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SOUTH AFRICA

biodiversity | food sovereignty | agroecology | social justice

bulletin

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Stories of Resilience Built Through Agroecology



Celebrating at the launch of Biowatch's new book: Stories of Resilience Built Through Agroecology.

Biowatch friends, farmers and guests gathered at the Durban Botanic Gardens in April to celebrate the launch of *Stories of Resilience Built Through Agroecology: Biowatch farmers speak out about living and thriving in troubled times (2020–2022)*.

The two years between the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, the civil unrest in July 2021, and the extreme floods in 2022 were unprecedented in terms of intersecting crises. Arriving one on top of the other, these experiences provide a window into the stark potential future we face should we not respond creatively and urgently to the need for systemic change. With the unfolding climate and biodiversity crises, economic and political turbulence, and growing corporate power, the need for resilience within farming communities and the food system is even greater.

During this challenging COVID-19 pandemic period communication between Biowatch and the agroecology farmers we support suggested that, on the whole, the farmers were coping. To confirm this anecdotal evidence, we commissioned a survey of 24 farmers, including long-standing and recent agroecology adopters, in nine areas in different parts of KwaZulu-Natal. The farmers' voices and stories offered in the new book provide insight into the multiple dimensions in which agroecology benefits rural communities and builds resilience in the face of intersecting climate, biodiversity, water and food crises and the social and political upheavals that loom ahead of us locally, regionally and globally.

Stories of Resilience Built Through Agroecology is available on our website at <https://biowatch.org.za/download/stories-of-resilience/>

Watch this space for info on the public release of *The Last Seed*, the documentary film exposing



the struggle for control of seed and Farmers' Rights in Africa.

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The National Plant Genetic Resources Centre visited Biowatch-supported farmers and expressed



their excitement about the success of agroecology farming methods.

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A delegation of CSOs and farmers met with the Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, Land Reform



and Rural Development and Department representatives.

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From the director

We hope you find the *Stories of Resilience Built Through Agroecology* refreshing, real and inspiring. It was so instructive doing this research; an experience that was echoed in a recent visit to some of the farmers featured in the publication by the national Dept. of Agriculture (see page 3). We've also just returned from a meeting of the KZN Agroecology Platform to Bonakude, outside Richmond, which was both inspirational and thought-provoking – more practical examples of resilience and exuberance. Bonakude also features in *"The Last Seed"* (see page 4) – the documentary which will have its Durban premiere on 27 September. Do sign up to the Biowatch mailing list via our website for further details.

The disjunct between this inspiring work and the disasters that are being experienced globally and locally is stark. Globally, it seems that the first week of this month is the hottest week on Earth in recorded history. Europe is facing its hottest summer, the massive wildfires in Canada continue, and there is the looming *El Niño* that brings increasing hardship to the Global South. Although extreme weather has occurred before, the scale is increasing. We urgently need governments to act bravely, collectively and with public interest in mind. There is no space for making money out of disaster, for example with flaky carbon credits which can be bought so that life-destroying greenhouse gas emissions can continue to be pumped out globally and iniquitous profits made. We need governments to hear and incorporate civil society's input – see page 4 for some action on the corporate industrialised food system.

There is also a great need for exposing "solutions" that on closer scrutiny are not what they seem. See the strong critique of nature-based solutions which was published earlier this year in *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* (<https://tinyurl.com/r2833nrz>). One of the farming groups Biowatch works with features in the article.

It is also the time for innovative and just transitions. Stories of resilience are here as a resource for all of us.

