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BULLETIN

Farmers demand government support for agroecology

Agroecology farmers from 14 areas across KwaZulu-Natal attended a Biowatch two-day catalysing advocacy workshop in July in Mtubatuba. The group of 25 smallholder farmers, mentors and demonstrators spoke about their engagements with different levels of government, what is needed in terms of support, and the huge and growing impact of extreme weather and changing seasons. They spoke of needing appropriate technology to lessen labour and assist with local food processing, materials to ensure household seed banks are secure, fencing, water storage tanks, and infrastructure for local community markets. They also noted the need for more multi-skilled extension officers who are willing to support agroecology, and the benefits of farmer-to-farmer mentorship programmes.

Their experiences with government support were varied, but opportunities in many spaces were being used to advance agroecology – whether it was through offering case studies towards developing a national Agroecology Management Framework, engaging with the provincial MEC, engaging with the national Department of Agriculture on the Plant Treaty, or the participation process in terms of the regulations to the Plant Breeders' Rights Act. A key, consistent message to government was the foundational role of seed in farmer livelihoods and food sovereignty.

Discussions took place on how best to work together considering the large geographical area, the farmers' next interventions at provincial and national levels to promote and gain support for agroecology, and the learning opportunities they can offer others, especially youth, in growing the agroecology movement.

It was very inspiring to experience the synergies and the energy farmers have for making a difference on the ground, and for securing rights for others in the province and the country.



Biowatch-supported KZN agroecology farmers meet to fine-tune their advocacy plans and messages to government.

AE Qalisa participants learn how to plan the main elements of a productive homestead and



implement a household vegetable garden.

See page 3

After a tour of flourishing food gardens and fields, "Come and See" visitors are treated to a delicious



and nutritious lunch made from produce grown by the farmers.

See page 3

The 2025 annual meeting of directors from regional SKI partner organisations, was also the first



meeting of SKI as a separate and independent legal entity.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Trying to write positively, with increasing extreme climate events, geopolitical turmoil and tragedy, and the horrifying impact on the local, is difficult! In southern Africa, news has just come in that our neighbouring country, Lesotho, has declared a national state of disaster. This is because of the high rates of youth unemployment and job losses and this is coupled with a 50% tariff imposed by the Trump administration – and this in a country experiencing the highest suicide rate in the world.

While the magnitude of change in the world is seismic and aftershocks abound, locally there is so much that is positive. The advocacy work with farmers (page 1), our provincial and national work (pages 2 and 3), and engagement at the international level linking local to global (page 4), are firmly grounded and strong. What has also been so inspiring for us these past six months is an agroecology pilot project with children in northern KwaZulu-Natal. It's been wonderful to experience the children's views on soil, food and careers, and the joy that working with the earth can bring. It's a reminder to do whatever we can to leave a resilient world for the generations of people and life to come.

Biowatch has also participated in the process towards an Agroecology Management Framework for South Africa. The challenge is to keep agroecology in its full sense – a science, a practice and a movement; agroecology that is working towards food sovereignty. Contradictions are rife, however, as at the same time Corteva Agriscience RSA (Pty) Ltd has applied for trial release of genetically modified (GM) canola. GM crops in the country are a symbol of the industrialised food system – large-scale monocultures, massive use of herbicides, high carbon footprint, destruction of biodiversity. This GM canola would be tolerant to the herbicide glyphosate. Do watch the recording of Pesticide Action Network UK's webinar "*Glyphosate: A groundbreaking global study on the controversial weedkiller*" on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/mtaacyx9>

Rose Williams

Biowatch Durban office:

222 Evans Road, Glenwood, Durban 4001
Telephone: 031 206 2954
E-mail: info@biowatch.org.za
Web: www.biowatch.org.za
www.facebook.com/biowatchsa

Biowatch Mtubatuba office:

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

Agroecology Action Collective

The Agroecology Action Collective is making headway (see Biowatch Bulletin January 2025). New agroecology platforms have formed in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and one across the western and northern Cape. Common interests include agroecology training, local language materials, and seed and learning exchanges.

As with the KwaZulu-Natal Agroecology Platform, initiated by Biowatch in 2019, seed is a focus with the need to improve skills on the multiplication of farmer varieties and seed banking. The KZN AE Platform has also expanded following a meeting in April that focused on mapping agroecology initiatives. This mapping process is a key activity of the Collective to identify where agroecology farmers can find a range of support, and to raise the profile of agroecology in South Africa. Initiatives from farmer learning sites to community centres and agroecology hubs are being mapped. These provide support including demonstration of diverse agroecology methods, training and mentoring, input production, seed banks, local processing and aggregation of produce for markets.

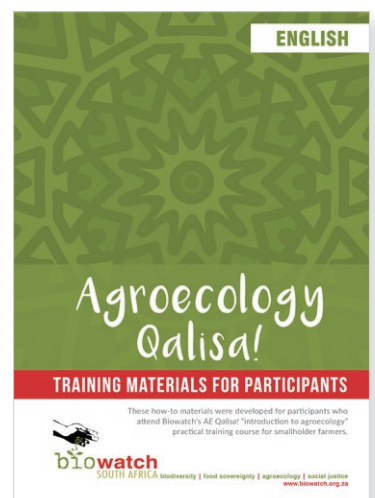
On the ground mobilisation is also key in the Agroecology Action Collective's response to a range of policy processes from food systems transformation, climate adaptation, and to shaping a draft National Agroecology Management Framework.

