

Sustainable food security in four villages: Context and new knowledge

By Thelma Nkosi with support from Bernerd Ngomane
Mpumalanga Water Caucus



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Written by Thelma Nkosi with support from Bernerd Ngobane

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Who are we?

We are community activists and participants in the EMG/MPWC Change Project Course.



Introducing our Change Project

In this project, we focused on water, land and energy security for food-growing and livelihoods in four villages: Sikhwahlane, Madadeni, Sibange and Magudu. Our first need was to understand these communities better in terms of their sustainability of food security. Through being part of the social learning change project, we did research on the sustainability of home gardens and was thus able to explore several opportunities to ensure food gardens are sustainable. Our project aims to come up with tangible strategies that can be achieved by fellow communities. The research we did also allows us to come up with good arguments in favour of food gardens, to table with responsible government departments.



What are the main questions guiding our action research?

In our project, we formulated two main research questions:

1. How can we secure water for home food gardening and protect the gardens from domestic animals?
2. How can we protect indigenous seeds?

These are very big and challenging questions, which require us to stay focused. Water is a source of life and everything on the planet is dependent on water. We cannot achieve anything in this world without preserving water and ensuring water security for all. This demands us to understand how to protect water resources like rivers, streams, and wetlands and also to know how to, as communities, use water in our own yards. Communities need assistance to achieve this.

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What is the context? What has already happened?



The four villages are situated in the Nkomazi Municipality in Mpumalanga, close to Mozambique (30 km away) and Swaziland (15 km away). These communities are classified as rural communities and are faced with many challenges, such as high rates of unemployment, poverty and lack of industries for employment or empowerment opportunities. Most employed people travel up to 120 km for their work on farms or in shops, they do domestic work, or have small self-owned businesses like selling vegetables, sewing clothes and repairing shoes. Many people depend on government grants like home-based care, and some are looking for work outside the province in mining areas.

These four communities are under traditional authority, which comes with its own challenges. One big challenge is people not owning the land, because the traditional authorities have the final say to whom they give the land. Another big challenge is the dispute within the traditional leadership, as groups are formed and if you are not in support of the group favoured by government, then chances to get support are very slim. In these communities, three villages Madadeni, Sibange and Magudu fall under one Traditional Authority: Mawewe. Land is not being used correctly as each chief does as he or she pleases and no proper Traditional Authority law - as stipulated in the constitution of the country - is being followed. This has led to many developments that are a destruction to the land and to society.

It is of great importance for these communities to stand firm for their sustainability. However, the communities are badly affected by coal mining, sand mining and their dependency on government support. These activities put stress on our plan to grow food gardens, in various ways.

Government support: We have realized that the issue of water for gardens and the need for an irrigation system to sustain the ploughing is of paramount importance. Government does give some support to small-scale farmers with irrigations schemes, but it is limited. We do not think the support from government should be the daily bread for people, but as they have been taught to depend on aid, they initially need that support until they are able to stand on their feet.

Coal mining: Has taken more land that could be used for farming and grazing. It also puts stress on the underground water and pollutes the top water. This is difficult to deal with, because compliance is not enforced by the Department of Mineral Resources (DMR). Coal mining has destroyed people's minds as they believe it can employ most of them, but so far – after having lived with this mine for over 3 years - little employment has been created. We need an urgent replacement for this, before our people's minds are completely destroyed.

Sand mining: Puts stress on the quality of water in the river and this puts more stress on the availability of water for domestic purposes. The **dry sand mining** is also taking a huge amount of land that could be used for farming and grazing. It is a big contributor to the scarcity of water for irrigation, as it destroys the water resource. Without the resource water, we are doomed. It is a big problem, because it seems unstoppable. However, currently talks and discussions are happening in forums like the water catchment forum and the Department of Water and Sanitation, in the Mpumalanga Water Caucus network and with local stakeholders who are all concerned about the damage happening to the water resources. They feel that the policies in small-scale mining are not being strengthened and are not well-known by local communities, so these communities can't defend the rivers according to the law. Also, some community members lack the knowledge to understand the laws around sand mining. And even if people are aware of documents, the accessibility of those documents is a big problem. And if we don't know how to get them, it's difficult to demand compliance with those laws. DMR as a government regulator on mining is not being strong and their monitoring tools are very limited to put an end to these extractions.

