

THE STRUGGLE FOR A JUST COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM IN THE EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA



Nohlumelo John is a community farmer in Booyesen Park. She was trained for this as a child by her parents. She uses her produce to feed people who 'default' on their TB medications in Booyesen Park. The main reason they are 'defaulting' is because of hunger.



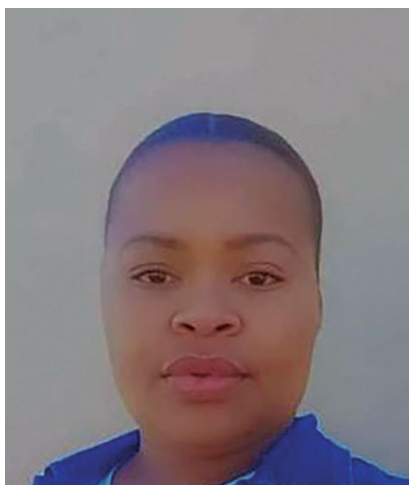
Siyabulela Mama is a member of the Nelson Mandela Bay Water Crisis Committee and Assembly of the Unemployed. He is a researcher at the Centre for Integrated Post-School Education and Training (CIPSET) at Nelson Mandela University and part of the *Amandla!* Magazine's Editorial Collective.



Vuyokazi Made is a backyard farmer, coordinator for *Amandla!* Port Elizabeth Collective and activist at the Assembly of the Unemployed.



Sibusiso Myoli is a traditional healer, finance student and a community farmer in Wells Estate.



Nombulelo Sineke is a community farmer.



Ziphozethu Vani is an agronomist and small-scale farmer.

The group refers to themselves as 'Abamelwane', an isiXhosa word meaning 'neighbours' in English.

Introduction

This article seeks to demonstrate some of the pathways and possibilities for food sovereignty by exploring the case of a community food system in Nelson Mandela Bay, Eastern Cape, South Africa. It examines the convergence of unemployment, poverty and inequality that is causing untold stress and anxiety for so many working-class communities. It looks at how building a community food system can be a liberating alternative for communities who are struggling to survive. Building community food systems is not just a form of resistance against the triad of unemployment, poverty and inequality affecting South African communities – it is also a therapeutic process that can help to empower communities to take action. Finally, we look at how Adult Learning and Education (ALE) that draws on the local and traditional practices of communities is an essential element to include at all stages of the process of developing community food systems.

The World Bank¹ recently released a report indicating that South Africa has the highest unemployment rate in the world. South Africa also has one of the most unequal income distributions in the world as measured by the Gini Coefficient². In the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, located on the shores of Algoa Bay in the Eastern Cape Province, where our work is located, 10 children died as a result of malnutrition and a further 108 were hospitalised between April and September 2022. South Africa's economic crisis has left many working class communities in a precarious situation and this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The problem of food insecurity was already evident before, but it has become worse in the past few years. Working the land to produce food locally has emerged as one way of combating this. It is a healing process that is not just about building livelihoods, but it is also where we find peace.

Background to the initiative

We are a group of community farmers working in different townships of Nelson Mandela Bay – Kwadwesi Extension, Kwazakhele, Wells Estate,

and Booysen Park. Some of us were moved from Veeplaas and relocated to Booysen Park, where the government built our RDP houses³. This is where we began the work of becoming Booysen Park community farmers. Collectively as farmers we hold a long history of activism, much of it through our partnership working with the Centre for Integrated Post-School Education and Training (CIPSET) at Nelson Mandela University. This is through their community education programme and, more recently, through their community food systems building project, which is linked to their community education work.

In Booysen Park

When we moved to this area, there was no proper infrastructure and no local shops to buy household groceries. Where there was access to shops, the high price of food, which rose exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic, meant that buying groceries was not feasible for many people. Faced with this situation, we made the decision to come together and take matters into our own hands. We decided to start growing food in our own backyards and to share the produce amongst ourselves, just as we had grown up doing in our rural communities.

