



biowatch
SOUTH AFRICA

bulletin

JANUARY 2021

biodiversity | food sovereignty | agroecology | social justice

Spreading agroecology during COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions

The suffering and trauma brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has galvanised the agroecology movement to reach out with stronger advocacy and sharing of practical knowledge. Although Biowatch's face-to-face work slowed with the lockdown, we embraced the online space and opportunities for training, networking and spreading agroecology.



A highlight was the Biowatch-hosted bio-inputs training course presented by Juanfran Lopez. While lockdown disrupted our plans for a physical workshop with Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) partners, it presented an opportunity to share more widely through an online training course: "Feed the soil – regenerating agriculture through bio-inputs." The five-module course (August–September) began with an introductory webinar (watch here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdOT1HBezYY&t=683s). This was followed by modules on: collecting wild microbes; bokashi; microbe and cow dung ferments; and mineral brews. The modules were structured with a theory webinar, followed the next week by a community of practice meeting where participants could ask questions based on their practical experience trying out the methods.

The course was open to participants in South Africa, eSwatini and Lesotho, and 133 people signed up. The power of utilising the online space to spread agroecology

Participants in the online bio-inputs course share their learnings with members of the Mbabane Urban Garden and Mbuluzi Eco Watch Association, seen here making bokashi in their developing garden in Mbabane, eSwatini.

was evidenced by lead trainers who attended the online course and then engaged with 25 farmer groups who also learnt through implementation of the practical work. The excitement generated called for an online community of practice group, which continues to buzz as members share their successes and failures for everyone's learning.

Building soil health was a big focus in 2020, with Biowatch participating in several SKI online learning webinars (see page 4), and also in the "Healthy Soil, Healthy Food" programme hosted by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) and SKI with partners across Africa. The interest in and success of the online courses is encouraging Biowatch to develop further online training in 2021. Watch our website and Facebook page for upcoming introductory courses on agroecology and a course to deepen practice in relation to seed systems.

New publication prepared for the Global Food Governance Working Group of the CSM for the UN's CFS



is a snapshot of the impact of COVID-19 on SA food systems.

See page 2

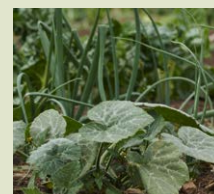
The KZN-AE platform gathered at Enaleni Farm to connect with others promoting and practicing AE



and explore how seed work can be taken forward in 2021.

See page 3

Launched on World Food Day 2020, Biowatch's "Good Food Conversations" is a podcast about



good food – food that's good for us and good for our planet.

See page 3

From the director

Focus, clarity, compassion, action – so much of what is needed in 2021. Our face-to-face annual Biowatch reflection and planning in January was a milestone after many months of remote connection. COVID-19 precautions were in place, and we are deeply grateful that as a staff we could meet “mask-to-mask” as we put plans in place to face a complex and challenging year.

2021 is still a new year, but there have already been many terrible tragedies in our country. There has also been the loss of a dear friend and ally, Gogo Qho, who has inspired so many (see the tribute including contributions from Biowatch Board member Mvu Ngcoya here: www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-01-14-gogo-qho-a-visionary-farmer-and-conservationist-who-refused-to-be-a-prisoner-of-history/amp/). Although her passing was not COVID-related, it is a great loss among many tragic losses due to the virus.

Our January issue of the *Biowatch Bulletin*, speaks to some of our new ways of working under COVID-19. The 2020 bio-inputs course was a highlight and it was inspiring how our first online course led to needed on-the-ground practical action, which quickly gathered more and more momentum. Do also listen to the new “Good Food Conversations” detailed on page 3. We’re also looking forward to our new agroecology farmer course “Agroecology Qalisa!” (*Agroecology, get started*). An article on page 4 speaks to the food system, the challenges that agroecology faces from the corporate-backed industrialised food system, and how agroecology needs to be taken forward at every level. The underlying systemic issues that are causing these conditions need to be understood and challenged. As national, regional and global crises intensify, as hunger and biodiversity destruction escalate, more and more “magic bullet” solutions will be put forward – think about who will benefit, who will lose land, who will lose livelihoods, and who will lose their sovereignty.

As the impacts of multiple crises unfold, temporary disaster support is needed. But what we really need is to build resilience at a personal, organisational and country level in 2021.

