

Organic gardens bring hope to poor urban communities

Abalimi Bezekhaya (Planters of the Home) is the leading urban agriculture organisation in the socio-economically neglected townships of Khayelitsha, Nyanga and surrounding areas on the Cape Flats near Cape Town, South Africa. It assists individuals, groups and community based organisations to develop their own organic vegetable gardens in order to supplement their diet, improve household food and nutritional security and provide sustainable additional income. A report from Rob Small.

Nearly one million people live in the townships to the North-East of Cape Town, mostly in shacks and matchbox houses. Approximately 40 per cent of them are unemployed. The majority speak Xhosa and are recent arrivals from the Eastern Cape - the former apartheid homelands of Transkei and Ciskei.

Abalimi's aim is to assist these

people to grow food sustainably, using organic methods, at home and in community gardens and, secondly, to plant water wise indigenous trees and flora in schools and streets, in order to transform the dune-sands of the Cape Flats into a sustainable water-wise urban environment.

Abalimi provides support services like low-cost bulk compost, seed,

seedlings, information, training and on-site project extension. Every year, nearly 3000 subsistence gardeners and 200 community agriculture and greening projects are supplied with inputs from Abalimi's two non-profit People's Garden Centres.

The economic potential is big, as there is a high and ever growing demand for organic vegetables in Cape Town. Organic markets and retailers large and small are always undersupplied. The organic movement is alive and well, led mainly by civil society. There is now an increasingly organised community-based "organic-friendly" farming and gardening movement, led by associations such as the Vukuzenzela Urban Farmers Association (VUFA), which is supported by Abalimi. VUFA is currently networking with other



Siyazama Community Allotment Garden Association, SCAGA - in 1996 (above) and in 2005 (right).

Credit: Abalimi



Umzomhle Educare Centre Garden, Khayelitsha

Fifty-five children from the Umzomhle crèche and the families of its staff are glad about the fresh vegetables provided by their garden every day. Starting from 2003 Abalimi's Fieldworker Liziwe Stofile helped the project members to remove their garden from a small backyard to the bigger area in front of the crèche and trained them to manage it professionally. Since then Abalimi has also supported Umzomhle with follow-up consulting, seeds, seedlings and other necessary resources.

Most recently Abalimi provided the educare with a drip irrigation system, which helps to save water by keeping up a direct supply to the plants.

Nosiphiwo Menqe (pictured in the middle), one of the six crèche employees caring for the garden, adds that donating and selling vegetables to the community members, especially to the unemployed and the sick ones, has become a very important task for the gardeners as well. This situation and an increasing number of children attending the educare has led to a fast growing demand for vegetables. In order to fulfill these needs the project members plan to enlarge and redesign the farming area.

The evident benefits that the garden provides to the community helped the project to receive the necessary permission easily. The staff members now hope that the application for the required funds from the Department of Agriculture will also succeed and they will be able to expand and develop their beloved garden soon.



The staff of the Umzomhle crèche and the Fieldworker Liziwe Stofile (second left) are glad about the new irrigation system provided by Abalimi

emerging small farmer organisations. Abalimi intends to assist VUFA to enhance its links nationally and regionally as well. It is hoped that, over time, the emerging national and

regional organic small and micro-farmers associations will federate so that they can be more effective in alleviating poverty.

Training

Abalimi runs several training courses to cater for people's varying level of expertise. All courses involve active participation and are very practical:



Maggie Bakeni, Happines Mgweba, Evelina Mzilikazi and Abalimi's Fieldworker Vatiswa Dunjana are glad to harvest big beautiful broccoli from the Masibambane Community Garden.

Credit: Abalimi

The basic three day course on organic gardening covers the deep trench system. This involves digging a trench, filling with compost, covering with soil and planting crops immediately above. The course provides participants (many of whom are semiliterate or illiterate) with the basic knowledge and skills to begin their own vegetable gardens. The courses are followed up with additional on-site training and support.

