances a theoretical and policy agenda aimed at shifting coastal development away from purely growth-oriented trajectories towards those that prioritise equity, participation, and resilience.

## **Problem statement**

Despite the potential of the blue economy, Hamburg's coastal community faces ongoing socio-economic and environmental challenges. Key issues include declining fish stocks, degradation of estuaries, high unemployment, and limited access to marine resources. These problems are exacerbated by historical inequities stemming from apartheid-era spatial planning (Mafumbu, 2022; Sowman, 2024). Such constraints diminish local agency, hinder diversification of livelihoods, and increase vulnerability to environmental changes. The central issue is that current policies and initiatives have not adequately integrated justice-oriented approaches to ensure equitable access, participation, and sustainability. There is a significant gap in understanding how alternative livelihood strategies can be conceptualised and implemented to simultaneously promote environmental sustainability, social equity, and economic resilience in coastal communities. This study, therefore, investigates the following question: How can alternative livelihood pathways in Hamburg, Eastern Cape, be designed and implemented to advance blue justice and foster resilient, equitable, and sustainable futures for coastal communities?

## **Literature Review**

Coastal livelihoods in rural South Africa have undergone significant changes in recent decades. Research in the Eastern Cape suggests that employment opportunities have declined, subsistence activities have shifted, and many households are increasingly relying on social protection rather than diverse income-generating options (Mbukanma et al, 2025). For instance, studies in the Pondoland region reveal that households face growing fragility and have limited capacity for autonomous adaptation or diversification over time. Coastal communities are particularly vulnerable due to their reliance on natural resources and the ecosystem services they provide. Specifically, areas like the Keiskamma River Estuary, which includes the settlement of Hamburg, are highly susceptible to climate change, food insecurity, and ecosystem degradation (Sustainable Seas Trust, 2023). Livelihood diversification, such as eco-tourism, small-scale aquaculture, and other coastal enterprises, is recognised as a crucial pathway to enhance resilience; however, its success hinges on access to technology, supply chains, policy support, and markets (Torell et al., 2017). Governance and equity in coastal management have gained increasing attention under the concept of “blue justice,” which emphasises the need for distributive, recognitional, and procedural equity in marine and coastal governance (Bennett, Blythe, White, & Campero, 2023). In South Africa, coastal populations have historically faced spatial exclusion, marginalisation, and limited participation in decision-making processes, despite policy frameworks promoting the blue economy (Coastal Justice Network, 2024). National policies acknowledge the economic potential of the coast but also highlight persistent disparities, with rural settlements like Hamburg exhibiting some of the lowest income levels in the country (Government of South Africa, 2023). These dynamics illustrate that livelihood interventions must address issues of access, recognition, and participatory governance, as equity and inclusion are essential for sustainable development.

Alternative livelihoods in coastal and marine settings are well documented for diversifying income streams and reducing vulnerability. Early frameworks, such as those proposed by the IUCN (2004), emphasised assessing and implementing non-extractive or diversified livelihood strategies. More recent studies stress the need to integrate these strategies within justice-oriented frameworks. Research on small-scale fisheries in South Africa has highlighted that sustainable livelihoods require recognition of local knowledge, participatory governance, and a challenge to extractive blue economy paradigms (Macdonald, 2019). Moreover, integrating nature-based solutions and indigenous knowledge systems has emerged as a promising approach to promote both ecological sustainability and community resilience. For instance, eco-creative projects in Hamburg have combined scientific and indigenous methods to develop sustainable livelihood opportunities while restoring local ecological functions (Sustainable Seas Trust, 2023; Cambridge Prisms, 2024).

Despite these developments, gaps remain in the literature. While there is a growing body of scholarship on blue justice, many studies have focused narrowly on fisheries rather than a broader range of livelihood opportunities, including tourism, aquaculture, and craft industries in the Eastern Cape context. Empirical studies that integrate blue justice with alternative livelihood pathways in small settlements such as Hamburg are still limited. Furthermore, the intersection of historical marginalisation, coastal governance, and livelihood diversification in small coastal communities is underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on Hamburg to examine how alternative livelihoods can be developed and implemented within a blue justice framework, offering pathways toward more equitable, resilient, and sustainable coastal futures.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Blue Justice, Sustainable Livelihoods, and Socio-Ecological Resilience. Blue Justice provides a framework for understanding equity, inclusion, and fairness in coastal and marine governance. It emphasises that coastal development and resource use should consider three types of justice: distributive justice (who benefits), recognitional justice (whose knowledge and identities are valued), and procedural justice (who participates in decision-making) (Bennett et al., 2023). In the context of Hamburg, Eastern Cape, blue justice highlights how historical marginalisation, limited access to coastal resources, and insufficient participation in governance structures hinder the community's ability to benefit from coastal development initiatives.

