

Ocean20 Stakeholder Inception Meeting and SAEON Community Engagement

Mbombela, Mpumalanga

26-28 May 2025



1. Introduction

As part of South Africa's leadership during its [G20 Presidency in 2025](#), a key emphasis was placed on inclusion and sustainability across national and global agendas. Within this framework, the [Ocean20 South Africa](#) team hosted a landmark three-day event in Mbombela, Mpumalanga, a region far from the coastline but nonetheless connected to the ocean through rivers, weather systems, and socio-economic dynamics. This engagement served a dual purpose: launching the national Ocean20 stakeholder process and expanding ocean dialogue to communities traditionally excluded from such policy spaces. The community engagement also reflected the Ocean20 vision that 'the ocean affects everyone, even those far from the coast.' The outreach event was followed by the Ocean20 Inception Meeting for G20 participants, held in hybrid format, to highlight Ocean Actions as focus areas for collaboration.

2. Background: Ocean20 and South Africa's Presidency

Ocean20 is a formally recognised engagement group under the G20 platform that promotes inclusive and sustainable ocean development. Since its formulation under Indonesia's G20 presidency in 2022, and continuing through the presidency of India, and culminating in its launch in Brazil, the initiative has focused on building resilient marine ecosystems, advancing inclusive ocean economies, fostering cross-sectoral partnerships, and enhancing the science-policy interface. With South Africa at the forefront in 2025, the Ocean20 vision emphasizes equitable participation, particularly drawing inland communities and early-career professionals into ocean governance discussions.

3. Summary Overview: Mbombela Programme

The programme in Mbombela unfolded over three days, bringing together inland communities, scientists, government officials, and ocean stakeholders. From 26 to 27 May, the focus was on community outreach, education, and participatory activities, while the final day, 28 May, was dedicated to showcasing the Ocean20 planning process through a formal stakeholder inception meeting.

4. Community Outreach: "Taking the Ocean Inland"

4.1 Agenda Overview

The outreach event, hosted at the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) Lowveld Garden, was themed "Why Do Oceans Matter to Inland Communities?" and was led by Ms Gugulethu Zwane, Acting Director-General of the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI). The programme unfolded as follows:

Time	Session	Speaker(s)
08:00 - 09:15	Registration and Breakfast	
09:15 - 09:25	Arrival of the Political Principals	
09:25 - 09:30	National Anthem	
09:30 - 09:45	Welcome Remarks	Mr. Morris Mazibane, MMC Strategic Services in the office of the Executive Mayor of Mbombela
09:45 - 10:00	Purpose of the Day	Dr. Mary-Jane Bopape, MD: NRF-SAEON
10:00 - 10:20	Keynote Address	Prof. Blade Nzimande, Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation
10:20 - 10:50	Ocean video and photo ice-breaker	Mr. Joe Sibiya & Ms Nomvelo Maplinda
10:50 - 11:50	Exploring the Crocodile River and your influence on the ocean	Ms Phumuzdo Ragimana & Ms Caitlin Ransom
11:50 - 12:30	Local Skies, Local Stories	Dr. Moagabo Ragoasha
12:30 - 13:15	Lunch	
13:15 - 13:50	The ocean's influence on rainfall and temperature	Dr. Ramontsheng Rapolaki
13:50 - 14:10	Opportunities in the Blue Economy	Mr. Malcolm Alexander, TETA, & Ms Thando Mazomba, Ocean Hub Africa
14:10 - 14:20	Q & A	Led by the Deputy Minister Dr. Nomalungelo Gina
14:20 - 14:30	Vote of Thanks	Led by the Deputy Minister Dr. Nomalungelo Gina

4.2 Summary and Speakers

The outreach event opened with a powerful keynote address by Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI), **Prof Blade Nzimande**, who framed the day's purpose within South Africa's leadership of the G20 and its broader agenda for inclusive science and innovation. He highlighted that the decision to host the Ocean20 event in Mpumalanga, an inland province, was deliberate and meant to challenge the notion that the ocean only matters to coastal communities.

"We may not see the ocean every day, but the ocean feels the impact of our everyday actions."

"Both inland and coastal communities must play a role in preserving our oceans and other aspects of our biodiversity."

The Minister painted a vivid picture of South Africa's ocean footprint, noting that our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) could grow to more than 2.4 million km², making it larger than our landmass. He reminded the audience that the ocean provides over half the oxygen we breathe, and is vital for climate regulation, rainfall, and food security, all of which directly affect inland farmers, communities, and youth.

"Every breath we take is a gift from the ocean."

"Understanding the ocean is particularly important for farming and rural communities."

Prof Nzimande also highlighted the critical research and infrastructure supported by the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation through the NRF-SAEON, including its coastal and offshore research nodes, marine infrastructure, and Antarctic programmes. These initiatives help South Africa monitor and understand ocean systems to ensure national and global sustainability.

Following this, the event shifted into a series of thematic sessions designed to bring the Minister's message to life:

- The **SAEON Science Engagement Team** facilitated workshops that used the Crocodile River and MiniSASS as a teaching tool, illustrating how local water systems impact ocean health.
- **Dr. Moagabo Ragoasha's (UCT)** "Local Skies, Local Stories" offered an inspiring blend of cultural wisdom and science, reinforcing the idea that stories and science both have a role in conservation.
- **Dr. Ramontsheng Rapolaki (SAWS)** explained how the ocean affects inland rainfall and temperature, making the case that changes in climate are often ocean-driven, even far from the coast.
- **Mr. Malcolm Alexander (TETA)** and **Ms Thando Mazomba (OceanHub Africa)** shared exciting career opportunities in the Blue Economy, from innovation and research to shipping/transport and sustainable enterprise.

