

# Farmers, food activists, academics & policymakers gear up to gather in Cape Town to promote agroecology for the 21st century

## Media Release

22 January 2019

The politics of food and its production will be on the menu at a multi-sectoral conference taking place in Cape Town next week.

Happening at the Centre for the Book, Iziko Museum and Spin Street Gallery from 28-30 January, the Agroecology for the 21st Century Conference will bring together some 200 regional activists, academics, small-scale farmers and policymakers to explore ways of rapidly moving southern Africa towards an agroecological future.

Through a series of interventions across sectors and disciplines, they will discuss how to galvanise the transition from a failing industrial food system to one that produces safe and nutritious food in a socially and economically just manner.

The current global food system is responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions, utilises the lion's share of the world's dwindling freshwater resources and is a leading cause of soil degradation and chemical pollution. It is also associated with a rising prevalence of obesity and related lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, along with food and nutrition insecurity.

Conference keynote speaker Dr Caterina Batello, formerly of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), remarks: "Agroecology already exists widely across the globe in science and in practice. With political support, and by connecting what already exists, we can provoke the transformation that is needed".

Lead organiser for the conference, [Professor Rachel Wynberg](#) of the University of Cape Town, explains that agroecology is "a science, a practice and a vibrant and growing movement that presents a way of regenerating relationships between people, food and ecosystems".

She points out how timely this conference is as South Africa engages with the issue of land redistribution, because agroecology can provide a potential blueprint for "addressing the damages of our colonial and industrial agricultural past, and for restoring and reclaiming arable land as a productive, rather than as an extractive activity".

The conference also presents an opportunity to bring together the 13 partner organisations of the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI), a Southern African initiative working on issues of small scale agriculture and local seed and knowledge. Farmers, NGOs and academics working with SKI will participate in the conference, creating a rare opportunity for farmers to share their knowledge and perspectives and benefit from engaging with current science and policy on agroecology.

[Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss](#), who coordinates SKI, insists that farmers must be involved in discussions about agriculture, which is often not the case in policy, education or research and development. SKI's work aims to ensure that farmer-led seed systems and indigenous knowledge are recognised and supported as crucial elements in food production systems and livelihood strategies. The conference will showcase the work of SKI partners and create platforms for farmers to share their experience and opinions.

Hosting partner [Biowatch South Africa](#) will be bringing two decades of experience in challenging industrialised food systems while implementing agroecological practices among communities in KwaZulu-Natal.

Over a period of nine years, Biowatch famously locked horns with the South African Government and Monsanto in a bid to create transparency about genetically modified crops, leading to an important Constitutional Court judgement that set a precedent on the



Judith Bingadi selecting seed. Chimanimani, Zimbabwe. Photo credit: Xavier Vahed

protection of whistle-blowers in South Africa. Biowatch continues to advocate agroecology as the ecologically sustainable alternative to ensure biodiversity, food sovereignty and social justice.

Biowatch will celebrate its 20th year as part of the conference.

For [Professor Rachel Bezner Kerr](#) of Cornell University, the Agroecology for the 21st Century Conference embodies the process of “co-creating knowledge” – a practice of bringing together different types of knowledge, such as traditional knowledge based on many years of observation and experience in local ecosystems and social context, with scientific knowledge in horizontal learning exchanges for problem solving and innovation.

“This is a crucial aspect of agroecology and is necessary if we are to find a new path to solve the pressing issues of hunger, poverty, climate change and environmental degradation,” she says.

The conference will host four parallel sessions running over three days to deliver a rich stew of science, knowledge, practice, policy and creativity, delivered in more than 60 inputs.

An arts programme has been woven into the conference to enliven and expand conversations. This will include poetry, photography, fine art, dance and installation work as well as an [‘Insecthibition’](#) installed at the 6 Spin Street Gallery, themed around the importance of insects in agriculture.

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#### NOTES FOR EDITORS:

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#### Keynote speakers:

- Professor Albert Modi - Deputy Vice Chancellor for the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science at the University of KwaZulu-Natal
- Caterina Batello - Former Team Leader: Plant Production and Protection, UN Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO)
- Dr Emile Frison - International Agricultural Research for Development
- Professor Loretta Feris - Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Cape Town
- Dr Million Belay, Coordinator – Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA)
- Pregs Govender - Former Commissioner and Deputy Chair - SA Human Rights Commission (SAHRC)
- Thombithini Ndwandwe - Seed Guardian, Farmer & Activist
- Delmah Ndhlovu - General Secretary, Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF)
- Magda Campbell - Founder, Beacon Organic Farms

Biographies and a detailed programme are available at: <https://www.agroecologyconference.co.za/programme/>