

Exported Toxicity: The EU's Banned Pesticides in South Africa

A Case Study

BAN
HAZARDOUS
PESTICIDES

“For Colette, Jo-Anne, Aunty Dina and all those valorous women that keep fighting for a better, brighter and healthier future.”



solidar

ABSTRACT

The European Union has banned highly hazardous pesticides from agriculture within its borders, due to their proven, or strongly suspected toxicity to human health, biodiversity, and the environment. Nevertheless, such pesticides are still being produced by some EU Member States and exported to third countries, such as South Africa, through globalised production channels. The Women on Farms Project (WFP), a South African feminist organization, collaborates with women farm workers and dwellers to advocate for their labour rights, offering support and fostering a collective effort to assert and attain those rights. WFP and farm workers in the Cape region have been waging a relentless battle since 2019, against the use of harmful pesticides on vineyards. As many as 67 types of pesticides currently used in South Africa are banned by the EU, but still exported there. The use of these pesticides entails strong labour rights violations and harmful consequences for the health of farm workers and their families exposed to them. Furthermore, workers are not always given proper usage information for these products, nor proper protective clothing and washing instructions. Since 2022, some European countries such as Belgium and France took the decision to stop exporting these dangerous pesticides banned within the European Union. If the EU wants to move towards a just transition for all, this practice of double standards in pesticide trade must be stopped immediately.

Pesticides that are banned in the European Union because of their hazardousness should be also banned for export outside its borders. People's health and living conditions have the same value, both in the Global North and Global South.

European environmental policies, such as the European Green Deal, should address these negative excesses and should include an international justice dimension: addressing climate change needs an approach that tackles inequalities in and between countries. The Global North, with a greater historical responsibility for, and with greater capacity to act against climate change, should do more. The EU must ensure that its policies do not lead to environmentally and socially harmful impacts in the Global South, but should rather provide incentives and support for partner countries to undertake their own Just Transition.

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The following case study is carried out in the framework of the [Global Just Transition](#) campaign, which calls on the EU to promote a socially and environmentally just transition not only in the European Union but also worldwide.

While environmental and climate action and social justice are two sides of the same coin, if policies for them are not planned and implemented in a coherent and inclusive manner, the European green transition can lead to environmentally and socially harmful impacts in the Global South. For example, Global South countries will need to adapt to new European standards developed in the framework of the European Green Deal and cope with negative spillover effects of the European production and consumption patterns. This is why since 2022, SOLIDAR has been working with its members and partners to collect views and approaches of just transition from Global South's civil society organisations, including trade unions, indigenous rights defenders, and feminist collectives. The Global Just Transition campaign is a joint action of [Solidar Suisse](#), [Movimiento por la Paz \(MPDL\)](#), [Olof Palmes International Center \(OPIC\)](#), [FOS](#), and [SOLIDAR](#), together with their partners from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Through their different testimonies, we will show the incoherences and negative consequences that this lack of focus on the external dimension has on partner countries.

We call on the EU to adopt a Global Just Transition approach in its relations with Global South countries and to turn the current EGD and its successor into a Global Green Deal to ensure policy coherence, accelerate the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and of the Paris Agreement's objectives, and guaranteeing a fair distribution of the costs and benefits of the European green transition between Europe and partner countries.

1 INTRODUCTION

The global expansion of agricultural trade, combined with new green technologies, has resulted in an increase in the use of mechanical equipment, new fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. Sales of pesticides and herbicides have seen a huge growth in recent decades, especially in the countries of the Global South.¹ The sale and use of pesticides are strongly regulated due to their widely recognized harmful effects on human health and their tremendous impact on biodiversity. In addition to international environmental law such as the Basel, Stockholm and Rotterdam Conventions, there are several international human rights instruments that contain clear provisions on protection against the risks linked to the use of pesticides. Furthermore, recommendations from several human rights bodies are increasing significantly with a view to ban the most dangerous pesticides and regulate and reduce the use of all synthetic pesticides.²

The use of certain pesticides is banned outright on European soil but **many member states continue to produce and export them to third countries.**³ Furthermore, due to the high globalized production chains and delocalization of big companies, it has become more and more difficult to access accurate information. In August 2023 the nonprofit organisation UnPoison, a South African research and advocacy group, compiled and published a list of 192 highly dangerous pesticides registered and used in South Africa. More than a third of these are banned in the EU due to unacceptable health and environmental risks but only 16 are partially banned or restricted in South Africa.⁴ Furthermore,

