



Photos: Sharivan Moodley

The micro-farming movement in Cape Town is helping unemployed locals feed their families, create self-help job opportunities and improve the environment.

# Reaping what they sow

Small-scale farming is helping poor communities to help themselves, with thousands of locals growing their own fresh organic food and many of them earning a living from their produce.

BY SHARIVAN MOODLEY

**I** never made money before, but my life has changed. I now have enough to support my whole family and other poor people from the community,' says Noviksi Ngamlana, who is the sole breadwinner for her 11 family members.

Ngamlana is part of a growing movement of micro-farmers in the townships around Cape Town who are growing vegetables not only to feed their families but also to earn an income from surplus produce. They are being supported by the Abalimi Bezekhaya civil society organisation, which is demonstrating how micro-farming in urban areas can be an effective means of reducing poverty,

improving the environment and ultimately developing communities. It provides interested people with seeds, seedlings, manure and the necessary training and support to grow their own food and become successful.

Together, these farmers now grow a range of organic vegetables including cauliflower, beetroot, broad beans, carrots, peas, cabbage, spinach and other vegetables – depending on the season.

## Tapping wider markets

The Harvest of Hope initiative helps micro-farmers tap into markets they otherwise wouldn't have access to. The produce is sold to businesses and the parents of schoolchildren at affluent schools in the city. 'We sell mostly in private schools in the southern suburbs and the response is pretty good,' says Bridget Impey, Manager of Harvest of Hope.

The vegetables are organic and have a lower carbon footprint since all produce is grown locally, so there is growing interest in it. Even the bags that salads are packaged in are biodegradable. A variety of seasonal vegetables are sold in a big box for R95 and a small box for R65, and come with recipes for healthy meals.

Christina Kaba, Abalimi's operations director, says the income received is split equally between the farmers and the organisation, which they reinvest into the development of more farmers. 'We measure what vegetables

are taken from each garden and we weigh them, and at the end of every month money is deposited into the bank account of that community garden for the farmers.'

All vegetables are pre-purchased and the vegetables are harvested every Tuesday morning. They are collected from the various community gardens and taken to Harvest of Hope, where they are washed and packed into boxes by part-time employees from the Safe Haven for abused women.

'Almost everything is picked on the day of packing so they get to the customer the same day and they're amazingly fresh,' Impey says. 'When parents pick their children up, they also pick up the vegetable boxes they ordered. But this means we've got to pack, load and go to the schools before 14:00.' They distribute an average of 120 boxes a week, but they're expecting this number to grow substantially in the next few years.



RIGHT: It may require a lot of work, but Noviksi Ngamlana supports her 11 family members in Philippi with the income she receives from farming.

Some 3 000 mostly women farmers are already reaping the benefits, 2 500 of them growing food in home gardens to provide for their families and 500 others who are moving beyond the subsistence level to make a living from the fresh vegetables they grow in community allotment gardens.

Produce is often sold to people walking by, but about 50% is harvested and sold to people in affluent parts of the city through the organisation's marketing wing, Harvest of Hope.

'We are creating sustainable development by linking the rich to the poor,' says Abalimi co-founder and resource manager, Rob Small. As a result of its success, he explains, some farmers are earning as much as R1 500 a month after costs. But this is just the beginning. With ongoing training and support, he says, they can realistically be earning as much as R3 000.

The aim is to help all the farmers develop from subsistence to creating a livelihood, while continuing to support newcomers to the activity. And, after 25 years of working in the field, Small says they now have a winning recipe. 'We're proving that micro-farming can



Part-time employment is also created for a number of women who help at Harvest of Hope every Tuesday.

be effective and that you don't need large farms to make it work,' he says. 'We've done it with small pieces of land, just 500m<sup>2</sup>.' The 100 community gardens where the commercial produce is grown is located mostly on school land, typically 'around fenced edges where they wouldn't build anyway. We also use municipal land and the community rent these at very low cost.'

The other requirement is a little bit of funding. Currently, it costs Abalimi less than R100 to support a farmer for a month, including a whole package of services that includes ongoing training and support, cheap and sometimes free resources, manure, seeds, seedlings, and marketing support. The R3 million required annually to support 3 000 farmers is currently donated by hundreds of individuals and organisations.

