



Building resilience

Farmer exchanges and seed rituals



In South Africa, where there is so little government support for agro-ecology and farmer-led initiatives, farmer exchanges and seed rituals are important events where farmers can come together to affirm traditional farming practices and celebrate seed.

At these events, such as the recent Biowatch Farmer Exchanges in Pongola and Ingwavuma, farmers share experiences and information on agro-ecological low-input agriculture, and together find ways to conserve and use their agricultural biodiversity. Importantly, these farmer exchanges and seed rituals also provide space for debate and critique of the handing out of “free” seed and chemical fertilisers to communities by government. These form part of a package of aid to communities which is premised on supporting an industrial model of agriculture – of monocultures, pesticides, GM seeds, high energy and water consumption, and land-grabs – which undermines farmers’ resilience.



Top: This extraordinary display of seed diversity was part of a seed ritual event hosted by the Indulo Seed Project, an umbrella group for Biowatch’s Ingwavuma projects. The aim of this annual event is to exhibit and bless the participating groups’ seeds. Above: Members of the Mupo Foundation, Venda, who attended the recent Pongola farmer exchange.

The Competition Tribunal has refused a merger that would have placed control of South Africa’s seed industry into the hands of two US-based multinationals.



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Zimele Rural Women’s Empowerment Organisation (ZRWE) members deliver their first samples of in-season vegetables to Pick n Pay.



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Biowatch t-shirt with hand embroidered mealie.

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From the director

COP17 – being held in Durban, the location of Biowatch’s head office – marks the coming end of 2011. Biowatch will be involved in the C17 People’s Space, the venue for civil society, where amongst other things we will be hosting an “Agro-Ecology and Climate Event” together with the African Biodiversity Network. The C17 People’s Space will be the place for “Change the system not the climate!”

We’ve had a busy past six months and been involved in a wide range of activities. Details of these, such as the national “Promoting agro-ecology and exploring effective markets” workshop, an African Biodiversity Network (ABN) partners meeting, the Competition Tribunal ruling against the proposed Pioneer/Pannar merger, and a pilot community market access case study, are described in greater detail in this newsletter.

Research has been an important part of our work during the past six months with legal analysis of the nine-year Biowatch legal battle being completed. (This started off as an access to information case and ended around the issue of legal costs, with a judgement ruling that Biowatch should pay Monsanto’s legal costs being overturned at the Constitutional Court.) We are also currently involved in two projects on seeds: field research in KwaZulu-Natal with small farmers; and a legal and policy analysis of the seed sector in SA.

In September, we engaged an agro-ecological expert to give an independent critical assessment of our agro-ecological practice and to give guidance towards greater livestock incorporation. It was a most helpful intervention!

Several farmer exchanges and seed rituals have also taken place. These are important spaces for small-scale farmers across the country to share experiences and knowledge. We look forward to many more of these significant events in 2012.

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Merger refused

Good news! The Competition Tribunal has refused the merger between US-headed multinational Pioneer Hi-Bred and South Africa’s largest seed company, Pannar – see Biowatch Bulletin: June 2011.

Biowatch made submissions against the proposed merger in November 2010 at the Competition Commission. The merger was refused by the Competition Commission in December. This decision was appealed and the matter was heard in September 2011. Biowatch was admitted to intervene at the Tribunal hearing but withdrew after the terms of its participation were significantly narrowed down.

Biowatch believes that blocking the merger is the best option given the concentration of control in the seed sector. Our position is that to meet South Africa’s needs, food production must be diversified and placed firmly in the control of community based farmers, not corporates.

Note: Pioneer and Pannar have since lodged an appeal to the Competition Appeal Court. We’ll keep you updated.

SA GM update:

Long list of permits approved in 2011

For a full (and worryingly long) list of permits approved in 2011 see the Genetic Resources: Biosafety section of the Department of Agriculture’s website. Most of the permits have been given to Monsanto and Pioneer.

GM rice

Approval has been granted to Bayer Crop Science to import LibertyLink (LLRice 62), a so-called “herbicide tolerant” GM rice. This GM rice is not yet grown commercially anywhere in the world, so this application is seemingly in preparation for when the market is “ready”. With the growing antipathy in South Africa towards eating GM foods, it’s hoped that the market will never be ready!

GM maize – “Give it back!”

