



biowatch

SOUTH AFRICA

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bulletin

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Working towards a just transition to agroecology in South Africa

Our country is going through a deeply disturbing time, but what is clear is that working towards building a just and resilient food system is not something that we should waiver from.

The first six months of this year have been busy ones for Biowatch. Adapting our work and approach in a growing online space, while adhering to COVID-19 protocols when we are able to work face-to-face with communities and farmers, has been challenging and energising.

We have refined and focused our work towards a transition to agroecology in South Africa with our core outcomes being more people practice agroecology; more civil society organisations learn and act together to advocate a just transition to agroecology; and more people increasingly value the ethical growing, buying and eating of “good” food.

In addition to our ongoing work with agroecology farmers and our research and advocacy work, this focus is seen in new, and exciting work and projects. For example: *AE Qalisa!*, a new structured 5-day isiZulu course for farmers and farmer trainers; our upcoming 8-module online agroecology course for civil society change-makers; the work being done to help build and strengthen platforms such as Agroecology South Africa (AE SA) and the KZN Agroecology Platform; the Biowatch podcast “Good Food Conversations”; as well as our recent community radio pilot with Maputaland FM – “Good food with Biowatch”.

We have also been part of the international opposition to the upcoming UN Food Systems summit – what seems a timely summit but its corporate capture, including through the strategic alliance with the World Economic Forum, has caused outcry and counter-mobilisation across all continents (www.csm4cfs.org/hundreds-of-grassroots-organizations-to-oppose-the-un-food-systems-summit).



In June, Biowatch ran the second AE Qalisa! (agroecology now!) isiZulu training for 2021. The training was held in Pongola, with support from agroecology farmer demonstrators in the area. Participants (farmers and farmer trainers) were new to agroecology and the 5-day course was designed to introduce a number of practices – with practicals – as well as basic theory and information sessions on topics ranging from “why agroecology” to “what is good soil” and “how to plan a homestead farm”. The next training will be in KwaHhohho in September – please email samu@biowatch.org.za for details.

A recent KZN AE Platform learning exchange, co-hosted by Siyazisiza Trust, explored moving beyond



production and localising the food system through AE.

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Agroecology demonstrators from KwaHhohho in northern KwaZulu-Natal hosted the first



Biowatch “Come and See” agroecology event for 2021.

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Several international policy processes are underway this year that significantly impact and further



entrench the unsustainability of our food systems.

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From the director

A deeply disturbing time, and very difficult to write something that speaks to this – the destruction, complexities and contradictions, history, political power struggles, deep inequalities, the power of toxic social media, the strength of the ordinary citizen, and the pain, fear and reality of extreme hardship and hunger for many. This is the face of the second week in July in KwaZulu-Natal province, where Biowatch is based.

Since 12 July the army has been deployed, more than 330 people have died, the main arterial road between the major cities of Durban and Johannesburg was blocked and now re-opened, hundreds of shops, clinics, warehouses... throughout the province have been looted and often burnt. State security and the police are scrambling to explain their shockingly slow response. So much is being exposed at the Commission of Enquiry into State Capture. So much hardship, acute hunger and unemployment, amidst ever-worsening impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much to be challenged. For example, looting. It cannot just be the abhorrence of looting of warehouses, of shops... – the visible. What about the looting of the less visible or the invisible – the merciless exploitation locally and globally of the environment – destroying livelihoods, poisoning air and soil and bodies, the destruction of biodiversity and ecosystems on an unimaginable scale, wealthy countries playing games with “carbon credits” and the never-ending pumping of greenhouse gas emissions that is looting the future of all on our earth. If looted goods are taken back by the police, what will be done to put right the other?

This issue of our newsletter, the Biowatch Bulletin, speaks to supporting a more equitable and sustainable society, one that does not loot its present and its future – local food systems, and agriculture with a low carbon footprint and no toxic agrichemicals (read about the burning of the multinational agrichemical giant UPL's warehouse in north Durban on 13 July, giving insight into the collateral damage of the industrial agriculture system (<https://bit.ly/3rCeJUr>).

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AE SA updates

■ Principles for collaboration and learning

A plenary meeting in March reflected on the outcomes of a first round of consultation on a vision statement and principles for Agroecology South Africa (AE SA). A second round of comments are being incorporated towards principles for learning and collaborating to build inclusive, participatory, and transformative systems for social and ecological justice. Biowatch continues to hold the space and support the development of the AE SA platform.

■ AE SA confronts technocrat's GMO myths

Media articles by Wandile Sihlobo, chief economist of agribusiness association AgBiz, promoting genetically modified and gene drive crops for South Africa prompted a strong response on the AE SA email listserv. Glenn Ashton authored a rebuttal for sign-on by platform members and other concerned CSOs in the region. This can be read – and shared – here: <https://biowatch.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Technocratic-support-for-GM-crops-misses-mark.pdf>

■ Unpoison webinars

The #UnpoisonSA group is working on a range of issues relating to agrichemicals. Webinars can be viewed on the newly live Unpoison website: <https://unpoison.org/> or YouTube: #UNPOISONSA.

KZN AE platform

Another energising KZN Agroecology Platform learning exchange was co-hosted at Siyazisiza Trust's Zululand Agri-Support Centre near Mtunzini in May. The event explored how we can move “Beyond Production” and localise the food system through agroecology.

Participants engaged in animated discussion on practice, marketing, agro-processing, and what it means to produce organically as the Siyazisiza team took participants on tours of the Centre and nearby Sivukile farming co-operative. Following the tours, everyone gathered to reflect and discuss what we can do together as the KZN AE Platform to build an agroecological food system in the province.