A one day school caretakers' training module trains participants in mulching, waterwise gardening and gardening maintenance. The workshops also provide a good opportunity for caretakers to gather together to share problems, ideas and information.

The new AgriPlanner course -

conducted since 2005 in one-day or three-day modules, and lasting a few weeks - utilises a simulation board game, in conjunction with on-site practical activities, to assist illiterate and semi-illiterate community gardeners to grasp and master the dynamics of agricultural business, which is very different from other forms of business.

As most trainees cannot afford to pay the full cost, bursaries are available according to need. Following the course, trainees receive a certificate, which helps them to find employment, for example as school caretakers, domestic gardeners, assistant landscape gardeners and even (for those who have attained sufficient competence) as trainers, either with Abalimi or with other service agencies.

SCAGA

A typical association that is a member of VUFA is the Siyazama Community Allotment Garden Association (SCAGA) which was set up in 1997.

This is the leading micro-urban agriculture model in Cape Town and possibly in South Africa. The very poor learn how to grow organic crops for sale and for eating at home, while conserving indigenous flora in the windbreaks and promoting alternative technologies. This project is Abalimi's main 'laboratory' for determining methodology and appropriate technology required to establish sustainable organic micro-urban agriculture projects on marginal land.

SCAGA is sited on a 5,000 m² in Macassar, Khayelithsa, in a corridor previously under power lines that were

low-intensity feeder lines and did not appear to compromise plant growth in any way. The power lines have recently been decommissioned.

SCAGA could provide between three to four permanent full-time formal jobs, but has decided instead to become a *Livelihood Level* garden, with up to 30 subsistence "jobs", on a mixture of individual and communal plots. These form the centre around which a number of other entrepreneurial and service initiatives have been, or are being developed. In SCAGA's case, a small seedling nursery, a craft group, tea and catering services have already been developed, while plans are in train for a soup kitchen and child care facilities.

Each member receives a minimum cash and food income, after costs, of between R50-R100 (\$7 - \$14) per member per month, a lifeline to households with no discernable income. The project now hosts its fifth group of about 30 people, mostly women, and is in its tenth year. It successfully markets high quality organic produce locally. Group savings at year end, after costs and own consumption, have varied between R 2,000 - R 20 000. Adjacent land within the same power line corridor - some three hectares of sandy wasteland - has now been fenced and is being developed to accommodate another 200-300 gardeners.

Impacts of the SCAGA project

This urban agriculture project has had far-reaching impacts both within the community and on policy development in Cape Town. It has sparked hundreds of applications from new groups and has given planners solid proof to argue for community managed open spaces, and for self-help job creation. SCAGA is repeatedly visited by VIPs, including local government Ministers and senior officials. The Western Cape Department of Agriculture (contrary to national level) has recently begun to give some solid support to community organic agriculture projects, mainly in the form of infrastructure support.

The impact on the local

Nosisa Merile

Nosisa Merile has been with Abalimi since 1999, when she joined the organisation as a volunteer after finishing her four-year horticulture studies in South African Technical College. Nosisa became a fieldworker in 2000 and has contributed to the activities of the organisation not only with her profound theoretical knowledge but also practical know-how, which she gained during her one-year internship in Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden.

Nosisa co-launched Abalimi's horticultural training course and has become the principle fieldworker of its greening programme. She also successfully implemented a cost-saving idea to grow many of Abalimi's own plants from seeds, seedlings and plant divisions involving trainees from the horticultural course. The plant stock grown by the trainees then supplements the general Abalimi nursery stock, creating a more sustainable re-stocking cycle for the greening programme.

Nosisa has always enjoyed being in nature and working with plants. She is very satisfied that in Abalimi she is given the opportunity to influence many people's lives by doing the job she loves. "People in townships used to think that greening is only for rich people, but I try to change their minds, saying that green environment is for everyone. Eventually I see the changes in people's minds, they tend to care more about their environment outside their homes".

