



biowatch
SOUTH AFRICA

25
YEARS OF ACTION

biodiversity | food sovereignty | agroecology | social justice | www.biowatch.org.za

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BULLETIN

In 2024 we celebrate 25 years of action and advocacy

25 years is a milestone! And a history that is vibrant, turbulent and steadfast!

Across 25 years, we have traversed from sustainable agriculture to transformative agroecology, through the High Court, the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court, securing the right in the country for organisations acting in the public interest to be able to litigate for their rights without fear of the chilling effect of costs orders. A gripping account of what's become known as "the Biowatch Case" can be found in *A Landmark Victory for Justice: Biowatch's Battle with the South African State and Monsanto – the inside story* (see the publications section of our website).

Biowatch, the first NGO in South Africa focusing on biodiversity and social justice, was founded in 1999 with the appointment of a strong and motivated Board and our first staff member. That year, the first genetically modified (GM) crops became commercially available including genetically modified maize, a staple food crop in the country. This injustice catapulted Biowatch into this area of work (and our nine-year legal battle with the



state and Monsanto). Over the next decade and a half, this work deepened and expanded to a robust critique of the industrialised food system that drives malnutrition, climate change and biodiversity loss.

But our history is not only of dissent and challenge. Inspiring engagements with organisations and movements in Brazil in 2010 gave us the word "agroecology" for our work – and the political, socio-economic and environmental framing to our advocacy and practically-grounded work with farmers. Agroecology has been our core work over the past decade. > *Continued on page 2.*

In June, 29 participants were selected to attend *AE Qalisa*, Biowatch's very popular practical



"introduction to agroecology" training in isiZulu.

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ARC visited Biowatch-supported agroecology farmers in Pongola, KwaNgwanase and Ingwavuma as



part of their research into transforming SA's farming system.

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South African partners in the regional Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), including Biowatch,



met to review, plan and budget for the next 12 months.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Our lead article in this issue of the *Bulletin* is on Biowatch's 25th and gives a snapshot of our history; but what is not mentioned are all the individuals and organisations who have been essential to Biowatch, who have supported and inspired us over the 25 years, and in some cases (e.g. the legal case) saved Biowatch!

Firstly, thanks go to Rachel Wynberg and David Fig, who far-sightedly saw the need for an environmental and social justice organisation such as Biowatch. Then the past and current Board members who have been steadfast, brave and wise during the ups and downs of the past 25 years. I would like to formally acknowledge the current Board – Prof. Loretta Feris, Dr David Fig, Prof. Mvu Ngcoya, David Ntseng, Beni Williams, Prof. Rachel Wynberg and Stha Yeni. In particular, we thank David Fig for his astute and dependable leadership as chairperson of the Board since its inception. Going forward we are glad to announce that David Ntseng and Stha Yeni will, respectively, be taking on the chairpersonship and vice-chairpersonship.

Thank you to Biowatch staff, past and present, and in particular to Biowatch's first staff member Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss, and our current staff: Blessing Zama (Finance and Operations Manager), Vanessa Black (Advocacy and Research Co-ordinator), Lawrence Mkhalihi (Agroecology Manager), Zama Magoso (Administrator) and Samu Zuma (Agroecology Administrator). There are also our close associates who have worked with Biowatch for many years, who have believed in Biowatch and who have amplified our work through their support with publications, comms, M&E, finance, organisation development, and more.

And thank you to the funders who have enabled and supported our work over 25 years, through thick and thin, including through the COVID-19 pandemic.

And, importantly, we thank our civil society partners and the many agroecology farmers and communities we have worked and travelled with over 25 years who have been an inspiration and have grounded our work.

Thank you to all.

Rose Williams

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2024 Biowatch Bursary

We're excited to introduce you to Tracey Pienaar (right) who is the 2024 recipient of the Biowatch Agroecology Bursary. This scholarship for post-graduate studies aims to deepen understanding of agroecology, including its science, practices and social movements.



Tracey is currently doing her Masters at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). She is analysing the "time factor" in agroecology and comparing it with conventional farming. She's researching the time commitment it takes to produce outputs, how agroecology farmers learn and plan for the future (future time perspectives), and the numerous factors (including gender, race, social class) that impact productivity and sustainability, especially in rural areas.

"I'm discovering that while conventional farming may seem less time-consuming in the short term because it uses store-bought inputs like chemical fertilisers, it is way more costly and is not sustainable in the long term," says Tracey. "On the other hand, while agroecology may need more time and labour in the beginning, in the long term it is much more sustainable and it builds food security and protects the environment."

Celebrating 25 years ...

< *Continued from page 1.* This includes supporting farmers and farmers' rights, rolling out training programmes such as *Agroecology Qalisa* and *Agroecology Qhubeka*, developing and disseminating materials such as the *Agroecology is Best Practice* book and the *Climate Change and the Industrialised Food System* fact sheet, as well as initiating the KwaZulu-Natal Agroecology Platform and participating in Agroecology South Africa. A significant highlight was our role in initiating the regional Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) and being the SKI project holder from 2013–2023.