Coming together as community farmers in eBhayi⁴, Eastern Cape

We recently visited fishers in the rural Coffee Bay area of the Eastern Cape. It is heartening to see how, after having spent the day at sea, they share their harvest with their neighbours. The smell of fresh fish cooking emanates from every house. This shows a level of solidarity that is re-emerging in many communities, one that can help build food-secure communities. After the needs of the community have been met, the surplus fish is sold to tourists to generate some extra income. We were greatly inspired by this example.

In Wells Estate in eBhayi many of us, like elsewhere in the country, have



Nohlumelo John watering her backyard garden in Booysen Park

struggled to find work despite having various skills and knowledge. As a result, we began discussions to see how we could take advantage of locally available resources. We turned our attention to the forest at the back of our houses. We decided to clear 10 hectares in order to start a food garden. We were able to grow enough food for our own consumption, and even produce a surplus that we can sell in the local community. We saw many others from our community using portions of the forest to kraal⁵ their livestock and we were able to use the manure from this for our farming. Many people are also occupying land to build shacks to live in. However, it is municipal land so they may have problems later (see further below). We decided to develop farmers' committees to manage the use of the land in the forest. Many people joined us in this project, and we are now also able to provide guidance to people who are looking for a place to live.

Ways of knowing and learning

Local and traditional knowledge is based on the understandings and skills developed over time by individuals and communities that are specific to where they are located. It is embedded in their livelihoods and is dynamic, changing according to the needs of the community. Thus, we always consult community members when implementing initiatives because they possess invaluable

knowledge about the area that they live in, including, for example, about the traditional use of medicinal plants. As mentioned, this approach is also inspired by our fisher counterparts who harvest fish for their livelihoods.

The skills we as adults have gained growing up in rural areas, as well as those learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, have come from putting those skills to use – learning by doing. It is learning that is embedded in our culture, history, beliefs, attitudes, thought processes, language and worldview⁶. Some of us acquired knowledge of farming from living in our rural homes even before migrating to the city for work. Others started farming for the first time during the desperate COVID-19 times. Thanks to the support of CIPSET in bringing us together through food assemblies as a form of peer-to-peer learning, we have been able to transfer these farming skills from more experienced to less experienced farmers, and even to beginners. Food assemblies are groups where we come together and share our experiences with others. For example, if someone has a problem with pests eating their crops, they can bring this up at the assembly and share it with others in an effort to find a solution. Others may have already experienced the same problem and know how to deal with it. This peer-to-peer learning is another element that helps us to survive and inspires us to work together in solidarity as we struggle to set up community food systems. It has also helped us to better understand the root causes of problems and the politics behind why we continue to struggle.

Stronger together

The solidarity that we have fostered through our work as community farmers expresses itself in various ways. For example, in our work we are faced with an ongoing problem of water scarcity. We have to carry water in buckets from our houses to our gardens. Therefore, apart from the issue of access to land, we have also become keenly aware of the issue of access to water as another essential factor to be tackled when trying to achieve food security and sovereignty. As a result, we have also joined a water sovereignty campaign. Community solidarity has grown and is helping people in other ways. For example,



Sibanye community farmers in Kwazakhele with Saltuba cooperative members – seedbank meeting

people who take medication for TB or other conditions need to eat properly while taking the treatment. They must ensure that they have adequate nutrition to aid in their recovery. What started as an initiative to provide people with food is also helping those with health conditions to cope with their illnesses. A community kitchen has also been started that cooks for patients at our local clinic at least once a week.

In Sibanye Community in Kwazakhele, the farmers look at community farming as something that is inspired by a range of issues. For example, we saw that we were buying everything from supermarkets, even food that we can grow for ourselves. We decided to challenge ourselves to break this dependency by producing our own food. Community farming is also helping to mobilise young people to confront not only the poverty and unemployment that they face, but also drug and alcohol abuse, which are endemic in the Kwazakhele community. We also looked at illegal dumping sites, especially the *gap taps*⁷, and saw that these too are areas that can be transformed into community gardens. We held a number of community meetings promoting this idea which were widely welcomed and supported.

