



TOXIC HARVEST

ELECTRONIC PRESS KIT

DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY Andréa Gema
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS Jan Urhahn and Refiloe Joala

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Mpho Sithole, Journalist and Health Entrepreneur

"We are exposed in so many different ways. It is extremely difficult to calculate the cumulative effect of all the chemicals we ingest on a daily basis."



Dr Colette Solomon, Women on Farms Project

"Farm workers and farm dwellers are really at the coalface of pesticides exposure by virtue of where they work and by virtue of where they live."

Dr Colette Solomon, Women on Farms Project

"African lives matter as much as European lives. Profits are prioritised before people's health. Profits are prioritised before people's lives."



Mpho Sithole, Journalist and Health Entrepreneur

"Agroecology is a fancy word for the diverse ways in which farmers have been growing food for millennia. Modern research fully supports this model of farming."

MISSION STATEMENT

Toxic Harvest: The Hidden Truth About Pesticides is a gripping documentary feature film that uncovers the devastating impacts of agrottoxins, highlighting the use of highly hazardous pesticides in South Africa. Through powerful firsthand accounts from farm workers and eye-opening expert interviews, the film exposes how these toxic chemicals poison our soils, water, and food, affecting us all. With striking visuals and shocking revelations, it calls for urgent action to phase out harmful pesticides and a shift towards agroecological farming.

SYNOPSIS

Toxic Harvest: The Hidden Truth About Pesticides is a gripping documentary feature film that uncovers the devastating and far-reaching impacts of agrottoxins, highlighting the use of highly hazardous pesticides in South Africa. Shot with unflinching honesty, it reveals how agrottoxins poison the environment – contaminating the soil, the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat – affecting us all. The film tells the stories of farm workers on the frontlines of exposure to toxic chemicals and their courageous fight against an unjust and exploitative system. Through expert interviews, striking visuals, and eye-opening revelations, Toxic Harvest sheds light on the systemic failures that allow these chemicals to persist – from weak regulatory measures to the profit-driven agendas of agrochemical companies. It also exposes the troubling double-standards that permit pesticides banned in some parts of the world to be sold and used elsewhere. At its core, the film calls for urgent action to phase out highly hazardous pesticides and a transition in our food production to agroecological farming practices for a safer, more sustainable future for all.



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Year: 2025 Run Time: 64mins Language: English and Afrikaans

HOST A SCREENING

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Interested in bringing the film to your classroom, campus or community, either in-person or virtually?

Please email **Refiloe Joala** (refiloe.joala@rosalux.org) to get started.

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PRODUCERS' STATEMENT

Toxic Harvest: The Hidden Truth About Pesticides

By Jan Urhahn and Refiloe Joala

Pesticides, often called agrotoxins are inherently hazardous – they are designed to kill. In South Africa, one of the largest agricultural markets on the African continent, their impact is widespread and deeply concerning.

According to the South African National Institute for Occupational Health, 9,000 pesticide products are registered in the country. Between 2019 and 2023, South Africa imported pesticides valued at ZAR 38 billion (around EUR 2 billion). During the same period, it exported ZAR 15 billion (approximately EUR 750 million) worth of pesticides to neighboring Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, mainly Zambia and Zimbabwe. China was the largest supplier to South Africa (ZAR 12 billion), followed by Belgium, Germany, and the USA.

However, despite this growing trade, South Africa's pesticide regulations are outdated. The country's primary pesticide law, the *Fertilisers, Farm Seeds, Agricultural Remedies and Stock Remedies Act* of 1947, is a relic of the apartheid era, failing to address modern scientific understanding of pesticide risks.

HIGHLY HAZARDOUS PESTICIDES: A PERSISTENT THREAT

Even more alarming is the fact that 192 highly hazardous pesticides (HHPs), remain legally available in South Africa. A third of these pesticides are banned in the European Union due to their dangers, yet they continue to be exported from Europe to developing countries like South Africa. These HHPs are classified as such because of their potential to cause severe and/or irreversible harm to human health, the environment and biodiversity.

THE HUMAN TOLL

Farm workers are at the frontline of pesticide exposure. The 929,000 farm workers in South Africa, many of them women are regularly exposed to some of the most dangerous chemicals used in agriculture on a daily basis in multiple ways without adequate protection and training. Globally, acute pesticide poisoning affects an estimated 385 million people every year – a dramatic rise from 25 million cases in 1990. Pesticides have been linked to serious health problems, including damage to the skin, eyes, liver, kidneys, and nervous and endocrine systems.

