

# Should Poisons be in a Farmer's Arsenal?

By Nomcebo Mvelase

*groundWork is working with farmers to ensure that the pesticides that they use do not kill more than just pests*

After long preparation, starting with invitations and continuing with follow up calls etc, the big day finally came where groundWork pulled together a two-day workshop for farmers from all around South Africa. This workshop was held on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2009, at Midrand's Ogilvy Conference Centre, in Gauteng.

Most farmers use pesticides for their crop production but very few are aware of the dangers. In addition to the ability to kill a variety of plants and animals such as insects (insecticides), weeds (herbicides), and mould or fungus (fungicides), pesticide exposure is also associated with an increased risk of health complications such as cancer, genetic mutation, decreased fertility, decreased sperm count and even birth defects.

We were honoured to have the dedicated Registrar of Act 36 of 1947, Mr Jonathan Maluta Mudzunga, from the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to give the keynote address and from his presentation we came to understand the fact that pesticides are designed to be toxic and are nevertheless deliberately released into the environment. He stated that, because it is critical to ensure food security and to maintain global competitiveness, it is also imperative to use pesticides in an informed and sound manner.

So, the biggest question is how do we balance the benefits that pesticides confer against any possible adverse effects? Having representatives from different areas, including academia, researchers, medical practitioners and environmental NGOs, sit together with farmers and community people proved to be a suitable forum for the farmers to discuss strategies to broaden the protection of society and to learn and share how they could

move to and adopt safer agricultural strategies to protect health and well-being.

When they were given a platform to discuss why we should or should not move away from pesticides it was quite interesting to hear the different views from the farmers themselves. These were the responses:

"Pesticides are dangerous, they result in water and soil pollution and they are persistent in the environment. Our forefathers were not using chemicals and they were doing well. We should also have experience of farming without pesticides! On the other hand, another group was saying "seeds today are weaker than original ones. To move away from pesticides could take years and that could possibly mean no good income for the farmers".

According to the presenter from the toxicology unit in Stellenbosch, Joy Veale, every year pesticides are implicated in a very large number of accidental poisoning cases, largely in the developing world. In South Africa alone, between 2000 and 2008, 12 364 cases were reported. It is true that South Africa has created some legislation to protect the environment and the health and well-being of people. One piece of Legislation directly linked to agricultural chemicals is the Fertilisers, Farm Feeds, Agricultural Remedies and Stock Remedies Act, 1947 (Act No. 36 of 1947) which is administered by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The reality, though, is that there are still many gaps that prevent effective management of pesticides such as too few outreach programs, insufficient enforcement, lack of scientific monitoring of the impacts of pesticides on human health and the environment and, in some cases, there is a lack of implementation of prevention or precautionary



measures which results in people being exposed to unsafe use of pesticides.

Some of the people working on farms complained about the fact that they suffer from time to time acute illnesses like throat, eyes and skin irritations, headaches, dizziness and sometimes even respiratory related illnesses. Some of these are women and they have had problems with falling pregnant. All these symptoms are related to pesticide exposure. In some instances these workers have used pesticides without even being given protective clothing. It goes to prove that for some people the labour law and the Occupational Health and Safety Act still carry no meaning. They do not know about their rights and therefore cannot do much to advocate for safer working conditions.

What was even more interesting on the second day was to get a live testimony from a young but very successful organic farmer, Tshediso Phahlane, who articulated the fact that as a farmer he understands that his role goes far beyond farming itself and that he is also responsible for the environment. He is doing well on his farm and has employed about 100 people. He also gives back to the community. He mentioned that they had a project where they bought shoes for school kids and have educated more than 800 learners from different schools about organic farming and the impacts of global warming. This was so motivating and it sounded so real, especially because it came directly from a farmer and slowly there was a mind shift and a lively interest in learning more and hearing more from this farmer. It is just that simple: if one person who is seriously committed can be so successful, then everybody else can be! All it takes is commitment and motivation to make a change.