- 1 Jaccard, J. (2023). *Hier verboden. Uitgevoerd naar daar. Overal dodelijk. De rol van België in de export van verboden pesticiden.*
- 2 Eggen, M. (2023). *Informatienota: Mensenrechten & pesticiden.*
- 3 Gaberell, L. & Viret, G. (2020). *Pesticides interdits: l'hypocrisie toxique de l'Union Européenne.*
- 4 Unpoison (2023). *SA list of 222 HHP's using JMPM criteria & ban comparison.*



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36 of the 57 pesticides that are banned but still exported, belong to the most dangerous class, according to the categorisation of the World Health Organisation: *“which, based on human health evidence, are known to be carcinogenic to humans and can cause death in acute poisoning”*.⁵

Pesticide trade harms the producers and consumers' health in numerous ways. The lack of adequate protection for the workers causes skin diseases, digestive and respiratory problems due to acute exposure, but also mutagenic diseases due to chronic exposure. These hazardous chemicals also enter the informal market with poor information on the risks that their use entails, especially in countries with levels of illiteracy. Moreover, the gendered effects of pesticide use should also be considered, as 43% of the global agricultural labour force is composed by women. Biologically, due to the fact that women have more hormonally sensitive tissues, they are more vulnerable to these hazardous chemicals.⁶ Pregnant women are also at greater risk, as contact with pesticides can cause foetal malformations. In this picture, European consumers are also affected since these hazardous active substances are used for crops destined for exports back to Europe.

Pesticides also threaten biodiversity and the environment, and their use undermines food security and the resilience of food systems. Moreover, it reinforces unfair competition among farmers, and contributes to the continuation of an agricultural model that relies on fossil fuels and on technologies that are not adapted to the current environmental challenges taking third countries permanently dependent on Global North exports and technologies⁷. This trade violates international human rights commitments, as stated in 2020 by the UN Special Rapporteur and 35 other UN experts. They criticized the EU for *“continuing to export those pesticides and industrial toxic chemicals, leading to general violations of the human right to life, dignity and freedom from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in low- and middle-income countries.”* They also mentioned the discriminatory and racializing nature of these standards *“as the dangers are outsourced to communities of African descent and other non-white groups.”*⁸ But it also does not fit into the framework of the European Green Deal, where the EU presents itself as a leader in ecological transition and pushes for the greening of its own economy, not taking into account the impact and consequences of its policies on the health of people and nature in the Global South.⁹ A concrete example is this EU double standard in pesticide trade, which undeniably represents a clear violation of human, environmental and labour rights.

5 ACB (2023). South Africa's list of highly hazardous pesticides researched and published by the network *Unpoison*

6 Ilang-Ilang, Q. (2022). *Gender: at the forefront of the exposure*.

7 Study Requested by the DEVE committee (2021) *“The use of pesticides in developing countries and their impact on health and the right to food”*

8 OHCHR Press Release (2020). *“States must stop exporting unwanted toxic chemicals to poorer countries, says UN expert.”*

9 European Commission: 'The European Green Deal', https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

2. WOMEN ON FARMS PROJECT AND THE WORK WITH SOUTH AFRICAN FARM WORKERS

Farm workers in South Africa experienced multiple labour and human rights violations during Apartheid, including inhumane living conditions and child labour. Unfortunately, in the post-Apartheid era many of these pre-existing labour rights violations remain in place despite the introduction of strong labour legislation. Research within South Africa's commercial agricultural sector showed that several requirements needed for an effective protection of labour rights such as labour legislation and installing controlling mechanisms of labour inspectors were not in place until the end of the 1990s and are still effectively lacking more than 20 years later and despite such legislation: *"non-compliance by employers remains the rule rather than the exception."*¹⁰ Despite the end of Apartheid, many marginalized communities, particularly black and impoverished populations, still live in areas with limited access to clean water, sanitation, and proper waste disposal. Although South Africa has environmental laws and regulations in place, the enforcement and implementation have often been inadequate. This environmental racism intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as economic inequality and systemic racism that are still present in South African society.