The Sustainable Livelihoods framework complements this perspective by examining how households mobilise various forms of capital, namely natural, human, social, physical, and financial, to maintain and diversify their livelihoods (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 2015). In coastal settings, this framework has been widely utilised to explore how communities adapt to environmental change and economic shocks by developing alternative livelihood strategies. In Hamburg, residents' reliance on fishing, subsistence agriculture, and small-scale enterprises can be viewed through this lens, which highlights both vulnerabilities and opportunities for diversifying into sustainable alternatives such as eco-tourism or aquaculture.

The Socio-Ecological Resilience perspective underscores the dynamic interactions between human communities and ecological systems (Folke, 2006; Porri et al., 2023). Resilience theory emphasises the capacity of social-ecological systems to absorb disturbances, adapt to change, and transform in response to stressors. By integrating resilience thinking with blue justice and sustainable livelihoods, we can achieve a more holistic understanding of how coastal communities can develop adaptive strategies that are both socially equitable and ecologically sustainable.

By synthesising these three perspectives, the study constructs a conceptual framework in which alternative livelihoods are positioned as mechanisms for enhancing community resilience while promoting justice in coastal resource governance. This framework acknowledges that sustainable development in Hamburg must address ecological constraints, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and historical injustices simultaneously, providing a theoretically grounded approach to reimagining coastal futures in the Eastern Cape.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a conceptual and exploratory research design, suitable for investigating alternative livelihoods and blue justice in Hamburg, Eastern Cape. It follows a qualitative, interpretive approach that combines insights from academic literature, policy documents, and case studies to develop a theoretical understanding of how alternative livelihoods can support equitable and sustainable coastal development.

Data for this study were gathered from various sources. Primary sources include government policy frameworks such as the South African Coastal Policy and blue economy initiatives, as well as reports from non-governmental organisations and coastal advocacy networks that focus on community development and environmental sustainability. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and grey literature addressing coastal livelihoods, socio-ecological resilience, and blue justice, with particular emphasis on contexts like Hamburg in the Eastern Cape. Recent studies on eco-tourism, small-scale aquaculture, and other diversified livelihood initiatives will aid in identifying potential strategies that could be implemented in Hamburg.

The study adopted a thematic content analysis approach to synthesise insights across these sources, identifying recurring patterns, challenges, and opportunities related to alternative livelihoods and equitable governance. Key themes explored included socio-economic vulnerability, governance and participatory decision-making, pathways for livelihood diversification, and environmental sustainability. These themes are examined through a theoretical framework that integrates blue justice, sustainable livelihoods, and socio-ecological resilience, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how coastal futures can be reimaged.

Ultimately, the research positions its findings within a policy-oriented framework, outlining implications for local governments, community-based organisations, and NGOs involved in coastal development. The methodology emphasises conceptual rigour, triangulation of sources, and contextual relevance, providing a robust foundation for subsequent empirical research whilst generating actionable insights for policy and practice in the Eastern Cape.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Based on the conceptual synthesis of literature, policy documents, and case studies, several key insights emerge regarding alternative livelihoods and blue justice in Hamburg, Eastern Cape. First, livelihood diversification emerges as a crucial mechanism for strengthening community resilience. Small-scale aquaculture, eco-tourism, and coastal craft enterprises are particularly promising options, offering economic opportunities while reducing reliance on traditional fishing practices vulnerable to environmental change (Torell et al., 2017; Macdonald, 2019). By integrating these livelihood strategies with local knowledge and participatory planning, communities can bolster both economic security and social cohesion.

Second, applying a blue justice perspective highlights that equity and participation are vital to sustainable livelihood interventions. Coastal communities such as Hamburg have historically faced marginalisation in resource governance, and without mechanisms for inclusive decision-making, new livelihood initiatives risk reinforcing existing inequalities (Bennett et al., 2023; Coastal Justice Network, 2024). Therefore, participatory governance structures, co-management approaches, and recognition of local knowledge are essential to ensure benefits are shared fairly and community agency is enhanced.

Third, linking livelihood strategies to socio-ecological resilience underscores the importance of environmental stewardship along with economic development. Alternative livelihoods must be designed within ecological limits, promoting restoration and sustainable use of coastal ecosystems. For example, eco-tourism initiatives can generate income while incentivising conservation of estuarine habitats and biodiversity in the Hamburg area (Sustainable Seas Trust, 2023).

