



biowatch
SOUTH AFRICA

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biodiversity | food sovereignty | agroecology | social justice

The COVID-19 lockdown exposes South Africa's food crisis

What the COVID-19 crisis highlights is what Biowatch and the food sovereignty movement have been warning of for years: increasing production in the corporate-dominated, industrialised food system does not ensure that everyone can access sufficient and nutritious food.

Inability to afford food and the poor quality of industrially-produced foods are contributing to high rates of stunting, obesity, and the epidemic of diabetes in South Africa – all indicators of malnutrition.

While agribusiness has long claimed that it feeds the country the COVID-19 lockdown has further exposed the industrialised food system's inadequacies. With restrictions on informal trade, smallholder farming and subsistence fishing, the working class and poor in South Africa were severed from vital access to affordable, healthy and nutritious food.

The emergence of a novel Coronavirus and other pathogen outbreaks, such as the listeriosis outbreak in 2018, also point to a food system that is at odds with healthy human and planetary ecosystems.

This moment has provided us with pause to reflect and as a country and a world, to fully commit to achieving the

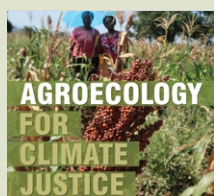


Smallholder farmers and informal traders provide affordable, nutritious food during the COVID-19 lockdown crisis.

right to nutritious food for everyone. We must build a different food system based on food sovereignty – one that restores our relationships with each other and the earth; regenerating the natural ecosystems on which we depend.

As such, Biowatch is calling for an urgent transition to agroecology in South Africa (see "Agroecology SA" on page 2). We can start this transition through ensuring equitable access to unpolluted land and water; supporting smallholder farmers and other small-scale producers; revitalising localised food networks and community markets; and strengthening farmer-led seed systems and farmers' rights.

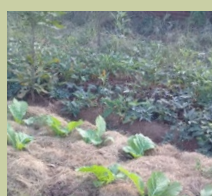
Biowatch's social media has been busy! We participated in joint campaigns, including one led by



AfSA promoting agroecology as just action on climate change.

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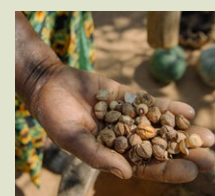
Nomusa Ngwenya is a Biowatch-supported agroecology farmer in northern KwaZulu-Natal. During



lockdown, her vegetable garden is thriving.

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A SKI CoP took on new meaning for Biowatch in 2020 – upscaling agroecology and securing food



sovereignty in Southern Africa in the context of COVID-19.

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From the director

July 2020. More than half-way through the year. And what a shocking time it has been.

In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have wreaked havoc, deepening inequalities, destroying livelihoods and increasing existing high levels of hunger in the country. Changes at a social, political and economic level have been dire. “Flattening the curve”, “social distancing” and “COVID-19” have become part of our lexicon.

Biowatch began 2020 with an excellent annual reflection and planning process. We developed a powerful plan and had new energy and determination to work towards the right to food and healthy food, and the imperative for South Africa to transition to agroecology in the face of climate change. These issues are still critical; now to hold this focus during a pandemic and under lockdown.

This newsletter highlights some of our current and future work. Good news is we welcome Zama Magoso as the new Biowatch administrator, and Stha Yeni to the Biowatch Board. Stha was recently national Co-ordinator for Tshintsha Amakhaya and worked for many years at Surplus People Project as Development Facilitator.

There were also big changes in the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), the 16-partner Southern Africa initiative of which Biowatch is the project holder. In March we said goodbye to Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss who has been Co-ordinator since SKI's inception in 2013. Her work has been monumental and inspiring. In April, we were very pleased to welcome Lindy Morrison as the new SKI Team Manager. Lindy brings new energy and two decades of experience in the NGO sector.

In closing, I reaffirm the message on our website with respect to COVID-19: “We stand in solidarity with all those affected and infected, with first responders and healthcare workers, and with all those on the front lines at this difficult and challenging time for our country, and our world.”

