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African civil society engages government representatives at the 46th plenary of the UN World Committee on Food Security (CFS 46), held in Rome in October.

High-level support for agroecology

After many years of campaigning by an international groundswell of farmers, activists and communities, decision-makers are increasingly recognising agroecology as the way to transform our broken food system.

This year, the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE), the science-policy interface of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), published their scientific report *“Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition”*. The report, which affirms agroecology as the most transformative approach that can address food system change in an integrated and systematic way, recommends using the “ecological footprint” as an operational principle to transition to sustainable food systems.

The report was presented in October at the 46th plenary of the CFS in Rome, where countries agreed to move

forward with a process to converge and approve policy recommendations at CFS 47 in 2020. Vanessa Black, Biowatch’s Advocacy, Research and Policy Co-ordinator, attended CFS 46 and presented at an AFSA and IATP side event on agroecological innovations for climate resilient agriculture and food systems in Africa.

She then continued on to Berlin to participate in several events discussing support for agroecology, especially in Germany’s international development co-operation. The highlight was a meeting with diverse political, government and civil society representatives, followed by a public debate on agroecology where Vanessa presented alongside Michel Pimbert, Coventry University; Joachim Spangenberg, co-author of the IPBES report on biodiversity; Jimena Gomez, Ecosystem Management and Agroecology (FAO); Iridiani Graciele Seibert, MMS Brasil; and Gunther Beger, BMZ (Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development).

Agroecology advocates, supporters and practitioners gathered in August and December to strategise how to move the transition to an AE South Africa forward.



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Food basket research shows that agroecological farmers eat more diverse food and save on shop purchases by growing and harvesting produce.



purchases by growing and harvesting produce.

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Biowatch facilitated a community mapping baseline of five villages in Ingwavuma as part of an M&E approach being facilitated across the regional SKI partnership.



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From the director

In the face of unprecedented global temperatures and biodiversity destruction, everything that can be done, should be done. But we have to be mindful and critique seemingly positive but false solutions – especially with big business starting to wake up to the climate crisis. The scale of “feel good” destruction that can potentially be unleashed is terrifying – the often well-intentioned but illogical planting of millions of trees in environments that cannot sustain them, will dry up water resources, destroy vital grasslands and other unique ecosystems, and irreparably damage landscapes and livelihoods. The only way to real and sustainable solutions is to think beyond ourselves, beyond short-term profits. Think agroecology!

In this issue of the Biowatch Bulletin, we lead with an article on high-level support for agroecology internationally. National and provincial processes that Biowatch has been part of to catalyse a transition to agroecology in South Africa, are discussed on page 3.

We're looking forward to our work with fellow partners in the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) in 2020; to our work with communities; and to strengthening a civil society movement that changes perceptions and policies to support farmer-led seed systems and agroecology.

In January we will be saying goodbye to our long-serving Biowatch administrator Allison Myeza, who joined us in 2010. We wish her well in this new phase of her life, and we thank her for being such a positive and integral part of the Biowatch family. And we are very pleased to welcome to our Board of Trustees, David Ntseng. David has many years' experience working with and learning from social movements and is a long-standing Programme Manager at the Church Land Programme (CLP).

We trust you will enjoy reading this issue of the Bulletin, and we wish you all the best for 2020!

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GM update

The struggle to prevent the spread of GMOs in Africa continues:

- Togo's Minister of Agriculture, Animal Production and Fisheries has formalised a decision to prohibit the importing, marketing and use of glyphosate and any product containing it (Glyphosate and GMOs go hand in hand).
- Nigeria has authorised commercialisation of Africa's first genetically engineered traditional crop – cowpea resistant to the pod borer insect, *Maruca vitrata*. Biowatch is deeply dismayed – cowpeas are grown by farmers in KwaZulu-Natal and elsewhere in Africa.
- South Africa is permitting Corteva Agriscience (formed by the merger between Dow and Dupont) to commercialise three GM maize varieties resistant to the application of the herbicide 2,4-D. This will greatly increase the load of toxic chemicals in our environment and food.
- Also in South Africa, Minister Thoko Didiza upheld decisions by the Executive Council: GMO Act and the Appeal Board rejecting authorisation for commercial release of a Monsanto 3-stack GM maize that included DroughtGard (MON87460). South African field trials could not prove efficacy of this GMO in protecting yields in water-limited conditions. Monsanto (now Bayer) has long been using the promise of drought tolerance to pressure other African countries into growing GMOs. Thank you to those who supported a sustained campaign across the country led by the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB).

Meet Annah Kudanga



We are happy to introduce Biowatch Bulletin readers to Annah Kudanga, our new Finance Officer. Annah joined Biowatch in August.