New on our website

■ Agroecology training support materials

These how-to materials (available in English and isiZulu) were developed for participants who attend Biowatch's AE *Qalisa!* "introduction to agroecology" practical training course for smallholder farmers. They were developed

specifically to support the first steps in applying agroecology practices in traditional homestead planning in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. These "how-to" practical step-by-step materials for farmers are available on our website at: <https://biowatch.org.za/training-materials/>



“Come and See” agroecology

The Biowatch “Come and See” events are opportunities for anyone interested in agroecology – but not sure what is involved – to find out more, and to see agroecology in practice. During these exchange visits, hosted by agroecology demonstrators and mentors at their homesteads, visitors explore flourishing food gardens and fields. They see first hand the benefits of farming in harmony with nature, of building healthy soils, and of not using chemicals. If you would like to find out more and join us on a “Come and See” visit, call the Biowatch Mtubatuba office on 035 550 3148 or send an email to samu@biowatch.org.za



AE Qalisa! is Biowatch’s very popular “introduction to agroecology” training for smallholder farmers, farmer trainers and practitioners from civil society organisations who are committed to supporting and implementing agroecology. Twenty eager participants were selected to join the practical, hands-on training in May, which took place near Pongola (northern KZN). They learnt about agroecology and how to plan the main elements of a productive homestead and implement a household vegetable garden.



(Top) In May, Nonhlanhla Mkhize hosted a very successful and informative “Come and See” at her homestead in Umgababa for 35 people, many of them youth wanting to know more about agroecology. (Bottom) In April, agroecology demonstrators hosted a “Come and See” for 22 people in Maphumulo at the impressive homestead of Busisiwe Zondo, after which visitors enjoyed a scrumptious and nutritious “agroecology” lunch hosted by Sthandiwe Dlamini.

KZN agroecology platform grows

Members of the KZN Agroecology Platform gathered in April at Vuleka Centre in Botha’s Hill. After an overview of the Platform since its formation in December 2019, participants reflected on the extent to which the Platform was achieving its objectives of improving communication and information sharing between agroecology advocates, creating a community of practice (CoP) of agroecology practitioners in KZN, and intervening in policy processes to influence decision makers to support agroecology.

The day also focused on plans for mapping agroecology initiatives that support and strengthen agroecology in KZN. A range of different initiatives were elaborated and unpacked: individual farmers whose homesteads are learning sites within a cluster of agroecology farmers; community centres; and more formal hubs that have more substantial infrastructure and external resourcing. These discussions have contributed to the thinking in the wider Agroecology Action Collective mapping process. In the afternoon, the group was hosted on a tour of eThekweni Municipality’s Agroecology Hub in Inchanga. The visit highlighted the many challenges of providing agroecology demonstration and services within the strictures of government systems.

Members of the KZN Agroecology Platform preparing for the mapping of agroecology initiatives in the province.



Regional community of practice focuses on Farmers' Rights

The annual Community of Practice gathering of the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) is an enriching learning experience for partners. This year's gathering, which took place in March in Zambia, was of special interest to the Biowatch staff attending as it focused on ways to put Farmers' Rights into practice.

Local SKI partner, Community Technology Development Trust (CTDT), provided theoretical inputs before facilitating field visits to their participatory plant breeding (PPB) projects. CTDT has adapted the farmer field school (FFS) model to ensure farmers develop and manage projects that meet their needs. In Chirundu, the FFS shared their pride in breeding several new varieties of drought-tolerant sorghum with assistance from public breeders at the Zambia Agricultural Research Institute (ZARI), one of which they hope to register through a farmer-variety registration process being pioneered in Zambia.

In Shibuyunji we observed the benefits and challenges of a community seed bank. We also visited farmers' field trials with different varieties of nutritious staple crops. It was interesting to hear how variety selection differed according to the priorities of men and women. Following our field experiences, participants reflected on learnings that could contribute to our work and advocacy positions. These included the central role of farmer-led research in advancing agroecological practices and the need to support stewardship approaches which see seed as commons to "free the seed" from corporate control.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- 2025 Biowatch Agroecology Farmer Fair: 19-20 August, Botha's Hill
- Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) Forum and the 53rd Committee on World Food Security (CFS) plenary: 18-24 October, Rome
- 2025 UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 30): 10-21 November, Brazil

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SKI partner directors gather at the 2025 annual meeting



SKI regional partner directors and SKI staff at the 2025 annual meeting.

The annual meeting of directors from the regional Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) partner organisations (in Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe) took place in May in Johannesburg. The main purpose of the annual face-to-face meeting is to consolidate and find new ways of working across countries and across working groups, to communicate better the excellent work that the Initiative is doing, and to build momentum with a strategy that centres farmers' voices, influences policy, and grows our visibility.

While this is always an important and inspiring gathering, the May 2025 meeting was also momentous! It was the first meeting of SKI as a separate legal entity – the SKI NPC (Non-Profit Company). Although the project holder for the current phase of SKI (March 2023 – February 2027) will still be the wonderfully supportive Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), from March 2028 the SKI NPC will take on this role.

The annual meeting was also a celebratory moment for SKI as it marked more than 10 years of existence. Acknowledgement was given to the various Steering Committees who served between SKI's inception in 2013 and December 2024, to the first SKI NPC directors who served for an interim period between January 2025 and the partner meeting in May 2025, and to Lindy Morrison (SKI Director) and SKI staff.

Members of the new SKI NPC Board, who were unanimously elected, will now serve for a three-year term going forward. They are Mutinta Nketani (Zambia and chairperson), Esther Lupafya (Malawi), Ottelia Mashingaidze (Zimbabwe) and John Nzira (South Africa).