

“Community agriculture for livelihoods among the poor: A key intervention to restore natural diversity and create sustainable food and life security”. Rob Small April 2007

This article covers:

- The history of community agriculture for livelihood in South Africa
- Relevant forms of agriculture
- Factors limiting the growth of community agriculture
- Progress on a Development Continuum for the sector
- New strategies strengthening community agriculture
- Views on Private, Corporate and State Investment

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The History of Community Agriculture for Livelihoods in South Africa

Community Agriculture for Livelihoods is not new. The remnants of a thriving and sustainable Community Agriculture can still be observed in pockets all over South Africa- for instance around Port St Johns, where mainly the older generation preserve many aspects of it on home-farm plots.

Pre-industrial society was founded on Community Agriculture for livelihoods. Sustainable farming and gardening was practiced by the majority of the population, in and around towns and villages. In the case of hunter-gatherer and pastoral cultures (as in South Africa), community agriculture for livelihoods only arrived relatively recently, since the early 1700's.

In the late 1700's, however, it has been said that some black African communities practiced successful Livelihood level community agriculture successfully. For example, in the area later known as the Transkei, black farmers are said to have supplied the majority of the fresh produce to the Natal market, traveling on horseback to and fro between farm and market points in Natal. This practice ended in the early 1800's when the colonial government built railway lines which by-passed black farmers and serviced only white farmers. Similar reports have been heard from areas like Lebowa in Limpopo.

Since the 1st World War, Industrial Agriculture has emerged, fuelled by chemical fertilizers which were initially by-products from munitions manufacture. This has evolved into the controversial “Green Revolution-for-the-poor” kind of Industrial Farming, now being fuelled by the genetically modified organism (GMO) industry. The industrial “Green Revolution-for-the-poor” approach has had significant negative impacts and is

being strenuously questioned by the emerging international movement for Food Sovereignty. Massive loss of biological diversity and farmer enslavement to corporate-owned genetic resources (e.g. GMO seed) are key issues. These negative impacts are also slowly being noticed by the Industrial Agriculture lobby, although vast amounts of investment money are at stake and thus judgments are not easily finalised.

Community Agriculture for Livelihoods has always been supported in one form or another by church networks and civil society and by certain individuals and departments in government. In terms of organised service provision, earliest known examples include a long list of venerable names: for example, the Community Agriculture Project (CAP) farm trust at Msukatshani in Tugela Ferry (Neil and Criena Allcock), Valley Trust agriculture project, Africa Tree Centre (Robert Mazibuko), Food Gardens Foundation, Operation Grow, Environmental Development Agency (EDA), Farming in the City (now Abalimi), Eco-Link, Operation Hunger national agriculture programme, Food and Trees for Africa and so on. Now there are new Service Providers and projects popping up everywhere, in response to both a new urgency to address food security and income creation but also arising particularly in response to an increasingly organised community agriculture movement in the urban centres, for example in Cape Town, where the first ever black organic urban farming association (Vukuzenzela Urban Farmers Association) was declared by black women in 2004.

Encouragingly, Local and Provincial Government organs of government (in contradistinction to National Government) are coming strongly on board to support this movement, particularly in Cape Town and in the Western Cape. Potential also exists in other parts of the country, but National Government Industrial Agriculture and Political agendas continually sow massive confusion among communities (e.g. the “Massive food production” initiative in the E/Cape, which is producing anything but massive results).

National Government interests, with the support of the “Green Revolution” corporates, carry on the attempt to create big industrial-level agriculture “out-the-box co-operatives” – previously in the “homelands” during apartheid and now under the Land Reform Programme. Most, reportedly all (Farmers Weekly, May 2007) have been and are a dismal failure.

Yet there is now a grassroots organic-friendly community farming movement among the poor – involving many thousands of people - who are organizing to defeat food insecurity. Leading examples are the Vukuzenzela Urban Farmers Association (VUFA) in Cape Town, the Master Farmers Association (MFA) in the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape Ubuntu Farmers Association (WEKUFU).