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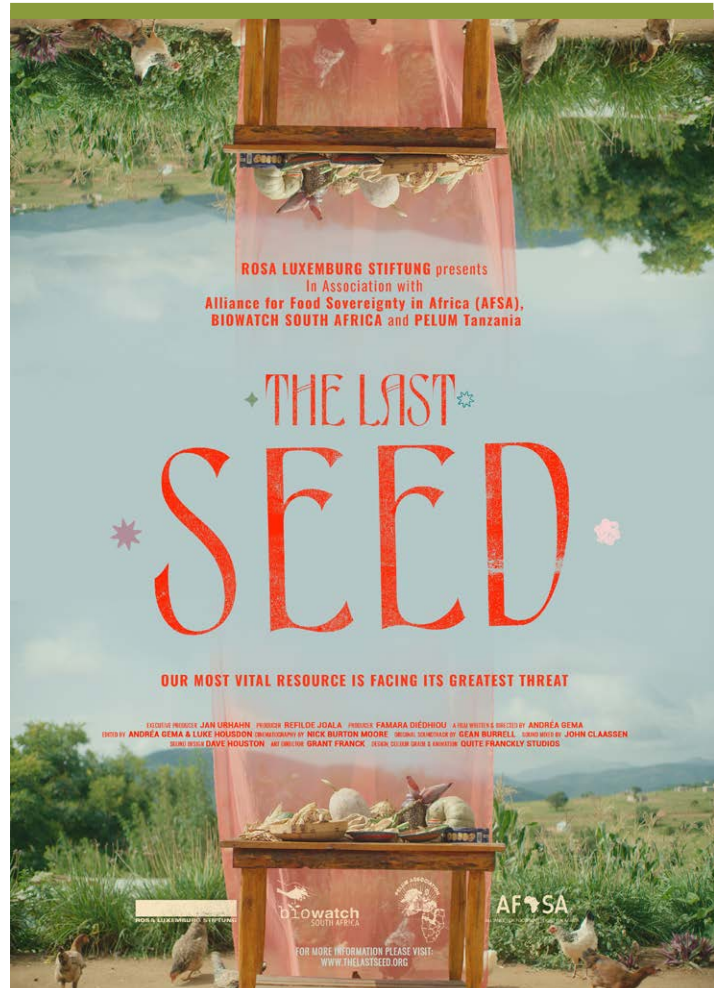
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The much-anticipated South African premiere of *The Last Seed*, produced by Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung in association with Biowatch, the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) and PELUM Tanzania, took place in Cape Town in May. This important, timely and visually stunning documentary film exposes the struggle for the control of seed and Farmers' Rights to save and exchange seed in Africa.

Biowatch agroecology farmers in northern KwaZulu-Natal feature in the film, as does Vanessa Black, our advocacy, research and policy co-ordinator, and Bonakude's Mvu Ngcoya, a Biowatch Trustee. *The Last Seed*, which has already won a number of awards at local and international film festivals, will soon be available on streaming services and for public viewing. We'll share the links as soon as they are available.

- In the build up to public release of the feature film, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southern Africa Regional Office will be releasing a series of thematic video clips featuring powerful voices and messages from *The Last Seed* and never-before-seen footage from the feature film. Watch the first release in this series, an eight-minute clip titled *The Seed Struggle in Africa*, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzLIVQYSzms&v=en>

Delegation engages with government

Earlier this year, Biowatch was part of a delegation of civil society organisations and farmers who met with the Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (ALRRD) and with government representatives from the Department (DALRRD).

The invitation to engage was in response to an open letter sent to DALRRD Minister Thoko Didiza in December last year by the African Centre for Biodiversity, Association for Rural Advancement, Biowatch, Environmental Monitoring Group and Tshintsha Amakhaya Network. The letter, endorsed by 48 other organisations, referenced DALRRD's under-expenditure of R1.3-billion for the 2021/22 financial year, and urged the Department to work with the agroecology sector in realising many objectives we have in common. It also called on government to develop and establish an agroecology strategy and programme; and to include agroecology as a key framing and response in the Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Plan (CCAMP).

After the delegation's input at the meeting, the Portfolio Committee expressed their appreciation for the trouble taken to engage constructively with them. There is much to do to build awareness of agroecology and its potential to contribute to a healthy, climate resilient food system and livelihoods in South Africa. Watch this space!



In June, representatives from the National Plant Genetic Resources Centre visited Biowatch-supported agroecology farmers in KwaHhohho and Ingwavuma. They were excited by the effectiveness of agroecology farming methods, especially for soil improvement and water conservation. They were impressed by the diversity they saw, by the farmers' variety of beans, and also to see finger millet and evidence of the farmers' know-how to harvest and prepare it. Millet and other small grains are important for resilience in the face of climate uncertainty.

