

CHAPTER FOUR

Healing the Land and Heeding the Call of “Dzomo la Mupo”, the Voice of the Earth

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Abstract

This chapter is structured in the form of a metalogue between the authors, including reflections from Indigenous custodians of sacred rivers and forests in the Vhembe district in Venda, South Africa, in terms of heeding the call of the “voice of the earth” (the spirit of Mupo). We discuss the expansion of the Dzomo la Mupo organizational network, which involves organic farmers, trainers from an international organic farmers' organization, and community-engaged university-aligned researchers, who have all made a difference to food security in Venda by inspiring one another. This is by initiating and continuing to widen a community of practice which expands on indigenous knowledge networks. We show how an agroecology approach resonates with indigenous ways of knowing, and we indicate that mutually enriching learning through using a metalogue approach enables systemic praxis (where people in their thinking and practice recognize their connectedness with one another and with the more-than-human world). We refer to the United Nations Sustainable Goal benchmarks of zero hunger and poverty, and the importance of water and soil security. The chapter joins up the dots on the many social, cultural, political and economic factors which shape wellbeing as it relates to climate change and food security. We indicate how our way of language in relation to “the world” is performative in the sense that it performs the function of *shaping* it – hence we consider carefully how we speak with one another and with the spirit of nature to support regenerative relationships.

Keywords: Agroecology, Performative Research, Metalogue, Ecological Justice, Water Security, Soil Security, Multispecies Relationality, Social Justice.

Introduction: Setting the Scene for Interwoven Voices

Norma: Our metalogue of interwoven voices, together perform alternatives to dominant social, political, and economic narratives and practices which are being disseminated across the globe concerning the meaning of “development”. We proceed to structure our chapter by providing our differing (but interconnected) voices. Collins (2020, p. 170) aptly provides a metaphor of quilting to indicate how African women create their unique patches that will be woven into a quilt that joins the pieces together. As it happens, all the authors of this chapter are women. Ngara argues that often in history it is women who have sought to “restore truth, justice and harmony” (2018, p. 15). This does not mean that our COP has excluded men – on the contrary, male as well as female

elders have been active participants of the COP, and male as well as female students from the University of Venda have actively participated too. Furthermore, the COP is intergenerational and supports intergenerational learning (see e.g., McIntyre-Mills et al., 2024a,b,c; Netshandama & Nevhudoli, 2021; Netshandama, 2023).

Janet: The chapter is a metalogue with custodians, organic farmers and trainers who have made a difference to food security by investing in indigenous knowledge networks. We show how an agroecology approach resonates with indigenous knowledge and two-way learning using a metalogue, enabling systemic praxis. We explore the United Nations Sustainable Goals (UNSG) benchmarks of zero hunger and poverty and the importance of water and soil security. Our discussion is set in the context of our appreciation that food shapes our lives and that we are what we eat and what we choose to eat. The work of Dzomo la Mupo (DLM) and Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) has been discussed elsewhere on earth jurisprudence, wild law, multispecies relationships, and rights of sentient voiceless (McIntyre-Mills 2022a,b; Wirawan et al., 2023; McIntyre-Mills et al., 2024a,b), but the focus here is on our stories expressing our mutual interdependence.

We are each of us walking colonies of beings in a shared habitat (Lethole et al., 2022; McIntyre-Mills, 2021a,b,c,d; McIntyre-Mills et al., 2022a,b,c). It is useful at this stage to reflect on the content and process of our research to date. I think that the metalogue approach illustrates the entangled nature of content and process. The team already have much expertise, thus what we are doing is drawing out and sharing this expertise in respectful dialogues in our ongoing COP. There is no shift in expertise from indigenous knowers to academic knowers as the roles overlap or are alongside non-Indigenous knowers who use a multispecies relational approach and are informed by new physics, systemic, multispecies and regenerative literature - conceptualized and applied in transformative research projects (McIntyre-Mills 2021; 2022a,b, 2024).

Mphatheleni: The considerations of a phenomenon or aspect taking into account broader physical views, social views and spiritual flow is an important outlook, and this reveals the interconnectivity which facilitates holistic lenses of attention. McMillan, Stanga, Sharon and van Sell (2018) state that a holistic view means seeing systems as more than a sum of its parts: it includes the mind, body, soul and the environment where the functions manifest. Furthermore, such a view recognizes that the disturbance in one part of the whole system affects all the other parts (p. 282). In terms of the global dominant social, political, and economic narratives, the impact of this draws our attention to articulate and raise our interwoven voices to express the need for alternative actions. The outlook of viewing life systems and gatherings like colonies of multispecies rooted in the environment (the whole of Mupo), attracts the attention of the need for holistic revival. The attention of the voices in communities and voices in the academic sphere enables a holistic understanding wherein water security and food security are viewed as aspects in their interconnection and interplay. We cannot solve water insecurity and food insecurity separately. And on that note again, the natural environment, the soil, the climate, the seasonal flows of food and water, the river source, combine with the interaction of humans with multispecies flow. That is what our voices attain as we reach the view of holistic social, cultural, dialogues of ideas, and economic factors which shape wellbeing. For us, when we describe wellbeing, it is the interplay of the following attention flow.