In this context, the use of Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HPP) is widespread. Farm workers working in vineyards across the Western Cape region, the majority of whom are women seasonal workers, are exposed to use these highly hazardous pesticides without receiving protective clothes or proper



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instructions and warnings of the health risks. The feminist NGO, Women on Farms Project (WFP), seeks to unite farm workers and fights for better working and living conditions, especially for women farm workers and dwellers, in the Northern and Western Cape. In these two regions of South Africa, work on commercial farms is becoming more and more irregular and 'seasonalized', partly as a consequence of climate change, which results in increasingly precarious working and living conditions, especially for women, as they are more likely to be seasonal workers compared to men.¹¹ Furthermore, farm workers and dwellers belong to the working poor in South Africa, especially *"seasonal farm women are among the poorest, least visible and most vulnerable categories of workers in South Africa."*¹² As they live scattered and isolated on huge commercial farms in rural areas, they are hard to reach by the government services, while at the same time, civil society and trade unions also struggle to organise and mobilise them.¹³

10 Devereux, S. (2019). *"Violations of farm workers' labour rights in post-apartheid South Africa."*

11 EIB Pavilion at COP27 (2022). *Climate change and gender-based violence as double threat to gender equality.*

12 Devereux (n10)

13 Ibid.

Violation of labour and human rights of women farm workers

Women on Farms Project has commissioned various research on the labour conditions of women farm workers in South Africa, including their exposure to pesticides. One of the research studies on labour conditions on Fairtrade-certified farms found that:¹⁴

- 54% of women surveyed are exposed to pesticides in the vineyards and/or at home;
- 44% of women farm workers have never received any information (including the names, risks and precautionary measures) about the pesticides being used on the farms where they work;
- 18% of women surveyed had to return to vineyards within 1–4 hours of pesticide application while 54% of women reported that they return to the vineyard one day after application.

The report concludes that farm workers exposed to pesticides must be given free PPE and that the WHO re-entry times to vineyards after pesticides application must be complied with, which is not always the case.

In 2017, a comprehensive study on the labour conditions of women farm workers, which interviewed 300 women farm workers, was carried out in the Western Cape and Northern Cape. The study also explored occupational health and safety issues, including sanitation facilities at work, compensation for injuries, and exposure to pesticides and use of protective clothing. The main results showed that:¹⁵

- More than two-thirds of seasonal workers (69%) are exposed to dangerous pesticides within an hour after vineyards have been sprayed.
- Exposed workers report negative impacts on their health, such as skin rashes, nasal and eye problems, breathing difficulties and headaches. An even higher proportion of seasonal workers (73%) are not provided with protective clothes by the farmer.
- Only one in five women in the Northern Cape (21%), less than one in five seasonal farm workers (18%), and less than one in ten domestic market workers (7%) have been informed by the farmer about what pesticides are used and their possible side-effects.
- Nearly two-thirds of workers (63%) who work with pesticides do not have a separate wash facility in the workplace, meaning that they wash at home, thereby potentially exposing their families to hazardous pesticides.

¹⁴ Fortuin, C. (2022). *“Labour and Living Conditions of Workers on Fairtrade Certified Wine Farms in the Cape Winelands District Municipality, South Africa.”*

¹⁵ Devereux, S., Levendal, G. & Yde, E. (2017). *“The farmer doesn’t recognise who makes him rich”: Understanding the labour conditions the Western Cape and the Northern Cape, South Africa”.*

On a daily basis, the labour rights of farm workers dealing with these harmful products are violated. Lamentably, numerous farm owners do not comply with mandatory regulations in providing protective clothing and/or do not provide appropriate training. They are carelessly ignoring regulations on pesticide exposures and do not take any responsibility in case of illness due to the harmful substances. The legislation currently governing the safety of farm workers is the Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1985 and, specifically with respect to pesticides, the Regulations for Hazardous Chemical Substances. These regulations prescribe *“the need for personal protective equipment, including respiratory protective equipment”* and the duty of employers to send a worker for a health evaluation if exposed to pesticides. Research has already shown the impact on the health of workers and the families

housed around the vineyards, namely, asthma, fetal malformations, skin disorders, eye lesions, among others.¹⁶ The University of Cape Town is currently conducting further research on the issue. Currently, South Africa’s pesticide policy is fragmented and spread across several ministries, including those of Agriculture, Health and Employment, with no single ministry taking responsibility. Therefore, one of WFP’s demands is that the South African government implement coherent public policies. After several meetings and campaigns targeting different government departments, including the Department of Employment & Labour, and the Department of Health, the Western Cape Labor Inspectorate expressed a willingness to work with WFP to establish a program for workers’ health and safety regarding pesticide use.



Credits: Women on Farms Project

2.1 The story of Patricia and Moos

Patricia and Moos Van Zyl started working in the Vredenburg Farm, Paarl, in 1995. Patricia worked with prunes, strawberries, and baby marrows on the farm.

