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# The World of Landscape Architecture

20 Years of Topos





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# Grassroots Urban Farming Initiative

Known as the “Eastern Cape on Cape Town’s doorstep,” the Cape Flats townships around Cape Town, South Africa, are populated largely by economic refugees from the previous apartheid homelands of the Ciskei and Transkei. New arrivals into Cape Town are officially estimated to be 1,200 per month and unemployment figures are in the region of 30 to 40 percent. Abalimi Bezekhaya (Farmers of Home) alleviates poverty and creates self-employment through gardening and micro-farming in the sandy soil of the Cape Flats.







“Its not scientific. It cannot feed the world. The pests will destroy it.” This is what I was told by the “experts” when I first joined the work to revivie the organic family farming movement in South Africa in the early 1980’s. Founded in 1983, Abalimi is a voluntary urban agriculture and environmental action association, working to improve sustainable food production and environmental greening amongst the poor in Cape Town. In particular the project targets women – mothers and grandmothers – who often represent whole families. “Abalimi” means “the farmers” in isi-Xhosa, the predominant language of their target community. These days around 2,500 family micro-farmers directly feed a minimum of 15,000 family members every year, from home plots. This home garden movement is the foundation of a thriving emergent community gardening movement, involving another 500 family micro-farmers in about 100 community allotment gardens. Of these, nearly 100 family micro-farmers in 20 to 30 community gardens are involved (since launch of the Harvest of Hope marketing scheme in 2008) in producing for the market to create permanent self-help jobs. Farmer training and development costs less than 100 South African rand per micro-farmer per month, or even better, 20 rand per family member per month, to keep the whole show on the road, and tummies full of healthy un-poisoned (organically grown) food.

**Helping people survive.** The foundation of Abalimi’s target group are pure survivalists, who “temporarily” engage in vegetable production at home until a “job comes along”. By supporting such individuals, a new grassroots organic gardening culture is becoming a permanent feature of the urban environment among the poor in Cape Town. The skills learned by survival and subsistence gardeners remain with them, even if they stop when they get a job, and can be drawn

upon again in future. Abalimi supports individual households and groups to implement their own micro-farming (home and community agriculture) projects. This includes between approximately 2,500 home based vegetable gardens and 70 to 100 community group projects (school gardens, community allotment gardens, communal gardens) per annum.

It runs two non-profit training and nursery projects in Nyanga and Khayelitsha. Called People’s Garden Centres, they supply free advice, information and subsidised gardening inputs such as trees, groundcovers, soil improvers (for example manure), seed, seedlings, basic tools, windbreaks and safe pest control remedies. Up to 1,000 people are trained each year through four-day basic organic vegetable growing courses plus year-round on-site technical follow-up support visits and demonstrations to projects. Social benefits are enhanced through activities such as: mutual help work events to accomplish large or difficult tasks; horizontal (farmer to farmer) learning events; and savings mobilisation.

**Other greening activities.** Indigenous trees, shrubs and groundcovers are planted mainly in community gardens in windbreaks, but also (on request) in community institutions such as education centres, community centres and schools. Abalimi has also established the Manyanani “we do it together” Peace Park – a unique community and environmental centre, and is working to launch Moya we Khaya “spirit of home” – a pan-African intergenerational cultural community home, which gives everyone – women, elders, youth and men – a healthy and related place in a “inter cultural crossover” community space, in nature.

**Recognition.** Since 1991 Abalimi has received numerous awards, including three Green Trust-WWF awards, two Presidents Social Forestry awards, and the Khayelitsha Achiever Award for Community Development. An average of 25

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new applications from community groups for help with their gardening and microfarming projects is received every year. Abalimi community gardens are the first to have proven that at least two sustainable family livelihoods can be created on 1,000 square metres.

**Home gardens.** The Home Garden Movement, also known as “Individual Membership sign-up” campaign, is asking individuals in the townships of Khayelitsha, Philippi, Nyanga, Crossroads, and many more to sign up for a one year membership for 30 rand. In return the individual gets training on how to start a garden and how to grow vegetables, a starter-kit (enough for two seasons) worth 60 rand, and constant access to advice at the Abalimi People’s Garden Centres, to get answers and help for growing vegetables at home.

**Case study.** Alice Veliswa Xala (62) came from the Transkei to live and work in Cape Town. Her family used to have big land to plant and she grew up working in the garden. She found out about Nyanga People’s Garden Centre and signed the membership form, got her first season package and developed her home garden, mostly motivated by selling her products in small scale. She is living with her adopted son and the garden looks prosperous and has enough veggies for them, and also for her two daughters’ families, who are living in other townships. On good days she can even give to neighbours. She is planting cabbage, parsley, turnips and onion, but also traditional African tobacco, which she can sell for traditional events.

**Harvest of Hope.** Since 2007 surplus produce from subsistence gardens has been sold to the wider market outside of the townships on a weekly basis. Launched in 2008, the Harvest of Hope social marketing business collects, packs and delivers organic vegetable boxes to families

in the more prosperous parts of Cape Town. This project offers regular income security to the community micro-farmers, by contracting them to grow seasonal organic produce at guaranteed prices. Customer-members also have the knowledge that their money is giving people jobs and conserving the environment through local organic farming among the poor. Therefore Harvest of Hope launched the box scheme at schools, where parents come to fetch their children after the classes and are anxious for fresh and organic vegetables for their families. Harvest of Hope is now producing more than 300 of these extraordinary vegetable-boxes per week, from 100 farmers in 20 to 30 community gardens, every Tuesday. The medium term aim is to increase to 300 farmers and 1,200 boxes and then to many more. The big box (enough for a family of four for one week) consists of 11 to 12 items of seasonal organic veggies, and the small box contains approximately eight articles, enough for a family of two for a week. People can sign-up to be standing order customer-members.

**Economic results.** If the above benefits are not enough, see how money has started to flow. A modest 1.2 million rand was turned over in the 2011/2012 financial year but increasing fast, into the hands of scores of previously unemployed micro-farmers. 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 urban wasteland. It could even be said that they eat better quality produce than most of the wealthy who shop at upmarket stores. Family farmers often assert that they have become healthy, positive and productive since starting with Abalimi thousands of family micro-farmers collaborate peacefully and help each other to feed countless sick and needy from their gardens.