

Sowing the seeds of hope

Full of new ideas, Christina Kaba plays a leading role in helping her community to help themselves

Some call her Christina, others Tembi but to the residents of Cape Town's townships she is simply MaDlamini or Mama Kaba, a matronly figure to whom they turn for help and advice and who has quietly but determinedly striven to improve their lives.

Born in Kokstad in 1948, Christina is a self-confessed farm girl and the fact that she only has a partial primary school education has not held her back. Her background engendered both a love of the land and the value of being able to grow your own food; this has developed her ability to help the whole community help themselves.

After working as a volunteer in community gardening projects in Lesotho, she began growing vegetables in her own back yard to supplement her family income in Cape Town. Soon others followed her example, news travelled fast and, working with the approval of the street committees, she mobilised and guided even more residents to do likewise.

When it was suggested she apply for a position as a field worker with the NGO Abalimi* in Khayelitsha, she was astounded to get the job as it called for someone with Standard 9 or 10 (Grade 11 or 12). "I still remember the day when they called to tell me I had the job," she says, adding that she hastily explained that she only had Standard 2 (Grade 4) and that they must have mixed up the names. But

the committee knew Christina had what they were looking for.


Christina soon had a thriving nursery and training centre running on the grounds of the Catholic community centre in Khayelitsha with a demonstration garden based on the trenching system. Seeds and compost were sold for 50c and seedlings R1 a dozen. Today, thanks to Christina's leadership, there are at least 2 000 home gardens in Khayelitsha, Nyanga, Gugulethu, Crossroads, Phillipi and Delft and in many other areas in Cape Town.

Since those early days working with Abalimi she has played a leading role in greening the bare sandy township. She led the development of the first community vegetable gardens on disused spaces or under power lines and helped those working in them raise money for fencing, tools and watering systems and facilitated donations of seed.

Most of the vegetables feed the families of the gardeners, but the excess is given to local orphanages and HIV and TB centres. She also encourages home growers and community gardeners to produce more food than they need and to put aside the money from selling the excess for their children's education. Thus in 2008 she co-founded the Harvest of Hope marketing scheme under Abalimi which now provides a regular income to many gardeners who supply and deliver pre-ordered boxes of fresh, organic vegetables to various outlets in Cape Town's Southern suburbs.



Christina is a lateral thinker and is as concerned for the elderly as she is for the youth. She has also been involved with the greening of the barren local school grounds and the establishment of school food gardens. When she realised these gardens were neglected during the Christmas break she suggested that the parents and grandparents 'farm' the land. Now it is common to see community gardens at schools in the townships.

Looking back on what Christina has achieved should be an inspiration to many. She is amazed that she managed to pass her driver's license and now has her own car. Her great wish for Abalimi is for a larger bakkie for the Khayelitsha nursery so they can reach out and help even more residents. Her personal wish is to shake Mandela's hand and tell him that she's tried to make South Africa as he would like to see it – a place where everyone is cared for. 

SOURCES

***Abalimi** meaning 'the planters' in Xhosa, is a voluntary organisation which assists and initiates in the creation of permanent organic food-growing and nature-conservation projects. These are the basis for sustainable lifestyles, self-help job creation, poverty alleviation and environmental renewal in townships on the Cape Flats near Cape Town. For more information, visit www.abalimi.org.za and www.harvestofhope.co.za

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