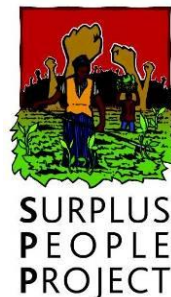


Biowatch – SPP national workshop on people’s alternatives to industrial agriculture and GMOs

Statement of Commitment towards Ecological and Just Agrarian Systems

November 2009



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A group of 53 small-scale farmers, NGOs and activists engaged in agricultural policy and rural development gathered for a national workshop hosted by Biowatch South Africa and the Surplus People Project on 24–26 February 2009 at Goedgedacht Farm, Malmesbury district, Western Cape. Participants produced the following statement of commitment, and called for their own and other organisations to endorse it.

1. The global systemic context and crises

The meeting took place in the context of extreme global economic and environmental crises, such as the unfolding of the impact of global climate change. These interlinked issues are the outcome of an economic system based on globalised industrial overproduction and wasteful over-consumption of the earth's resources – especially in the highly developed countries and by small elites in the developing countries. As a consequence of this uncontrolled globalised system, water resources, land, soil and atmosphere have been seriously polluted and degraded.

We oppose the dominant corporate-led industrial model of agriculture within this economic system, which includes harmful chemical and energy-intensive production methods, the move to the mass production of agrofuels to the detriment of food production, and promotion of highly questionable GMO¹ technologies, designed to permanently locate food production and power and profits in corporate hands.

These trends are also threatening people's autonomous food security and food sovereignty, i.e. the right of communities and countries to control what, how and where they produce as well as the policies and programmes under which they produce their food.

2. Our aims and commitments

We oppose the currently dominant 'export-led' production strategies and unfair free trade. Furthermore, we reject exploitation of labour and support the protection of tenure security for farm workers. We aim, instead, to encourage maximum food self-reliance through the creation of local production to serve domestic markets. Through education and awareness we also hope to facilitate consumer demands for diverse agro-ecological produce.

In this regard, we support an agro-ecological model of farming. This entails systems that are sustainably managed to conserve natural resources and prioritise social justice. Such systems must also draw on and enhance dynamic knowledge base of indigenous farming practices while combining these with socially responsible science and technology.

We resolve to engage energetically with government at local, provincial and national levels to demand greater recognition and active support for agro-ecological farming practices through

¹ Genetically modified organisms.

farmer assistance. Necessary support for farmers includes infrastructure such as roads, storage facilities and equipment, as well as appropriate participatory research and training/retraining of extension workers to advance agro-ecological farming rather than hinder it.

We are committed to building an ecological learning network – a “living university” – consisting of farmer-to-farmer education. This would be done through exchange visits, experiential learning sites and the documentation and dissemination of experiences which demonstrate the possibilities and benefits of agro-ecological farming methods and contribute to the continual improvement of these methods.

3. Building resistance

We **are determined to** resist free trade agreements as well as policies at international, national, regional and local levels, which promote a neo-liberal agricultural model of chemical and energy-intensive methods. This system includes mechanised farming equipment, global transport of inputs and outputs, including farming inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides all of which are petroleum-based. This agricultural model also includes technologies, such as GMOs, which are centred on maximising corporate profit and power. This model favours big business and limits the responsibility of the state to achieve socio-economic, environmental and political goals for the well-being of people and the environment.

Noting that Southern Africans are eating GMOs as staple foods, we call for immediate public research on the impacts of GMO food on the health of people, particularly vulnerable groups such as children and those affected by HIV and AIDS. In the interim, we demand the labelling and separation of GMO seed and produce in order to allow farmers and all people the right to information and to make informed choices.

Against the past failure to consider the public’s view and adequate participation in decision-making on existing GMO legislation, we will actively pursue all means to challenge and reverse pro-GMO policies and their implementation. In the long term, our aim is for South Africa and the whole of Africa to be a GMO-free zone.

4. Public awareness and popular education

In the context of current concern about rising food prices, collusion and price fixing amongst supermarkets and food processors, we commit ourselves to engage in public advocacy, education, and awareness in order to gather support amongst the broader public to build conscientious resistance against the industrial model of food production.

We set out to popularise information on the politics of food and seed, the privatisation of life and the dangers of industrial farming (including the impact of chemicals, GMOs and related social issues such as farmer debt), and to promote agro-ecological alternatives to this paradigm. This can be done through:

- creative and accessible communication methods;
- targeting the youth and women in particular;
- engaging with existing community structures such as churches, street committees etc.;
- communicating in all local languages;

- facilitating greater public debate and critique of current seed and food production and distribution systems; and
- working with and through popular culture and community media.

In addition, this can be done through the sharing of information on farmers' varieties and traditional seeds through seed and farmer's festivals, seed exchange programmes and by celebrating the links between seed, culture and food. These are essential for promoting a more sustainable means of food production.

5. Policy and action research

We call for independent research into the impact of rural government programmes that are focused on the industrialisation and corporatisation of rural economies. Such research would include the impact on rural livelihoods, land, culture, food security and sovereignty resulting from programmes such as those which promote agro-fuels, and the Massive Food Production Programme.

Our demands are:

- The revision of the curriculum in schools, tertiary institutions, and agricultural colleges in particular, to prioritise agro-ecological practices and to raise awareness of the negative impacts of industrial agricultural systems.
- The reorientation of public research organisations and parastatals, such as the Agriculture Research Council (ARC), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and tertiary education institutions towards support for a people-centred research agenda.
- The reallocation of public funds to research on agro-ecological farming and away from funding industrial agriculture infrastructure, research, directly and indirectly using taxpayers' money for private benefit.
- The protection of indigenous crop biodiversity through the recognition of the rights of farmers and communities over the varieties and traditional seeds that farmers have developed as well as their seed banks.
- Honouring the right of people to be informed in an accessible and understandable manner and fully consulted on decisions affecting them, which includes the development of new policy on issues such as the growing of GM² crops in their areas.
- Ensuring effective post-settlement support to men and women who have benefited from the land reform process within a pro-poor agrarian reform for food sovereignty framework.

6. Our alternatives

We propose the transformation of agricultural and broader national economic policies away from the 'growth and export-driven' orientation to one which supports the well being of people, involves meaningful public participation, and puts local needs first, within the framework of national and regional food sovereignty.

² Genetically modified.

Specifically, we will use the potential commercialisation of GM potatoes to highlight and mobilise all sectors of the population around cross-cutting issues including:

- the impact of GMOs on health;
- the plight of small-scale farmers;
- their right to public participation in government decision-making;
- access to nutritious food for the poor; and
- the inappropriate use of public research institutions to further corporate and foreign interests.

7. Building coalitions

In order to promote and advance the above, we aim to forge coalitions and create a co-ordinated platform through:

- supporting local organisations with the common aim of pursuing agrarian reform and achieving food sovereignty through the promotion of agro-ecological farming practices;
- networking and collaborating between such organisations to build resistance through joint actions, while maintaining respect for the autonomy and principles of individual organisations;
- collaborations which may take the form of, amongst others, seed banking, campaigns, actions, research, workshops and forums, and sharing of information and resources;
- forging linkages with the widest possible range of social movements at both the national and regional (southern African) levels, such as with the Southern African Social Forum, the People's Solidarity Network, and the People's Dialogue amongst others.