



“Agriculture is plain hard work - 7 days a week, 365 days a year to start with.”

## COMMUNITY AGRICULTURE, NEW WAYS

The rise (and rise) of sustainable Mother-led agri-enterprise

By Carol Posthumus

### Kortliks

Abalimi Bezekhaya “Farmers of the Home” in Kaapstad is ‘n inspirerende nie-winsgewende organisasie wat fokus op die volhoubare voedsel produksie en die omgewingsvriendelike vergroening van die ruwe stedelike landskap van die Kaapse Vlakte wat ‘n bevolking het van 1 miljoen. Ongeveer 1200 mense vestig hulself elke maand in hierdie area op soek na ‘n beter toekoms, maar vind dit moeilik om ‘n werk te kry in die stad. Hierdie mense dink dat die stad méér

werksgeleentede bied as hul landelike omgewing, maar dit is nie die geval nie, want die werkloosheidsyfer in die stad is ‘n verstommende 30 - 50%. ‘n Toenemende aantal ontluikende entrepreneurs vind ‘n lewensboei in die Abalimi inisiatief wat gesonde voedsel voorsien en organiese produkte produseer. Daar is ongeveer 3000 kommunale boere in die Kaapse vlakte wat deel uitmaak van dié Abalimi inisiatief.

Abalimi is thought to be the biggest community urban agriculture formation in South Africa. The boosting of micro-agriculture, for the critical reasons of the essential nourishment of families as well as a part of small business development, appears to be emerging as a compelling movement in South Africa.

Abalimi has received 15 national and international awards since 1991. These include Nedbank Green Trust WWF awards, two Presidents Social Forestry Awards and

Woman of the Year accolades.

The organisation is supported by donors, with private sector groups in agriculture – such as Neutrog Bounce Back, Rapid Raiser) providing inputs. The sandy soils in the Cape Flats are not ideal for growth of crops, and fertiliser and manure is needed. Crops include carrots, lettuce, spinach, potatoes, and tomatoes.

On the irrigation sides, Abalimi co-director Rob Small says that Abalimi has experimented some with drip irrigation. They

do use drum-drip systems in the interests of water efficiency and optimisation of growth. But they reckon they will need to up-skill people on the maintenance and operation of drip as a technology into the future if they implement it on a wider scale. Micro jets are in use by the farmers. The conservation of water is vital to the project. In the future the organisation has said it will look at cold storage facilities, expanded packing sheds and “tunnels”.

### We train for careful watering and the problems of over watering.

“We train for careful watering, and train on the problems of overwatering. Our systems need to be low-tech to start with, with low overheads and easy management and maintenance,” says Small.

The organisation sees thousands of farmers growing organically produced table vegetables; since the launch of a special marketing scheme (Harvest of Hope) under Abalimi in Feb 08, 91 subsistence and semi-commercial farmers have sold over R600 000 worth of fresh produce and have pocketed 50%. This amounts to, on average, R254 per farmer/month, besides the value (at least another R254/farmer/month) of what is eaten direct from

their gardens. Many of the families, before becoming Abalimi growers, had very little nourishment for the table – their crops provide a basic food supply.

### PRESERVING INDIGENOUS FLORA

The project, which was founded in 1982, is proud that Abalimi-supported urban organic community gardens have proved that sustainable livelihoods can be created by micro farming, while preserving and promoting indigenous flora.

Small says: “Abalimi is women-driven, actually a Mother-led enterprise. While we are not biased, we find women drive the enterprise – when money starts rolling in, men and the younger people tend to get more involved! Women, mothers and grandmothers more often than not represent whole families, thus the direct impact of our work goes well beyond individuals. It’s not an easy road, agriculture is plain hard work – and often if easier options present themselves many will move on, but many will also retain the knowledge of organic vegetable cultivation.”

### HARVEST OF HOPE

Interestingly, the semi-commercial farmers, who started off as survival farmers, but have taken a step into the marketplace by >>>



*A farmer and survival home garden in the shacks.*

selling their surplus, have an innovative way of distributing. This is being done by an organisation (under Abalimi) called Harvest of Hope (set up with the help of the SA Institute of Entrepreneurship and the Business Place Philippi, and funded to begin with by the Pick 'n Pay Foundation). Farmers supply boxes of organic vegetables via Harvest of Hope (who pack and consign the goods) to parents collecting their children from school in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town and also to a group at the Law departments of the University of Cape Town. The parents and university people pay (R95 a family box and R65 a small box, with half the money to the farmers) in advance, and simply collect their organic veggies – for which there is a growing demand – every week. (only 50% of the produce grown by Abalimi is sold via Harvest of Hope, with the other 50% going to the families of farmers, sold in the townships or given to people in need in the townships).

### TRAINING INTERVENTIONS

In terms of growing skills, Abalimi trains up to 1 000 people per year through a four day Basic Organic Vegetable Growing course and other interventions. In four days, anyone can obtain the basic skills, if applied, says Small, with some guidance over two seasons, to permanently grow productive survival or subsistence gardens. Small says that it is a proven fact that “a reasonable living, after costs, is possible off 500<sup>2</sup> m or less, selling organic vegetables at street prices.”

### SOME OF THE PROJECT TYPES THAT ABALAMI GROWS INCLUDE:

- Community gardens on council land and on school grounds. Sizes range from 1000m<sup>2</sup> to 5000m<sup>2</sup>. When a community garden has no infrastructure, it will require an investment of R100 000 over a three period to set up.
- Household survival and subsistence gardens. Abalimi provides start-up, advice and subsidised set-up to survival-

ists. An investment of R1 750/household is required to establish a viable organic household vegetable garden.

- Community Greening projects.

In a paper about “Community agriculture for livelihoods among the poor. A key intervention to restore natural diversity and create sustainable food and life security,” Small, who trained as a Bio Dynamic farmer and market gardener at Emerson College in Sussex UK with a depth of experience in community agriculture, says in his conclusion: “A food secure nation is possible through relatively self-sustaining community based initiative. Quality organic vegetables, grown in hundreds of thousands of ecological oases, can and should be abundantly and cheaply available. Rather than grow basic vegetables and foodstuffs for the poor, agribusiness can then refocus and develop the endless possibilities available for elite and export markets. Mind you, they should beware competition from community farmers who by that time will have reached commercial level. Unless of course permanent jobs for all and/or permanent free and subsidised food for the poor can be provided via the formal economy and high-tech agriculture.”

For more information:  
[www.abalimi.org.za](http://www.abalimi.org.za);  
[www.harvestofhope.co.za](http://www.harvestofhope.co.za)



*Drum drip: drip is seen as the future, used but more training needed* 