



biowatch

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biodiversity | food sovereignty | agroecology | social justice

Let's examine the real factors contributing to the drought crisis



From their parched hilltops, with their failed crops and dying livestock, communities in Pongola look down on the bright green of irrigated cane fields.

For the past two years, northern KwaZulu-Natal has been in the grip of a crippling drought, with widespread crop failures. While the dire situation has focused government attention on relief measures, little attention has been paid to the factors contributing to the drought and how to lessen our vulnerability.

At Biowatch we believe that industrial agriculture is the unacknowledged “elephant in the drought crisis room”. In our new *Fact Sheet: Drought Crisis* (available on our website) we provide a critique of industrial agriculture and timber plantations, and the false drought solutions that agribusiness is touting – such as genetically modified crops. Despite their deleterious contributions to climate and water crisis, government continues to promote and invest in these as rural development strategies. Instead,

we are urging government to support locally-adapted agroecological farming, which has the ability to mitigate climate change by building soil and water conservation into its practice.

Biowatch-supported agroecological farmers make use of swales, deep trench and double-dig beds in their household gardens and have composted planting stations sown with seeds. These methods have enabled the farmers to grow crops in spite of the drought; however, there have been unexpected challenges. Starving cattle have pushed over many farmers’ fences to decimate their thriving crops. On page 3, read about tenacious 73-year-old Rhoda Mvubu, an agroecology farmer in Ingwavuma, who is still harvesting – her crops surviving the drought and marauding cattle.

While surrounding areas withered with the drought, Rhoda Mvubu, an agroecology farmer from



Ingwavuma, harvested crops and fed her family.

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Farmers and the community March Against Monsanto and demand the right to grow, save and share



traditional seeds, safe from unwanted genes and poisons.

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SKI CoP members observe good millet production in a very dry area in Zimbabwe, and learn more



about crops and initiatives that do well in drought conditions.

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From the director

We are very pleased to welcome Pumla Mabizela as Programme Manager to Biowatch. As Biowatch is the secretariat for the regional Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), this additional capacity is definitely needed and we are fortunate to have such an experienced and insightful person join our staff.

Pumla worked for Oxfam Australia for more than 13 years. While we are excited to have her join our staff, we are also saddened by the closure of Oxfam Australia's office in South Africa. Oxfam Australia has supported Biowatch and our work since 2010 and has been a key funder for many organisations in the country; their partnership model and development model are to be aspired to! At their closure in March we felt that we were laying the matriarch elephant to rest before her time.

The past six months have been busy ones here at Biowatch. In this time we produced a number of Fact Sheets to clearly set out and share the facts about topics including the drought crisis and GMOs in South Africa. We also look at and critique terms and methods being used to describe "methods" of so-called ecological agriculture, such as climate-smart and conservation agriculture. Biowatch has been watching as more and more terms are being used nationally, regionally and internationally – as the stakes get higher, it seems terms vie for prominence and support. But what are they really describing, and how do we cut through the greenwashing? If you are confused by the many terms currently in use (agroecology, permaculture, climate-smart agriculture, organic agriculture, conservation agriculture, climate resilient agriculture, carbon farming), here are some questions that we ask: Does it use herbicides or pesticides? Does it support small-holder farmers and keep them on the land? Will it be sustainable – and for whom? Who gets the money – and how much? Who benefits ... really?

We encourage you to read and share our Fact Sheets and other publications, and to follow our Facebook page for updates on our work.

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GM update

■ GMOs in South Africa

GMOs are yet another technology that furthers the industrialisation of agriculture, making farmers and consumers dependent on a limited, expensive range of corporate products. There is also increasing evidence of GMOs creating environmental and health risks and having dubious economic advantages.

In our new *Fact Sheet: GMOs in South Africa* (available on our website at www.biowatch.org.za) we set out the facts about why farmers and consumers should avoid and speak out against GMOs. In summary:

- GMOs do not help small farmers.
- GMOs are contributing to the corporate control of our food system.
- GMOs are unhealthy.
- GMOs cause damage in the environment.

Download or read our new Fact Sheet online, and find out more about what crops and foods contain GMOs in South Africa, and about labelling regulations and GMOs in our food.

