



## Farmer-led seed systems are key to food sovereignty

Strong and diverse farmer-led seed systems are at the heart of agroecology, and are vital for food sovereignty. Having their own diverse seed means farmers can decide what and when to plant in response to local cultural and nutritional preferences and ever-changing climate.

For thousands of years, farmers have carefully selected desirable seed to develop the crop diversity we have today. This invaluable contribution and the right of farmers to plant, save, exchange and sell seeds, is recognised in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture – also known as the Plant Treaty. These Farmers' Rights continue to ensure crop genetic diversity and enable food sovereignty and are counter to powerful national legislation that supports and enables a highly

industrialised food system – a system that also contributes to climate change and biodiversity destruction.

South Africa's ratifying of the Plant Treaty in 2025 was a significant achievement for agroecology advocates and farmers and signalled government's growing commitment to global efforts to conserve and sustainably use plant genetic resources essential for agricultural biodiversity and food security.

Biowatch's work in 2025 (and into 2026) – on the ground with smallholder farmers, in networks with other civil society agroecology advocates and practitioners, and in policy processes – builds, strengthens and advocates agroecology for food sovereignty and diverse farmer-led seed systems.

*Agroecology is so much more than a farming practice. In a new series of videos, we explore agroecology*



*for food sovereignty and share our work with farmers.*

*See page 2*

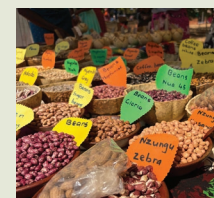
*A highlight of the 2025 Biowatch Agroecology Farmer Fair was a visit from former Minister Thoko*



*Didiza, now Speaker of the National Assembly.*

*See page 3*

*The Agroecology Action Collective South Africa-Zimbabwe learning exchange began with a visit to*



*the annual Good Food and Seed Festival in Harare.*

*See page 4*

## FROM THE DIRECTOR

We enter 2026 reaffirming and deeply committed to a just transition to agroecology for food sovereignty and thriving, biodiverse and climate-resilient environments. “Agroecology for food sovereignty” speaks to so much, including climate resilience – we have had a sobering start to the year with raging fires and a National Disaster being declared in the wake of widespread and devastating flooding and severe weather across five of our nine provinces (and in neighbouring countries Mozambique and Zimbabwe). It also speaks to the systemic crises of increasing hunger, childhood stunting, malnutrition and biodiversity destruction.

This issue of the *Biowatch Bulletin* gives an overview on some of our work over the past six months. Our cover article focusses on farmer-led seed systems underpinning food sovereignty. Other articles cover highlights including the new Biowatch video series “Agroecology for Food Sovereignty”; the annual Biowatch Agroecology Farmer Fair; dialogues on the national agroecology framework document; Farmers’ Rights and the Plant Treaty; as well as engaging at the World Committee on Food Security.

In 2025 we started a pilot project to address climate change and support children through agroecology. Many of the children are the grandchildren and children of the agroecology farmers that we have worked with for many years. One of the outputs from this project is a research paper on the National School Nutrition Programme.

In November 2025 South Africa hosted the G20. Biowatch was invited to be part of the Global Town Hall 2025 special session “Listen to Us: Messages for G20 Leaders from Civil Societies Around the World”.

In the coming month, we will be contributing to two important calls for submissions: one from the United Nations Working Group on UNDROP on the Right to Seed; the second, from the SA Human Rights Commission on their inquiry into the food systems of South Africa. With the current onslaught on human rights, the UN and multilateralism, it is more important than ever to engage to strengthen human rights in all our endeavours.

*Rose Williams*

### Biowatch Durban office:

222 Evans Road, Glenwood, Durban 4001  
Telephone: 031 206 2954  
E-mail: [info@biowatch.org.za](mailto:info@biowatch.org.za)  
Web: [www.biowatch.org.za](http://www.biowatch.org.za)  
[www.facebook.com/biowatchsa](https://www.facebook.com/biowatchsa)

### Biowatch Mtubatuba office:

Aloe Business Centre, Aloe Ave, Mtubatuba 3935  
Telephone: 035 550 3148  
E-mail: [samu@biowatch.org.za](mailto:samu@biowatch.org.za)

## New publication

### Smallholder farmers, school food gardens and South Africa's National School Nutrition Programme – a focus on KwaZulu-Natal



Smallholder farmers, school food gardens and South Africa's National School Nutrition Programme – a focus on KwaZulu-Natal



Researched and written by Stha Yeni, this eye-opening Biowatch Research Paper explores the design, implementation and outcomes of South Africa's National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), with a focus on KwaZulu-Natal. Of particular interest is the role of smallholder farmers in the programme and the food production projects in schools. Lessons from Brazil, India and Ghana show that if well-structured and adequately funded by the state, smallholder farmers can effectively supply schools with healthy, nutritious food. In return, they create local economies and contribute to broader livelihoods through secured markets for their produce.