“The tractor spraying the pesticides sprayed while we were working; we walked right behind the tractors as they were spraying the pesticides, and my job was to keep the pipes spraying the pesticides. I wore no protective gear or masks while doing so.”

Moos did various works at the farm, but his main duty was to spray the pesticides.

“The pesticide that I was spraying was Roundup¹⁷; it’s very strong. In the evenings, when I arrived at home from work, my mouth tasted like the pesticides – it was a bitter taste, and my throat was also scratchy. When we used to spray the pesticides, all the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Roundup is the brand name of a glyphosate-based herbicide produced by Bayer. Several countries have restricted or banned the use of Roundup, due to the fact that one of its main ingredients is glyphosate, classified by WHO in 2015 as a “probable human carcinogen.”

workers used to return to the sprayed areas immediately, with no protective gear or masks. One Monday evening, I came home, and my throat was extremely sore after a long day of work and spraying the fruits with pesticides. I went to the clinic with my wife and was immediately referred to Paarl Hospital. I went through various assessments; a camera was put down my throat and a scan was done. Thereafter, I was given a full body MRI scan. The doctor said that my blood was not flowing as it should. At the hospital, they asked what work I did because my condition is strange; I informed that I am a pesticides sprayer on the farms. I was hospitalized for 1 week; they found yellow sores in my throat and down into my stomach. The doctor wrote a letter to the farmer informing him that I can no longer work. They say my internal organs are infected and yellow; I am still undergoing medical tests and treatment.”

Patricia is also dealing with the dramatic consequences of the use of pesticides.

“One day, after the pesticides were sprayed, I started feeling tired, weak and eventually collapsed. My throat started feeling scratchy and my chest was very tight. I was rushed to the hospital; the doctor said, if I had taken any longer, I would have died. The nurses asked me what work I did and whether I wore protective clothes during the spraying of the pesticides.

From then onwards, my health started deteriorating. I had chronic problems with breathing. My neighbour often used to take me to the hospital where I got oxygen to assist my breathing. The doctor informed the farmer who I worked for that I was no longer able to continue working because of my health. Since then, I was unable to work and currently I am still under medical treatment.”

3. CURRENT SITUATION

As a result of widespread exposure to pesticides, farm workers experience severe health consequences. **Pesticides that have been prohibited within the European Union due to their hazardous nature should also be banned beyond its borders. This is imperative because the well-being and living conditions of people hold equal importance, regardless of whether they reside in the Global North or the Global South.**

Every year before the harvest, from September onwards, farm workers spray the vineyards with pesticides, usually using tractors. Very often, farm workers are still in the vineyards while the spraying happens; protective clothing such as hand gloves and masks are usually not provided, neither is clean water available to wash hands. Moreover, there are often no toilets in the vineyards, so women are forced to relieve themselves in the vineyards or nearby bushes which have also been sprayed with pesticides. Testimonies from farm workers state indicate that when they arrive home, their work clothes are wet from the sprayed pesticides. Working without clean water and sanitation has a tremendous effect on the health of the workers and represents a violation of human rights.

3.1. Enforcing of existing laws and regulations

In the short term, WFP and farmwomen called on the South African government to enforce existing laws and regulations, including the use of protective clothing, effective training and information for farm workers, and adherence to re-entry times

after spraying vineyards. Additionally, there should be an improvement in screening procedures and enhanced healthcare access for farm workers who are exposed to pesticides. Farmers who fail to comply with these regulations should face prosecution.

However, WFP has maintained that, in order to address the more fundamental issue of the exposure of farm workers to highly hazardous pesticides, the South African government should ban pesticides that are already prohibited in the EU. This should be accompanied by efforts to identify and implement alternative bio-pesticide solutions to safeguard farm worker communities. Furthermore, it is crucial to update the legislation related to pesticides, which dates back to 1947, to align it with current international best-practice standards.

Lastly, WFP has also called for greater transparency in the pesticides trade in South Africa, including the registration of (new) pesticides, in publicly accessible register that provides information about the pesticides in use, their ingredients, and potential health impacts. Farm workers and the general public have a right to such transparency and information.

