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Farmers' roundtable dialogue with government: "Protect our seeds!"

Over the past few years, Biowatch-supported farmers in northern KwaZulu-Natal have joined the global March Against Monsanto (MAM) by organising protests in their local municipalities. Farmers have presented memoranda to Department of Agriculture representatives, demanding amendments to policies that jeopardise farmers' rights, and requesting support for agroecological farming.

In support of MAM 2018, Biowatch-supported agroecology farmers from Ingwavuma, KwaHhohho, KwaNgwanase, Pongola and Tshaneni invited government to a roundtable discussion and seed festival. The event, held on 23 May at the Mtubatuba Municipal Hall, was attended by representatives from the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Department of Environmental Affairs, representatives from the KZN Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as Izinduna from the Mkhwanazi clan.

His Worship the Mayor of Mtubatuba Cllr MV Gumede opened the event, voicing his delight that practices he remembered from his youth were being revived. After the seed blessing by Induna MZ Mkhwanazi and rousing traditional dances, farmer representatives painted a



Biowatch-supported agroecology farmers in northern KwaZulu-Natal invited government to dialogue on the support provided to small-holder farmers, and a seed festival in solidarity with the 2018 global March Against Monsanto.

picture of their rural context, agroecological farming practices, challenges, and the ways they need government to support and communicate with them. In particular, they noted their distress with the distribution of genetically modified (GM) seed to small-holder farmers and the draft Plant Improvement and Plant Breeders' Rights Bills which are set to criminalise age-old seed exchange practices.

The roundtable event concluded with a delicious lunch of traditional foods. The next day the hall was opened to members of the public who were invited to view seeds, sample traditional foods and buy seed and fresh produce.

Biowatch presented on "seeds and indigenous knowledge" at the iZindaba Zokudla Free People's



Conference, a parallel event at the Slow Food Soweto Eat-In.

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Many farmers have re-introduced small grains into their seed systems and are working hard to recover



lost traditional knowledge related to processing.

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SKI partners from Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe met for a five-day strategic workshop



to plan for the next phase of work in the region.

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From the director

Biowatch has been busy in this first half of 2018! From working with farmers on multiplying seeds of small grains, to engaging with farmers and government and publishing a research policy paper. We have also enjoyed working with our regional Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) partners on a rigorous and inspiring strategy planning process for the second phase of SKI.

One of the key reasons for Biowatch's focus on agroecology relates to the shockingly high contribution of the industrialised food system to global greenhouse gas emissions – approximately 50% (from the clearing of land, monocultures and intensive use of synthetic fertilisers, through to packaging, transportation and food waste). There is increasing acknowledgement that for life on Earth to continue, this global industrialised food system must change. Agroecology is the antithesis of this system, providing nutritious food, locally, with a low carbon footprint. We need a reconceptualisation of agriculture at a global level, with the emphasis on the local – and we need governments to put in place an enabling policy and legal framework that will support this. Our new research paper (see Recent Publications, opposite) challenges government to do this. An article by Biowatch Board Chairperson David Fig "*South Africa needs to reverse corporate capture of agricultural policy*", published in *The Conversation* (<http://theconversation.com/south-africa-needs-to-reverse-corporate-capture-of-agricultural-policy-96661>), gives more thinking on this.

We are currently working on a publication on Biowatch's best practice in agroecology – it has been an important and challenging process articulating "best practice". We hope that this will be a good contribution to the literature on this important topic that is gaining traction across the globe.

Much needs to be done to change discourse and dispel myths such as "small-holder farming cannot feed the country". Small-holder farmers themselves are claiming their right to be heard by government on all matters pertaining to traditional seed and the right to seed sovereignty and food security (see page 1).

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

GM update

■ Bayer-Monsanto merger

Following the European Commission's approval in March, the US Justice Department has given the green light to the German multinational Bayer in its US\$2.5-billion takeover of the infamous Monsanto corporation. Bayer closed the mega deal in June, after agreeing to a US\$9-billion divestment of its cotton, canola, soybean, vegetable seed and Liberty herbicide businesses, which it is selling to BASF. In February 2017, South Africa was the first country to be notified of the intended merger; and by May the Competition Commission had given a conditional approval. Bayer will ditch the much reviled name "Monsanto", but they have bought a company that was accused by the International Monsanto Tribunal of crimes against humanity and against the planet. Bayer will now control 25% of the global seed and pesticide markets.

■ GM contamination caravan

A group of small-holder farmers, NGOs, researchers and gene bank representatives, from South Africa, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zambia and Zimbabwe, boarded a bus in January for a five-day field trip to Ingwavuma, which included farm visits and a series of workshops organised by UCT and Biowatch. The pilot project to explore contamination of farmers' seed systems with GM genes builds on work by participating researchers Dr Angelika Hilbeck from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology and Ignacio Chapela from the University of California, Berkeley, who have been working on a new system that will enable farmers to conduct cheap and immediate tests for GMOs in their fields. The proposed collaboration will include the development of strategies to reduce the influx of transgenes into local seed supplies.

Recent publications

All Biowatch publications are available on our website: www.biowatch.org.za. To be notified when we launch new publications, sign up to our mailing list – use the link on our website home page or e-mail info@biowatch.org.za

■ Research Paper: Policy Impacts – The impact of government agricultural and rural development policy on small-holder farmers in KwaZulu-Natal

By Dr Harald Witt

Examining policy and the efficacy of government support for, and the challenges faced by, small-holder farmers in rural KZN (40 pages).





