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MEDIA RELEASE

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Agroecology is best practice: smallholder farmers mend a broken food system

Smallholder farmers in KZN share their stories in a newly published book

Despite the adversity of a hot and often dry climate in the rural areas of northern KwaZulu-Natal, an innovative and well-informed network of farmers is regularly supplying fresh, nutritious food for their own households as well as surplus for sale at markets. They have shown that the land can take care of its people – if its people take care of their land.

On her rocky, soil-poor and water-scarce plot at Esikhalenisomthonga, Doris Myeni was still picking greens and vegetables late into the recent drought, able to meet most of her large household's fresh produce needs. Rhoda Mvubu of Manhlali also had rich green crop fields deep into the drought, even though all the fields around her were struggling to grow in the hot, dusty winds.

Like many rural farmers, Myeni and Mvubu farm using traditional practices that they learnt from their parents, but they were successful even when the rains failed because they apply farming principles that work in partnership with nature. As farmers who work with environmental justice NGO Biowatch South Africa, they have been learning, sharing and applying agroecology practices on their farms that make the best use of their natural resources, while also protecting and replenishing those resources.

Agroecology empowers smallholders to be more productive and helps to alleviate poverty. It creates abundance where it is needed, producing a greater variety and quantity per hectare than commercial agriculture, including food, medicines, fibres, fuels, and building materials.

Mvubu has always been an active farmer, and has been earning her living entirely from the soil for more than 25 years. When she began using agroecology practices, her maize yield suddenly improved, and she was able to finance a house for herself and her children from the sales. She implements a few simple agroecology methods that improve her crop yields and lengthen the growing time on her farm. For a start, she prepares her soils early with composted depressions that hold moisture for longer, and she maintains a groundcover to keep the soil cool and wet. She intercropped her maize with beans, cowpeas, watermelons, pumpkins, peanuts, sorghum, jugo beans, mung beans, and sesame. The high diversity in each field helps to keep her soil in good condition, and reduces outbreaks of pests and diseases.

For Myeni, whose plot is up in dry, rocky hills, it was trench gardens that made all the difference. The trenches, along with other water harvesting techniques, hold water and keep the soil healthy. It was backbreaking work to dig the trenches and then fill them with soil-improving material such as tins, bones, dry grass and kraal manure, but she was soon rewarded with an abundance of fresh vegetables and greens. Myeni is able to produce enough for her household throughout the year – which can be around 15 people in the holidays – and still has surplus to sell. She plants lemon bush and chives to repel pests, and a great variety of plants for the pot, with wild plants, such as umsobo and imfino growing alongside domesticated plants such as onions, peppers, and pumpkins.

Now, she maintains the trenches with compost and kraal manure, relying mainly on rainwater for irrigation. She mulches meticulously, and also brings in her chickens to aid soil fertilisation and pest control. She says that without the agroecology practices that she learnt, it would not have been possible to have fresh produce from her garden.

AGROECOLOGY is a way to work towards FOOD SOVEREIGNTY where the control of seed and land remains in the hands of farmers, and the land is used in an ecologically sustainable way.

Agroecology is not a single system or set of practices. Rather, it is about applying a set of principles learnt from nature to create farming systems that are unique to each farm. How a farmer uses the land will depend on the plants she wants to grow and livestock she wants to raise, along with the local climate and geology, and the resources that nature has provided on her land.

“Our children do not have to look after us. We are not a burden on them,” says Biowatch-supported farmer Selinah Mncwango. She grows more than 40 varieties of fruit, herbs, and vegetables on her homestead in Khwelelani, and also raises cattle, sheep, chickens, and goats. In her experience, traditional varieties of maize yield better in times of adversity, and she scrupulously collects and stores seed from each harvest, sharing it happily other farmers.

The farmers learn, we learn, and we adapt collectively.