1. To appreciate a mission of life to sustain and regenerate all life forms.
2. To appreciate and understand the ecological calendar.
3. One should create an ecological calendar to be able to recognize how to act to lead to good health, peace, and food security, while being in touch with Mupo. To draw the calendar is

to know what to do and when to do it, at the proper time. Food shapes our lives in a form of letting food sovereignty flow from our sense of connectedness with the spirit of Mupo. Furthermore, as Janet has already noted, we are what we eat and what we choose to eat as it relates to food and food security.

4. In short, the attention of Dzomo la Mupo is to protect Nature in all its forms. This engagement emphasizes the creation of intergenerational learning.

Our Metalogue with Custodians

Norma: Yes, this chapter is focused on our way of activating an alternative to capitalist farming practices symbolized by the so-called Green Revolution (originated in the 60s and 70s), which continues to be presented in dominant discourses as the answer to questions of food security. While promising increases in crop production, this “revolution” in effect replaces forms of traditional food production linked to cultures rooted in fostering a harmonious/balanced relationship between human beings and nature, where humans are seen as part of, and not distanced from, the rest of nature (Altieri, 2012; Riva & Silva, 2022; Shiva, 1991; Romm, 2014, 2024; Wright, 2014). Besides subverting the ancient sense of spiritual connection between humans and the more-than human world, as Riva and Silva indicate (2022, p. 4), the Green revolution served the interests of wealthy farmers who had the money to benefit from the “modernization” process, buying heavy machinery and relying on monocultural crop production with an excessive use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers and transgenic seeds, with genetic modification of seeds through biotechnology. These agricultural inputs, in turn, are produced by multinational corporations interested in profit-making through their investments financed by global financial capital. As far as small-scale farmers are concerned, the corporations producing chemical pesticides, fertilizers and infertile seeds continue to market these as “magical” farm inputs that increase crop production, but meanwhile create a dependence of small farmers on them as well as a destruction of their environment in the form of pollution of rivers and seas and soil degradation, which in the short and long run impacts on their livelihood and health, while creating ecological devastation (Wright, 2014).

It is in this context that we set our metalogue discussion in this chapter based on our stories, which all revolve around our common concern with exploring together ways of knowing and of being/living that support planetary regeneration, while nurturing a (spiritual) sense of intimate connection with all that we encounter –as also described by Mabunda and McKay (2021). We concentrate on the work of our growing community of practice (COP) in which we as researchers/practitioners have all been involved (albeit in different ways) – mainly with reference to the work being undertaken and expanded led by the organisation founded in 2007 by Mphatheleni Makaulule (first author of this chapter) called Dzomo la Mupo (Voice of the Earth) set up as a community-based organisation in Venda, South Africa (<https://www.thedzomolamupo.org/>).

Mphatheleni: In my Master's dissertation, I explored the indigenous uses of *Luranga* (pumpkin plant) as a way to bring out the impact of separations of knowledge while drawing attention to human needs for food as body nourishment in a form of food to eat, where humans appreciate their interconnections with nature as a whole. The holistic approach is supported by the Afrocentricity outlook, as Molefe (2009) presented in a question about what would be the natural response in the social, psychological, religious and including history about Africans if there had not been the intervention of colonialism or enslavement. The discussion of food security in the indigenous uses of the pumpkin plant was a way of presenting an alternative voice to reveal that food security should be viewed as multi-functional and with the interconnections to different

spheres, apart from planting it for harvesting to eat. The well-being of humans is accompanied by not only physical body needs when we look for development, unlike modern development, which does not embrace a holistic flow.

The exploration exposed the interrelated functions of *Luranga*; they provide nourishment, material products, including the ecological course, as well as spiritual and psychological identity, particularly associated with womanhood identification. This is the relevance of the Vhavenda reviving their indigenous uses of the pumpkin plant. Wilson (2008) asserts that the holistic approach is a thinking based on concepts of interconnected relationships that bring balance to the phenomenon. Freedman (2005) defines holism by referring to a person's viewpoints and all the substances around, from spirituality, mind and physical structure, including interconnectedness. Through observation and listening to participants, the results show that system-attention of the interconnectedness from their explanations, for instance, *Luranga* was or is not used as a food source alone; on the other hand, it is used and valued for multiple functions apart from physical needs, such as nourishment. On the segment cycle, the holistic functioning was seen in different ranges, and the findings revealed an interconnection which supplements each other through the cyclical flow. The uses mentioned below describe the indigenous uses which Vhavenda has been valuing towards *Luranga*.

Norma: Meanwhile, our COP continues its work of expanding possibilities for modes of knowing and of being that support sharing of ideas and of practices towards holistic wellbeing in line with an Indigenous worldview. In terms of this worldview, as Ngara (2018) succinctly states, “there is no separation between matter and spirit, the individual and community, human and nature. All of existence is an expression of relationships, interactions and balances between energies, powers and spirits” (p. 14). Our metalogue that we present in this chapter offers an indication of how we try to introduce positive energies into the shaping of events as part of the world-in-becoming. In this regard, Ngara notes that our ways of relating to one another and to what they take to be “the world” itself already impact the formation of the world. This is what is meant by the saying that we live in a *participatory universe* where we are all participants in world-shaping and never simply spectators (She argues that quantum physics has begun to understand eons of Indigenous wisdom concerning the effect of our “observations” on that which we are supposedly observing but are indeed shaping as we interact with “the world” of which we are a part – 2018, p. 14.). Some authors call this a performative perspective as it highlights that *we perform the world as we speak* – through the words we use, the stories we tell, the relationships we form, etc. (Escobar, 2016; Inoue, Ribeiro, Gonçalves, Basso, & Moreira, 2024; McIntyre-Mills, 2021; Romm, 2021; Wright, 2014). As McIntyre-Mills expresses it, “we change the world as we research it [ideally collaboratively and ideally in collaboration also with Mother Nature]” 2021, p. 1288).

