

An NGO is helping microfarmers to shift from survival to sustainability, reports **Kristin Palitza**

Gardening for life

With the back of her hand, she wipes beads of sweat from her forehead and adjusts the headscarf that protects her from the sun. It is mid-morning, but Maggie Mbovu has already put in a good few hours of hard work, tilling the soil of her community garden.

Together with four other women, she has planted cabbages, carrots, onions and potatoes, which will soon be harvested and sold through an organic vegetable marketing scheme initiated and managed by Abalimi Bezekhaya ("farmers of home"), an agricultural NGO.

"Before, we planted to have a little bit to eat for our families, but now [that I am part of the community gardening scheme] my life has changed. I am doing very nicely. It is hard work, but I enjoy it. It keeps me strong," says Mbovu, while inspecting a head of cauliflower for pests in her garden in the Fezeka section of Gugulethu, Cape Town.

As part of its livelihood-creation programme aimed at reducing poverty and empowering communities, Abalimi Bezekhaya provides microfarmers with seeds, seedlings and manure as well as agricultural training and business skills. It also helps farmers market and sell their produce in urban centres.

It is the NGO's goal to take small-scale farmers from survival level, at which they produce only enough to feed themselves, to livelihood level, at which they generate a proper income from farming that sustains their families.

"When we say livelihood, we mean farming that is 50% commercially driven. People keep food for their families and communities, but also [farm] to earn money. That's where Abalimi takes people. That's where we put our flag," explains Rob Small,

the Abalimi Bezekhaya resource mobilisation manager.

Each community garden plot is 500m² and farmers earn between R1 500 to R3 000 a month after costs, according to Abalimi.

"Everyone told us it's impossible to create a farming job on 500m². Everyone said you need huge farms. Absolute nonsense. I'm hoping that others will notice. We need people to pick up the idea and go with it," says Small.

He believes the farmers' current income is still small compared to their potential.

"They could be producing triple and quadruple of what they are producing today on the same size plot, but they need more training and more labour force," he says.

For small-scale farmers in rural and township areas, access to markets through which they can sell their produce is a major struggle because they lack transport to bring their vegetables into the urban centres.

That's why, in February 2008, Abalimi launched Harvest of Hope, a marketing programme through which microfarmers sell boxes of organic vegetables to families in urban areas.

"We ask farmers to grow specific vegetables, such as carrots or beetroot, based on demand.

"That way, each bed [in their community garden] is booked in advance and all food produced has a customer by the time it is harvested. This assures farmers of an ongoing income," says Small.

Every Tuesday, the produce is collected from about 20 community gardens in townships all over Cape Town.

The farmers harvest their vegetables in the early morning. An Abalimi vehicle collects the produce and brings it to a central point in



The Fezeka community garden in Gugulethu, Cape Town, is tended by six community members. Abalimi Bezekhaya, an NGO, helps them sell their produce and thus earn a living from it. Photo: David Harrison

Philippi, where it is washed, packed into boxes and delivered to customers. A big box of organically grown seasonal vegetables costs R95 and a small one sells for R65.

To grow its customer base, Abalimi staff approached schools in and around Cape Town. Families from about 10 schools, as well as a few groups at the University of Cape Town, have signed up to the scheme.

Abalimi sells about 150 boxes each week. Half the profit goes directly into the farmers' pockets, and the other half goes to Abalimi to help run the organisation.

"It's a social business, along the lines of fair trade. Nobody gets rich here and there is a possibility we might turn it into a cooperative later on," explains Small.

Gladys Puza, a mother of five, who has 22 grandchildren and 24 great-grandchildren, is one of the community farmers who benefits from Harvest of Hope. She supports most of her family from her income and the food she plants.

"Abalimi's support is very good for us. Now we can get our vegetables to the city. We have a market now," she says. "Before we didn't have a place to sell our vegetables. Sometimes they got rotten because nobody [bought them]."

Abalimi has plans to expand the project. By the end of this year, the

organisation wants to sell between 250 and 300 boxes of vegetables each week and 400 to 500 boxes by the end of next year.

"Our goal is to sell 600 boxes per week by 2012. That would make us operational five days a week and make about R200 000 profit, which we will use to develop even more farmers," Small says.

In total, Abalimi supports 3000 farmers every year: 2500 are home gardeners at subsistence level, and 500 operate community gardens in townships around Cape Town.

"It's a real movement of organic microfarming among the poor," says Small.

Paul Cohen, executive director of the Cape Town-based Rural Education Development Corporation, believes Abalimi has developed an important strategy to create food security in South Africa.

"It's very difficult for microfarmers to get access to a main market, partly because government isn't promoting or incentivising small-scale agriculture," he explains.

The department of agriculture mainly subsidises large-scale com-

mercial farming and monocultures.

"Government focuses on macroeconomic policies, which favour large, short-term profits rather than long-term sustainability," says Cohen.

As a result, small-scale farmers, who don't have the capacity to produce large quantities of food for export and sale on global markets, are hardly considered in agricultural policy-making.

Experts such as Cohen believe market-driven agricultural policies on their own cannot create sustainable agriculture in developing countries such as South Africa.

He suggests government should integrate commercial farming with social and ecological aspects, such as creating food security and reducing the carbon emissions produced by commercial farming.

"We need to find a way to integrate issues of economy, land, poverty and health. We need to integrate poverty-alleviation strategies with our current growth-driven economic policies," says Cohen.

Abalimi Bezekhaya's microfarming scheme might offer part of a solution to the problem.

"With less than R100 subsidy per farmer per month we train farmers to sustain a livelihood. Abalimi provides a model of what can be possible in all urban settings throughout the country," says Small.

"The model is there. It works and can be easily copied."

'We need to find a way to integrate issues of economy, land, poverty and health'

If you could change one thing forever, what would it be?

"I would want African government structures to be strong and for democracies to function effectively in Africa. Lawlessness and corruption should be shunned."

Kate Rooseboom, individual supporter

SMS "CHANGE" and your answer to 36545 or answer online

Kate donates through change4ever every month. "I believe money should be channelled into initiatives that are led by people with a vision," she says. Text your answer to the change4ever question or answer online. With each SMS you donate R5 to change4ever. This not only gives you the opportunity to have your say about what you would like to change forever, but at the same time take action to create the change you want to see. Your contribution will support the many groups working for lasting solutions to poverty in southern Africa.

www.change4ever.org

Change4ever