Our observations are that home gardens are grown at many households. The people who are doing them are very excited about what they are doing. This makes me very happy, as I can see that our work is being put into practice. The sustainability of these communities can be realized. This also means that community members are going to have a voice to stand up for themselves and that their level of dependency will decrease. Currently people are dependent on the word of politicians who sometimes use people to achieve their own goals rather than the goals of the people. This means people are always promised public works project jobs which are not sustainable and give them little money to survive on. People are also given food parcels, which we all know is a once-off thing. This situation deeply affects the youth as they still have a long way to go in life. However, seeing some youth engage in farming is a big victory to me. I believe and wish that what I am seeing must grow to involve many other youths.

Farming can be very beneficial to our people but has its own challenges. Especially gender issues are important, as men believe that home gardens are for women and farms are for men. This can be overcome by constant engagement with communities. It will not be achieved overnight, rather it is a process that needs to be nurtured and monitored closely until people are in a state of mind that has no fear of any challenge ahead of them.

Since poverty and hunger are growing very fast in these communities, they need another layer of strategies for sustainability. In 2015, our organisation EMG trained the Mpumalanga Hazyview communities on the ABCD model (Asset Based Community Development) and the EDE model (Ecovillage Design Education). This program has been running as a project in the Eastern Cape Ngcwele and Bhele villages. Some community members approached us and asked for assistance to implement what we have been teaching them. I visited some members of my community to see what they are doing in the house and how much land they have. In rural communities, people are normally given a big stand. The purpose is to allow people to grow food on that piece of land and to have space for their livestock. Most people are not using that piece of land for anything, as they are not aware of the importance of having these assets. After our ABCD workshop many people started to have an interest in making sure that this resource is being put to use.

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Building a knowledge network

Government

Government including traditional authorities

We interviewed Mr Mkhathshwa, the head man in my community. I asked him what makes farming difficult these days, because they tell us that in their time it was their way of life. He told me that civilization has corrupted people's minds as it taught people that they must relax and food will come from big companies. He said it was looking good at the time but later they realized that their power to decide what to eat was taken away from them. I asked him if it is possible to reverse the situation. He said it requires a lot of effort as people's minds are corrupted and what's more important: their cultural dynamics are also being destroyed. He said farming was part of their tradition and culture and that is now gone. It needs more collaborative effort to try and change that. However, he said that what we are doing with the home gardens is a good way to start, because people will have the power to decide what to eat in their household and that might extend to the entire community and villages at large.

NGOs/CSOs

Inkomati Usuthu Catchment Management Agency and Mpumalanga Water Caucus

In our research to help the small-scale farmers who are keen to farm, we approached the Inkomati Catchment Management Agency to find out if they could assist us in securing water for subsistence farming. They indicated that they are able to help those farmers, but it is a process as they need to register them for which they must have documentation as a registered entity with the Department of Trade and Industry. The Mpumalanga Water Caucus approached SEDA (Small Enterprise Development Agency) which provides information around starting a business and assists people in registering a company. The coordinator of SEDA Malelane, Zodwa Mahlangu, assisted by registering the people as small-scale farmers. We could then start the process with Inkomati Usuthu Catchment Agency to apply for support for the people doing home gardens. We are now waiting for their response. The support that we are looking for is water tanks, pumps and a license to take water from the source to the gardens next to the river and to build water wells for those who are far away from the river. If we are successful, we will know we have secured water for watering the gardens.

There is still a big challenge with water quality: it will not help us to use water that is not clean for our gardens as it will affect our health and no one will buy the vegetables we produce. We always attend the CMFs' meetings where there are updates on the quality of the water we are using and we engage in campaigns to clean our streams and rivers. So far there is no tangible way to make sure that resources are always clean, but we depend on the information given by stakeholders in the CMFs' meetings.

The people we communicate with are: Dikegtsso and Gugu, the coordinators of the Inkomati Usuthu Catchment Management Agency. The Inkomati Usuthu Catchment Management Agency made it clear that they are not providing fences to protect the home gardens, but they did refer us to the Department of Agriculture for assistance. We then made an appointment to meet the responsible person in the Department of Agriculture, regional manager Mandla Ndhlala. He told us that they do support with fencing, but they have targets for a year which means you need to register and be in their system. It turned out that we are late for this year, but we can still register for the next year. We are looking forward to that. We now need to follow up and meet with the home gardeners for them to register.

Spring of Hope (NGO)

We have also visited the NGO Springs of Hope in Hoedspruit. We met Try Give Nxumalo, an expert on food gardens. Springs of Hope has been doing home gardens for over 7 years and now they have over 200 households with gardens which they are monitoring. Try Gift came up with the plans of monitoring these gardens, drawn on a spread sheet, and he developed a team of people helping him with monitoring. It was an amazing experience to learn what they are doing and what they have achieved so far through home gardens and schools. I was speechless. We are arranging a meeting to exchange our knowledge with them. He shared ways of preserving water in the gardens, like how to keep the soil moist for a longer time and how to water a big space with just 5 litres of water. He also spoke about the issue of gender, as he also said that more women are involved in home gardens than men, but he has achieved a lot as he is now working with 12 men.