3.2 Environmental racism

International pressure is growing to address the double standards in the international pesticides trade. The UN Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights, Dr. Marcos A. Orellana paid an official visit to South Africa in August 2023. In his end statement, one of his observations referred to the need to intensify the efforts to tackle the so called “*environmental racism*”¹⁸. The UN Special Rapporteur pointed out that the use of pesticides has “*exponentially grown in South Africa*” which promotes an agricultural model that is chemical-intensive and does not include the right to environmental and human health. In his words, “*During my visit to the Western Cape province, I heard from women farm workers who were routinely*

¹⁸ It was African American civil rights leader Benjamin Chavis who coined the term “environmental racism” in 1982, describing it as “racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of colour for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of colour from leadership of the ecology movements”. From Beech, P. (2020). [What is environmental racism and how can we fight it?](#)



Credits: Michelle De Baene (FOS)

exposed to hazardous pesticides and who denounced serious adverse health impacts in their communities. I also learned that pesticides meant for agricultural use are illegally sold and used to combat rampant rat and cockroach pest infestations that spread in the absence of sanitation services in informal settlements. I was appalled to learn of the many children who were poisoned or died from eating, drinking or handling hazardous pesticides.”¹⁹ Despite the scientific evidence of their harmful effects and the fact that they cannot be safely used, many highly hazardous pesticides are still exported to, and legal, in South Africa.

There have been several recent cases²⁰ of poisoning and death caused by the two pesticides Terbufos and Paraquat: “These two pesticides [Terbufos and Paraquat], amongst many others, are banned in the European Union; yet they are still produced in European countries for export, particularly to developing countries. This practice reproduces long-standing racist and colonial patterns of exploitation.” The UN Rapporteur was **critical of the South African government** which, despite its strong legal framework, is meaningless in practice when considering the serious human rights abuses experienced by farm worker communities arising from the increasing use of pesticides: “The legacy of environmental racism has meant the externalization of costs of environmental degradation to the marginalized and poor communities.”

¹⁹ Orellana, M. (2023). *End of Mission Statement by the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights.*

²⁰ Davies, B., Hlela, M.B.K.M. & Rother, HA. (2023). *Child and adolescent mortality associated with pesticide toxicity in Cape Town, South Africa, 2010–2019: a retrospective case review.*

3.3. The story of Marie

Marie Adams worked as a farm dweller on the Koopmanskloof wine farm for 30 years, and she was forced to stop working, due to health deterioration.

“I believe my health challenges are related to the lack of toilets in the vineyards and pesticides’ exposure. The farmer would only place toilets in the vineyard when ethical audits (Fairtrade) took place. The rest of the time, we had to relieve ourselves in the vineyards. Squatting in an open workplace, shared with male workers is not only undignified, but women are also exposed to the pesticides from the grass and ground where pesticides have been sprayed. Squatting in an open field also exposed women’s intimate parts to pesticide drift. There is no toilet paper and women often have no alternative but to use their hem (wet with pesticides) to wipe themselves. There was no clean water to wash your hands. We were also forced to return to the vineyard immediately after it was sprayed. As women workers, we were not provided with gloves and masks. I was forced to work under these difficult conditions for many years.”

“One day, I started feeling strange, as if something was hanging out of me. I was in extreme pain, and I had difficulty walking. After three visits to the health facility and various tests, I was informed that I have uterine cancer and they had to remove my uterus urgently. Later I came to understand that my cancer was a result from pesticide exposure and the fact that there is no toilets and clean water in the vineyard while people are working”.

Marie continues to live on the farm where she worked. Her house is still amongst the vineyards where she is still exposed to pesticide drift when the vineyards are sprayed at various times of

the year. As a former seasonal farm worker, she received no additional benefits (provident fund/pension) when she stopped working. She also received no compensation for what she now believes to be an occupation-related disease because, like thousands of other farm workers, no causality was investigated and proven during her treatment. Today, Marie is struggling to make ends meet and is dependent on a small state social security grant which is not sufficient to meet all her needs and the additional expenses of a special needs child.



Credits: Women on Farms Project

4. CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

4.1 EU policies with double standards

Since 2019, Women on Farms Project has been waging a relentless battle against the use of these harmful pesticides in vineyards of the Western Cape and Northern Cape, including commissioning several research studies on labour rights violations experienced by farm workers. A desk-top study by WFP revealed that as many as 67 pesticides currently used in South Africa are already banned for use within the European Union – that is the so-called double standard.

This double standard can be tackled in two ways: first, by imposing an export ban in the exporting countries. France is the first example among EU member states that has put a law in place to ban the production and export of pesticides and active substances that are banned in the EU for health or environmental impacts. Belgium has recently followed suit.