Relevant forms of agriculture

Agriculture accounts for only four per cent of gross domestic product (Farmers’ Weekly, May 2007). But without adequate food, the whole economy is under threat. Right now basic food prices are on the rise again (Mail and Guardian, May 18/07) and the poor – the majority of the population, who cannot afford expensive imports - are the hardest hit. Our current economy is not producing enough jobs to sustain cash-based food security. Jobless Growth, a worldwide phenomenon from which South Africa is not excluded, commonly experiences healthy growth of GDP while unemployment – and poverty, deepen.

It is important, therefore, at the outset, to understand the difference between the main forms of agriculture, and their potential impact on food security.

- **Industrial agriculture** (inclusive of chemical, GMO, hydroponic and factory farming) is not readily taken up at community level as it is highly skilled, capital and mechanical intensive. If not managed responsibly, it destroys natural diversity and sheds jobs. Based on super-technology, huge crops are grown quickly. Food Aid Organisations can channel surplus to ensure food security. This works if there is enough “free” money to buy or subsidise massive amounts of food on a regular basis (e.g. e-Pap, food parcels).

Industrial agriculture can indeed supply all food needs, which can (in theory) be sustainably supplied to the poor. When this day comes, there will be no need to support Agriculture Livelihoods.

- **Ecological agriculture:** adapting both Industrial and Organic forms, this is the “new agriculture” form. It tries to combine the best elements of both. Low-External Input Agriculture (LEIA), Minimum Tillage Agriculture (MTA) and ‘Organic’ Hydroponics fall under this heading. However, even at a basic level – this form tends to require relatively high “base-line” skills to begin. Ecological agriculture is best introduced to farmers who have achieved full competence at Subsistence/Early Livelihood Level.
- **Organic-bio dynamic agriculture** (including permaculture and ‘food gardens’): in its elementary form, is the most easily deployed among the poor, at Survival and Subsistence Level. It automatically promotes natural sustainability and intensively conserves soil fertility, on-farm biological and seed diversity and indigenous nature and knowledge. It is spontaneously community building and labour intensive with “human scale technology”. There is solid evidence to suggest that organic food provides superior nutrition ⁽¹⁾, that over the long term productivity equals industrial outputs and (if the full up-line and down line costs are calculated) it is cheaper and more productive ⁽²⁾.

Note: Commercial level organic agriculture, however, is as complex as Industrial and Ecological agriculture. It results in overpriced organic produce available only to the rich.

Organic-Bio dynamic and Ecological forms of agriculture are therefore best suited to establishing Livelihoods among undereducated, unskilled or semi-skilled emerging farmers and gardeners.

Factors limiting the growth of community agriculture:

- Only a modest investment (compared to the potential for impact) has been made over the last 25 years. This was mainly from corporate, international and private donors. Recently, government is also getting involved in a very small way.
- People aim for “easier” options: successful agriculture - even part-time - is plain hard work, at least to begin with - 7 days a week / 365 days a year. Out of necessity the poor are willing to work hard for fresh food and modest incomes. But if easier options appear many move on.

- Lack of appropriate skills: while it is simple to garden at a basic level, to be sustainable at higher levels requires high level abilities. These are not acquired quickly – 3 years minimum for beginners. High level training is out of the reach for most, as it is expensive and geared for literate people.
- Lack of long term subsidies: most agriculture – within our current economic paradigm – cannot function without subsidies. This also applies to community based organic agriculture, although to a far lesser degree than to Industrial agriculture. In the USA and Europe, agriculture would collapse without multilevel, often hidden subsidies. In South Africa, where no overt subsidies exist, disintegration would quickly follow if research, cheap extension, special loan & grant finance or cross-subsidisation were withdrawn. Being subject to natural forces, agriculture cannot compete against “straight-line” business, which basically adds value to cheap raw material.
- Chronic illness: last but not least, an emerging limiting factor is HIV and AIDS, where increasing numbers of people are too weak to work. A special note here about HI and AIDS and chronic illness: a new type of community garden is emerging at Survival, Subsistence and Livelihood levels – this is the ‘treatment support garden’ which supplies fresh organic vegetables to the sick and needy.