This and other Biowatch Research Papers can be viewed and downloaded from our website at [www.biowatch.org.za/download/national-school-nutrition-programme/](http://www.biowatch.org.za/download/national-school-nutrition-programme/)

## Agroecology for food sovereignty video series



Agroecology is so much more than a farming practice. It connects grassroots communities, farmers, researchers, workers and consumers in a global movement for food sovereignty and Farmers’ Rights. The practical manifestations of agroecology around the world are as diverse as the landscapes, climates and cultures of each local place. In this new series of videos, we explore agroecology for food sovereignty and share our work with smallholder farmers in KZN. Watch at [www.biowatch.org.za/videos\\_agroecology-for-food-sovereignty/](http://www.biowatch.org.za/videos_agroecology-for-food-sovereignty/)



*The 2025 Biowatch Agroecology Farmer Fair took place in Botha's Hill, Durban, in August. The celebration of small-holder farmers, their seed, and their Farmers' Rights was attended by Biowatch-supported farmers from KwaZulu-Natal, members of the KZN Agroecology Platform, as well as Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) and Agroecology Action Collective partners. A highlight of the two-day event was a visit from Thoko Didiza, Speaker of the National Assembly and former Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (pictured top right with Biowatch's agroecology administrator Samu Zumu and Biowatch Director, Rose Williams). The very popular former Minister re-affirmed her support for agroecology and commitment to smallholder farmers and their vital role in securing food security in the province.*

## Agroecology seminars

### ■ What is agroecology, really?

In October 2025, farmers, local and provincial government, the Agricultural Research Council, and civil society organisations attended the Biowatch public seminar “*What is agroecology, really?*” at Durban Botanic Gardens. The seminar unpacked how the concept of agroecology has developed over time to the current understanding of agroecology as a transdisciplinary science, a practice and a movement seeking food sovereignty and the equitable and sustainable transformation of agriculture and food systems. This exploration included discussing the 13 Principles of Agroecology, an internationally agreed set of ecological and social principles to guide food system transition distilled by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE-FSN) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

### ■ Securing Farmers' Rights

In September 2025, Biowatch co-hosted a symposium with the UCT Bio-economy Research Chair at the SANBI Education Centre in Pretoria. Representatives from the Directorate of Genetic Resources in the Department of Agriculture, the Agricultural Research Council, SANBI, academics, civil society organisations and farmers shared their views on “*Securing Farmers' Rights in South Africa*”. Farmers presented their challenges and solutions to strengthen farmer-led seed systems, and Dr Netnou-Nkoana, Director: Genetic Resources, encouraged engaging the Department in joint projects to support Farmers' Rights and submissions to guide South Africa's positions on critical issues in the Plant Treaty negotiations.

## KZN Agroecology Platform gathering

The KZN Agroecology Platform gathered in October to explore “Agroecology in action and policy”. Day 1 included sharing learning from the Agroecology Action Collective learning exchange visit to Zimbabwe (see page 4), and reflection on how the HLPE's 13 Principles of Agroecology applied to our own practice. This provided useful grounding for discussing the draft National Agroecology Framework for South Africa and its imminent release. Day 2 began with a learning visit to Donna Hornby's inspiring agroecological smallholding in Howick. The day and ended with an informative exchange at AFRA's new Pietermaritzburg office and agroecology hub where agroforestry, a seed bank, seedling production, demonstration vegetable gardens, composting and a farmer activity space are being developed.



# Agroecology Action Collective learning exchange



Partners and smallholder farmers attend the Agroecology Action Collective South Africa-Zimbabwe learning exchange.

A team of 25 South Africans from six provinces (Limpopo, Gauteng, KZN, E Cape, W Cape and N Cape), participated in an Agroecology Action Collective learning exchange to Zimbabwe in September. Organised by Biowatch in partnership with PELUM Zimbabwe and ZIMSOF, the learning exchange began at the annual Good Food and Seed Festival in Harare. The core of the Festival was an impressive display of seed diversity emphasising traditional and local crops, especially small grains, legumes and indigenous vegetables. The festival offered a refreshing emphasis on traditional culture, values and foods.

Participants then visited Fambidzanai Permaculture Centre before a five-day exchange at ZIMSOF's Shashe Agroecology School in Mavingo Province. The exchange combined farm visits, practical learning, and theoretical discussion. Stand-out features were the strong community collaboration and cohesion, genuine self-sufficiency purely on the basis of agroecological practices, the extent of on-farm processing using appropriate technologies, on-farm integration and diversity, and, again, the strong assertion of local African cultural values at the heart of everything.

Replication in South Africa will depend on supportive policy and securing access to land, water and other natural resources to agroecology farmers. But farmers are already leading through practice, including seed saving, farmer-based demonstration of agroecological practices and technologies, adoption of *ilima* (communal work teams), solidarity food relief, and rainwater harvesting.

## High rates of food insecurity a focus at CFS

Biowatch's Advocacy and Research Co-ordinator, Vanessa Black, participated in the 53rd plenary of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the preparatory Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSIPM) Forum in Rome in October. A focus was the *2025 State of Food Security and Nutrition Report* which reflected continuing high rates of food insecurity (<https://tinyurl.com/23nb9erz>). Exacerbation of hunger through wars in Congo, Sudan, Ukraine and especially Palestine, and other systemic issues, were also key but often controversial discussion points.

CFS received the new HLPE report on *Building Resilient Food Systems* (<https://tinyurl.com/2unwxm5b>), which provides excellent input towards the 2026 policy convergence process. CFS also endorsed the *Policy Recommendations on Strengthening Urban and Peri-urban Food Systems*, which note the rural-to-urban continuum and support for land tenure rights, participation, agency and informal markets. Food sovereignty is mentioned and for the first time "traditional gatherers" were recognised.

CSIPM presented their *Vision Document for Urban and Peri-urban Food Systems* with diverse case studies which highlight the critical role of local governments to implement food system transformation at the local level (<https://tinyurl.com/3v9saczj>).

### WHAT'S COMING UP?

- United Nations Working Group on UNDROP call for submissions – the Right to Seed: by 19 February <https://tinyurl.com/ycyhzf2n>
- SA Human Rights Commission call for submissions – National Inquiry into the Food Systems of South Africa: by 27 February <https://tinyurl.com/ycstujue>
- KZN Agroecology Network meeting: 23–25 March

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