The years of work with the local township people, in which Nosisa observed many social problems, led to a new idea that she would like to implement in the future. Nosisa noticed that more and more women from different African origins, Zimbabwean, Nigerian, Angolan and others, are coming to live in Cape Town, but are mostly isolated from society due to the inability to speak the local language and general distrust and suspiciousness between them and the local women.

Nosisa is aiming to set up greening projects, which encourage South African women to work with the newcomers in order to ease their integration. She is sure that the South Africans would also greatly benefit from the projects by exchanging experiences on different topics as well as fighting their groundless stereotypes and fears.



Nosisa Merile

Credit: Abalimi

environment has been quite substantial. Soil fertility inputs have decreased - in the early years 30-40 tonnes of compost was applied each year, but about half that quantity is now used. Pests, once a headache, are hardly mentioned now. Health is much improved, the use of fresh organic food is helping to build everyone's immune system and

working in the gardens is having a therapeutic effect. New members often come with signs of malnourishment. They have little energy and less money. After one season, frequent remarks on all-round health improvement are often heard.

There have also been positive impacts on the position and role of women as leaders. For example,

Intervening at the appropriate level

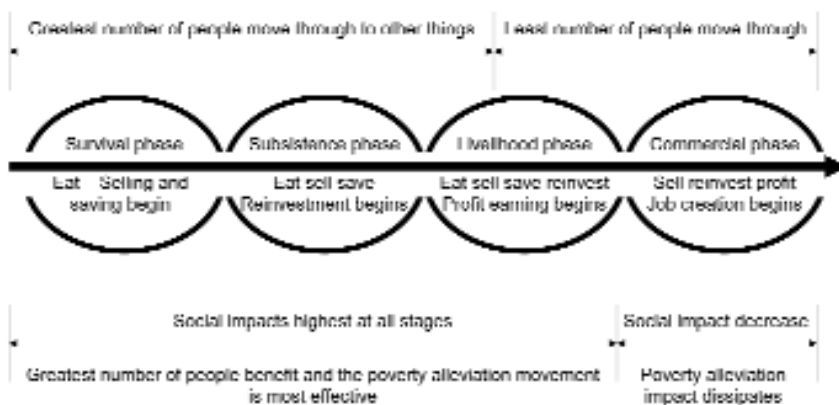
The experience of Abalimi has shown that moderate investment in community-based agriculture does make an impact. Recently, a step-by-step development continuum for community based agriculture has been developed. The development continuum takes the limiting factors into account and enables a constructive and empowering 'flow-through' of participants who have other aspirations and need to farm or garden only as a stepping stone.

The notion of a development continuum is not new. However, a clear step-by-step pathway for the creation of sustainable community garden and farming projects definitely is. Distinct phases or levels have been identified from field experience, with sustainability measurements at each level.

The continuum runs through four phases or levels, from survival, to subsistence, to livelihood and finally to commercial level. Energy is right now being wasted by donor agencies attempting to move Survival-level farmers up to commercial level too quickly, while beneficiaries themselves are confused about which level they would like to achieve, or even if they want to be farmers at all!

Growing out of the continuum, Abalimi is developing a special training to provide community farmers and gardeners with sustainable assistance, while allowing 'flow-through' of temporary farmers. The training will enable both illiterate and literate people at survival level to progress to the level that suits them, or to eventually achieve commercial level. The training model also takes account of a new type of community garden that is emerging at survival, subsistence and livelihood levels - this is the 'treatment support garden' which supplies fresh organic vegetables to the chronically ill.

The sustainable development continuum for organic micro farming projects



through "Ilima" - traditional mutual-help work events. Such events become practical women's empowerment and mobilisation tools to lead development and obtain community support and muscle power for their projects.

The "Ilima" idea all began when SCAGA women (during the time when the first trench beds were being dug) decided to get unemployed men to do

the heavy work, and came up with this idea of re-introducing a traditional rural practice. After work is done, traditional beer and food is served and much fun is had. These events cost very little, and everyone goes home feeling satisfied. The women earn wide respect and support in the community.