It isn't just the farmers who are benefiting, but entire communities too. 'Each of the farmers have at least five dependents so this is really helping to feed up to 15 000 people each month,' says Small.

Produce that isn't consumed by the farmers or sold through Harvest of Hope is distributed to poor community members, child-headed households and sick, bed-ridden residents. Christina Kaba, Abalimi's operations director, says that the health of the communities is a major focus.

'The farmers live in the community so they know where people are sick and every week they take them fresh organic vegetables, and it is encouraging better nutrition,' she says. Food is also given to schoolchildren where the gardens are located as well as to local HIV/Aids and TB clinics.

Small adds that it was critical for the initiative not to be purely commercial. 'Subsistence can be dignified, abundant and highly beneficial to the community but the moment it becomes purely commercial, the benefits to the community shrink. We've seen this. A strong commercial element coupled with a strong community element radiates health into the community.'

There are also a number of positive spin-offs for the environment. Otherwise empty pieces of land are now being used productively, promoting ecological diversity and improving the appearance of open spaces in these areas.

'We've proved that you can create

## Why micro-farming is important

- It improves food security by encouraging people to grow their own food.
- It improves the environment by turning open spaces into productive pieces of land and promotes ecological diversity by growing vegetation.
- It creates healthier communities by promoting better nutrition through organic vegetables and offers a lower carbon footprint as vegetables are grown and distributed locally.
- It encourages people to help themselves through self-help job creation, instead of depending on charity.



After collecting vegetables from community gardens, they are washed, packed and then distributed to customers elsewhere in the city.

a job on 500m<sup>2</sup>, you can feed a family on 100m<sup>2</sup> and less, and you can do this all for less than R100 per month,' says Small. It is improving food security, the environment and the health of communities, while addressing poverty. 'It's a no-brainer. There hasn't been a model until now and it's just a matter of spreading the word and getting people to copy it. And it can happen anywhere,' he says.

There have also been some valuable lessons learnt. One is that the new farmers need to be developed from a subsistence level to livelihood gradually. 'The mistake of many government and big business efforts is that they've taken people who are good survival entrepreneurs and leapfrogged

them into a commercial environment. It takes one or two years for a farmer to develop into subsistence level, with a four-day training course and an ongoing minimal support service. And it takes five to seven years to grow from subsistence to livelihood farming, which is semi-commercial – 50% commercial and 50% subsistence.' A combination of types of support is needed – from poverty alleviation to marketing support and everything in between.

But, it's not that difficult and experience has shown that organic micro-farming can be extremely effective in cities and on plots as small as 500m<sup>2</sup>.

'With thousands of these it would

be possible to create hundreds of thousands of self-help jobs in our cities and towns,' says Small.

It's also extremely cost-effective. This project has shown that participants can be supported from as little as R100 per farmer per month, including resources, tools, training, marketing and support. Just R3 million enables 3 000 farmers each year to reach a subsistence level, while enabling up to 100 of them to start earning an income.

If you want to support, contact or find out more about Abalimi, call the Farm and Garden Trust on 021 801 9677 or visit [www.farmgardentrust.org](http://www.farmgardentrust.org)

## What government can do to help

Municipalities and provincial governments should step in to help these kinds of projects, given the benefits. Assistance could include:

- Providing grants to and building relationships with NGOs working in this field.
- Including food garden projects in LED, community development, and sustainable livelihood programmes.
- Encouraging ward councillors to get involved.
- Including food security and micro-farming in the IDP.
- Making spare pieces of municipal land and water available to communal gardens, especially in the vicinity of clinics, schools and community facilities, where there is an abundance of passers-by.
- Including micro-farmers in provincial agricultural support programmes. The benefits are numerous and it is extremely cost-effective. 'It is in the best interests of government to provide permanent ongoing subsidised support to farmers and particularly small farmers,' says Abalimi's Rob Small.
- Encouraging more schools to get involved, through Departments of Education facilitating NGOs working schools, through principals, learners and school governing bodies.



Vegetables are harvested on the same day they are distributed to customers, ensuring they are as fresh as possible.