Progress on a Development Continuum for the sector

The moderate investment over the years has born promising fruit, despite the limiting factors. The grassroots community based organic agriculture movement, led by organisations such as VUFA, MFA and WEKUFU, and capable of significantly mitigating local food poverty (while regenerating and conserving nature), is steadily growing in South Africa. Jobs can be created: it is now a proven fact that a reasonable living, after costs, is possible off 500 square meters or less, selling organic vegetables at street prices. ⁽³⁾

New innovations are underway and a step by step development continuum for community based agriculture has now been developed, which takes the limiting factors into account and enables a constructive and empowering “flow-through” of participants who have other aspirations and need to farm or garden only as a stepping stone.

The notion of a development continuum is not new. However, a clear step by step pathway for the creation of sustainable community garden and farming projects definitely is. Distinct phases or levels have been identified from field experience, with sustainability measurements at each level. The continuum runs through four phases or levels, from Survival, to Subsistence, then onto Livelihood and finally into Commercial. Energy is right now being wasted by agencies attempting to move Survival level farmers up to Commercial level too quickly, while beneficiaries themselves are confused about which level they would like to achieve, or even if they want to be farmers at all! Growing out of the continuum, a special training is being developed, to assist community farmers and gardeners sustainably, while allowing “flow-through” of temporary farmers. The training will enable both illiterate and literate people at Survival level to progress to the level that suits them, or to eventually achieve Commercial level. ⁽³⁾

New strategies strengthening community agriculture ⁽⁴⁾

Furthermore, innovative and tested development strategies have appeared which can sustainably enable the burgeoning movement, such as:

- Horizontal Learning exchange (farmer to farmer learning), utilising Action-Learning, has been widely tested and is essential to spread knowledge, skills and commitment, and to build community organizations at local level.
- Savings Mobilisation (people saving very small amounts regularly and collectively) is a powerful mobilisation activity among millions worldwide, used principally for housing and subsistence-level business. Group savings can be used as leverage to gain development support and a range of other economic and social benefits. Every community agriculture project should start with a savings programme.
- Cheap Micro-Loans: once savings mobilisation is established as practice and people are earning a regular- if small- income, micro loans become an increasingly viable option to encourage higher level entrepreneurial development. Micro-loans are best applied at upper Livelihood level and at Commercial level to create Small, Micro and Medium Enterprise (SMME's).
- Local Economic Trading Systems (LETS): are entirely transparent systems which allow trading of goods and services, using debt-free local currencies that cannot themselves be traded or invested. LETS will enable enormous growth and sustainability in the food security arena, whereby (for example) cash-poor families will be able to buy food from community gardeners, and gardeners will be able to purchase many local services and supplies that they need – without cash and without debt.
- Community Investment Programmes (CIP's): this approach rapidly enables communities to conceive, form and drive their own sustainable development plans, utilising all of the above interventions, including community based organic agriculture. CIP's are the future of citizen participation in bottom-up development.

Views on Private, Corporate and State Investment

A movement is mobilising, a development pathway has been carved out, essential tools and supplementary approaches have been developed, all of which can change the face of food security and result in community based support for nature conservation—sustainably, from the bottom up. The terrain is now comprehensible.

In four days, anyone can obtain the basic skills which, if applied (with some guidance) over two seasons, results in a permanent ability to grow productive survival or subsistence gardens at low cost. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that self-sustaining community agriculture, involving many thousands, in uncontested land such as backyard plots, rural smallholdings, school yards, in servitude and commonage land, can provide a foundation for localised food security and nature conservation among the poor.

In the next ten years and through the movement, private and corporate social investment could ensure that a sustainable, national, bottom-up food security model is enabled.

The State – whose job it is to take to scale proven innovations which work - can then confidently stimulate replication on a massive scale.

A food secure nation is possible through relatively self-sustaining community based initiative. Quality organic vegetables, grown in hundreds of thousands of ecological oases, can and should be abundantly and cheaply available. Rather than grow basic vegetables and foodstuffs for the poor, agribusiness can then refocus and develop the endless possibilities available for elite and export markets. Mind you, they should beware competition from community farmers who by that time will have reached Commercial level. Unless, of course, permanent jobs for all and/or permanent free and subsidised food for the poor can be provided via the formal economy and high-tech agriculture.

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