

Foreword from Biowatch SA

Over the past few years agroecological farmers with whom we work in Ingwavuma, KwaNgwanase, Mtubatuba, Pongola and Tshaneni have participated in the international event, March Against Monsanto (MAM). These marches have culminated in the handing over of memoranda to representatives of the Department of Agriculture, requesting that the Department amend policies that are not supportive of small-holder farmers and that contravene farmers' rights. Reflecting that these have had little response, in 2018 the farmers requested that Biowatch assist them in inviting key decision-makers to a Roundtable Dialogue on 23 May. Here representatives from local, provincial and national government departments, the Mayor of Mtubatuba and local Indunas received presentations on the support farmers do and don't want. They were also invited to view traditional seed, and sample the delicious and nutritious food the farmers prepare from these crops.

The statement below reflects the presentations made by the farmers on the day.

For more information, please contact Biowatch SA's Advocacy, Research and Policy Co-ordinator Vanessa Black, email vanessa@biowatch.org.za

Small-holder agroecological farmers' statement

Roundtable Dialogue with government

Mtubatuba, northern KwaZulu-Natal

23 May 2018

Introduction

Over the past few years we have participated in the international event, March Against Monsanto (MAM). We marched to raise our concerns about the type of farming that these companies are promoting. As part of the MAM events we have also presented memoranda to District Representatives from the Department of Agriculture to raise our concerns about threats to our traditional seed and farming systems and requesting support for farmers who wish to farm with nature. Last year we reflected on the results of these efforts and decided that in 2018 we would try a different approach to talking with decision-makers. With the help of Biowatch SA, we have invited you to this Roundtable Dialogue.

We thank-you for coming and being present at this Roundtable Dialogue today.

Who we are and how we farm

We are small-holder agroecological farmers, organised as farming projects and co-operatives in five areas: Ingwavuma (Lindizwe Project; and the Sifisoethu, Msebe, Vukaphansi, Sivulizandla, KwaQatha, Vukuzibuthe and Siphosethu Crop and Vegetable Projects), KwaNgwanase (Vulindlela

Project), Pongola (Abalimi Ezemvelo Agroecology farmers), Mtubatuba (Zimele Project) and Tshaneni (Sphiwinhlanhla Project).

We farm to support our families, generate income, increase our seeds and help vulnerable people in our communities. We grow our own food to know how it was planted; we know what we are eating.

Our different areas experience different conditions. KwaNgwanase farmers produce in the sandy coastal belt, and others farm on hilly slopes. We all experience a shortage of land and water and we rely entirely on rain for our crops. On average our farms are between half and two hectares in size.

We farm using agroecological methods where we work together with nature:

- At our homesteads we have household vegetable gardens, seed plots to ensure we have enough diverse seed, and fields for grains and legumes.
- Our vegetable production is watered by the grey water we save at home, and some have access to small springs. We conserve the water we have by digging fertility beds and using a thick cover of mulch on the soil in our vegetable gardens. We use swales to sink rainwater in our fields as well as using cover crops for a living mulch.
- We also use organic materials and animal dung to make compost.
- We don't use any synthetic chemicals like fertiliser, herbicide or pesticide. We don't kill pests but chase them away with strong smelling plants and mixed cropping.
- We save our own seed and are focused on reviving our traditional grains as these are nutritious and grow better. We don't use GM seeds and avoid commercial hybrids.

This way of producing is important for us as we don't rush to the shops for food and save our money. When we eat this food, we are not affected by disease.

We want our future generations to have and know our traditional seeds.

Our request to government

Communication

We have invited you to this Roundtable Dialogue as we would like to share our ideas and challenges. For several years we have delivered memoranda to our district Department of Agriculture offices, but we have never had a response. We hope that this event today can bring government and small-holder farmers closer together.

We invite government to communicate more with us. It can do this by:

- the Department of Agriculture visiting us;
- contacting our community leadership structures;
- sharing information with the Biowatch SA office to distribute.