Finally, the discussion reveals the necessity of integrated policy frameworks that connect local development initiatives with regional and national strategies. Policies supporting training, market access, resource rights, and financial backing for small-scale enterprises are vital to ensure that alternative livelihoods are viable, scalable, and aligned with blue justice principles. Conceptually, the findings suggest that sustainable coastal futures in

Hamburg can only be realised by simultaneously addressing economic, social, and environmental dimensions through justice-oriented and participatory approaches.

In sum, the conceptual analysis indicates that alternative livelihood pathways, when embedded within frameworks of blue justice and socio-ecological resilience, offer promising strategies for fostering equitable and sustainable coastal development in the Eastern Cape. These insights provide a foundation for empirical investigation, practical application, and policy formulation in Hamburg and comparable coastal communities.

### **Policy Implications**

The conceptual analysis of alternative livelihoods in Hamburg, Eastern Cape, within a blue justice framework, yields several implications for policy and practice. First, there is a clear need for policies that prioritise equitable access to coastal resources. This includes recognising historical inequities and ensuring that local communities have meaningful participation in decision-making processes related to marine and coastal management. Policies should support community-based co-management structures that empower residents to shape the allocation and use of resources in ways that align with local needs and cultural practices (Bennett et al., 2023). Second, livelihood diversification initiatives require targeted support to be effective. Government agencies and NGOs should facilitate access to training, microfinance, technical resources, and markets for small-scale enterprises, including eco-tourism, aquaculture, and artisanal crafts. Integrating these initiatives with existing local knowledge and practices can enhance both economic viability and social acceptance, while simultaneously reducing pressure on vulnerable ecosystems (Torell et al., 2017; Macdonald, 2019). Third, environmental sustainability must be embedded in all livelihood interventions. Policies should promote nature-based solutions, habitat restoration, and sustainable resource use that align with socio-ecological resilience principles. For example, eco-tourism initiatives can generate income while incentivising the conservation of estuarine habitats and biodiversity in Hamburg and surrounding areas (Sustainable Seas Trust, 2023). Finally, there is a need for integrated and multi-level governance frameworks that connect local initiatives with regional and national development strategies. Such frameworks should align coastal livelihood policies with broader blue economy objectives while safeguarding social equity and ecological integrity. Coordination among government departments, NGOs, and community organisations is essential to ensure that interventions are context-sensitive, scalable, and sustainable.

Taken together, these policy implications highlight the importance of designing interventions that are socially just, environmentally sustainable, and economically viable. By operationalising blue justice principles through targeted, participatory, and ecologically informed policies, stakeholders can support alternative livelihoods that enhance resilience and foster sustainable coastal futures in Hamburg and similar Eastern Cape settlements.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has explored the potential of alternative livelihoods to advance blue justice and sustainable coastal development in Hamburg, Eastern Cape. By synthesising insights from literature, policy frameworks, and case studies, the analysis has highlighted that livelihood diversification through small-scale aquaculture, eco-tourism, and coastal enterprises can enhance both economic resilience and social equity. The application of a blue justice lens underscores the importance of recognising historical marginalisation, ensuring participatory decision-making, and distributing benefits equitably. Integrating these approaches with socio-ecological resilience principles further emphasises that livelihoods must be environmentally sustainable and adaptive to ecological change. The findings indicate that achieving sustainable coastal futures in Hamburg requires multi-dimensional interventions that simultaneously address economic, social, and environmental objectives. Conceptually, the study demonstrates that alternative livelihood strategies, when embedded within participatory and justice-oriented frameworks, have the

potential to transform coastal communities into resilient, empowered, and environmentally responsible actors.

Based on these insights, several key recommendations emerge. First, local and regional authorities should develop policies that ensure equitable access to coastal resources and enable community co-management. Second, interventions to diversify livelihoods must include support for training, market access, technical resources, and financial mechanisms tailored to local conditions. Third, environmental sustainability should be integrated into all livelihood initiatives through nature-based solutions and conservation-linked economic activities. Finally, governance mechanisms should be coordinated across multiple levels to align local initiatives with regional and national development objectives, ensuring interventions are context-sensitive, scalable, and just.

In conclusion, operationalising alternative livelihoods through a blue justice lens offers a viable pathway for fostering resilient, equitable, and sustainable coastal futures in Hamburg and similar settlements across the Eastern Cape. These conceptual insights provide a foundation for empirical research and practical policy implementation, contributing to the broader discourse on just and sustainable coastal development in South Africa.

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