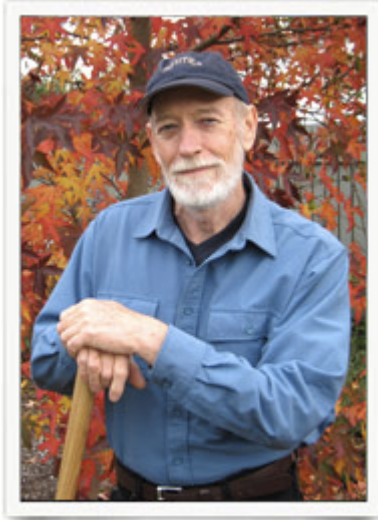
This is one of Try Give's gardens that he is monitoring, and which he showed us.

On the left, they started a community garden where they all go to in the morning. They use this piece to raise funds and support local schools and orphans.

On the right: Try Gift at his house, explaining the importance of mixing crops to prevent diseases and letting us to taste the herbs in his garden.

Media sources and documents

Earth easy (company)



From the website: "Hello! My name is Greg Seaman, and I'm the founder of Earth easy. Here's a little information about my background and how Earth easy came into being.

'A native of Long Island, New York, I was raised in a typical middle-class home with two working parents and four children. After graduating from university, my first job was supervisor of the Centennial Exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History. The exhibit was called 'Can Man Survive?' and was a multimedia presentation of the impact of our modern lifestyles on the health of the environment. It illustrated how the earth's carrying capacity was threatened by excessive energy consumption, pollution, overpopulation and unsustainable development. It was a real eye-opener, and this was 1970! Little did I know at the time that this job experience was the seed which would ultimately lead to the development of the Earth easy website?'

This media source was amazing for us as we were not aware that people take this thing of food gardens so seriously and make a living out of it. We have learnt that it is possible to live on home food gardens and grow it into a big business. When you hear that these people do not have as much land as we have but they are doing this successfully, this makes me wonder: how much more with us? With the land we have, we can go over the moon.

Agriculture & Food Security

This information is from 'Agriculture and Food Security'. According to them, the global population is expected to reach over 9 billion by 2050, so there is a continuous need to increase food production and buffer stocks. In this scenario, countries around the world, especially developing countries where the pervasiveness of hunger and food scarcity is more acute, are resorting to various counter strategies to meet the growing demand and to avert food insecurity and famine. They say over the recent years there

has been growing interest to strengthen and intensify local food production in order to mitigate the adverse effect of global food shocks and food price volatilities. Consequently, there is also much attention towards home gardens as a strategy to enhance household food security and nutrition. Home gardens are an integral part of local food systems and the agricultural landscape of developing countries all over the world and have endured the test of time.

It has said that home gardens provide a global review of social, economic, and environmental contributions to communities in various socio-economic contexts. Many of the pieces on home gardens share research and experiences of developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These studies have shown positive impacts of home gardens towards addressing food insecurity and malnutrition, as well as providing additional benefits such as income and livelihood opportunities for resource-poor families and delivering a number of ecosystem services.

Learning from new knowledge

The mind is a very critical aspect of all things we need to achieve in life. You can give people a lot of help if you think they need it, but if you do not deal with the mindset it is as good as nothing has been done.

We believe there is a need for more research and empirical data to appraise the role of home gardens and assess their economic value and impacts on food security, nutrition, economic growth, and gender issues. It is clear to us that we are on the right track with what we have started, the whole world is behind this initiative to overcome malnutrition and hunger and to restore dignity to many families who are poor. For us, people are not poor if they have their natural resources and are able to use them. That is why we talk about having a voice to many, because once you depend on yourself and not someone else then your dignity is restored.

We have learned that working in a garden is also a shared experience for the family and instils in children an understanding of the natural cycles of growth which provide lessons of lifelong value.

From the Departments we have visited we have learned that the government is trying to help our people. However, We feel the strategy they are using is not right, as it seems to us that people are being fed not being helped to stand on their feet. Actually, they need to deal with the mindset first before they can try to help. The mind is a very critical aspect of all things we need to achieve in life. You can give people a lot of help if you think they need it, but if you do not deal with the mindset it is as good as nothing has been done.

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