Janet: As a COP, we are reflecting in this chapter on how the agroecological approach of DLM, PGSA (PGS in South Africa) and the work of Vho Vhonani at Univen and Unisa, with the help of colleagues at UnPad (in Indonesia) and the University of Adelaide (where I am a research affiliate), has progressed food security. This chapter has mapped some of our progress as seen through our different perspectives. We should also not forget that changes in other services (such as attending school, clinics, or buying food or other items for the home, for example) have been made possible as a result of increases in organic harvests. The more disposable income generated through the entrepreneurial projects named when we visited the communities in October 2022, and the continued work of Univen through Vhonani, with her support for social entrepreneurship, all augur well for showing actual practices that support human, along with more-than-human wellbeing. I think, too, that we should emphasize here that saying ‘no’ to mining and the

destruction of water sources has resulted from action by the network. Other actions include linking with Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) via Stef Swanepoel¹, who helped inspire our work on setting up a co-operative, and also linking us with the organic farmers network, which resulted in the support from two very committed women, Butshabelo Mabunda and Constance (Connie) Mbodi². The work of colleagues at the University of Adelaide³ and Universitas Padjadjaran⁴ on bamboo and community engagement to support a circular green economy also helped protect organic gardens in Venda thanks to the outreach work on protecting water sources, saving seeds, planting trees, making fences to protect gardens and promoting biodiverse corridors. As a COP, we all learn from each other and from other sources (such as nature's classroom (McIntyre-Mills et al., 2022) and academic organizations, such as the International Systems Sciences and other professional associations to which we are linked and we continue to share and learn to enrich our perspectives and actions. At the outset, it is worth explaining to our readers that the metalogue approach builds on the work of Gregory Bateson (1972) and Norma Bateson (2021) to foster an "ecological mindset" and to work with the rich, warm contextual data (cf. <https://batesoninstitute.org/warm-data/>; and also Geertz, 1973).

Our metalogue approach enables us to pay special attention not only to face-to-face or Zoom conversations, but also to reflection on recordings and interpretations. This engagement enables learning as we become aware that our words and the way we express them can themselves make a difference. This is the crux of the performative idiom referred to in this chapter. (See also McIntyre-Mills, 2021e; Romm, 2021, 2024; Rosiek, Snyder & Pratt, 2020.)

Norma: This is why we need to be careful of the language we use – for example, language such as *development* or *poverty* can carry meanings which shape how we think and act. As indicated earlier, the focus in this chapter is on our ways of nurturing relational existence in our encounters with each other and with the world in its unfolding. We weave our stories around this common focal point. We structure the chapter in the form of a metalogue where we have all made contributions through various virtual and face-to-face meetings, as we enrich our mutual understandings around this focal point.

We acknowledge in this process that multiple knowledge configurations exist, and that academic-led knowledge cannot claim more expertise than knowledge produced outside the academy. We also do not pretend that knowing can be distanced from action. Hence, we also recognize that through our metalogue (and the actions that accompany it) we inspire one another and help to "perform" (shape) new worlds – new in relation, for example, to the agribusiness model for promising food security which permeates dominant narratives throughout the globe and which poses a threat to traditional ways of life and ways of farming.

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In the setting which we discuss in this chapter, there have been concerted efforts of the South African government to work with a large cluster of Chinese conglomerates to set up what is called a Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone (MMSEZ) in Vhembe, which is a megaproject proposed to be implemented through investments by these conglomerates coming into the area, mainly for the mining of minerals, but also for industrialized agriculture. It has been planned in co-operation with the South African government, which has been intent on pushing it through. (Karim, 2023.) DLM has been active for many years – along with other environmental organizations – in trying to stop this project, by pointing to its inevitable destructive effects on sacred forests and rivers and the livelihoods of the local people. One of the recent initiatives in which DLM was involved was a film created to point out the dangers of allowing this project⁵. (xInterestingly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which had formerly agreed to help support the planned project, has now recognized its likely destructive effect on the indigenous communities and on the environment – and has pulled out of supporting it, as noted by Carnie, 2024⁶. At this point, the MMSEZ still hangs in the balance – but there may be shifts in the direction of stopping the project. Mphatheleni’s vehemence in this regard is well expressed in the film that was produced as a way of educating the community to the need for resistance against this project.

