



Research and learning to support farmer-led seed systems

Where does southern Africa stand in terms of research agendas, training programmes and tertiary curricula which support agroecology, food sovereignty and farmer-led seed and knowledge systems? The second in a series of seminars hosted by the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), which was held from 26-27 October in Cape Town, sought to address these and other questions.

The participant group, numbering close to 50, included academics, agricultural researchers, practitioners, funders, postgraduate students and NGO representatives from South Africa, Zambia, Italy, the United Kingdom and neighbouring Zimbabwe – the first SADC country to be actively involved in SKI's regional partnership programme.

Day one was devoted to research related to local seed and knowledge systems, food sovereignty and agroecology. Rachel Wynberg from UCT set the scene by reminding participants that the current research agenda was heavily skewed towards propping up an unsustainable industrial system of agriculture. Liz Hosken from the Mupo Foundation described the important role of women in agriculture, emphasising the holistic nature of their traditional knowledge systems, so often undermined by the dominant male-led “scientific” research agenda. Enthused by the recent wave of student protests across South Africa, Scott Drimie from Stellenbosch University suggested that the notion of “disruption” could be equally effectively applied to the current dominant agricultural discourse. Focusing on the diverse seed systems of Zimbabwe, Isiah Mharapara from the Agricultural Research



For more information about the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), go to www.biowatch.org.za.

Council, said that his country needed to formulate a seed policy that recognised farmer-led seed systems. He also called for the myths around genetically modified crops to be dispelled. Shawn McGuire from the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia provided global perspectives on the value of maintaining the resilience of local seed systems, and Jan Engels of Bioversity International compared the so-called “informal” and “formal” seed systems, emphasising that farmer-led seed systems need to be respected and not undermined by the formal system.

Day two focused on training and education. In an inspiring session, postgraduate students reflected on challenges that prevented a more sustainable agricultural system, highlighting the need for students from rural backgrounds to access tertiary education in agriculture.

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were awarded agroecology certificates in August.

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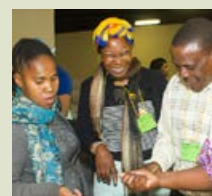
On World Food Day farmers showcased agroecology and shared their learnings as well as their



vegetables and traditional crops with guests and the media.

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Biowatch hosted an Agroecology Event as part of the Civil Society Alternative Programme (CSAP),



which ran in parallel with the World Forestry Congress.

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From the director

Climate Smart Agriculture ... and why we say NO! Our new Fact Sheet (available on our website) on this hot and controversial topic was taken to the World Committee on Food Security (CFS) in Rome in October, where Climate Smart Agriculture was punted as a solution to cope with the climate change crisis and ensure food security. Similarly being pushed at COP21 in Paris, and at country level in many countries, this false solution is challenged by many – with the climate change crisis, there is no room for playing games.

Also new on the website is our Fact Sheet on agroecology. According to the former UN Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, agroecology is proven to quickly realise the right to food in vulnerable parts of society while addressing the concurrent food, ecological and energy-climate crises. Our work on agroecology has been growing and certificates of achievement were handed out to 26 farmers in August. These farmers also all save 14 or more different varieties of seed. Next year, Amanxusa (“seed ambassadors”) will take forward the strengthening and deepening of seed work at farmer level. We are also looking forward to starting work on participatory plant breeding in 2016.

In October, the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) held the second in a series of seminars. It was a research seminar with a difference – vibrant discussions, engaging with the history of agricultural research and curricula, and then planning for the future. The group, numbering close to 50, included a large contingent of academics, government officials, practitioners and NGO representatives from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Italy and the UK who came together to explore and nurture an alternative vision for research and training to support agroecology and farmer-led seed systems.

In closing, it is with relief that some rains have come – the unrelenting drought has delayed planting and devastated livestock. There is something terribly wrong with our government’s priorities which allow unsustainable industrial/commercial agriculture to use 62% of South Africa’s water. Forward to agroecology! Forward to sane agriculture and food security!

Rose Williams

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GM updates

■ No GM potato in SA

Excellent news! In the previous Biowatch Bulletin we mentioned the long-outstanding appeal by the South African Agricultural Research Council (ARC) with respect to their genetically modified potato – a potato with a built-in pesticide against the tuber moth. The good news is that this is not going to go ahead. The Minister of Agriculture has decided to uphold the Executive Council’s decision not to allow the commercial release of this GM potato, which means the South African public can know that the potato they eat is non-GM – there are no in-built pesticides, unlike in most of the country’s maize, soya and cotton.

■ Monsanto on trial

During COP21 in Paris earlier this month, Monsanto was accused of crimes against nature and humanity by civil society, which will put Monsanto on trial at a “Monsanto Tribunal” to take place in The Hague next October, on World Food Day. According to members of the steering committee (which includes Olivier De Schutter, Vandana Shiva, Corinne Lepage, Marie-Monique Robin, Gilles-Eric Seralini and Hans Herren), the goals of the tribunal are to set an example, to hold Monsanto to account, and to say STOP: Life is of greater value than money or profits! For more information and to declare your support, go to www.monsanto-tribunal.org.

New report celebrates African women farmers

The vital role that African rural women play in selecting, breeding and enhancing the diversity of their seeds is celebrated in a new report by the African Biodiversity Network and the Gaia Foundation, in collaboration with the African Women’s Development Fund.

