



How can we sustain the diversity of seeds that feed us?

A central question at SKI Seed Seminar



More than 40 delegates from South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi and the UK attended a seed seminar organised by the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), a long-term collaboration between Biowatch South Africa, the Mupo Foundation and the DST/NRF Bio-economy Research Chair at the University of Cape Town. SKI is working to revive and enhance traditional seeds and knowledge systems and to deepen understanding about their functioning, within the context of supportive agricultural, cultural and ecological practices.

The two-day seminar, which took place in September in Stellenbosch, brought together representatives from a number of NGOs working with farmers, as well as gene bank managers, government and academic researchers and breeders, and a group of postgraduate students from UCT.

Delegates from seven countries attended the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) Seed Seminar in Stellenbosch.

Delegates explored ways to strengthen support for small farmer-led seed systems which focus on knowledge exchange, collaboration and innovation between formal and informal seed systems, and spent time mapping a way forward to create more sustainable farmer-led innovation systems that can maintain the diversity of seed in the region. Such systems are critical not only for ensuring food security and increased resilience to wider environmental and climatic change but also for embracing entire cultures and identities.

More information about SKI and its work in the region is available on our website at www.biowatch.org.za.

Following a lengthy process, Biowatch-supported farmers (10 farmers from 5 project sites) receive



water tanks from the Department of Water and Sanitation.

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“We say NO to GMOs.” Farmers speak out at the Biowatch Seed Sovereignty and Agro-ecology



Seminar, claiming their right to save and choose their own seed.

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Farmers from Zululand and Venda visit the Chikukwa Ecological Land Use Community Trust in Zimbabwe



as part of a SKI experience sharing and learning event.

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From the director

2014 was the United Nations International Year of the Family Farmer; 2015 is the International Year of Soils. These huge topics are now getting the attention they deserve, but massive political will is needed for the implementation of what is needed. It is not enough to promote family farming and living soils: we must analyse and dismantle the systems that undermine them.

We look forward to a year where the gains from the year of the family farmer are built on and where there is a global mind-opening to the importance of soils. There is more than enough evidence that family farming feeds most of the people on Earth, and that a healthy soil is vital for life on Earth. Soil should not be in an intensive care unit needing ever-increasing doses of, ultimately toxic, chemical fertilisers! We also look forward to a year where the myths of climate smart agriculture and sustainable intensification are debunked.

In 2014, Biowatch spent much time building relations and preparing the ground for a long term project for the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI). This was followed by the development of an M&E framework with partners the Mupo Foundation and the University of Cape Town, and farmer representatives in the five communities in which we work. It's good to enter 2015 with this process behind us and to have it to guide us in our important work on seed and knowledge systems and promoting agro-ecology as a sustainable farming practice.

We hope that you find this bulletin informative and enjoyable reading – the activities highlighted range from the local to the regional to the global. There are many similar synergies and struggles with others all over the world and the more that these can be linked the more the narrative and practices can be changed on a local and global level.

We wish all our readers all the best for 2015.

Rose Williams

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GM update

■ Study: GM contamination in Eastern Cape

A recent research study by Iversen, Grønsberg, van den Berg, Fischer, Aheto and Bøhn titled “Detection of Transgenes in Local Maize Varieties of Small-Scale Farmers in Eastern Cape, South Africa” has just been published. The study highlights many important issues particularly that seed farmers have nurtured over generations has been contaminated. This careful research published in *PLoS ONE* (which also notes that the authors have declared that no competing interests exist), should be read in its entirety. It has implications for policy and decision makers, farmers and consumers. For the full article see www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0116147.

■ Opposition to GM banana feeding trials

Biowatch, along with more than 120 organisations, has signed an open letter from the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) strongly opposing the human feeding trials taking place in the US involving the so-called “super banana”: GM Matooke, Sweet and Roasting bananas (see www.afsafrica.org/afsa-open-letter-opposing-human-feeding-trials-involving-gm-banana/). This letter has been sent to the responsible parties: the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Dr. Wendy White from Iowa State University, and the Human Institutional Review Board of Iowa State University.

■ International tribunal demands GM maize ban in Mexico

The ETC Group reports that the Mexican Chapter of the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal has called on the Mexican government to ban the planting of genetically modified (GM) maize in the country. The Tribunal’s decision cited the importance of maize as one of three principal staple crops globally, which millions depend on. The Tribunal, which considered evidence gathered over three years from more than 1000 organisations on this and other issues, also highlighted the importance of Mexico as the centre of origin of maize globally. The Mexican government, the Tribunal ruled, must “adopt all necessary measures to ensure the conservation of peasant maize as the main food source and as a vital element of the social structure and cohesion.” The final ruling noted “serious risks” of genetic contamination in “the centre of origin and diversity of this staple crop,” which forms the basis of the livelihood of the “Peoples that created it for the good of all mankind.” Read ETC’s excellent report here: www.etcgroup.org/content/international-tribunal-demands-gm-maize-ban-mexico.