A second option is to restrict pesticide imports at a national level. Tunisia, Palestine and Mexico have imposed a ban on imports of pesticides that are forbidden in the exporting or producing country itself. However, a recent study by the NGO, PAN Germany, shows that such national bans are not enough to prevent imports.²¹

4.2 Export ban at EU-level

Numerous NGOs have been calling on the EU Commission for a complete ban on pesticides – not

only within EU borders but also for their production and export to countries outside the EU. *“EU companies are taking advantage of weak human health and environmental national laws in order to sell pesticides that are considered too dangerous for use in Europe, to third countries. This is simply immoral, yet the Commission is giving its consent.”*²²

The European Commission has opened a consultation on a legislative initiative on Hazardous Chemicals – ‘prohibiting production for export of chemicals banned in the European Union’, a process led by the Commissioner for Environment, Oceans, and Fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius. The initiative aims to introduce a mechanism prohibiting production and/or export of certain hazardous chemicals that are banned in the EU – to protect non-EU countries from their negative effects on human health and the environment. The initiative will further align internal and external policies and improve the international standing of the EU, strengthening the credibility of its actions. It will, as stated *‘fulfil a commitment made in the EU’s chemicals strategy for sustainability.’* The initiative is now being discussed, but there are alarming signs of a downturn (for example, as it does not appear in the Commission’s workplan for 2024).

4.3 The role of the agrochemical lobby

The rules relating to the pesticide sector (production, approval, sale and use) are different in every country. But these laws are stricter in the EU than in the rest of the world, and agrochemical companies profit from this inequality: in the absence of regulations in third countries they can, in accordance with the Prior Informed Consent procedure²³, export active substances banned in the EU to other regions. The pesticide industry tends to hide behind the “demand from importing countries” for their banned products, but opposition to the use of these pesticides is also growing in those importing countries, such as in South Africa.

21 Clausing, P. And Haffmans, S. (2022) Pan Germany. *“Exports of EU-banned pesticides from EU countries to South Africa. Results of a research carried out by PAN Germany for Women on Farms Project (WFP) South Africa”*

22 Lysimachou, A., Pesticide Action Network Europe (PAN). (2020). *Banned Pesticides: 70 NGOs Demand EU Commission Puts End to EU Double Standards*

23 The principle of the Rotterdam Convention is based on the procedure of the prior informed consent or PIC. This procedure allows signatory countries to obtain information on the characteristics of these chemicals, get informed on the export and give their consent to their importation.



Credits: Michelle De Baene (FOS)

4.4 Near future: national import ban by South Africa in 2024 and international action

Since 2019, WFP has been lobbying the South African government to ban the import and use of pesticides that are already banned in the EU. WFP has organised annual mass-based events which were attended by 200 – 300 women farm workers and dwellers, which have targeted various government departments. In 2019, when WFP launched its pesticides campaign, more than 200 farmwomen marched to the national Parliament where they handed over a Memorandum for the attention of the Minister of Employment & Labour and Minister of Agriculture demanding a ban of the 67 pesticides already banned in the EU. Then, in 2022, WFP organised a Health Indaba²⁴ where hundreds of farmwomen from various areas and farms shared

the health impacts of their exposure to pesticides. After the Health Indaba, farmwomen marched to the Department of Health (DoH) in Worcester and handed over a Memorandum for the attention of the national Minister of Health, demanding *inter alia* that the DoH meet with WFP; support the call for a ban of highly hazardous pesticides already banned in the EU, and also ensure that doctors and healthcare professionals are aware of, and sensitive to, the health effects of pesticide exposure of farm workers, and that they probe farm workers accordingly when they present with various physical symptoms.

In addition to these mass-based events, WFP with farmwomen representatives has also held roundtable meetings with senior provincial and national government officials from the Departments of Agriculture; Employment & Labour; and Health,

²⁴ Indaba is the Zulu word which means an important conference or meeting to discuss issues of importance to the community.

including the Registrar of Pesticides who is the official actually responsible for the registration and de-registration of pesticides in South Africa. WFP's activities have been fundamental in keeping the pressure on the Government to act. In September 2022, the Registrar announced government's intention to phase out and completely ban certain pesticides by 1 June 2024.

However, Colette Solomon, director of WFP, warns that although the South African government has agreed on a ban in June 2024, it remains important to keep organising, fighting and maintaining the campaign and being vigilant about Government's actions. Indeed, WFP has been made aware of the fact that the agrochemical industry and commercial farmers have been actively lobbying the government and have even threatened to challenge the Government's decision in court. UN Special Rapporteur Orellana also noted in his observations the influence of the agrochemical industry on access to relevant information and the creation of legal frameworks: *"While the government does not have a publicly available list of registered pesticides, Croplife, an industry association, has an online database for purchase. Not even other Government departments, such as the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment, has free access to the list of registered pesticides."*²⁵

In September 2023, WFP organised a march gathering about 200 women working in agriculture. The protesters marched to the head office of Bayer, and a memorandum was handed over to a company representative, calling on the European company to stop producing and exporting pesticides to South Africa.