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AE SA updates

■ AE SA and #Unpoison

Biowatch continues to hold the space and support the development of the Agroecology South Africa (AE SA) platform, which has grown to 244 participants. In the past six months, several AE SA working groups met to discuss plans of action and to hold learning events. Working groups were established to work on: policy; education and training; databases and mapping; practice and research. A dynamic sub-group is working specifically on agrochemical policy reform. Branded under the hashtag #Unpoison, the group organised two informative and well-received public webinars: one on pesticide legislation; and another on pesticide spray drift, where affected farmworkers and communities shared heartbreaking stories of the impacts of indiscriminate pesticide spraying (watch here: www.youtube.com/channel/UC5tU-hDsNBZATY_NqZ0Ujvg).

■ CropLife outrage

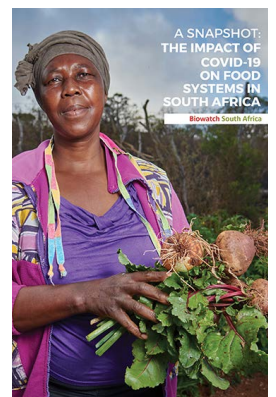
Pesticide licensing was a hot topic in 2020. In November Biowatch signed on to a letter to FAO Director-General Qu Dongyu objecting to the FAO’s stated plans to strengthen official ties with CropLife International, an organisation set up by the pesticide industry. In South Africa, CropLife drew outrage when leaked documents revealed it was trying to establish itself as a body to approve field trial scientists separately from the statutory body mandated to license and regulate scientists. In this way pro-pesticide scientists could be embedded in the process of testing and setting safety requirements for pesticide registration. Civil society in SA is calling for urgent reforms in pesticide regulation and monitoring given the negative impacts of pesticide use.

Recent publications

All Biowatch publications are available on our website: www.biowatch.org.za. To be notified when we launch new publications, sign up to our mailing list – use the link on our website home page or email info@biowatch.org.za

■ A Snapshot: The impact of COVID-19 on food systems in SA

A publication prepared by Biowatch for the Global Food Governance Working Group of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSM) of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS) (10 pages). Available here: biowatch.org.za/download/impact-of-covid-19-on-food-systems-sa/





Richard Haigh shares his passion for AE with KZN farmers.



Jack, the joyful donkey, joins the farm walk-about.

KZN-AE platform meeting at Enaleni farm

A Biowatch-initiated provincial agroecology platform has picked up the pace after a slow start in 2020. An online meeting in September was followed by a socially distanced face-to-face meeting in December at Enaleni Farm in Camperdown, KZN.

Enaleni is a small agroecology farm where farmer Richard Haigh grows and raises mixed grains, vegetables and rare breeds of livestock including Nguni sheep. During the farm walk-about Richard shared insights into the intersecting nutrient cycles that make this such a richly diverse farm. For example, locally-adapted speckled Kolbroek pigs help to weed and till the fields before planting. Richard and three interns are training the donkey Jack to pull a slasher

that will help with weeding. Richard remarked that we are not only losing livestock breeds, but also the knowledge passed down through animals. In the past, the young donkey would learn from being with an older donkey, but now Richard is training Jack from scratch. Enaleni provided rich learning in the importance of diversity and how appropriate processing and nimble marketing contributes to a livelihood in farming.

After a delicious lunch of farm produce, participants settled into the main focus of the day: strengthening farmer seed systems. We discussed challenges with producing, accessing and storing seed and opportunities to address these. Lawrence Mkhali, Biowatch's

Agroecology Manager, shared some of the processes Biowatch is engaged in to assist farmers in building their seed systems. Richard also shared insights regarding storage and the importance of keeping the purity of the indigenous and heirloom varieties of crops and vegetables he grows. The meeting ended with discussion on how we can build the KZN-AE platform to strengthen our work collectively.

In closing, Mvu Ngcoya, Biowatch Trustee and Associate Professor at the UKZN School of Built Environment and Development Studies, said: "I saw a joyful donkey for the first time in my life. Farming should be joyful and at Enaleni the plants are joyful, the people are joyful, the animals are joyful. This is inspirational. We must not doubt ourselves; we are working against the system. Everything we do is a revolutionary act. May we continue to inspire one another in the work."