But farm workers are not the only ones at risk. People living in rural communities near farms are also exposed to pesticides through aerial spraying on farm fields, often without any regard for their proximity to people's homes. In urban areas, and particularly in informal settlements, pesticides intended for agricultural use are sometimes misused to control pests, leading to tragic poisoning incidents, especially among children.

CONTAMINATION IN FOOD AND ENVIRONMENT

Pesticides are also contaminating our food and the environment. Random testing on fruit, vegetables, and processed foods in South Africa has revealed residues of 14 HHPs, with nine samples exceeding legal maximum residue levels. Alarming, 12 of these chemicals are banned in the European Union, yet remain legal in South Africa. Soil and water are similarly affected, as pesticides persist in the environment, impacting ecosystems and communities far beyond their intended targets.

PROFITS OVER PEOPLE

The agrochemical giants – Bayer, BASF, Corteva, and Syngenta – control about two-thirds of the global agrochemical market. Shockingly, 60 percent of their HHP sales target emerging markets like South Africa. These companies take advantage of weaker regulations and enforcement, insufficient education about pesticide risks, and limited access to protective equipment in the Global South, prioritizing profits over the health of people and the planet.

Although pesticide manufacturers claim that their products are "safe when used as directed," this assertion rarely reflects reality. Protective gear is often unavailable, unaffordable, or unsuitable for local conditions, and many farmers are unable to comprehend the technical instructions on pesticide labels.



CHANGE IS REQUIRED

The current agricultural system is not only toxic but also historically unjust. A just transition is urgently needed – not just in South Africa, but globally – to shift away from the massive reliance on hazardous pesticides toward safe food, healthy communities, and sustainable farming practices for future generations.

Historically, farm workers and farm dwellers in South Africa have been leading the charge for the adoption of stronger pesticide regulation, calling on the government to ban the use of HHPs in food production.

To achieve this, South Africa and many other nations need a comprehensive overhaul of their pesticide laws. Key actions must include:

- 1. Implementing pesticide reduction policies:** Phase out HHPs and promote safer, environmentally sound alternatives.
- 2. Ending double standards:** Prohibit the use of pesticides banned in other regions, such as the European Union, due to their health and environmental risks. Furthermore, exporting countries must prohibit the manufacture, storage, and export of pesticides that are banned within their own borders.
- 3. Transitioning to agroecology:** Shift from toxic, extractive agricultural systems to agroecological practices that prioritise health, workers' rights, food security, and environmental sustainability.



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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When I first brought the animation team on board during post-production for Toxic Harvest, one of the guys looked up and said, "I think the only reasonable response to this is to riot." We all laughed – but there was something uncomfortably true in that reaction. Because once you start to understand what's happening to our food system – what's on our plates, and what it's doing to our bodies – outrage feels like the only logical emotion.

This film grew out of our first project, The Last Seed, which opened my eyes to the disturbing reality of agriculture in Southern Africa. That film helped me understand how badly the system is failing – not just because of government neglect, but because private agricultural companies are often driven by profit, not nourishment or the desire to produce healthy food. Toxic Harvest picks up where The Last Seed left off. It asks: what does that profit-driven mindset actually do to our food? To our health? To our future?

What we discovered in making this film shocked us. We spoke to people within the food system who didn't seem to grasp – or maybe didn't want to grasp – the true cost of what they were producing. The environmental damage. The human health implications. The toxins that make their way into our bodies daily. We found a deep, systemic indifference, fueled by the sheer scale of corporate investment in the status quo. When profit is the engine, ethics and health fall by the wayside.

And yet we discovered that nobody's testing our food. Nobody's asking any questions. And so we – the general public – are eating poison daily, unaware of what goes into, and onto, our food.

As a team of filmmakers, we felt that horror deeply. Making a simple trip to the supermarket took on a sinister tone. We started messaging each other regularly on the side, discussing the problem and what more we could do beyond making the film. How could we change things in our daily lives, to perhaps save ourselves and our families from the poison deluge.

We don't have the power to rewrite legislation or reform global agriculture, unfortunately. But what we can do is tell the truth. From the beginning, we knew this story needed to carry a sense of unease, anxiety – even dread. We leaned into that, both emotionally and creatively.

This project took an emotional toll. Learning how entrenched the problem is, and how many layers of corporate interest are invested in keeping things exactly as they are, was draining. At times, it felt like we were documenting something too big to fight. But that's exactly why we made the film: to empower viewers to see the system for what it is – and to question whether they want to be complicit in it.

We're not actually calling for riots, but we are calling for disruption. If top-down change feels impossible, then the power must come from the bottom up. From the people who are being harmed. If enough of us change how we buy, eat, and think about food, we may be able to push the system toward something better.