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Agroecology SA

In June, 63 participants gathered in the first online meeting of Agroecology South Africa (AESA) – an initiative kick-started by Biowatch in 2019 to strengthen civil society collaboration in catalysing the transition to agroecology in South Africa. In addition to sharing the purpose of the AESA platform, the meeting provided space for sharing updates on several other national initiatives including the SA Food Sovereignty Campaign, Land Network National Engagement Strategy in South Africa (LandNNEs), the SA Water Caucus, and AVACLIM (Agroecology, ensuring food security and sustainable livelihoods while mitigating climate change and restoring land in dryland regions). The Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) members shared perspectives from the farmer movement.

Progress on the stalled national Agroecology Strategy and Organic Policy, a call for agrochemical policy reform, and the development of a National Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) agroecology qualification were also shared.

The platform's first collective action was a submission on the national Supplementary Budget critiquing the cuts to land reform, food security, rural development and small-scale fisheries while boosting the budgets for the military and police.

Eight AESA working groups will develop collective plans for taking agroecology forward in South Africa.

Meet Zama Magoso

Meet Zama Magoso, Biowatch's new Office Administrator. Zama joined us at the beginning of April, just as the country went into COVID-19 lockdown. Well done Zama for adapting so quickly to extraordinary circumstances – and for embracing the most interesting of induction processes!



Zama has worked in the NGO sector for 15 years and brings a wealth of experience in many aspects of an effective organisation. She is also a qualified counsellor, trainer and victim empowerment worker, and recently completed a Social Entrepreneurship Programme at the Gordon Institute of Business Science.

Welcome to the Biowatch team, Zama!



In the photo above (taken by a member of her household), Nomusa Ngwenya, a Biowatch-supported agroecology farmer in northern KwaZulu-Natal, stands proudly in front of her granary storing maize seed on the cob. This will be planted out ahead of summer rains. Her winter vegetable garden is thriving. Although there hasn't been much rain the thick mulch blanket on her planting beds (middle), and closely spaced vegetables (right), conserve the moisture provided from household grey water.

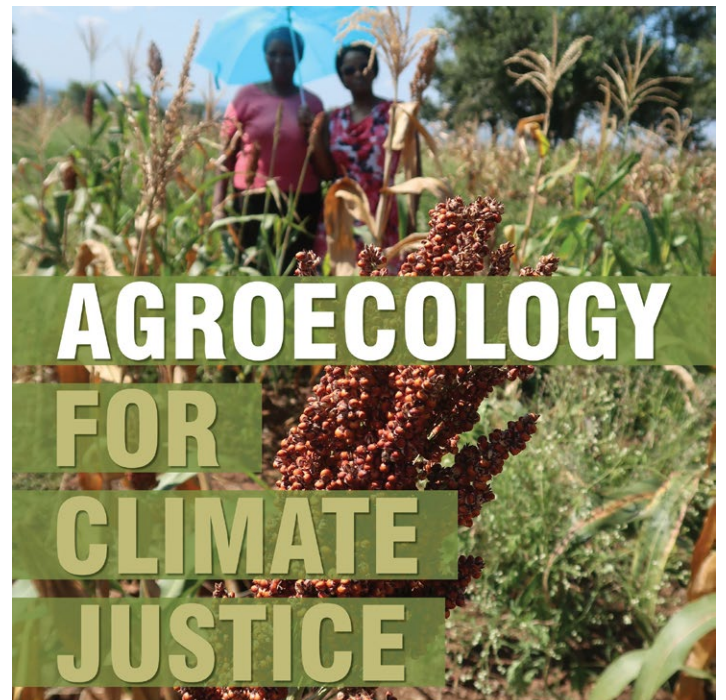
During lockdown, MaNgwenya struggled to buy vegetable seedlings due to shortages at nurseries in town, but she has learnt the skills to grow her own. Although she worries about selling her surplus produce while local markets remain inaccessible during lockdown, she has been doing a roaring trade with neighbours who buy at her gate. She says: "I am able to grow and produce healthy food as I do not use chemical fertilisers." In addition to food for the family "there is always cash in my house"; the children "take the money from sales to go and buy what they need."

Disaster relief flawed

The nationwide COVID-19 lockdown has had devastating consequences for food security in South Africa: school meals for 9 million children abruptly stopped; food prices, especially of fresh produce, rose dramatically; community markets were shut down; and food parcels reached a fraction of needy families.