“Celebrating African Rural Women: Custodians of Seed, Food and Traditional Knowledge for Climate Change Resilience” offers a window into the complexity of women’s agricultural knowledge, evolved through their intimate relationship with land and seed, and their understanding of the nutritional and cultural needs of the family and the community.

“Reclaiming and enhancing seed diversity and women’s traditional knowledge and role underpins the regeneration of community cohesion and ecologically viable food systems,” said Liz Hosken, founding director of the Gaia Foundation and lead author on the report, which is available online at www.gaiafoundation.org.



26 farmers from Biowatch-supported projects in Tshaneni, Pongola, Mtubatuba, KwaNgwanase and Ingwavuma were awarded agroecology certificates at a ceremony in August, acknowledging that they do not use synthetic fertilisers, pesticides, insecticides or herbicides; do not use GMOs; make and use their own “living” compost; prepare and plant fertility beds; collect and use grey water from their homes; use dry grass and plant material as mulching; and save the seeds of at least 14 traditional varieties.

Farmer gathering

On 19 November agroecological farmers gathered at Vuleka Centre in Botha’s Hill, KwaZulu-Natal, to discuss farming practices and common interests. More than 40 farmers attended the event from organisations including Biowatch; Women’s Leadership and Training Programme; Zisize Ingwavuma Educational Trust; Cliffdale Agri-hub; and Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries (COSPE), based in Swaziland.

During the day the different groups presented on their work, and in the afternoon farmers visited an ecological demonstration garden at the Cliffdale Agri-hub where they were given a number of cuttings to add to their gardens back home.

Farmers were struck by the fact that they were not alone in their commitment to farming in harmony with nature. Many others have similar farming methods, and there is knowledge to be shared. New friendships emerged, and farmers are looking forward to future farmer exchanges.



Farmers from KwaZulu-Natal and Swaziland gathered to share their experiences and learnings about agroecology, farming in harmony with nature, and growing nutritious food.



Siphiwe Ntshangase (top) and Sophiwe Dlamini (bottom), from the Biowatch-supported Impisethunjini Project, talk to 1 KZN TV about agroecology and food security.

World Food Day

Biowatch and farmers from the Impisethunjini Project celebrated World Food Day in Pongola on 16 October. Local farmers had the opportunity to showcase agroecology and to share their learnings with guests, including local NGOs and representatives from the Department of Agriculture.

After a lively discussion about the negative impacts of GMOs and how GMOs are “killing” traditional seed, guests enjoyed a tour of local food gardens and sampled vegetables and traditional crops grown in harmony with nature. Farmers were able to network with local media, and were interviewed on 1 KZN TV and Radio Maputaland.

International experience sharing

■ Policy and Advocacy Training

2-6 November, Ghana

Along with participants from Zimbabwe, Kenya, Benin, Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana and South Africa, Biowatch's advocacy and farmer support officer Karen Read attended a 5-day Policy and Advocacy Training in Kumasi, Ghana. The training was organised by the African Biodiversity Network, in conjunction with the Center for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development (CIKOD). Learnings and insights from the training will inform Biowatch's Advocacy Course for Farmers, which is planned for next year.

■ Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) to the 42nd session of the World Committee on Food Security (CFS)

10-11 October, Rome

Rose Williams, Biowatch director, participated in the CSM which facilitates civil society participation in the United Nations' World Committee on Food Security. The CSM is the largest international mechanism of civil society organisations (CSOs) seeking to influence agriculture, food security and nutrition policies and actions – nationally, regionally and globally. The two-day meeting was in preparation for the week-long meeting of the World Committee on Food Security (CFS).

■ Participatory Plant Breeding, Varietal Selection and Farmer Field Schools

15-30 July and 14-18 September, Zimbabwe

Lawrence Mkhalihi, Biowatch's agroecology manager, attended two training of trainers workshops in Zimbabwe, which focused on participatory plant breeding, varietal selection and farmer field schools, with a focus on self-pollinating and cross-pollinating crops – millet, sorghum, maize and ground nuts. Hosted by the Community Technology Development Trust (CTDT), the trainings explored the role of farmers in managing genetic resources, and built skills in participatory learning and research with farmers.



Guests learn about agroecology and seeds at Biowatch's Agroecology Event at CSAP in September.

Agroecology showcased at CSAP

The World Forestry Congress (WFC2015), convened by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), took place in Durban from 6-11 September. A Civil Society Alternative Programme (CSAP) was organised in parallel with the intention of providing a space for civil society and community groups to raise awareness about the environmental and social issues connected to the WFC2015 agenda.

While the FAO and the WFC label plantations as forests, the message from CSAP was that this is blatant greenwash. Plantations are a severe threat to people's land, livelihoods, water and biodiversity across the globe, whereas forests are compatible with both the natural environment in which they occur and the forest-dependent communities they are surrounded by.

As part of the CSAP programme, Biowatch hosted an Agroecology Event where guests were invited to meet and to celebrate agroecology farmers. During the CSAP plenary Biowatch Board chairperson David Fig gave a presentation titled *"Is agroecology the answer?"* in which he reiterated the dangers and destruction of industrial agriculture, reinforcing that agroecology is the solution that can feed the world.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- International colloquium on global governance/politics, climate justice and agrarian/social justice, organised by Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies (ICAS): The Hague, 4-5 February 2016
- Biowatch's National Seed Sovereignty Workshop: 18-19 May 2016
- International Monsanto Tribunal: The Hague, 16 October 2016

Biowatch Bulletin will keep you updated.

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