We are grateful to the many NGOs, activists, and collaborators who trusted us with their stories and expertise. Their courage and clarity gave us the foundation to build this film – and to do so creatively, boldly, and with purpose.

Toxic Harvest is not meant to bring comfort – it's meant to provoke. Because there is no peace when you're eating poison every day, unaware.



We're not actually calling for riots, but we are calling for disruption. If top-down change feels impossible, then the power must come from the bottom up. From the people who are being harmed.

GALLERY





FILMMAKING TEAM



Andréa Gema
Director and Editor

Andréa Gema is a documentary filmmaker whose work explores the intersections of agriculture, corporate power, and food sovereignty in Africa. She is the director and editor of Toxic Harvest (2025), a compelling investigative film that examines the hidden costs of pesticide use in industrial agriculture, revealing the human and environmental toll behind the food on our plates. Her previous film, The Last Seed (2023), traced the fight for seed sovereignty across the continent, spotlighting the resilience of African farmers and the grassroots movements resisting corporate control of the food system. Driven by a commitment to social justice and environmental accountability, her work combines deep research with a powerful cinematic style, amplifying underrepresented voices and challenging viewers to rethink the politics of food. She continues to use film as a tool for advocacy and education, working closely with communities, scientists, and activists to illuminate urgent stories often left untold.



Jan Urhahn
Executive Producer

Jan Urhahn is an expert in agriculture and food. From 2019 to 2025, he served as the Director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's Food Sovereignty Programme in Johannesburg, South Africa. His work focuses on critical issues such as farm workers' rights, the impacts of hazardous pesticides on humans and the environment, food prices, and the control of seed and land. He is also the Executive Producer of the award-winning documentary feature film, The Last Seed.



Refiloe Joala
Executive Producer

Refiloe Joala is a researcher and programme manager specialising in African food systems. With over a decade in the development sector, she has led and contributed to numerous research projects and consultancies focused on agro-food system transformations in Southern Africa, food and land rights, and climate change. As the Food Sovereignty Programme Manager at Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southern Africa, she combines research, political education, alliance building, and filmmaking to advocate for food sovereignty and farm workers' rights. Refiloe is also a co-producer of the award-winning documentary feature film, The Last Seed.



FEATURED VOICES

Mpho Sithole, Journalist and health entrepreneur

Leslie London, Professor and Chair of Public Health Medicine in the School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town

Andrea Rother, Professor and Head of Environmental Health Division, University of Cape Town

Leslie Petrik, Professor and founder of the Environmental and Nano Sciences research group in the Department of Chemistry, University of the Western Cape

Pia Addison, Associate Professor, Integrated Pest Management, Stellenbosch University

Debbie Muir, Pesticide Risk Manager, South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment

Deneco Dube, General Secretary, Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU)

Siphiwe Sithole, Agroecological farmer, activist and African Marmalade organic farm owner

Johan Grobler, Head of Special Projects, Dutoit Agri

Morgan Lee, Doctoral Candidate in Environmental and Geographical Science, University of Cape Town

Dr Colette Solomon, Director, Women on Farms Project

Fransiena van Roy, former farm worker and activist

Dina Ndleni, former farm worker and activist

Gertrude Yonkers, farm worker

Tshimangadzo Phandavhudzi, Agroecological farmer and Muzwali Farm owner

Megan McCarthy, Head of Spier Food Garden, Spier Wine Farm

CREDITS

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Executive Producers: Jan Urhahn
and Refiloe Joala (both Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung)
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Illustration and Design: Ashley Atherton (ThenAgain)
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Animation and Design Producer: Amy Knight (ThenAgain)
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FEATURING IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

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Prof Leslie Petrik
Prof Leslie London
Joors Simson
Prof Pia Addison
Debbie Muir
Shiloh Gianna Angelina Abrahams
Refiloe Joala
Deneco Dube
Siphiwe Sithole
Johan Grobler
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Morgan Lee
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The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (RLS) is an internationally active, progressive non-profit organisation for political education. One of the six major political foundations in the Federal Republic of Germany, the RLS is closely linked to Die Linke, the German Left Party. Since its founding in 1990, the RLS has been engaged in the analysis of social processes and developments. Through its teams in many regional and country offices, the RLS works with hundreds of partner organisations, political actors and individuals in over 80 countries. One of the topics the organisation is engaged in is food sovereignty. The aim of the RLS's work is to strengthen emancipatory political forces.

AFRICAN CENTRE FOR BIODIVERSITY (ACB)

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The African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) is a research and advocacy organisation working towards food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa, with a focus on biosafety, seed systems and agricultural biodiversity. ACB is committed to dismantling inequalities and resisting corporate-industrial expansion in Africa's food and agriculture systems.