Good Food Conversations is a podcast about good food – food that's good for us and good for the planet. Launched on World Food Day 2020, the podcast celebrates diversity in what we grow, cook, eat and store, and the diversity of voices passionate about good food that nourishes our bodies and our lives, as well as the web of life we share our gardens, fields, pastures and waters with. We launched with three conversations:

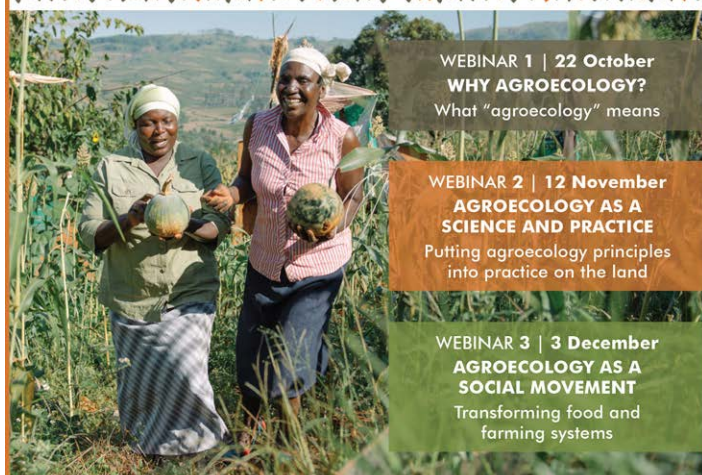
- Zayaan Khan gives tips on how to improve the diversity in our kitchens and the nutrition in our diets with fermentation and ancient methods.
- Vanessa Black says that as much as we need diversity on our plates, we also need diversity in a food system.
- Fakazile Mthethwa and Nikki Brighton talk about increasing the diversity on our plates by being creative about what we harvest from what we grow, and what we forage from wild plants in our gardens and fields.

It is with deep sadness that we share the news of the passing of Fakazile, known affectionately as Gogo Qho. Rest in peace and strength, Gogo.

CALLING FUTURE LEADERS OF THE AGROECOLOGY MOVEMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA



In 2021, SKI and partners will be running an in-depth agroecology course. Leading up to the course, we are hosting **THREE INTRODUCTORY WEBINARS** which you are invited to attend.



WEBINAR 1 | 22 October
WHY AGROECOLOGY?
What "agroecology" means

WEBINAR 2 | 12 November
AGROECOLOGY AS A SCIENCE AND PRACTICE
Putting agroecology principles into practice on the land

WEBINAR 3 | 3 December
AGROECOLOGY AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT
Transforming food and farming systems

SKI Seed and Knowledge Initiative

For more information and registration:
www.seedandknowledge.org/AEcourse_IntroWebinars

Introduction to agroecology webinars

Between October and December, regional SKI partners (including Biowatch) developed and hosted a three-part series of introductory webinars on agroecology for agricultural practitioners, food activists, farmers, students and any citizens concerned about our food system. Each webinar was recorded, and the series is available on the SKI YouTube channel (watch here: www.youtube.com/channel/UCcUKsi5_uBYPdeNml2aT1CQ).

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- **"Agroecology Qalisa!"**, an agroecology course in isiZulu for new Biowatch farmers: 8–12 March 2021
- **"Introduction to agroecology"**, an online course for CSOs: April 2021

For more information about these courses please follow our Facebook page, keep an eye on our website, and/or sign up to our mailing list on www.biowatch.org.za

COVID-19 creates havoc in food systems

The COVID pandemic continues to create havoc in food systems. The global impact of this was investigated in a special High Level Panel of Experts Issues Paper titled *The Impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition: developing effective policy responses to address the hunger and malnutrition pandemic*. The paper was the focus of the second day of discussions during World Food Week at a special online plenary of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) has been lobbying for a CFS policy response, leveraging a detailed report, *Voices from the ground: From COVID-19 to radical transformation of our food system*, to provide evidence of the crisis unfolding on the ground and policy recommendations from members in all regions. Biowatch also contributed a snapshot of the impact of COVID-19 on food systems in South Africa (see page 2).

The pandemic has prevented the normal format for negotiations, reverting to delayed online negotiations that have made participating in the processes to develop policy guidelines in two crucial workstreams on "food security and nutrition" and "agroecology and other innovations" more challenging.

At this juncture, when the need to radically transform food systems is so clear, multilateral food governance under the CFS – and the only UN space where there is genuine participation from civil society – is being threatened by the call for a UN Food Systems Summit (FSS) planned for November 2021.

Biowatch supports the CSM's call to join other organisations and movements in a collective process to challenge the UN Food Systems Summit.

While ostensibly to address the challenges that unsustainable food systems pose to our climate and biodiversity, it seems the Summit is heavily influenced by corporations and finance capital seeking to capture food policy making by transferring it to the climate policy arena; undermining decades of work to protect food sovereignty and defend food as a fundamental human right. The CSM is calling on organisations and movements concerned with food and its many dimensions to collaborate in a collective process to challenge the FSS.