Finally, given the global value chain of pesticide production and export, an international legal framework is compelling. Therefore, the International Labour Organization (ILO) negotiations on a new standard on protection against biological hazards, that will kick off at the 112th ILO Conference (June 2024), are a promising initiative in this direction.



Credits: Women on Farms Project

4.5 The story of Jo-Anne

Jo-Anne Johannes is a 54-year-old farm dweller from Simondium, a small agricultural area between Franschhoek and Stellenbosch, famous for its export wines. She is also an activist, working alongside Women on Farms Project (WFP).

"One of our main issues of concern on farms is the use of harmful pesticides. Although men are the main agrochemical handlers and sprayers, women are also exposed to pesticides. Our houses are surrounded by vineyards and the drift of the pesticides affects us directly. Farmers do not give any warning about the time that they will be

²⁵ Orellana, M. (2023). *End of Mission Statement by the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights*.

spraying, resulting in chemical drift entering our homes through open windows and the washing hanging out on the washing lines. Women are also responsible for washing men's pesticides-soaked work clothes. Our children are also affected by the pesticides drift when they are playing outside; our water sources (such as dams and boreholes) are also affected by these pesticides."

Through her involvement with WFP and her community activism, Jo-Anne joined the Double Standards Campaign, asking for the ban of highly hazardous pesticides in South Africa.

"We are asking for the banning of especially those agro-chemicals that are banned in the EU but still exported to South Africa. Are the lives of Europeans more important than the lives of people in South Africa? Through WFP's advocacy, I've been part of delegations who met with Department of Employment & Labour and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. During our engagements with them, we raised our concerns about the harmful health impacts of those pesticides."

"Farm workers and dwellers experience respiratory problems, skin rashes, eye problems (a high percentage of farm workers wear spectacles and always have dry, red itching eyes, especially during the pesticides spraying season). Many women complain of urinary tract infections which they attribute to relieving themselves in open pesticides-contaminated areas because there are no toilets in the vineyards; they are forced to squat in vineyards which have been sprayed with pesticides. Because there is no clean water or toilet paper provided in the vineyards, women are also often forced to either use the hems of their clothes or wild grasses which are already wet with pesticides. Because there is usually no clean drinking water in the vineyards, farm workers are often unable to wash their hands before eating their lunch. Women farm workers, especially seasonal workers, do not receive special protective

clothing and gloves when they work in the vineyards. They are also expected to re-enter the vineyards immediately after pesticides spraying; sometimes, pesticide are even sprayed in vineyards where women are working. Since women are not sprayers, they are not allowed to use the special bathrooms and washing machine facilities that farms are supposed to make available to workers who work directly with agrochemicals – male permanent workers who apply and spray the pesticides."

In her role of local activist, Jo-Anne visited many farms in her community, to share information about the harmful impact of pesticides as well as about occupational health and safety regulations that must be adhered to when pesticides are used on farms, while encouraging workers to get to know the names of the various pesticides that are used on their farms. As part of her advocacy work, together with WFP they have also distributed information pamphlets and mobilized women to participate in advocacy actions that call for the banning of harmful pesticides and finally, they had pickets at those farms that violate health and safety regulations with regards to pesticides.

*"The most important thing, however, is to ban the harmful pesticides that are already banned in the EU. **If it is too harmful to use there, it is too harmful to use here.** Therefore, we also marched to Bayer in September to hand over a Memorandum calling on Bayer (and other pesticide producers) to stop producing and exporting pesticides already banned in the EU. We are saying that the **lives of peoples in Africa matter as much as those in Europe.** As a result of our continued advocacy initiatives, the South African government officially announced that they will phase out certain harmful pesticides by June 2024. We continue to monitor the process to ensure that it happens and that the most harmful ones are included in the banned list."*

5. CONCLUSION

Women farm workers in South Africa face many challenges and struggles in their daily lives. As women, they do not have the same access to permanent contracts on farms; they do not have a stable income; and they take on multiple roles at the same time, including primary responsibility for the family and children. Farm workers are also landless because 30 years after South Africa became a democracy after the end of apartheid, White people still own 72% of agricultural land in the country although they only comprise 7.7% of the total population.