Emerging threads include the need to lobby for local markets; organising collective farmer exchanges and market days; improving our understanding of various standards in relation to quality, safety and organics; mapping of platform members; and sharing the rich knowledge within the platform on agroecological practice and seed.



Experiencing agroecology in practice, first-hand. Above: AE demonstrator Ntobizethu Ntuli shows plot preparation in her market garden. Top right: Livestock is an important component of agroecology diversity. Right: Drying sorghum for seed in AE farmer Thombithini Ndwandwe's seed bank.



"Come and See" agroecology

In April, agroecology demonstrators from KwaHhohho in northern KwaZulu-Natal hosted the first Biowatch "Come and See" event for 2021. Twenty-one guests, including participants from Women's Development Bank Trust (WDB), Church Land Programme and KwaWoza, visited community and household food gardens and farmers' fields. They experienced first-hand agroecology practices such as building healthy soils, composting, use of grey water, and seed saving and storage. Several of the organisations attended the Biowatch AE Qalisa! farmer training in June, and others have applied to attend in September.



New online AE course for change-makers

Biowatch has taken up the challenge of developing an in-depth online agroecology course to help equip civil society change-makers with an understanding of agroecology's potential for transitioning to a just and life-supporting food system. The online course will explore why we need the urgent transition to agroecology; what agroecology is (and what it is not); and agroecological principles and theory of practice to enable participants start implementing and advocating agroecology in their work spheres. The course format is modelled on the very successful online bio-inputs course Biowatch and SKI ran in 2020, which was a mix of theory, discussion and practical components.

While contributing to developing a supportive community to take agroecology forward in Southern Africa, we believe our new online agroecology course will help towards achieving one of Biowatch's key objectives for 2021: *More CSOs learn and act together to advocate a just transition to agroecology in KwaZulu-Natal and South Africa.*

The first eight-module course will run over five weeks in October–November 2021. Watch our website for details, or join our mailing list for more information – sign up on our home page: www.biowatch.org.za

Biowatch's Good Food Conversations is a podcast about "good food" and a food system that can nourish our bodies and our lives, as well as the web of life we share our gardens, fields, pastures and waters with. Recent conversations include:

- Chantell Witten gives us an insight into South Africa's nutrition profile and we discuss affordable ways to improve nutrition, especially for children.
- Gertrude Pswarayi-Jabson talks to us about strengthening traditional farmer-led seed systems and how proposed seed laws threaten food security and farmers' rights.
- Pralini Naidoo uncovers new narratives around food and culture in the context of indentured labour.
- Method Gundidza gives us an insight into the African spiritual practices that honour the connection between food, land, people, and all living things.

International advocacy for a just food system

The increasingly globalised corporate-driven industrialised food system is at the nexus of a number of global crises. It contributes to at least 37% of climate change emissions and is a major driver of habitat and biodiversity loss. It hasn't improved the global situation of increasing numbers of people suffering from hunger, and alarming increases in malnutrition and diet-related diseases.

The Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism (CSM) of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), has been calling for a human rights-based and agroecological transformation of food systems to secure peoples and planetary health. The CSM successfully lobbied for agroecology to be included on the CFS agenda in 2020/21 together with another critical workstream on Food Systems and Nutrition. Due to COVID-19, negotiations took place online and were rushed to completion in deference to the problematic corporate-captured UN Food Systems Summit.

The CSM, which Biowatch is a part of, is deeply disappointed by the results. Hostility towards the strong inclusion of rights, especially the rights of women and indigenous peoples, in both processes is concerning. The policy guidelines on "Agroecological and other innovative approaches" do not differentiate between agroecology and approaches pushed by agribusiness, such as climate-smart agriculture and digitalisation, and includes a retrogressive clause on optimisation and management of pesticides and fertiliser.

The CSM has rejected the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition as insufficient for the urgent task of transforming the global food system to be "fairer, more sustainable, resilient and healthier" and failing to hold the current agro-industrial model accountable for its role in climate change and malnutrition.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- *AE Qalisa!* (see page 1): 13–17 September
- World Food Day celebrations: 13–16 October
- Biowatch's online agroecology course for CSOs (see page 3): 26 October to 23 November

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



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Building a regional AE online learning toolbox

Its use started off as a necessity due to COVID-19, but online webinar technology has proved to be a huge asset to the regional Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) agroecology learning toolbox. As one of the 15 SKI partners, Biowatch has been so appreciative to still connect with partners, both in the SKI Community of Practice (CoP) where there have been online webinars on agroecology, natural pest control and markets for agroecology produce and products, and at the annual SKI Partners meeting – online doesn't match the richness of face-to-face engagement, but more people can participate, the carbon footprint is lower, and whilst travel between the participating countries (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi) currently can't happen, we are fortunate to have this as an option.

The SKI partner meeting was held over four days in May and was designed for an on-line space – mornings only, break-away groups, excellent facilitation and committed participants. There were 30 participants from the 15 SKI partners with sessions on building the partnership, strengthening programming and practice, communication for advocacy, cross-cutting issues (gender, HIV and youth) and the amplification of farmers' voices. There was renewed commitment from all for this regional initiative!

With Southern Africa experiencing renewed waves of COVID-19 infections and low vaccination rates, it does seem that the reality of life and work under COVID-19 is something that will be with us for the foreseeable future; and a regional online learning toolbox is significant for our work in the country and across the region.