Mphatheleni: The purpose of creating the film was to raise the voice of the marginalized communities, as the MMSEZ development plan is undermining the affected communities’ voices. Earth Life Africa is also involved in the collaboration on amplifying community voices. The film helped to create that space as communities were looking for ways to increase awareness of global development plans that destroy the biodiversity-sensitive areas (Earth Life Foundation, 2023). The intention and meaning of DLM is to bring out the voices that speak for natural conservation, Mupo voices, and we make these a loud voice to create awareness and bring attention to the destruction of the habitat of the environment.

The ideas we foster through DLM are not to see the Earth as a resource for *human* wellbeing, but to have a completely different, spiritual relationship that we encounter in our line of work. We explore practical efforts of caring about multispecies and the spiritual presence of creative life forces, which express the spirit of Mupo. In doing this work, we meet many people who collaborate with us and share a common vision. This assists us in reimagining our ancestors’ way that envisions wellbeing not only for *human* beings but for all species (as referred to by McIntyre-Mills, 2021a,b,c,d, 2022) that inhabit the earth with us. Consequently, our ways of doing ecological mapping and drawing our ecological calendar are not only about the needs of human beings, but we also seek food and health for ourselves. The goal is the well-being of multispecies, the climate and the soil fauna and flora, and harmony of nature. We differ from an anthropocentric approach regarding spirituality in that we learn the path of spirituality as the way of our ancestors, which is not for human beings alone. Furthermore, in our spiritual engagement, we pray for human beings and all species, including animals, plants and so on. To better understand and appreciate this, we need to revive our ceremonies that accompany our spiritual path.

The problem is that creating rights on paper – even rights of the waters, forests, animals, plants, etc. – means that we create human laws and policies that still disconnect and separate ... a distance still is there. To take action in caring for the ecosystem, we need to continue spiritual

⁵ The film is called: MMSEZ Promise of Progress and the Peril -<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naEho-yFSdk>.)

⁶ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-02-25-limpopo-heavy-industry-plan-on-shaky-ground-as-un-agency-rethinks-support/>).

ceremonies. We acknowledge the rights of all beings and life forces to exist. In an Indigenous worldview, the question of rights does not emerge because *we already feel interconnected with all of creation*. Hence, when we do ecological mapping, we learn with elders, youth, parents and children about how to draw a map of interrelationships, including the Earth and up to the stars and moon and including the level of insects and small grasses, etc. on Earth. We learn about the importance of nurturing the well-being of the multispecies and harmony towards nature – we learn about spirituality, which is about the welfare of everything.

Norma: Yes, this is the kind of point that you also expressed at the Earthrise meeting of 24 February 2024, with Rutendo Ngara chairing, where other people also indicated that the notion of rights of nature as introduced in some governments' constitutions already implies that there has been a rift created between humans and nature, and now this needs to be corrected via the law. This is similar to what Riva and Silva (2022, based in Brazil) are arguing when they point to how legal forms can become a barrier to agroecology understood in a non-anthropocentric sense.

Mphatheleni: The ecological mapping and calendar that I learned also through my stay in the Amazon, where I was taught by Indigenous leaders there, is a way of expressing this. We have learned this in Venda too through our ancestors and elders who follow the path of spirituality. That is the point of involving the youth in Eco mapping activities – to help them to appreciate this too.

Vhonani: At the University of Venda, we have recently (January 2024) reconfigured the Community Engagement Directorate to include Inclusive Innovation and Entrepreneurial Orientation, mainly because traditional learning and teaching models have been largely exclusive and siloed. We will continue to forge strong links with DLM and the rest of the community, also through the strong relationship that Mphaṭhe and I have developed through the years of her Master's study at Univen. One of the initiatives that we have been supporting is the intention of eco-mapping learned by Mphaṭhe in the Amazon and shared in our context, to draw attention to how our traditional Indigenous ways of knowing are spiritual at root. We have set out to build a relationship between the university and the community involving elders, university researchers, students, community members, etc. We have been documenting people's learning from the eco-mapping events and other events that have been organized for intergenerational learning in keeping with the spirit of Mupo.

The eco-mapping workshops are a fantastic way to get communities involved in thinking about the connections between how we as humans do things and the impacts of climate change as a global issue. It is a way of creating a sense of connection between our ways of living and climate change. It is also a way of developing conversations around this – and also around how Indigenous Knowledge Systems are embedded in agroecology. PGS has also been very helpful in contributing their know-how in relation to soil management and organic pesticides, and the collection and preservation of Indigenous seeds. This is joined with practices learned from elders and Indigenous farmers through their historical sharing of experiences and ongoing experiments in responsiveness to nature's classroom. This all develops enthusiasm to look after nature.

We are furthermore at Univen trying to create an environment where creativity on the part of our students and the community flourishes, to create tangible societal and economic impact – but not in terms of conventional economic models based on maximizing profit-making. Entrepreneurship is socially geared and also geared to regenerating the ecosystems of which we are a part. We are hoping through all our efforts not only to contribute to community development but to develop ideas that contribute to global knowledge advancement about sustainable and viable ways of living, which appreciate our connection to nature. That is, we are hoping to impact on the global landscape through showing how a thriving human and more-than-human world can be

fostered. Meanwhile, my plenary address at the International Society for Systems Sciences held in the Kruger National Park in South Africa in June 2023 (where Janet initiated the process through the president of the society, who then invited me to do the plenary) was an opportunity to share some of our African concepts of Ubuntu with an international audience. The panel discussion that was also held at the same conference, where many members of our COP were present and which we treated as a ceremony, was one of the highlights of the conference, as named by the ISSS president (International Society for Systems Science, 2026)

Norma: It is very important that Indigenous ways of knowing and being become more publicized across the globe, with concrete instances of how relationality can and must be fostered as a moral imperative against the separateness mentality – also highlighted by Andreotti in her plenary at ISSS in 2022. Her subsequent (2023) presentation to an audience in Germany explicated well the concept of “relational intelligence”.