TRUST FOR COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND EDUCATION (TCOE)

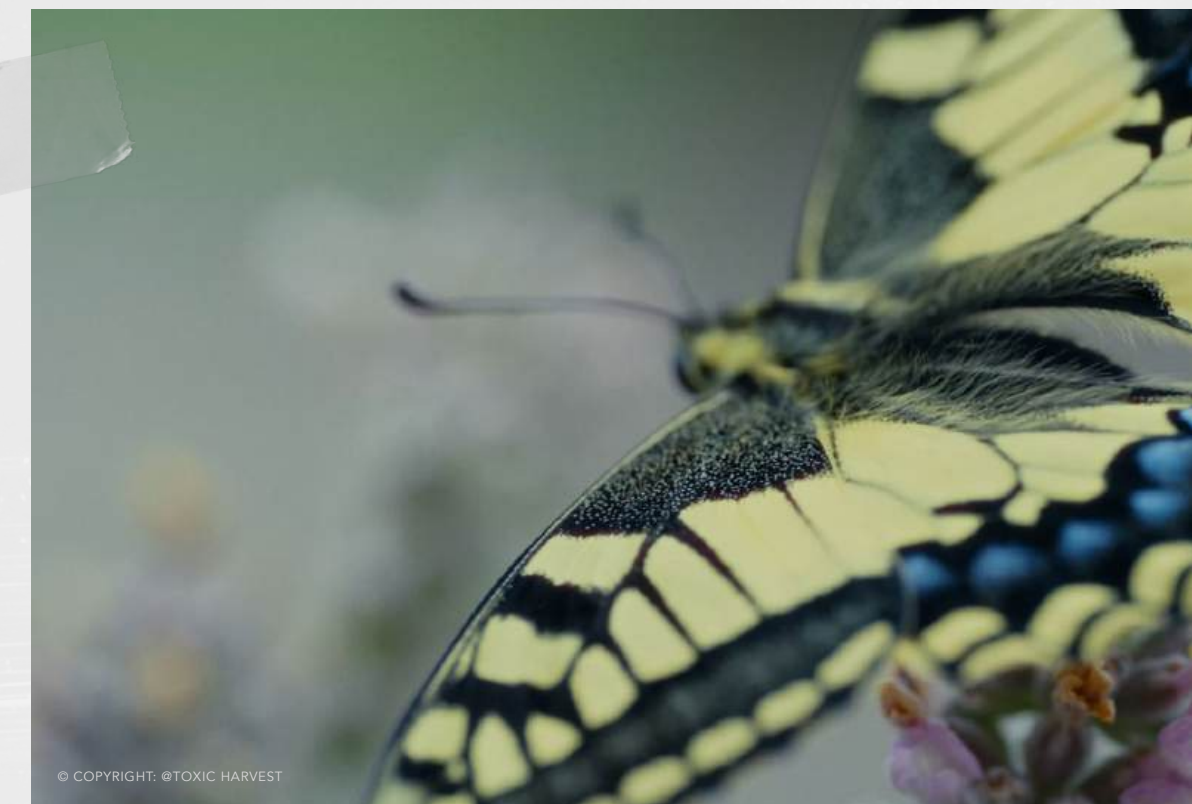
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Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) is a South African rural development NGO that works directly to support and facilitate movement building, voice and agency of the rural poor. The focus is on food sovereignty, the land and agrarian questions in South Africa.

WOMEN ON FARMS PROJECT (WFP)

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Women on Farms Project (WFP) is a feminist NGO in South Africa, which has the goal of empowering women farm workers to improve their living and working conditions and to achieve gender equity in the workplace, the home and the farming community through rights-based and gender education, lobbying, advocacy and building of farm worker structures. WFP also collaborates with global partners especially around advocacy campaigns of international interest, such as agrochemicals, climate change and a just transition.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southern Africa extends its heartfelt gratitude to the farm workers, families living on farms, affected communities near farms, and activists in Cape Town and the broader Cape Winelands of the Western Cape, South Africa. This film honors your decades-long struggle against agro-toxins and the harsh working and living conditions on farms, paying tribute to your resilience, sacrifices, and unwavering spirit. A special thank you goes to the farm worker communities of Ceres, De Doorns, Helshoogte, Paarl, Rawsonville, and Spookiesdorp.

We also extend our sincere thanks to the experts and respondents featured in this film for generously offering their time, invaluable knowledge and expertise.

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southern Africa wishes to acknowledge the contributions of the civil society organisations that contributed to the production of this film. We are grateful for their partnership and solidarity, without which this film would not be possible:

- African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB)
- Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE)
- Women on Farms Project (WFP)



THANK YOU



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit www.toxic-harvest.com
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