Our work responds to the crisis our country and world faces, arising from the nexus of climate change, hunger, malnutrition, and loss of biodiversity. And Biowatch will continue to advocate and demonstrate agroecology to maintain biodiversity and secure food sovereignty and social justice!



In June, 29 participants were selected to attend the five-day AE Qalisa course in Mtubatuba, northern KwaZulu-Natal. AE Qalisa is Biowatch's very popular "introduction to agroecology" basic training for smallholder farmers, farmer trainers and practitioners from civil society organisations who are committed to supporting and implementing agroecology. The training, which is practical and is conducted in isiZulu, is run by the Biowatch agroecology team with support from agroecology farmer demonstrators. The next course is planned for August. Email samu@biowatch.org.za for more information.



Learning more about Farmers' Rights



Seed custodians amongst Biowatch-supported farmers and advocacy partners gathered in April to explore Farmers' Rights. They traced the history of social movement advocacy to have the Farmers' Right to save, exchange and sell seed recognised in international law. They learnt about how this Farmers' Right is defined and included in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (the Plant Treaty), and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). The group then grappled with the opportunities and hindrances to its implementation.

Farmers led a discussion about how their implementation of Farmers' Rights is contributing to agricultural biodiversity. Anticipating that South Africa may soon ratify the Plant Treaty, the group also discussed the support and policies they need to strengthen their seed systems. Insufficient government support for agroecology as the foundation of farmers' ability to maintain farmers' seed systems, and access to land and water, were concerns threaded through the day's discussions.



During a sweltering week in March, a team from the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) visited Biowatch-supported agroecology farmers in Pongola, KwaNgwanase and Ingwavuma. The ARC team is researching how best to transform the current farming system in South Africa into one that is resilient and sustainable. The research will inform the Directorate of Land and Soil Management's agroecology strategy for the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural development (DALRRD).

The ARC team asked the farmers to explain and demonstrate how they improved their soil, where their seed comes from, how they market produce, if they do any landscape management, and what led farmers to transition to agroecology. In turn, the farmers asked that ARC communicate their needs to DALRRD, including the need for fencing to expand production, appropriate small equipment such as milling machines, and support to access and store water.

SKI partners meet

South African partners in the regional Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), including Biowatch, met in April to review, plan and budget for the next 12 months. Deliberations included our ongoing collaboration in the Farmers' Rights campaign, a focus on changing and challenging the narratives sustaining the industrialised food system, learning from each other as partners grapple with monitoring and evaluation, as well as how best to bring advocacy for small grains (millets and sorghum) more centrally into each partner's work.

The group also reflected on the unique contribution each South African partner brings to SKI: Biowatch's advocacy grounded in farmer practice, EarthLore's reviving bio-cultural practices through community dialogue, Ukuvuna's broad reach through resilient and empowered communities, and the UCT Bio-economy Chair's robust research.

An appropriate structure to support collaborative work and equitable sharing of resources in SKI's exciting transition to an independent legal entity was grappled with.



Representatives from South African SKI partners meet to review, plan and budget for the next 12 months.



In May, Biowatch joined academics and researchers for the inaugural meeting of the Agroecology Knowledge Network in South Africa. Hosted by the DSI/NRF SARCHI Bio-economy Research Chair at the University of Cape Town, in partnership with the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), this Network aims to strengthen collaboration and sharing of best practices to catalyse transformation in tertiary curricula and research in support of agroecology. Many ideas were shared to integrate the practice, science and social movement dimensions of agroecology and counter prevalent narratives. These included the need to centre farmers and recognise other forms of knowledge, and for more contextually responsive, long term and trans-disciplinary research, taking a broader view of agroecology and linking to other issues such as nutrition and health.

The lie about “new” technologies and techno-fixes

Biowatch attended two workshops exploring how emerging technologies are impacting the continent. In March, the ETC Group and AfriTAP hosted “Confronting technofixes in Africa” in Nairobi. Collectively participants scanned the developing “technosphere”— digitalisation, geoengineering of the climate (including carbon capture and manipulating weather systems), genetic engineering, nanotechnologies, and even biodigital organisms. Participants assessed the technologies asking: who owns them, who benefits or doesn't, where do the resources to make them come from, what and whom do they displace, and what is the ecological impact? On closer inspection these promised techno-fixes for disease, hunger and climate change are a new form of colonialism, ensuring continued elite profit and control.

In June, an African Centre for Biodiversity workshop took a deeper dive into agricultural digitilisation and new breeding technologies, such as Cisgenesis and genome editing. While their developers try to evade biosafety regulation, these technologies emerge from the same outdated understanding of interactions in gene ecosystems, with similar risks and unintended outcomes as first-generation GMOs.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- Biowatch 2024 Agroecology Farmer Fair: Durban, 12–15 August
- Public Seminar – Markets, politics and agroecology: Durban, 14 August
- AE Qalisa “introduction to agroecology” practical training: Mtubatuba, 26–30 August

Biowatch Bulletin will keep you updated.

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