Patricia: Besides other initiatives that I have been involved in to foster the spirit of DLM, I recently set up a group concerned with the preservation of the wetlands near the University of South Africa’s regional office in Ekurhuleni (Gauteng Province), where I am regional manager. I noticed, as inspired by DLM’s educating me about the importance of wetlands, that we have a large wetland area just outside our regional centre. What I have done so far is involve the Sakhile Community, who are keen on learning about the wetlands. They are a community engaging in small-scale agriculture and small business entrepreneurship. Janet educated us on the significance of using organic food, although we are uncertain about how to effectively promote our items. This is where we hope to obtain some further ideas from PGS. The PSG has been very helpful to various communities in Venda, where DLM is based. As you know, PGS in South Africa has been active in training farmers in expanding their knowledge of organic ways of making fertilizers, natural pesticides (through using plant materials) and creating seed banks of organic and environmentally resilient seeds. This is part of their mission to encourage organic farming and foster an awareness in the community and society about the importance of the health of people and the planet through consuming organic foods. As far as the wetland near the Unisa regional office in Ekurhuleni is concerned, the Sakhile community group has shown interest in learning more about the wetland and water more generally. On 9 March 2024, I arranged for an environmental justice activist (Ferrial Adam) to present at a workshop. This is to help the community become citizen scientists in learning how to use testing kits to test the quality of water as a way of improving water security.

All in all, there have been so many activities that we have all (in our growing COP) created, that together we create ripples towards regenerative living. This is a collective effort. It follows on from traditional rural places, where people used to engage in communal ploughing to assist one another. The collective ploughs one field at a time, alternating between one another or two fields simultaneously, until all individuals are accounted for. A similar approach is used in the stokvel arrangement, with the exception being that it operates in monetary terms. But the money is collected based on trust that when members need it, it will be available for each of them in turn, as part of a kind of participatory microfinance system. If I want to summarize how I have felt connected with and inspired by, and in turn inspired, our expanding COP, I can mention the following: Since we started our community-engaged project via UNISA, connecting with a community in Venda, I have been a team leader of the action learning approach to support a green circular economy. We are working together with DLM, University of Adelaide (Australia), Universitas Padjadjaran (Indonesia), University of Venda (Univen), and the PGS in South Africa. The purpose of DLM (mentioned above) is to promote the balance of multispecies and intergenerational knowledge. Since its inception in 2007, it has grown to include a range of

different communities (Vuvha, Vhuṭanda, Tshidzivhe, Vhuṭalu, Mudzidzi, Muloḍi, Mulambwana. Through Janet's connection with PGS, we have been able to draw on their vast knowledge, based on the promotion of organic food for human consumption. It starts with the preparation of soil, Indigenous fertilizers and the marketing of organic products (which are guaranteed as organic by PGS using specific criteria).

My involvement in this COP started on 11 April 2021 when I met Mphaṭhe Makaulule. The purpose was to fill the gap I was feeling after I lost my son. During the meeting, I also shared that UNISA needed a community to work with as a community-engaged project we wished to set up, only to find out that she is a community leader (of DLM). The same Sunday, we met the Tshidzivhe community, and we presented ourselves to the community, intending to work with them. I conducted focus group interviews with the community. Subsequently, various members of the then COP team (which has now grown) had several webinars and hybrid presentations with the community members. Some of the points of dialogue were to share the roles of different community members and researchers.

One of the highlights of our COP was the 5-day trip in October 2022 in Venda that we organized: It involved UNISA (Pat Lethole, Viwe Luxomo, Fhaṭuwani Makahane, Moipone Masalesa, Hector Mothudi, Enid Pitsoane, Norma Romm) and Janet McIntyre (University of Adelaide). As part of the 5-day trip, we also had a panel discussion at UNIVEN. Different community members of DLM, PGS, UNISA researchers and UNIVEN participated in a dialogue, facilitated by Vhonani Netshandama. The dialogue covered sharing of intergenerational knowledge, promoting organic food and some of our draft articles were shared with the community members. The following day, we went to the Tshidzivhe community site, where different communities attended the full-day event/workshop. The workshop was inclusive of young people (UNIVEN and from the communities) and old. The conversations were focused on the learning through involvement in DLM and PGS and the social-ecological enterprises that had been set up in various communities, and we also dealt with teenage pregnancy by communicating with parents to give them support, not to give up on them. We then travelled to the Muloḍi community, where they shared with us how Bamboo growing was used to protect the water fountain, and now it is cemented around, and it has been negatively affected. Norma and Janet advised them of the importance of involving the Makhadzi in resolving the matter (which was later followed up by Mphaṭhe). This is because the Venda people have a high regard for Makhadzi and the role she plays in the public sphere and the society (Matshidze, 2013). We then travelled to Tshidzi (hosted overnight) and did the same with Mabveṭe community.