The National Gene Bank avoids using fertilisers and pesticides when reproducing farmer seed and encourages their community seed bank projects to do the same. For this reason, they are interested in learning agroecology practices from Biowatch, and sending farmers on Biowatch's agroecology training programme later in 2023.

Our hands-on agroecology training programme is gaining momentum – and many new enthusiastic, committed agroecology converts.

*(Top and bottom) Theory and practice come together in the **AE Qalisa** "intro to agroecology" course in Pongola.*

*(Far right) Guided by experienced agroecology demonstrators, top **AE Qalisa** 2022 graduates learn more about soil health and bio-inputs at an **AE Qhubeka** course in KwaHhohho.*

The courses are run by the Mtubatuba staff team, with support from experienced Biowatch farmers. Email samu@biowatch.org.za for more information.



International advocacy

■ Mobilising against corporate-dominated industrialised food systems

Social movements and civil society organisations are responding to several processes that threaten to further entrench corporate-dominated industrialised food systems globally and on the continent. Of concern is an event to “take stock” two years after the UN Food Systems Summit. This FSS+2 will take place from 24–26 July in Rome. This process continues to undermine democratic and rights-based processes to action systemic food system transformation to ensure healthy food for all. A series of counter-mobilisation events are planned including the launch of a monitoring report from the African CSIPM Popular Consultation space on the UNFSS follow-up processes in Congo Brazzaville, Kenya, Mali, Morocco and Zambia.

■ African agriculture ministers urged to support transition to agroecology

African CSOs collaborated in preparing a declaration to the 5th Agricultural Ministerial Conference under the African Union and the European Union partnership which took place in Rome on 30 June. This urges our agricultural ministers to work towards achieving food sovereignty on our continent by implementing 11 recommendations that include shifting financing towards agroecological transitions and promoting farmer-managed seed systems.

- Read the statement here: <https://afsafrika.org/african-civil-society-organizations-and-peoples-movements-call-for-food-sovereignty/>
- Sign on here: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdsS7ExHp07XCcUUpzoE67Mxi-BVtJE8c0fb1sWhjwohrMnA/viewform>

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- National Policy Dialogue on a Just Transition and Adaptation in the SA Food System: Johannesburg, 20–22 September
- Screening of “The Last Seed”: Durban, 27 September
- 51st plenary session of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS 51): Rome, 23–27 October
- Agroecology Farmer Fair: October 2023

Biowatch mailing list sign-up at www.biowatch.org.za



Representatives from the 15 Southern African SKI partner organisations met earlier this year to plan for Phase 3 (2023–2027).

SKI enters new phase

The Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) that Biowatch has been the project holder of since 2013 has entered a new phase! From March 2023, there is a new project holder, the inspiring Alliance for Food Sovereignty (AFSA). Biowatch will remain one of the 15 SKI partners that span Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

To end off the current phase, Phase 2 (2019–2023), SKI Partners met in Johannesburg in February to reflect, plan and finalise the framework for the next four-year period. One of the many highlights from the previous phase were the results from the community mapping process – a shortening of the lean or hungry season; an increase in dietary diversity as well as deepening of agroecology practices; farmer-to-farmer learning; and community action plans.

The development goal for the next four-year phase, Phase 3, sets a high standard, namely: “By 2027, farming communities have improved food sovereignty through resilient farmer-led seed systems and more biodiverse and multifunctional landscapes.”

The new phase will be characterised by SKI being partner-led; collective and collaborative commitment to building agroecology and food sovereignty in Southern Africa; co-creating knowledge and agency among farmers; tackling multiple causes and challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, including soil and water management; curriculum change; a stronger focus on advocacy at country and regional level; and broader networks to support Farmers’ Rights, Farmer-led seed systems and agroecology; and agroecology markets. There is much to be done and achieved in the next four years, and Biowatch is fully committed to the work and the vision of this vibrant, vital regional initiative.