After nearly 20 years of trialling and learning together, Biowatch and the smallholder farmers they work with have developed confidence in a set of practices that they have used successfully in northern KwaZulu-Natal. They share their best practices in their newest publication: *Agroecology Is Best Practice: Biowatch South Africa's work with smallholder farmers*. The book explores the workings of eight farms in northern KwaZulu-Natal, illustrating agroecology best practices through the personal experiences of each of the farmers. It showcases the organisation's key work areas: **diversity**, which is fundamental to maintain the web of life – both Earth's biodiversity and farming systems that protect and honour the connections between all living things; **soil & water**, which are vital to life and without which we cannot produce food; **seed**, which is the foundation of food sovereignty; and **advocacy**, which supports farmers' voices to work towards changing the industrialised agricultural system and discourse.

Biowatch is sharing its best practices to provide principles and ideas that could help others, even though specific agroecology methods and techniques vary according to local climates, soils and cultures. Mavis Nhleko, one of the farmers whose story is shared in the new book, explains agroecology's benefits in a nutshell: “I get good yields, I'm eating healthy food with my family, I record what I plant, and have shared my knowledge.”

The book is available electronically on the Biowatch website: www.biowatch.org.za
Hardcopies are available and can be ordered off the website or by calling Allison Myeza on 031 206 2954.

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A selection of high resolution photographs are available on request.

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Rhoda Mvubu, a smallholder agroecology farmer in Ingwavuma.

Photo: © Biowatch South Africa



Doris Myeni, a smallholder agroecology farmer in Tshaneni, with her “chicken tractor”.

Photo: © Biowatch South Africa

About BIOWATCH

Established in 1999 as an environmental justice NGO, Biowatch works with smallholder farmers, other civil society organisations, and government to ensure that people have control over their food, agricultural processes and resources, and other natural resources, within a biodiverse, agroecological and sustainable system.

- Biowatch supports smallholder farmers to make informed choices; have control over their agricultural resources (including land, water, seed, infrastructure); and secure their farmers' rights.
- Biowatch contributes to building platforms for civil society to develop joint understanding of and action towards securing biodiversity, food sovereignty and social justice.
- Biowatch challenges and supports government to implement policy and practices that promote, facilitate, and actively support agroecology, and that safeguard people and land.
- Biowatch resists corporate appropriation of natural resources.

About AGROECOLOGY

Agroecology encompasses a holistic science; a practice; and a movement with a bottom-up approach to creating just, ecologically sustainable and viable food systems.

Agroecology is an approach to food production that works in harmony with nature and ecosystems. It builds on local cultures with their unique expressions of knowledge and practice that have developed over millennia around the world.

Agroecology promotes food sovereignty, which is the right of peoples to access and control the resources they need, to be able to choose the kind of food they eat, produce and buy. These resources include land, water, seeds, biodiversity, markets and knowledge. Food sovereignty aims to democratise the food system, while recognising our dependence on ecological systems for our food.

There is no one recipe for agroecology because each area is unique and has its own climate, ecology, geology, culture, social dynamics and resources. What agroecology does is apply principles learnt from nature, which guide its practice in each place, resulting in diverse expressions of agroecology around the world.

Internationally, agroecology is being recognised as a necessary approach to agriculture in the 21st Century as we realise the catastrophic impact industrial agriculture is having on Earth.

Biowatch BEST PRACTICE

The principles and practices of agroecology value and contribute to diversity in the greater environment, the local landscape and the fields – ensuring the agricultural landscape supplies not only cultivated food but also wild food, building materials, medicines, fodder and habitat for other creatures. Smallholder farmers growing crops for household and community consumption seek to satisfy a range of social, cultural, economic and production needs. Farmer seeds are also productive indefinitely when they are part of an active system of use that includes the introduction of new germplasm (genetic material) through seed exchanges and cross pollination or breeding from wild relatives.

Agroecology best practice, as we see it, requires a level of understanding of each strand in the “web of life” so that farmers can design how best these strands connect to each other. Agroecology encourages the planting of many different kinds of crops and using a range of farming practices that emulate and harmonise with the natural ecosystem, a landscape made up of a community or “patchwork” of diverse parts to fulfil the ecological principles of agroecology, but adapted to the planning of the homestead. These are designed for functional diversity within the agro-ecosystem to create these connected landscapes, where all farmers' homesteads within a community work to benefit each other beyond household food security. Agroecology is about connections between crops, animals, communities, farmers and consumers. It is also about building social movements. Diversity is vital, and Biowatch's approach respects all life and the role all living organisms play in the “web of life”.