In an effort to improve local food supplies through winter and spring, the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development announced a R1.2 billion COVID-19 disaster relief fund for smallholder farmers. While well-intentioned, the application process revealed some of the flawed thinking on smallholder support. Many successful small producers were disqualified by needing to provide proof of land tenure and an annual turnover of more than R20 000. They were also expected to have off-take agreements, assuming supply into formal value chains. The support offered is focused on conventional inputs supplied through vouchers redeemed at the nearest agri-retailer. This framing of small-scale production is embedded in the near final Comprehensive Producer Support Policy, which looks set to continue pressurising small producers into the industrialised food system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has painfully exposed our failing food system, providing the impetus for change. Biowatch is optimistic that civil society will seize this moment to work together to build food sovereignty through localised food systems and an Agroecological South Africa.



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#Agroecology4Climate

www.biowatch.org.za

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Biowatch's social media has been busy! One of the viral campaigns we were part of, lead by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), called for action on climate change and promoted agroecology. For more info and to join us, visit and like our Facebook page: #BiowatchSA



The Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) is a partnership of Southern African organisations committed to securing food sovereignty in the region. Photo © SKI

SKI: A regional community of practice

A Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) community of practice took on new meaning for Biowatch in 2020. Biowatch participated in two powerful face-to-face SKI partner meetings in early 2020 – little did we know the import of such gatherings. The first in February focused on different aspects of upscaling agroecology, where Biowatch was involved in the work on agroecology courses and participatory research action. The second was a regional partners strategy meeting to plan our next steps as SKI partners working together across four countries (Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe) towards our goal of “Improved food security in participating farming communities through more resilient farmer-led seed systems and agroecology.”

While there is much commonality across the four countries there are also key differences, emphasising the need for a regional approach in a context that does not know national borders – a context of hunger, climate change, biodiversity destruction, and now COVID-19. Strong relationships will hold our work – a strong community of practice across the region is needed now more than ever.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

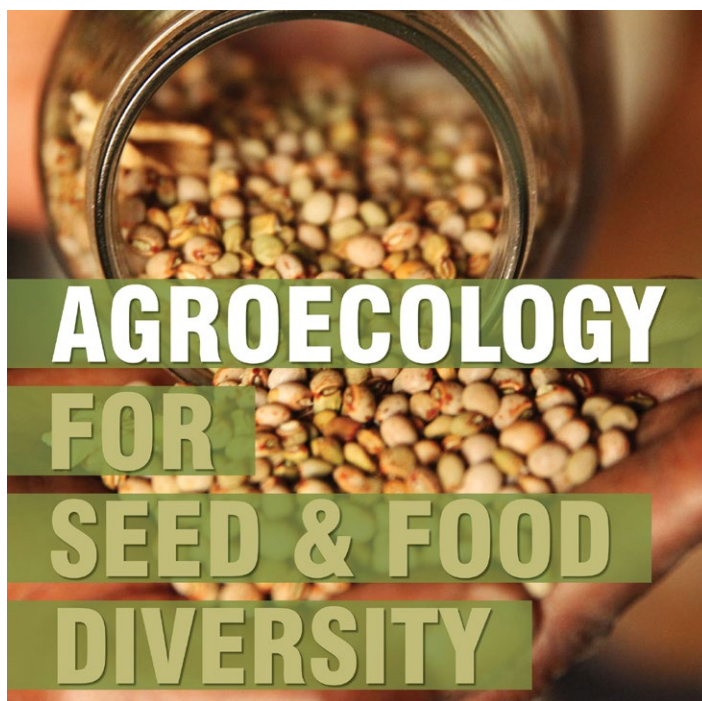
- Zimbabwe Food and Seed Festival: 15–19 September (to be confirmed)
- World Food Day: 16 October (Biowatch's social media campaign and online event)

Biowatch Bulletin will keep you updated.

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

■ During August and September Biowatch and SKI will be hosting an online course on the use and production of biofertilisers. Presented by international expert Juanfran Lopez, the online weekly trainings will encourage participants to put theory into practice, with mentoring and support. Interested in participating? For more information go to www.biowatch.org.za/biofertiliser-training/ and to join the **introductory webinar on 4 August**, please contact zama@biowatch.org.za

■ Look out for webinars hosted by SKI introducing key concepts in agroecology through the insights of African practitioners from the SKI regional network. Visit www.seedandknowledge.org for more information.



#AgroecologyIsBestPractice
#BiowatchSA