Meet Pumla Mabizela

We're very happy to introduce our readers to Pumla Mabizela, who joined Biowatch at the beginning of April. Pumla is our new Programme Manager.



Pumla has worked in development for more than 23 years, and brings to Biowatch her experience of working as a Programme Manager for an international donor organisation.

"I began work in development at a community level. I then worked at an international level for 13 years. And now I have an opportunity to bring all of my experience and learning back into an implementing organisation that is as passionate about making a real difference in people's lives, as I am," said Pumla.

Indeed, her passion for people and development, and the change that can be achieved when we work together, is inspiring and energising! Welcome Pumla, we look forward to journeying with you towards "healthy environment = healthy food = healthy people!"



A Tshaneni farmer (right) critiques peanut productivity during a recent visit to Ukalinga, the University of KwaZulu-Natal's farm near Pietermaritzburg. During the visit, farmers observed research trials comparing rain-fed and irrigated crops. UKZN is currently doing research on pigeon pea seed from the group of Tshaneni Biowatch-supported farmers, including a study of seed characterisation, germination rates and yields.



The University is also doing research on jugo bean seed from a Biowatch-supported group of farmers in Pongola.



Rhoda Mvubu in her fields which survived the drought and marauding cattle.

Surviving the drought

While surrounding areas withered with the drought, Rhoda Mvubu, a 73-year-old agroecology farmer from Ingwavuma, harvested crops and fed her family. But her family weren't the only one's benefiting from her agroecological farming techniques. In October last year livestock, starving as a result of the drought, invaded her fields which she had planted early to an intercrop of maize, beans, cow peas, watermelons, pumpkins, peanuts, sorghum, jugo beans, mung beans and sesame. Instead of abandoning the field, she persisted with weeding and planting crops amidst the scattered remains of her hard work. By January the grazed sorghum, peanuts and sesame had re-grown. Rhoda harvested a diversity of crops through summer and into winter.



Farmers and the community joined the international March Against Monsanto on Saturday 21 May in KwaNgwanase (top left and centre), Mtubatuba (bottom left and centre), and Ingwavuma (top and bottom right). Speaking out against GMOs and the corporate control of our food system, they demanded their farmers' rights to practice agroecology and to grow, save and share traditional seeds, safe from the risk of contamination from unwanted genes and poisons.



Participants at the Bread for the World gathering held in Kenya in March to explore agricultural adaptations to climate change with regards to global food security, nutrition and the role small-scale farmers can play. Rose Williams, Biowatch Director (fourth from the left), was invited to attend the gathering and contribute to an African perspective on “climate resilient” agriculture.



The Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) held a Community of Practice (CoP) gathering in March to design a learning curriculum for 2016-2017, and to introduce new members to the CoP. The meeting was held in Zimbabwe’s Gutu district, a dry area with few crops. The CoP members were able to observe good millet production (pictured above), and they learnt more about what crops and initiatives could do well in drought conditions.



More than 90 farmers, farmer advocates and donors from 6 continents met for 4 days in Uganda.

Agroecology Learning Exchange

“A Global Convening to Amplify Agroecology Solutions” – this was the title of the Agroecology Learning Exchange which took place in May in Uganda.

Hosted by the Agroecology Fund and the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, the Learning Exchange created a space for farmers to share their learnings about promoting agroecology in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. Delegates also worked together to identify ways to amplify agroecological solutions across the world and strengthen agroecology as a science, movement and a practice.

Lawrence Mkhaliphi, Biowatch Agroecology Manager, attended the event. “We learnt much about how farmers are reviving and honouring traditional knowledge and restoring the soils,” he said. “Agroecology is growing!”

Participants from around the world honoured sacred seeds, foods and their traditions during the opening ceremony of the 2016 Agroecology Learning Exchange.



WHAT’S COMING UP?

- Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) research seminar: KZN, 12-14 September 2016
- Monsanto Tribunal: The Hague, 14-16 October 2016
- Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) to the 43rd session of the World Committee on Food Security (CFS): Rome, 15-21 October 2016

Biowatch Bulletin will keep you updated.

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