In February 2023, DLM, UNISA, the University of Adelaide, and PGS held discussions (online) in which community members showcased the indigenous fertilizers and food they produce. Because of loadshedding (electricity outages), the webinar was cut off, and Janet's presentation was discontinued. However, the panel discussion continued, and unstructured interviews were conducted with community members and UNIVEN students concerning their involvement in the COP. At the moment, as I indicated above, we are working together with the Sakhile community. We intend to invite PGS and DLM to conduct further workshops.

Butshabelo: Concerning the testimonies of the authors in this chapter and elsewhere, where testimony has been defined by Fochesatto et al. (2024, p. 11) as an avenue for sharing stories of our “encounters with humans and/or the more-than-human world”, I present my story of how my involvement with PGS began and has continued to this day. It started on 15th September 2015 with four team members (Audrey Wainwright, Shadrack Mhlanga, Alan Rosenberg and Mama Lucy) who were members of the Bryanston Organic Market PGS in Bryanston in Gauteng

Province. The time I met them, I had already been working for Dzunde Farmers Development Co-operative Limited, which is an agricultural training institution based in Polokwane, as their Training Manager for conventional farming practices.

These four women were by then producing their vegetables and sending them to Bryanston Market. At that very moment, after 15 minutes of meeting them, I decided to become an Organic Activist. Since then, I have not looked back. From that day, I resigned from my well-paying job and followed the Organic Sector. In January 2016, I was admitted to the Organic Leadership Course for the whole year, and the course was offered by the IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movement) Academy, which is based in Bonn, Germany. The course was for the whole year online as well as two face-to-face sessions, which were held in Tanzania and Uganda. In April of 2016, I was admitted to 17 Shaft Training Institution, which was then based in Crown Mines in Johannesburg, Gauteng Province, to study agroecology, where I learned the importance of organic farming methods/practices as well as Leadership from May of 2016, and graduated at the end of August the same year. In 2017, I was admitted to participate in the Master Course of the Organic Leadership Course Class, and the face-to-face session was held at Geosan Province, aka the Organic Province in Seoul, South Korea. In 2018, I attended the Creating Market Linkages Course for Smallholder Farmers and Global GAP, which was sponsored by GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit). In 2021, I attended the TOTOT (Training of Teams of Trainers) offered by IFOAM Organic Academy, also sponsored by GIZ. Participating in the global space made me commit more to the organic sector as I realized that my beloved country, South Africa, is one of the only countries in the world where its people consume GMOs daily, as maize is our staple food.

As I was eager to learn and impart my skills to my fellow South Africans, I have presently been trained in several agricultural practices, i.e., Agroecology, Biodiversity, Farming God's Way, Agribusiness, Global Gap, PGS, and TOTOT (Training of Teams of Trainers). With these hands-on training practices, I visit various farms to *re-teach all the people who had learned from me in the past, to now adopt organic farming and avoid the use of chemicals*. I realized that I have to change and redo what I had done by going back to the people with organic lessons. What I wish for my Limpopo Province is to make sure that it returns to its glory of producing food for the country and the neighbouring countries, as it was known as the Fruit Basket of South Africa. I informed the people at the market of my intention to change my teaching techniques. I realized the need to create a course for the organic sector. Hence, I was trained in Johannesburg in agroecological farming, or one can say the natural way, from May 2016 to August 2016. Below, I continue my story in some more detail, leading up to my involvement with DLM.

Nkomo Village, located in the Greater Giyani Municipality in the Mopani District of Limpopo Province

After my training, I reconnected with the four women who supplied the Bryanston market at the beginning of September 2016. We began to organize meetings, and our number grew from four women to 28 members of the organization. In the meeting, the members were taught hands-on practices, the following compost making, garden staking, intercropping, crop rotation, mulching, water recycling, and Integrated Pest Management, using local resources and practical training was done at one another's backyards. One person took cow dung, another green leaves, and a third dry leaves. Then we learned to make compost, about soil preparation, and about using worms. As the group grew, I invited Constance Mbodi to come and assist me, as I knew her from

the 17 Shaft Training Academy. From 2016-2017, the group grew to 28 members, and they registered their group legally as a Co-operative. The group started the Stokvel, which assisted each other with financing their farming activities. The stokvel approach [see Patricia's reference to this above]. The group helped one another to develop their backyards; presently, 85% had managed to drill boreholes and drippers in their backyard gardens. After realizing that the methodology was viable, I started visiting different villages to replicate what was done at Nkomo Village in the Greater Giyani Municipality. In April of 2017, Giyani PGS was officially launched at Nkomo Village.

Makhuva Village, Located in the Greater Giyani Municipality in the Mopani District of Limpopo Province

We went from village to village teaching people about organic practices and principles. Nowadays, team Butshabelo and Conny are just monitoring the groups as the farmers have started mentoring one another. In the process, we met with local farmers from Makhuva Village, which is also found in Greater Giyani Municipality, and they welcomed organic practices as they reduced the cost of agricultural inputs in their fields. In 2018, Mrs. Rikhotso Tintswalo Marlena won an Award from the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and in 2019, Mrs. Rikhotso mentored her daughter-in-law to win the Award as well. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic between 2020 and 2022, the competition halted, and it resumed in 2023, where Mrs. Hlungwani from the same PGS group won the Award.