Support from government

The way that we farm is friendly with nature and produces a lot of food and seed diversity. However, there are many small-holder farmers around us who are using destructive practices. We would like government to have systems that help the wider community farm like we do.

We work our small and established fields by hand. For this we require assistance with appropriate implements including: ploughs, picks, spades, shovels, garden forks, sickles, slashers, watering cans and wheelbarrows. We want to expand our fields so that we can grow more food and seed for those who need it. To open up larger areas to production we request support with ploughing services, especially less destructive ploughing with oxen. Although we no longer have oxen, we would like to bring back this practice.

Although we grow healthy and nutritious maize, it is difficult to mill this by hand. When we take our maize to the commercial mills for milling they often mix up our maize with others and give us different maize back. Government support in accessing small-scale, localised and household milling machines would ensure greater food security and health for our communities and livestock.

We need the support of our traditional leadership to host community dialogues that can resolve the issue of roaming livestock, so that cropping systems are protected. The livestock is all over and is no longer controlled. We would like the Izinduna to enforce that no livestock are allowed in fields during the growing season.

Small-holders need support with small-scale water systems for our vegetable production that use efficient irrigation; solar and wind-powered pumps and earth dams. For homesteads we request support in building ferro-cement water tanks that last longer and provide more storage for the same cost than plastic tanks.

No farmers should use overhead sprinklers that waste our common water resources.

We would like support setting up local markets and transport to sell our surplus production. We would like government institutions to buy our produce, especially local schools so that our communities' children can also eat healthy food.

We would like our municipalities to create depots where organic materials, such as grass cuttings, could be brought to create community composting facilities.

Our method of farming and supporting activities like composting and food processing can create work for youth. We also want school gardens to be revitalised.

Our seed is important to us

We can save our seed to plant in the next season. This is important because they cost us nothing and are original seeds that we have inherited through generations.

Each of us has a household seed bank, so we are always ready to plant as soon as the rain comes and do not need to wait for and rely on anyone.

Our farmer seeds are better than the commercial seeds because they:

- Give us a good yield despite our difficult conditions.
- They grow without fertiliser and pesticides, whereas the commercial seeds do not grow unless they have fertiliser every year.
- They are drought resistant.
- They taste good and are nutritious.
- They don't get pests easily.

These seeds are important for our culture as they are tied to rituals we perform.

It is important that farmers from other areas know where to find traditional seed – many people no longer know their seed, and many want them but don't know where to find them.

This seed ensures food security – we harvest food from these seeds and can eat and share with others.

Seed laws [Plant Improvement Bill and the Plant Breeders' Rights Bill]

Government must listen to farmers when decisions about seed are made, as seeds are about life and food security in Africa. It is within government's power to protect us as Africans or sell us to the Monsanto's.

We feel that we have been left behind by these Bills, which only talk about commercial farmers and the commercial seed industry – they don't talk to us as smallholder farmers with our farmer-seed systems.

How will ordinary farmers like us know about these laws? Have any people been sent to communities to teach us about the Bills? They contain things that affect us and can criminalise us? We must be alerted if these laws are passed, and not be left behind.

There are things in the Bills that we do not agree with:

1. If you have seed in your seeds that have been registered by someone else, you will be fined – but we may have these without knowing.
2. The definition of selling seeds that includes sharing and giving seeds – our cultural norms are to share and give seeds and the diversity that comes with this strengthens our seed. We are heartbroken by this selling being the same as sharing.

Seed and GMOs (genetically modified crops)

We note that the vegetable seeds provided by government often arrives late and doesn't germinate.

We have a problem with government distributing GM and hybrid seed to small farmers like us, and we are calling for government to stop this and support us with open-pollinated and traditional seeds instead.

We do not want to grow GM crops because:

- GM seed needs fertiliser to grow well and these chemicals kill our soil by killing the micro-organisms.
- GM food is bad for our health. There are increasing studies with animals that should make us be cautious as they show allergies, organ problems and cancer.
- GM seeds are grown with chemical sprays like herbicide – these kill good insects, harms nature, they are taken by the rain to contaminate our water and affect the people and animals around the spraying.

We thank-you for listening.