

Women, vegetables and the power of change

A group of South African mothers and grandmothers are using gardening to transform their communities. TRINA TUNE compiled this story.



Above: Women tending the organic vegetables at Fezeka garden.

Left: Fezeka member Phillipina Ndamane.



GRANDMOTHERS AND MOTHERS in poor South African townships on the edges of Cape Town have taken up organic gardening to improve the way their families and communities live, eat and make a living. Driven by low pensions and large families to support, the women are turning unused land into flourishing community gardens of organic vegetables. But the gardens bring more than just vegetables, they bring the women freedom from hunger, better health, empowerment, friendship and a way of helping others in their communities. Their stories are told in a series of reports by Helen Kilbey and others on the allafrica.com website.

One such woman highlighted in the reports is Phillipina Ndamane, 72, co-owner of the Fezeka community garden in Gugulethu township. Phillipina represents a typical grandmother. She depends on a government pension of R800 (AUS\$130 a month) to support herself, her elderly sister and nine orphaned children – six grandchildren and three others.

“We can’t buy vegetables,” Ndamane says. “The garden is helping me a lot because we don’t [need to] buy the things we grow here.”

Roughly three quarters the size of a soccer field, the Fezeka garden is filled with thriving vegetables. Five women

own the garden. Each has her own personal plot, while a communal section provides the women with vegetables to sell. They all share the profits.

Health and wellbeing

Another Fezeka garden co-owner, Shaba Esiteng, 77, attributes the garden to her improving health.

“When I first came to the garden, really, I was thin. I was sick... I’m very strong now, I’m eating vegetables every day [and] I’m getting exercise,” she said.

Esiteng says the garden also brings social benefits to the community by providing vegetables to people who don’t work or who are sick, have HIV, or are old. Women are the predominant drivers of the community gardening movement in Cape Town and Africa, as their focus is on family and food. The women find that they work better without men.

During the past 25 years the Cape Town-based, non-profit organisation Abalimi Bezekhaya (Planters of the Home) has been stimulating and developing the townships’ food gardening movement. The organisation’s resource mobilisation manager Rob Small says that the Fezeka garden operates on an “emerging livelihood level model”. This means gardens range from a ‘survival level’

(food is grown for immediate consumption) through to ‘subsistence level’, and then ‘livelihood level’ where food is grown for personal and commercial reasons. Abalimi Bezekhaya has been directly involved in establishing 50 gardens, and in the last decade has supported the development of about 300 more.

Even the central government’s Department of Agriculture and the City of Cape Town have come on board to support community gardening, with the city the first in Africa to have a formally approved urban agriculture policy. Initially, Abalimi had to persuade people to start gardening, now the organisation is swamped with requests from township residents keen to grow their own food.

“The garden is strengthening us; it’s why we are here every day. I enjoy this garden... I will carry on till I die,” says Ndamane.

References

- Information and quotes sourced from www.allafrica.com, *Utne Reader* magazine and Abalimi Bezekhaya. AllAfrica has many photos, videos and reports on the township gardening movement.
- More information can also be found at: www.abalimi.org.za **OG**