Lebowakgomo Township, Located in Polokwane Municipality in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province

In 2019, I met with Mrs. Mokoena, who was then the CEO of Lebowakgomo Hospital at Toyota in Polokwane. We were both taking our vehicles for regular services. Whilst they were waiting patiently for our vehicles to be serviced, I introduced her to the organic world. After a week of our initial meeting, she invited me to come and introduce her neighbours, who were mainly retired nurses, teachers, clerks, etc. After getting the practical skills on organic farming, they registered their group as a Co-operative and started farming organically. So nowadays the group has grown. They share their skills with other communities and the information with many groups mushrooming in the province. In 2022, Mrs. Mokoena and her team started processing an Indigenous coffee known as Mohlopi, which the people in their nearby communities used to drink whilst she was young. The coffee is sourced locally from their nearby forests, and now the coffee has the SABS authorization to be sold in the local markets.

Polokwane Town, which is found in Polokwane Municipality in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province

At the beginning of the year 2019, I was introduced to Mrs. Rosah Ramipadi by a family friend, Mr. Hlulani Mathye, as she had gone to our farm in Leeuwkuil in Polokwane to collect the chicken feed. Mr. Mathye informed Mrs. Ramaipadi to consult Butshabelo for information on organic farming. After meeting Mrs. Ramaipadi over the phone, we finally met in February of the same year. On the 27th of May 2019, I was part of the delegates who were present at the launch of Polokwane PGS. Polokwane PGS, which now holds its Market days at the end of each month, where Mrs. Ramaipadi is spearheading the activities. I mentored Mrs. Rosah Ramaipadi in the establishment of Polokwane PGS, and today she is a PGS Pollinator in the Capricorn District.

Dzumo la Mupo in Tshidzivhe Village in Makhado Municipality in Vhembe District of Limpopo Province: How I became involved with Dzumo la Mupo Organization

The Bamboo Co-operative and Organic farmers based at Tshidzivhe village, in collaboration with Dzumo la Mupo, showed their interest in becoming the family of PGS by approaching Sustainable Institute and Stefanie Swanepoel, who linked them with PGS South Africa. The conversation between PGS South Africa and the above organization started in March 2022, and the first Zoom meeting was held on the 11th April 2022. Sasha of PGS SA recommended that I (Butshabelo) should interact with the DLM organization, who are operating in Limpopo Province. After the Zoom meeting, I started coordinating with Ms. Mphatheleni Makaulule, the founder of DLM and the 1st meeting was scheduled for 23rd June 2022. The preparations for the hosting of the 1st meeting were successfully coordinated by Makhadzi and her team, and it was held at Sedzazwau Conference Centre in Thohoyandou at Thulamela Municipality in Vhembe District of Limpopo Province.

The first meeting was a face-to-face Theoretical Session where the following topics were introduced to DLM members:

1. What is a GMO, and what effects does it have on people and the environment?
2. Indigenous Knowledge
3. Introduction to PGS
 - 3.1 What is PGS?
 - 3.2 How PGS works?
 - 3.3 Six Elements of PGS
 - 3.4 Ten features of PGS

After the 1st meeting, we agreed to start with training members on Compost Making. We conducted compost-making demonstrations successfully at Vuvha Seville Village at Nzhelele (Makhado Municipality) in Vhembe District of Limpopo Province on the 12th of July 2022, and 42 DLM members attended the session. DLM, as you know, has members from various communities. The above training has been successful, as now DLM members who were trained in compost making have started teaching each other on the subject, so practices are spreading like wildfire, and many have even started selling compost to communities at large. Currently, I help to train various communities in Limpopo, who reported on the helpfulness of this in our October 2022 meetings in the Tshidzivhe and nearby communities. I am so proud of what DLM has achieved over time. We had a meeting at UNIVEN, and one woman brought her organically created compost to sell. I had shown them how to make it. The results are now showing.

Fortunately, the Department of Agriculture has shifted its stance, now even supporting some organic seed banks being created in various parts of the country. *PGS is now educating some staff from the Department of Agriculture.* Meanwhile, sometimes when people from the Department of Agriculture, who are untrained in organic farming, try to offer non-organic seeds and fertilizers to people whom I have met and trained in the communities, they refuse to use them.

Challenges in the country

Our big challenge now is the Department of Agriculture, which year in and year out buys and gives farmers free seeds and fertilizers (non-organic ones). A similar situation was reported in

Ghana, where the government buys and supplies farmers with inorganic fertilizers to boost crop production (Demi, 2019; Demi and Sicchia, 2021). However, despite the Department of Agriculture's efforts to promote agricultural intensification, our farmers' group reject these freebies. Many of these people are involved with DLM, and PGS are aware of the destructive impact of these practices. It is worth noting that the above stories are part of my success stories, and people continue to call me via phone for advice and mentoring in the sector.