As a follow up to this process groundWork has decided to plan a further event with the same farmers to strategise and map a way to move to the next step for change. We are planning to do this in partnership with other NGOs such as Women on Farms, BioWatch and the Endangered Wildlife Trust. ✕

#### **Resolution that was taken on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December, 2009:**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2009 we, the small scale subsistence farmers, farm labourers on large agricultural land, organic farmers, as well as community people and non-government organisations working with communities on pesticide pollution and its impact on health, have met to better inform ourselves of the dangers of pesticides in the workplace and society in general and the challenges we face as we attempt to move away from pesticides in agriculture and society in general to less harmful processes of managing of natural pests.

We have heard from technical people working on toxicology, medical health community practitioners, community based farmers, labourers on large commercial farms, the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs and non-governmental organisations.

We have heard about the impact - such as cancers, impaired nervous system, reproductive problems, endocrine system and even immune system impairment - of pesticides on one's health and well-being as well as their impact on nature.

We believe that meeting the challenge facing us in eliminating the use of pesticides that are harmful to one's health and well-being needs an inclusive and democratic process, managed by the relevant government departments including the Departments of Health, Environment, Labour and Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

We call upon government to:

- Review and update legislation relevant to pesticides in order that society can be adequately protected from the improper use and dangers of pesticides;
- Develop adequate enforcement in order that, where there is improper use and illegal use of pesticides, people are held accountable for the danger they have exposed society too;
- Continue with the 'review of pesticide products' as a matter of urgency and we commend this action. We believe that such a



process needs to collect and record data on the import, export, manufacture, formulation, quality, quantity and use of pesticide in order to assess the extent of any possible effects on human health;

- Develop information systems that will efficiently and effectively collect reliable data and maintain statistics on health aspects of pesticides and pesticide poisoning incidents;
- Develop health surveillance programs on those who are occupationally exposed to pesticides including investigation and documentation of poisoning cases, provide guidance and instruction to health workers, physicians and hospital staff on the treatment of suspected pesticide poisoning, and establish national or regional poisoning information and control centres;
- Establish training in alternative and organic ecological agricultural practices, including non-chemical alternatives that have been effectively practised in Cuba after they were forced to do without pesticides when their crude oil and chemical supply from the previous USSR was turned off as a result of the end of the Cold War;
- Give appropriate priority to pest and pesticide management in national sustainable development strategies and poverty reduction papers to enable access to relevant technical and financial assistance, including appropriate technology for the transition away from pesticides as we know them;
- Hold industry and users of pesticides accountable for the health and nature impacts of the use of banned pesticides or pesticides that have a contentious record and have been linked with impact on society;
- Hold farmers and industry accountable for worker health and safety and for the improper use and application of pesticides.

All of the above actions must happen in a transparent and democratic manner that ensures that those most affected have a rightful say in them.

We call upon industry to:

- Stop placing society at risk for increased profit by putting onto the market pesticides and associated products that have not gone through a democratic and public assessment and review process on their safety in the construction of the pesticide, the use of the pesticide and the eventual life in society of the pesticide;
- To stop lobbying our government officials and politicians to allow for pesticides to be used that are clearly detrimental to one's health and to nature, and especially to stop placing pressure to allow the use of pesticides that are banned elsewhere globally for health or precautionary reasons.

We, as participants in this workshop, commit ourselves to:

- Working with government, unions and with the community to increase pressure on government to protect society from pesticides;
- Better understanding how our health is impacted upon by pesticides and to increase awareness in order that people and labourers understand the dangers of pesticides and thereby to pressure government to act in the interest of society. Pesticide poisoning needs to be made a notifiable case and poison centres must be expanded. Pesticide containers must be marked to warn people of dangers as is the case with the tobacco industry.
- Working with government, community people and unions to develop mechanisms and 'tools' for better enforcement and monitoring in order that society is protected against pesticide abuse and those responsible are held accountable. We believe DOH, DAFF, DWEA are responsible. The Green Scorpions must act on new, stricter laws that must be developed;
- Ensuring that Government develops platforms of participation when developing new policies or reviewing old policies;
- Building awareness of the dangers of pesticides on society in general and within the workforce in particular.