Farmers receive water tanks from government

Following a lengthy process that started with the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in 2013, 50 Biowatch-supported farmers (10 farmers from 5 project sites) received water tanks from the Department of Water and Sanitation in November 2014. Water tanks are vital in rain-fed agriculture areas.

It is a small, but important step forward and is an example of government responding to the farmers' articulated needs for water tanks and fencing (and not for GM seed, fertilisers and pesticides). It is also support for farmers who practice agro-ecology – agriculture that does not have the devastating water consumption of industrial agriculture.

This department is now working towards supplying approximately 700 more water tanks over the next few years. We are documenting the process, so that it can be of use to other farmers and organisations.



Seed learnings in Brazil

In August, Karen Read (Biowatch Advocacy Practitioner) was part of a 14-member international team that visited the Movimento Campones Popular (MCP) in Goiânia, Brazil. MCP has been rescuing, producing, sharing and saving creole seeds for the past 10 years.

MCP was able to refuse GMO seed from the government, and rather negotiate to grow their own seeds, distribute these to their own farmers, and have the government pay them for doing so. We look forward to incorporating what was learned into Biowatch's work.



"We say NO to GMOs": Farmers speak out at Biowatch's Seed Sovereignty and Agro-ecology Seminar.



Seed Sovereignty and Agro-ecology Seminar

Through the voices of farmers, the Seed Sovereignty and Agro-ecology Seminar held in June in Pongola highlighted the importance of seed, seed saving and multiplication, and the farmers' right to choose their own seed.

More than 60 delegates, including farmers from five of Biowatch's project sites and representatives from local government, attended the Biowatch event which included a seed display, a panel discussion on seed sovereignty, a seed sharing celebration, and a site visit to Seed Champion Sophiwe Dlamini's homestead and household seedbank. A highlight was the session "Farmers' stories: seed diversity, saving seed and marching for our rights".

Such opportunities support farmers to build morale and take pride in their activities as agro-ecologists and activists. By acknowledging seed diversity and promoting household seedbanking, farmers are strengthening their vibrant seed networks.

LIVING SUSTAINABLY



Biowatch participated in this year's Sustainable Living Exhibition, along with Earthlife Africa Durban, South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) and Timberwatch. The four organisations combined their efforts to promote their work and environmental justice. Working at the joint exhibit were (left to right) Tholinhlanhla Mzimela, Linda Hlengwa (Biowatch interns), Bongani Mthembu (SDCEA) and Delwyn Pillay (Earthlife).

REGIONAL FARMERS MEET



As part of the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), farmers from northern Zululand and Venda joined Biowatch Agro-ecology Manager Lawrence Mkhalihi on a visit to the Chikukwa Ecological Land Use Community Trust in Zimbabwe. Despite language barriers, farmers shared what they know and do, and inspired each other with their experiences and successes.

CIVIL SOCIETY MEETS IN ROME TO DEVELOP POSITIONS ON FOOD SECURITY



In October, Rose Williams (Biowatch Director) visited Rome to participate in the two-day Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) meeting to develop a civil society position to take to the week-long World Committee on Food Security (CFS) meeting. The CFS meeting, with delegations from the 127 member countries of the United Nations, was hosted by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO).

SKI PARTNERS VISIT BHUTAN



In June, representatives from each of the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) partners visited Bhutan. Pictured above (from left to right) are Rachel Wynberg, University of Cape Town; Mashudu Takalani, Mupo Foundation; Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss, SKI Co-ordinator; and Lawrence Mkhalihi, Biowatch Agro-ecology Manager.

The main purpose of the visit was to participate in the 14th Congress of the International Society for Ethnobiology (ISE) to present our work on seed and knowledge in South Africa and the region. 485 participants from 57 countries attended the Congress. In total there were 241 presentations. From the presentations, it is clear that there are many similar struggles across the world, highlighting the importance of linking up around shared struggles towards securing food and seed sovereignty globally.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- Agro-ecology Training Event: May 2015
- March Against Monsanto: 23 May 2015
- Global civil society event on corporations and plantations in Durban (a counter to the World Forestry Congress also happening in Durban): 7-11 September 2015

Biowatch Bulletin will keep you updated.

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