In Kwadwesi Extension, the Amandla Study Group has set up *backyard gardens*. This initiative emerged from the discussions of study groups that were looking at a variety of community issues, principally at the widespread problem of unemployment. We wanted the study groups to carry out some

practical actions to respond to the problems being discussed, and they settled on the farming project as a simple and effective intervention that people could get involved in. As shown above, community gardens do not just help to mitigate food insecurity in communities, they also bring people together in an atmosphere of solidarity where they can mobilise on other topics that interest them, such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs), austerity, unemployment, crime and drug abuse, etc. Our discussions and activities have resulted in us joining the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign as we believe that we will only overcome the problem of food insecurity by striving for food sovereignty in our communities and removing dependence on external food systems.

The importance of language

Reflecting on this work has also challenged us to consider how we use language and how certain words can sometimes undermine the meaning of important humanistic work. We do not refer to the work we do as gardening. This is an English word most often associated with middle class leisure, or often with work performed by working class men whose labour has been marginalised and racialised in our society. The word gardener does not adequately describe what we do. It fails to capture the essence of the socially useful livelihoods work carried out by working class people in urban

and rural communities. The isiXhosa terms *ukulima* (to farm) and *abalimi* (as farmers) are the words used by people involved in community farming when referring to themselves and their work in our communities. These words better value the important work they perform.

A new worldview

We are acutely aware that food security and sovereignty are burning issues in South Africa that are intimately connected to access to land. Although community farmers are reclaiming and regenerating land in schools, clinics and previously neglected public spaces, the amount of land is still very marginal. The problem is made more difficult by the fact that the state usually views available urban land as potential space for housing and not for local food production. This is in stark contrast to the view of communities that sometimes settle informally on land that is earmarked for housing. To better serve communities, land should be set aside for a variety of social purposes, including urban farming. We see an example of this in Silindokuhle Pre-primary School in the Joe Slovo settlement in Cape Town where the Wathint'Abafazi farmers are growing their own food.

Urban planning should take into account the ideas and wishes of communities when deciding on land allocation and planning processes. This would result in greater recognition and possibilities for urban community farming. We recognise that many of us are farming on municipal land that we have occupied, and that the municipality may show up at any time with a development plan for the land. This is why we are currently advocating for 10-year leases for the land we occupy so that we can be more secure, and our situation less precarious. We also understand that our struggle for food sovereignty challenges the hegemony of large-scale industrial agriculture and the political economy of multinational companies in Africa. On the one hand, this industry produces a lot of food for the wider market, but on the other, it is exacerbating the problem of food insecurity that is affecting poor communities across the continent.



Sibusiso Myoli and Mzikazi Nkata planting new seedlings (Wells Estate Community Farm)

Therefore, our struggle is also an act of protest and advocacy against the agro-industrial complex in Africa that focuses on mechanisation and technology to achieve economies of scale that are not sustainable for the environment, nor for the human race.

Conclusion

Our journey has taught us that we each have a duty to work for the development of alternative food systems. We need to mobilise communities so that they are better equipped to organise themselves and to engage in activities to sustain their livelihoods. Education can play a role in helping people understand the links to other important issues such as the right to land, water, energy and a safe environment. Our struggle is also one for better leadership, one that values the rights and needs of all members of society and realises that our environment is a finite resource. On the way, we have drawn on a wealth of local knowledge and experience learned from our communities. We continue to forge links with other food movements around South Africa and the continent because only through solidarity with other African communities can we win the struggle for food sovereignty.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=ZA>
- 2 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264627/ranking-of-the-20-countries-with-the-biggest-inequality-in-income-distribution/#:~:text=Gini%20Index%20%2D%20countries%20with%20the%20biggest%20inequality%20in%20income%20distribution%202021&text=South%20Africa%20had%20the%20highest.a%20Gini%20score%20of%2063>
- 3 RDP houses are government subsidised housing for low-income families (part of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) initiated in 1994).
- 4 eBhayi or iBhayi in isiXhosa means 'the bay'. It is the name used for a group of predominantly Black townships on the outskirts of the city of Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth). It is also used as a name for the city.
- 5 To enclose in an area (kraal).
- 6 See Porta, T.D., & Cafarella R.S. (2010). *Capturing the Voices of Learners from Non-Western and Indigenous Cultures: Links to Learning in Adulthood*.
- 7 Municipal land which is zoned as public open space.