GM maize is still being handed out by government to unsuspecting communities as “free” seed. “YieldGuard” GM maize has been handed out to communities with no explanation of what GM maize is, how it should be planted, what the environmental and health risks are, or that the GM maize can contaminate their traditional maize varieties. Fortunately, as a result of a recent farmer exchange, the Pongola community is aware of GMOs and they’ve said a loud “give it back” to the free maize seed!



Left: The Zimele Rural Women's Empowerment Organisation (ZRWE) community market garden at KwaHhohho, near Mtubatuba. Middle: Household garden of one of the ZRWEO project members. Right: ZRWEO deliver their first samples of in-season vegetables to Pick n Pay in Mtubatuba.

Pilot market access case study

Biowatch is participating in a pilot market access case study with 30 members of Zimele Rural Woman's Empowerment Organisation (ZRWEO) in KwaHhohho, near Mtubatuba in KwaZulu-Natal. Each member has a home garden and access to a community garden.

The ZRWEO Pilot Market Access Project started in April 2011 with a workshop to establish capacity, discuss a planting programme and examine market opportunities. Working with Biowatch, the market committee then investigated and made contact with potential buyers in the area, including major retailers and local resorts, and secured an order from Pick n Pay in Mtubatuba.

In June they delivered their first samples of tomatoes, cabbage and spinach, and now continue to supply Pick n Pay. In summer, crops such as green mealies (traditional varieties), pumpkin and beans will be planted for sale.

Factors contributing to the success of this pilot include:

- the enthusiasm and commitment of project members supported by a democratically elected market committee;
- the market survey and visit to potential buyers by Biowatch;
- "bridging" loans provided by Biowatch for the purchase of additional seedlings; and
- a good transport deal secured by the market committee.

Strategy meeting

In October, Biowatch hosted a market strategy meeting in Mtubatuba with a number of government departments (Economic Development and Tourism, Social Development, Health, Local Economic Development) and two other NGOs, CRESSI (Co-operative Rural Enterprise Support Initiative) and the Siyavuna Development Centre.

This is the start of a formal engagement and exchange regarding the support that government can give to marginalised small-scale farmers.

Community trainings

Several community members from Biowatch projects recently attended climate justice workshops organised by TCOE and EMG, while others participated in a training event organised by Siyavuna Development Centre on Co-operative Development – bookkeeping and financial management; soil improvement techniques; agro-processing.



Sophiwe Dlamini (left), a Biowatch Community Facilitator, with her seed bank in her home in Pongola. Together with her husband, daughter, grandmother and other members of the family, Sophiwe grows over 50 different species of crops, vegetables and imifino in their biodiverse homestead garden.

National workshop: Promoting Agro-ecology and Exploring Effective Markets



Participants at the national agro-ecology workshop hosted by Biowatch, SPP and EMG.

In August, Biowatch – with partners Surplus People Project (SPP) and Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG) – hosted a national workshop on “Promoting Agro-ecology and Exploring Effective Markets”. The workshop, which was held in Scottburgh, KwaZulu-Natal, was attended by 37 small-scale farmers, activists, NGO staff and academics.

The aim of the workshop was to deepen our understanding of agro-ecology, develop strategies to promote it as an alternative to industrial agriculture, and explore effective markets for surplus production.

Opinion and support for “Promoting Agro-ecology” was unanimous. However, when it came to “Exploring Effective Markets” there was a wide range of opinions and concerns. This is an arena that was new for many of the workshop participants and there are many issues to be grappled with.

African Biodiversity Network partners' meeting in Kenya

In June, Biowatch agro-ecology manager, Lawrence Mkhaliphi, participated in the African Biodiversity Network's (ABN) Bi-Annual Partners' Meeting. ABN is a network of individuals and organisations seeking African solutions to the ecological and socio-economic challenges that face the continent. Biowatch has been part of this network since its inception in 2002.

The main purpose of the meeting was to reflect on and review 10 years of ABN work, and to renew a strong momentum in ABN as a partner-driven network.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- COP17 United Nations Climate Change Conference – 28 November to 9 December 2011, Durban
- Biowatch/African Biodiversity Network “Agro-ecology and Climate Event” – 30 November, C17 People's Space, UKZN, Durban
- Rio+20 People's Summit for Social and Environmental Justice – June 2012, Rio de Janeiro

Biowatch Bulletin will keep you updated.

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