Annah holds a Master's Degree in Accounting from the Durban University of Technology (DUT); Mphil – Corporate Law and BCom Honours – Management (Finance stream) from the University of the

Western Cape (UWC); as well as a BBA Accounting degree. She will be part of the team responsible for the recording, processing and reporting of financial operations at the Biowatch Durban Office. Welcome Annah!



Agroecology supporters and practitioners gathered in August (left) and December (right) to catalyse an AE South Africa.

Catalysing agroecology in South Africa

In 2019, Biowatch initiated a process to strengthen civil society collaboration in catalysing the transition to agroecology in South Africa. In August a “think-tank” of 24 individuals committed to advancing agroecology (AE) contributed ideas towards a common vision for an agroecological South Africa, and strategic interventions to achieve this. A second workshop in December, organised by a volunteer group and staff from Surplus People Project (SPP), African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) and Biowatch, brought together representatives from civil society and farmer organisations to expand on the vision and plan how best to support a co-ordinated movement for agroecology in South Africa.

Possible strategic interventions were grouped into thematic areas (communication and narrative on agroecology; policy, curriculum development; research; knowledge sharing and learning; agroecological practice;

organisational support), and next steps were fleshed out. The need to more strongly articulate what agroecology is in the South African context was recognised, especially within the context of the patriarchy, racism and extreme inequality entrenched through our history of colonialism and apartheid. Lead organisations were identified to get the ball rolling in every province to organise similar gatherings to advance agroecology across South Africa.

In KZN, Biowatch hosted 30 participants from civil society organisations based in the province that support the call for an AE South Africa. These organisations connect agroecology to land, fishing, mining and climate struggles. This platform has committed to ongoing collaboration to build a community of practice and advocate together on critical policy issues. Contact vanessa@biowatch.org.za if you, your civil society or farmer organisation wish to be included and participate.



In August, Biowatch conducted a course on agroecology in Durban. This included understanding what agroecology is (as a practice and a movement), why we need an urgent transition to agroecology in South Africa and internationally, and the application of agroecological principles in practice. Thirty civil society and government practitioners engaged in animated debate about the food system, how agroecology compares to other approaches to agriculture, and the benefits it provides. Frank Edwards welcomed participants to his guerrilla garden in Overport to witness agroecology in action in an urban environment and practise the agroecological methods covered in the workshop.



In 2019, Biowatch worked with students at the Owen Sitole College of Agriculture (OSCA), and implemented an agroecology demonstration plot where students learnt swaling, bed preparation for soil improvement, and vegetable production. The healthy vegetables provided a convincing demonstration of the benefits of agroecology.



Ingwavuma farmers discussing food security analyse their diets using a diversity wheel.



By growing and harvesting produce, agroecological farmers eat more diverse foods and save on store purchases.

SKI partners facilitate community mapping

In November, Biowatch facilitated a community mapping baseline of five *izigodi* (villages) in Ingwavuma, KwaZulu-Natal. This work was part of the participatory and transformative monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approach being facilitated across the regional Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) partnership.

Between 30 and 40 farmers attended each of the three days to describe what is happening in their community and analyse where they are at and where they would like to be in terms of food security, seed diversity and dietary diversity. Some initial results emerging from the mapping process include:

- All households practicing agroecology said they had enough to eat during the “lean season” (generally September–November).
- Farmers have worked hard to save traditional seeds and the vast majority of households (94%) only use farmer saved seed; no households use only hybrid seeds. Farmers were unhappy that some (10%) use both hybrid and traditional seeds as they were worried about contamination from their neighbours.

WHAT’S COMING UP?

- SKI Community of Practice (CoP) meeting 17–21 February
- Catalysing the transition to an AE South Africa KZN meeting: March (date to be confirmed – see page 3 and contact us for more details)

Biowatch Bulletin will keep you updated. If you would like to join our mailing list, please e-mail your details to info@biowatch.org.za

Food basket research highlights benefits of agroecology

In November and December, Biowatch conducted pilot research into the “typical” food basket of farming households in Pongola and Ingwavuma. This was done using the “food basket model” of the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group. Two focus group discussions in each area aimed to explore whether agroecological farming practice improves food security, nutrition and socio-economic circumstances, compared to similar households practicing conventional agriculture.

Several important insights have emerged. The research took place during the vegetable growing season. At the time these areas were experiencing extreme drought, and it was only the Biowatch-supported agroecological farmers who were still engaged in agricultural production due to the resilience of water-conserving agroecological methods.

The core foods in the basket were the same for all groups: maize, cooking oil, rice, sugar, flour and meat, with price determining the brand. However, the agroecological farmers were able to eat more diverse food by growing and harvesting produce, thereby saving on shop purchases. In Ingwavuma they also had some surplus to sell.

Agroecological farmers also grow and forage a more diverse range of crops and fruits indicating a more intimate knowledge of the diverse foods that occur in the area.

Agroecology protects and builds biodiversity, is empowering to farmers, and promotes food sovereignty.
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