SCAGA is now firmly women-led

and women-led projects are now the norm - male members, who do not run homes as well, had more time and thus women used to let them lead. But friction soon arises when men decree that everything has to be sold ! This was a common occurrence which is now being minimised because female leadership is now the norm. Most recently, it has been decided that men, while very much needed for heavy work, should on the whole run their own gardens separately!!

New developments

A unique *Development Continuum* with measurements for sustainability has now been evolved from actual field experience. This tool is not based on theory, it has and is evolving from practical experience. The tool is able to assist decision and policy makers to target resources more effectively and appropriately and is certainly very useful to Abalimi! This continuum and measurement system tracks the development of community agriculture projects through four levels -survival, then subsistence, onto livelihoods and finally into commercial.

The continuum takes into account dynamics such as group conflicts, and the turn-over of members. These become positive events, rather than constraints. It is now known that new groups need about seven years to establish a relatively stable organisation, while sustainable-level skills and knowledge takes approximately three years to acquire within each stage. The only quick thing is physical infrastructure (funds permitting of course!) which can be delivered within a year- except for fertile soil of course!!

In anticipation of future water shortages, drum-drip irrigation is being demonstrated at the garden centres and leading projects. The drum, or tank, is filled and this provides just the right amount of water pressure into the drip-lines. The drum/tank also gives exact control over amount of water delivered. This is critical in summer (our dry season), when there is a tendency to overwater using other systems- which leads to



Gardeners from Delft in the Cape Flats, and George in the Eastern Cape, gather in our Khayelitsha garden centre, deeply engaged in the agriplanner game.

higher running costs. Overwatering also leads to leaching nutrients out of the topsoil, which leads again to higher fertilisation costs because more compost is then needed to feed the crops. This system is ideal for our conditions as it applies water directly to the plants so there is little wastage, reduces water loss through wind and evaporation, is simple to operate and repair and is relatively inexpensive. Abalimi aims to install drum drip systems at every community garden project in future.

Increasing livelihoods

The *livelihood garden* is a subsistence level garden with a commercial component that serves as the anchor for a number of other social and

economic initiatives, identified by gardeners. These can include crafts and refreshments for visitors and tourists, child care and soup kitchens (part-funded by government grants) for the sick and needy, nurseries for seedlings for own use and for sale to others. In this way, the gardens become multi-functional entrepreneurial and community support initiatives. The livelihood garden can also incorporate part-time and non-gardeners who wish to benefit from the gardening activity while also doing something they like better.

Since 2000, Abalimi has developed an Organisation Building (OB) arm, using tried and tested interventions to build farmer & gardener skills and organisations. Horizontal learning



Ten SCAGA members posing in their lush green garden.

Credit: Abalimi

(farmer to farmer) exchange, action learning and savings mobilisation are key activities here.

Cheap micro-credit to groups with consistent savings records will be available (via partners) in future for projects which are entering the livelihood and commercial levels.

Periodic farmers markets, tunnels, cold-storage rooms and value-adding packing sheds will follow in the next years, supplying a wide range of produce for cooperative marketing and creating unlimited new livelihood and job opportunities for the poor.

Organic certification is now being prepared, whereby Abalimi and VUFA will obtain "bulk certification". Thus association members can obtain certification more cheaply and increase external marketability of their products. Abalimi is determined to ensure that certification will not act as a gatekeeper to keep emerging players out.

Abalimi - in partnership with the South African Institute for Entrepreneurship - is developing a *Master Gardeners* training which will become accredited and will be able to enable illiterate gardeners and farmers to move from survival into subsistence level, thence to livelihood and on into commercial level. This will also form the basis of a capacity building programme, enabling genuine organic farmers to return to abandoned Eastern Cape lands.

This social impulse, combined with relative economic success, provides the first examples in South Africa of sustainable urban community organic gardens as a new lifestyle choice. There is no limit to what can be achieved once people have found a way to work again in trust and goodwill on the land.

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