With a display of seed from her household seed bank, KwaHhohho farmer Thombithini Ndwandwe (far right) attracts a stream of visitors to the Biowatch information stand at the Slow Food Soweto Eat-In event.

Slow Food Soweto Eat-In

In May, Biowatch was invited to present on “seeds and indigenous knowledge” at the iZindaba Zokudla Free People’s Conference, hosted by the University of Johannesburg. The conference, which brought the public and experts together to explore agriculture as a means to radical economic transformation, was a parallel event at the 2018 Slow Food Soweto Eat-In at the Soweto Theatre. The Eat-In was a vibrant event with Slow Food members displaying traditional and artisanal food products from around the country, craft stalls, live music and two cooking competitions.

Internationally Slow Food advocates food system change through developing good, clean and fair food choices and conserving food biodiversity and its related gastronomic traditions.

Sharing knowledge

Seed development workshop

Seed custodians from Biowatch project sites gathered in Pongola in April to share knowledge about producing a greater quantity and quality of seed. The adoption and bulking of traditional small grains is an important focus in this development process. Many farmers have re-introduced these grains into their seed systems and are working hard to recover lost traditional knowledge related to processing and preparation.



Agroecology farmers gathered around the shake and roll of winnowing baskets, exchanging stories and freely sharing their experiences, learnings and traditional knowledge.

Millet nutrition workshop

A workshop on the nutrition found in small grains, with an emphasis on millets, was hosted by Biowatch in KwaNgwanase in April. Farmers in all five Biowatch project sites in northern KwaZulu-Natal have increased their production of traditional and naturally drought-tolerant finger and pearl millet, but not everyone has been sure of how to prepare the nutritious grains. The workshop concluded with farmers preparing and sharing recipes.



With support from Biowatch, the school principal, governing body and parents, agroecology farmer and community activist Selinah Mncwango worked together with Fakazile Mthethwa (Gogo Qho), a local permaculturist from Mtubatuba, to design and establish a productive food garden and agricultural field at Lundini CP School in Ingwavuma. (Left) The Lundini garden and field. (Centre) The current crop of sweet potatoes. The land has been prepared and planted to nurture soil health and build fertility. (Right) With learners and visiting teachers at the project hand-over function in May are (left to right from centre of the back row) Lundini Principal Mrs Ntshangase, Biowatch Agroecology Manager Lawrence Mkhaliphi, Lundini Governing Body Chair Mr Mvubu, Fakazile Mthethwa and Selinah Mncwango.



Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) partners from Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe met for a five-day strategic workshop to plan for the next four years.

Regional SKI planning

Over the course of five days (14–18 May), Biowatch joined other Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) partners from Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe to develop forward-thinking plans and strategies going into the next phase (2019–2023).

To plan for the future, we must understand our past and present, and this is what the first day was about. Day two focused on country findings and partners' contributions to change. On day three a panel discussion – with David Fig (Biowatch Board Chairperson), Stephen Greenberg (African Centre for Biodiversity), Ruchi Tripathi (ActionAid International), and Method Gundidza (EarthLore) – explored the threats and opportunities for the work being done by SKI and its partners in the Southern African region. Days four and five included an assessment of partner strategic interventions, relationship strengthening, and discussions centred on the sustainability of SKI.

Dedicated and continued engagement from all partners, along with important decisions and plans for the future, showed a deep commitment to SKI's work and objectives as the initiative moves into its next phase.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- Inqolobane 2018, Biowatch's annual seed survey: 9 July–3 August
- Biowatch's agroecology learning intervention at Owen Sitole College of Agriculture: July–October
- Small grains and nutrition, a Biowatch farmer workshop (sorghum): October

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During the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) Community of Practice (CoP) learning process in northern Malawi in February, representatives from regional SKI partners – including Biowatch's Agroecology Manager Lawrence Mkhaphi and Programme Manager Pumla Mabizela – visited Soils, Food and Healthy Communities (SFHC) organisation to learn about their work combating malnutrition through agroecological practices, and to see the gender emphasis being incorporated into their work with communities. Pictured above: Farmers and SKI CoP visitors prepare food together.

Note: Biowatch, the Bio-economy Research Chair at the University of Cape Town and EarthLore are founding partners of the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) – see article opposite.

Talking about GMO contamination

In January, Biowatch co-hosted the "Talking about GMO contamination" seminar with the Bio-economy Research Chair at the University of Cape Town. The well-attended seminar was held at Durban Botanic Gardens. Making the most of visiting experts, Dr Angelika Hilbeck (ETH Zurich) spoke on the disingenuity of "drought tolerant" GMOs and how these are used to open up markets in Africa. A video presentation by renowned scientist Ignacio Chapela on the international perspectives on GM contamination proved a highlight. Biowatch agroecology farmers Thombithini Ndwandwe and Petros Makhanya shared their experiences relating to testing that revealed GM contamination of farmers' traditional maize. The audience included many individuals who voiced their concern around their health, given GMOs are so entrenched in our staple foods. Staff from agricultural colleges came to find out more, as did a representative from the South African National Biodiversity Institute which is legally mandated to monitor the impacts of GMOs in our environment.