

The Re-Evolution of FAMILY FARMING

Farming and food-growing activist Robert Small has been pushing for years to have as many people possible growing their own urban and rural micro food farms. He is also a proponent behind efforts to save the Philippi Horticultural Area on the Cape Flats. This is his story about why family farming is good for us – good for local consumption and the roots of a renewed, healthy and humane economy.

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It's not scientific. It cannot feed the world. The pests will destroy it.'

That's what I heard from the experts, when I joined the work to revive family farming in South Africa, straight from my training in Bio-Dynamic farming in the UK. That was in Soweto in the early 1980s. I have always felt uncomfortable with the prevailing belief that 'survival of the fittest is the driving force behind the economy and is harnessed for the good only by competition, which generates trickledown to feed the world'.

This is no longer true, if it ever was.

Firstly, the current world economy is shedding more jobs than it creates, despite often healthy GDP. This is not changing.

Second, a fundamental insight, borne out by direct daily experience in the field over 33 years among tens of thousands of grassroots people: evolutionary and original cultural and economic impulses are actually driven by desire to serve the Good for All. The free decision, exercised daily, often under severe duress, to care for others, is everywhere directly observable, between the cracks. Survival of the fittest, like greed, is just a necessary evolutionary obstacle on the way to becoming fully Human.

Thus, given ethical leadership, and modest all-round assistance – at a cost of between R10-R100 per micro-farmer per month – it is possible to produce hundreds, thousands, millions, of food-secure households, and uncountable micro-farming enterprises which produce R3000 per month and much more, after costs. All this on pieces of wasteland no bigger than a classroom, 100m² – or five classrooms, 500m².

Everyone needs to eat. And all modern human

cultures grow around food consumption and production, for the good of all – hence 'Agri-Culture'.

There are about 13.7 million taxpayers in SA, with regular incomes. They mostly buy supermarket food: chemically-treated for longevity, agri-poisoned and increasingly genetically modified. This doubtful produce has to be transported over hundreds – even thousands – of kilometres, at huge energy and climate change cost, to supermarkets.

Now what if I offer some of the above regular income earners the chance to collect international-quality, un-poisoned, same-day harvested, super-fresh and healthy seasonal food at a good price? And what if I show that, along with ensuring unlimited sustainable jobs for local family farmers, this modest purchase directly enables community-based nature conservation and climate change mitigation, while diminishing individual carbon footprint by at least 50%?

Highly productive

Did you know that family farming is just as productive as (and 250% more energy-efficient than) agri-industrial food systems, which actually cause over 40% of the carbon pollution on the planet? A 30-year study by the Rodale Institute, plus other important studies, substantiate this position. Such a product is easy to sell, because 'the markets' (that is, human beings) increasingly want to get off the destructive path we are currently on.

So, how is it done? Simple. Buy some of your fresh food from local family farmers. This super-fresh produce makes you jump for joy, and the farmers get enough cash to develop and send their kids to school. Or you can sponsor a family farmer so s/he can grow his/her enterprise.

The problem is that family farmers among the 'poor' are still too few in South Africa.

Family farmers among the 'poor' are not widely honoured because they themselves are often uneducated or under-educated. They can't get access to finance and professional services the way commercial farmers can. They can't compete with big commercial farmers. In order to become financially viable, they need to build dedicated local (niche) markets for themselves. Yet they don't have the finances and professional skills to create and supply local markets. It's a classic vicious circle.

Secret ingredient

This is where an all-important 'new' secret ingredient changes the failure game: a modest, sustained, subsidised



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support package costing between R10-R100 per month per family farmer, supplied by honest agencies. This package enables family farmers to permanently access bulk farming inputs cheaply, get training, professional advice and mentorship according to their level of farming development, obtain monitoring and assessment assistance, and obtain guaranteed access to fair-pay (short value chain) local markets via a local pack-sheds, or secure local farmers markets.

I hear someone say: 'Subsidy – but this is unsustainable'. However, this objection is blind – please remember that international agri-business is subsidised in the trillions of dollars. Witness all that affordable

imported food on our supermarket shelves. In South Africa, established commercial farmers are not subsidised and this has arguably led to an extensive shrinking of the sector, who have been predicted to diminish from 40 000 commercial farmers in 2011 to a projected 15 000 in 2026, with huge consequences for food security.

So why quibble about R10-R100 per farmer per month to create healthy food and livelihoods for the unemployed?

Its how subsidies are applied that makes the difference.

'This wont work,' I've heard someone cry. 'Its too idealistic.'

And that is why I have written this article – because the above simple solution has been achieved, modelled and tested, once and for all, among the 'unemployable', in Cape Town, and is starting to be rolled out by family farmers in villages, towns and cities around South Africa – anywhere there are communities who eat fresh food.

Micro-farmers

Around 3 000 active family micro-farmers in Cape Town directly feed a minimum of 15 000 family members every year, off home plots. This home garden movement is the foundation of a thriving emergent community garden movement, involving another 500 family micro-farmers in about 100 community gardens. Of these, over 100 family micro-farmers in 30-40 community gardens are contracted (since launch of the Harvest of Hope pack shed business in 2008) into producing for the market, to create permanent micro-farming enterprises and to sustain self-help jobs. All costing R10-R100 per family

micro-farmer per month, to keep the whole show on the road, and thousands of hungry tummies full of healthy un-poisoned food.

And, if the above benefits are not enough, see how Harvest of Hope has started to make money flow – a modest R1.8 million turnover in 2014/2015, but increasing fast, into the hands of scores of previously unemployed micro-farmers, and it keeps coming. Take a look at how thousands in Cape Town already eat the freshest, most nutritious, un-poisoned food on earth, grown abundantly on little patches of wasteland. They eat good quality food just like the 'rich' who go to up-market stores. Family farmers most often assert that they have become healthy, positive and productive. Thousands of family micro-farmers collaborate peacefully and help each other, to feed uncounted sick and poor from their gardens.

Put a price on this and tell me if the Family Farming movement among the poor, modestly sponsored by enlightened donors, does not have the real practical potential to overcome poverty and provide innumerable jobs. □

Resources & Options

To collect a box of same-day harvest, seasonal, un-poisoned veg in Cape Town, sign up at: www.harvestofhope.co.za
To donate, to build the Family Farming movement, go to: www.farmgardentrust.org or find out more by sending an enquiry to info@farmgardentrust.org.
To find out more about Abalimi Bezekhaya, visit www.abalimi.org.za