Enid Pitsoane: Considering the role of the Makhadzi, to which Pat referred earlier, the Makhadzi is an aunt, a sister to the chief (Kgosi), who are now called Senior traditional leaders. Makhadzi plays a key role as an advisor to senior traditional leaders in any tribe. The Traditional leaders consult with her on every decision and action that has to be taken concerning the community. If Makhadzi does not agree or approve of any suggestion made, nothing can ever take place. She is a respected elder and advisor to the traditional leader. The role of Makhadzi should be cascaded down to women in society so that they can also be respected and listened to. When it comes to the first ladies, they play a minimal role as long as their husbands are still alive.

I have spoken to women whose husbands were senior traditional leaders and had lost them; they are disgruntled about how they are being treated by the uncles of their husbands when their husbands pass away. Many cited mistreatments and being denied their responsibilities as queens by their uncles. The uncles will assume a role of chieftaincy during the time of their mourning. However, during that time, the uncle will change everything into his name in the government to earn the salary without supporting the family of the rightful heir and even without their knowledge. The women in the traditional tribes are still experiencing oppression. Their voices are often not heard, and still looked down on. It is time for women to stand together and raise their voices and claim what is rightfully theirs. Women are equally capable of ascending the throne of power by becoming leaders of their respective tribes (Chauke, 2015).

Our responsibility as COP is, *inter alia*, to advocate for the rights of women so that they can be empowered to fend for themselves and their families. Our COP focuses on sharing knowledge with the women in communities to tap into their skills and make a living out of what they have at hand. Women are also empowered and assisted to register with universities and colleges to further their studies. These women are encouraged to register a cooperative company with the work they are involved in, and this further enables them as a community of women to work together as a group and use their different talents to generate income. The women we are working with are involved in crop farming, bead making, and dress making; together, they are encouraged to form a cooperative and open a business account. Once their cooperative company is registered as such, they are likely to get contracts which will generate money for them while they also contribute to the community through their skills. The company can also grow into a legacy for their children, which generates sustainable income.

Norma: Yes, I remember Mphaṭhe once drew attention to the way people often use the word *poverty*, without recognizing how people can experience wellbeing in their community. Even words such as *development* must be carefully used so that the word does not offer a mono-vision of development but includes pluriversality (see Kothari et al., 2019; Netshandama & Nevhudoli, 2021, p. 42). We need to be careful of the way words impact the world (for example, when development is linked to continued growth instead of to regeneration). Mphaṭhe has tried to fervently point out that the community resistance against mining is linked to an understanding that this is not development, but indeed destruction! (See again the use of film to portray and express, and share this message - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naEho-yFSdk>.)

Janet: We focus on ways to link the systemic governance of water with a circular green economy to foster engagement spanning upstream villages, midstream flood plains, to coastal villages and marine environments. We also raise the potential of undertaking multi-stakeholder engagement and the creation of a multi-stakeholder co-operative that could be scaled up with communities in line with Jakowi’s one village, many enterprises approach (in Indonesia). In the forthcoming volume *Affirmative Intervention to support Multispecies Relationships* (McIntyre-Mills, 2024), I cite the 2023 IPCC synthesis report for policymakers, which stresses that global warming poses an existential risk:

“This report recognizes the interdependence of climate, ecosystems and biodiversity, and human societies; the value of diverse forms of knowledge; and the close linkages between climate change adaptation, mitigation, ecosystem health, human well-being and sustainable development, and reflects the increasing diversity of actors involved in climate action.” (IPPC, 2023, p.3)

The loss of farm land and destruction of the water sources are caused by development at the expense of the habitat on which human beings and other species are dependent.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we presented a metalogue showcasing how our way of interacting with one another (and with others), taking into account a responsiveness to the voice of Mupo, expresses our sense of relationality/connectedness in our common existence. We highlighted how our agroecological approach, which we advocate, is fundamentally *non-anthropocentric* in orientation. At this point, we also wish to note that the notion of “agroecology” can all too easily be co-opted in terms of an agenda which is still anthropocentric – based on fulfilling certain *human* needs, and also becoming yet another cog in what Ramdas and Pimbert (2024, p. 1) call a “cog in the capitalist wheel”. They refer to a case in South India, which they criticize, where global capital has now jumped on the bandwagon of creating non-chemical farming inputs. But the resultant farming processes (through a co-operation between the government and corporate enterprises) have led to a dispossession and/or impoverishment of small-scale farmers. They contend, citing Pimbert et al. (2021), that we need to view agroecology

as an alternative paradigm for agriculture and food systems that is simultaneously: (a) the application of ecological principles to food and farming systems that emerge from specific socioecological and cultural contexts in place-based territories; and (b) a social and political process that centres the knowledge and agency of Indigenous peoples and peasants in determining agri-food system policy and practice. (Ramdas & Pimbert, 2024, p. 3)

Ramdas and Pimbert furthermore stress that (genuine) agroecological practices are based in grassroots people’s movements, which aim to “build countervailing power to advance food sovereignty and challenge the global capitalist corporate agribusiness food and farming regime” (2024, p. 3). They thus sound a word of caution that the kinds of principles that we have expressed through our metalogues above can become eroded insofar as global capitalist corporate agribusiness co-opts the notion of agroecology and undermines the efforts of grassroots social and ecological movements.

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