Finally, the programme created space for community voices, as local residents and youth shared personal experiences with changing climate patterns, river health, and food production, echoing the Ocean20 and the Minister's call for inclusive, people-centred ocean governance.

4.3 Highlights and Key Takeaways

- **Inland to Ocean Connection:** Attendees walked away with a deeper understanding of how inland actions and ecosystems are closely tied to the ocean's health.
- **Youth Empowerment:** The programme sparked enthusiasm among young people for careers in marine science, innovation, and ocean advocacy.
- **Community Voice:** There was a strong call for inland communities to be more actively involved in national ocean policies and discussions.

5. Stakeholder Inception Meeting

5.1 Agenda Overview

Held on 28 May 2025 at the University of Mpumalanga, the Ocean20 Stakeholder Inception Meeting brought together a diverse mix of participants from government, academia, civil society, and business. The session was opened by Dr. Mary-Jane Bopape, Managing Director of NRF-SAEON, who welcomed attendees and set the tone for a day of collaboration.

The meeting featured hybrid participation, to accommodate representatives from G20 states, with strong engagement both in person and online. It served to deepen national ownership of the Ocean20 process and discuss how local innovations and community knowledge can shape South Africa's contribution to the global ocean sustainability agenda.

5.2 Summary and Speakers

Dr. Tammy Morris, Ocean20 South Africa Lead Coordinator, opened the session with an overview of national efforts to align local actions with global ocean sustainability goals. She highlighted areas like ocean finance, renewable energy, ecosystem restoration, and capacity building. Dr. Morris stressed that progress must be both inclusive and practical. She also referenced the recent launch of the UN Global Compact Ocean Investment Protocol, calling it a critical step toward financing a sustainable ocean economy.

This was followed by a lively interactive discussion on how we define terms like *ocean economy* and *blue economy*. This session revealed that many people view the ocean economy as covering all economic activity linked to the ocean, whether it's fishing, shipping,

tourism, or innovation, while the blue economy focuses on making those activities sustainable and fair. This prompted quotes that captured the mood of the day:

“We can’t have a sustainable ocean without inclusion.”

“Without the ocean, there is no economy.”

“Shared understanding leads to shared responsibility.”

The next portion of the session featured presentations on current Ocean Actions happening across the country.

Ms Safiyya Sedick (SAEON) introduced ECON-SA, a growing network for early-career ocean professionals. She explained how it will help connect young scientists and early career ocean professionals, give them a voice in ocean policy, and improve access to mentorship and resources.

Mr. Jethan d’Hotman and Prof Juliet Hermes (SAEON) presented work on low-cost ocean monitoring tools that coastal communities can use to gather data about their local marine environments. These tools help fill research gaps and allow citizens to contribute to national ocean science.

Ms Nicole du Plessis shared a proposal to reimagine the South African Marine Research and Exploration Forum (SAMREF) as a more open and collaborative platform. Rather than focusing solely on oil and gas, she suggested expanding it to support partnerships between researchers, industry, and local communities for better data sharing and innovation.

The session ended with an interactive Blue Foods panel that explored how ocean-related food systems can support sustainable development.

- **Ms Mashebane Thosago**, President of SA Women in Fisheries, described the work being done across the region to support women and youth in aquaculture and small-scale fishing. She stressed the need for funding, permits, and government support to help these projects grow.
- **Mr. Gert le Roux** from Woolworths spoke about challenges and opportunities in sourcing seafood from small-scale fishers. He shared how the retail sector can help by improving certification systems and supporting more accessible sustainability standards.
- **Ms Aphiwe Moshani**, a PhD candidate and Blue Food Futures Fellow, discussed the importance of investing in research and better data to guide South Africa’s blue food strategies. She also highlighted issues like exclusion from markets, lack of funding, and how historical land and ocean injustices still affect many fishing communities today.
- **Dr. Serge Raemaekers**, Director of Abalobi, focused on how small-scale fishing cooperatives can build sustainable businesses. He shared how Abalobi helps fishers track their catch, access markets, save money, and even get life insurance, all while supporting responsible fishing practices.

5.3 Highlights and Key Takeaways

- **We need a shared language:** The discussion showed that many people are using terms like “ocean economy” and “blue economy” differently. Creating common understanding will help align government, research, and business goals.
- **Inclusion must be real and practical:** Youth, women, and small-scale fishers, especially those inland, must not only be invited to participate but also supported through funding, training, and access to decision-making.
- **Stronger partnerships are essential:** Participants agreed that researchers, communities, and businesses need to collaborate more. Tools like ECON-SA and SAMREF can help build those bridges.
- **From discussion to action:** From aquaculture to coastal monitoring, South Africans are already building solutions. The focus now is scaling what works and supporting it with real resources.
- **Food security and blue innovation are national issues:** Blue foods, like fish, seaweed, and aquaculture, are about more than the coast. They can play a role in feeding people, creating jobs, and strengthening the economy across the country.
- **Data matters:** Whether from satellites or small boats, better information helps communities protect the ocean and plan for the future.

6. Conclusion

The Mbombela programme embodied the core values of Ocean20: inclusion, sustainability, and innovation. It brought the ocean to inland South Africa, not just geographically, but emotionally and intellectually, while launching a collaborative national process to shape South Africa’s Ocean20 contributions.

The event’s outcomes will guide the next phases of stakeholder engagement and feed directly into South Africa’s G20 reporting, showcasing how local action informs global change. As the journey continues, sustained collaboration, investment, and transparency will be essential to building a lasting Ocean20 legacy for people and the ocean.