Climate change has exacerbated the precarity and insecurity of farmwomen's livelihoods. The weather is more unpredictable and directly affects the seasons and, therefore, women's employment and earnings on farms.

At the same time, farm workers and their families are being poisoned by the use of pesticides which are so toxic and dangerous that have been banned for use in the EU but are still produced by EU countries and exported to South Africa where they are still legal.

This case study shows the harmful impacts of pesticide exposure on the health of farm workers, especially women seasonal workers, and how continued activism, including organising, awareness-raising and advocacy initiatives are crucial for change.

Testimonies from farm workers and research done over the years show that the labour and human rights of workers are violated on farms because pesticides are sprayed while workers are in the vineyards; they do not receive any personal protective equipment (PPE); they are not informed of the health risks of the pesticides that they are exposed to; they do not have access to toilets and clean water in the vineyards; and are not warned in advance of pesticides being sprayed. While WFP fights against such non-

compliance of farmers with health and safety regulations, WFP's focus has been on the double standards whereby the EU continues to produce and export pesticides to South Africa that have already been banned in the EU.

At the national level, WFP has demanded that the South African government ban these pesticides, while at the international level, WFP has joined the campaign of European NGOs and is calling for an EU-wide ban of the production and export of pesticides already banned in the EU. A ban on hazardous pesticides must be global and doing away with the current double standards scenario.

The European Union and its member countries have committed to policy coherence for development, meaning that they seek to take account of development objectives in policies that are likely to have an impact in developing countries. However, this double standard on pesticides clearly lacks coherence: the lives of South African farm workers (and other people in the global South to which these dangerous pesticides are exported) have the same value as that of European citizens.

EU policies that have negative externalities must be phased out to contribute to a Just Transition for all, including the Global South, which has contributed the least to the current climate crisis.

Interests of European businesses cannot come before the health and lives of people, as this is clearly against the EU values of human dignity, equality and human rights. With an export ban regulated at EU level, EU institutions can get rid of the unfair double standards in the case of pesticides that have detrimental effects on human health, and support South African farm workers, especially women seasonal workers, in their struggle for decent work and dignified livelihoods, ensuring that their human rights and labour rights are respected.

6 TOWARDS A GLOBAL JUST TRANSITION

Despite its efforts the EU is lagging behind on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals²⁶ while some of its strategies and policies, like the European Green Deal, risk putting at stake partner countries' capacity to achieve the SDGs.

While environmental and climate action and social justice are two sides of the same coin, if not planned and implemented in a coherent and inclusive manner, the European green transition can lead to environmentally and socially harmful impacts in the Global South.

Therefore, the [Global Just Transition Campaign](#) calls upon the European Union's institutions, including the future members of the European Parliament and the new European Commission to ensure the next European Green Deal is equipped with a strong external dimension.

In this framework, the EU and its representatives shall:

- ✔ Lead on the implementation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through a comprehensive EU sustainable development strategy and ensure Policy Coherence to tackle the potentially negative impacts of the EU policies, programs, and actions on partner countries. They should conduct in-depth sustainability impact assessments (ex-ante and ex post) of its policies, programs, and actions to assess and address the external economic, social, environmental and political impacts of EU policies, especially on the most marginalized communities.
- ✔ Revise its trade policy and economic relations to incorporate sanctions on labour and environmental standards. Ensure that all EU business enterprises respect human rights, do not infringe them; addresses adverse human rights impacts with which they are involved, and ensures access to effective remedy in case violations occur.
- ✔ Increase incentives, such as technical and financial support, as well as grants-based funding for loss and damage, mitigation and adaptation for partner countries to undertake their own Just Transition processes and mechanisms.
- ✔ Promote, protect and enable civic space and counter shrinking space for civil society. Ensuring meaningful, inclusive and safe consultations and dialogues with CSO, during the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of its policies. At the same time, the EU should promote an open civic space and protect human rights defenders, such as environmental, women', indigenous people', workers' rights defenders, as well as the right to defend rights.
- ✔ Strengthen social justice during the green transition by promoting and facilitating the mobilisation of domestic and when needed international resources to set up and scale up Universal Social Protection Floors and systems, including income support schemes, re-skilling and up-skilling programs, and quality public services such as health care.
- ✔ Finally, the above case study illustrates that the EU must end its policy of double standard and implement a complete ban on dangerous pesticides, not only on their usage within EU borders but also on their production and export.

²⁶ EEB Press Release (2023), "[SDGs: EU Voluntary Review does not support rhetoric of transformative and participatory change](#)"

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