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MEDIA STATEMENT

For immediate release

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Farmers march against Monsanto in Manguzi

Smallholder farmers coming from Ingwavuma, Mtubatuba, Pongola, Tshaneni and KwaNgwanase will converge in Manguzi on Friday, 19 May to raise concerns about threats to their traditional seed and farming systems. The farmers are protesting in solidarity with the 6th global “March against Monsanto” (#MAM2017) taking place around the world to highlight the corporate take-over of seed and farming, and the resultant harm to our health and environment.

The farmers are also concerned that government programmes are forcing smallholders into using genetically modified (GM) and hybrid seeds, as well as chemical fertilisers and poisons, instead of supporting them to strengthen their traditional farming systems. “We have our own seed for traditional crops that grow well without expensive chemical inputs, even in the bad droughts we have experienced,” says Richard Mthembu from Ingwavuma. “The Department of Agriculture must come closer to hear what we need: we need land so we can multiply our seeds, we need water tanks, and we need fencing to protect our fields from livestock. We want other farmers to learn about agroecology so they can use what they have to produce healthy food without harming the environment.”

The farmers want to protect and conserve their seed, but are angered that their maize has been contaminated by genetically modified (GM) genes, even in the remote hilltop villages of Ingwavuma and KwaNgwanase on the border with Mozambique. Forty-two maize samples from all areas were recently tested. Four samples contained pesticidal toxins and one was resistant to glyphosate. “We have tested our maize and found that GM maize has mixed with ours,” protests Baba Petros Makhanya. “We do not want to eat or grow GMOs. The Department of Agriculture must stop distributing GM seeds through the farmer co-operatives. The Department is just acting like a warehouse for multinational companies like Monsanto and Pannar.”

Just a handful of companies own the seed and agricultural input market, and others the distribution and processing of foods. On 3 May, the Competition Commission approved the acquisition in South Africa of Monsanto, which owns the biggest share of the global seed market, by Bayer – second in the crop chemicals market. This further consolidates power and control in the South African agricultural sector and limits choice and self-determination for farmers.

The long reach of corporate greed even threatens to criminalise traditional practices of seed saving and exchange. Draft Bills revising the laws on Plant Improvement and Plant Breeders’ Rights, which primarily protect the intellectual property of commercial plant breeders, are currently being deliberated by the National Council of Provinces. Thombithini Ndwandwe explains, “We are independent and grow nutritious food for our families, because of our diverse seed. But now Government is changing the laws on seed. We are worried that these new laws will take away our right as farmers to freely save, exchange, and sell seed and produce. Farmers have always saved and exchanged seed; and this is what makes our seed diverse and strong.”

Vanessa Black from Biowatch adds, “The way that the Plant Improvement Bill is drafted will limit farmer seed exchange to very small amounts of non-protected open-pollinated varieties. This limits smallholder farmers to using their own seed for subsistence only, and ultimately forces smallholders that wish to expand their farming into buying corporate-owned seed.”

Biowatch SA supports the farmers’ initiative to march to the Department of Agriculture’s offices in Manguzi as a means to protect their traditional seed systems, which are not appropriately recognised and supported by government. Traditional and farmer varieties of seed are more resilient to climate change and grow well in the difficult conditions the farmers face. It is essential that we resist the corporate take-over of seed – farmers must retain control over their seed and maintain this diversity for their food security into the future.

Farmers and member of the public who wish to join the march are welcome to do so.

March details

Date: Friday, 19 May 2017

Start: 10h00 at the market area opposite the Engen garage, Main Road, Manguzi

End: 11h00 at the Department of Agriculture offices, Main Road, Manguzi where the farmers will hand over a memorandum.

Contact persons

- Farmer coordinator and spokesperson:
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- Farmer spokesperson:
Thombithini Ndwandwe, Zimele Project, Mtubatuba – Cell: 079 590 4940
- Farmer spokesperson:
Richard Mthembu, Msebe Project, Ingwavuma – Cell: 076 158 1341
- Biowatch spokesperson on agroecology:
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- Biowatch spokesperson on GMOs and the seed bills:
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- Information on the global “March Against Monsanto” protest can be found at <http://www.march-against-monsanto.com>

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