

Gardens of power

Abalimi Bezekhaya is an urban agriculture and environmental action association operating in the socio-economically neglected townships of Khayelitsha, Nyanga and surrounding areas on the Cape Flats near Cape Town, South Africa. Abalimi means: "the Planters" in Xhosa, the predominant language among their target community. They assist individuals, groups and community based organisations to initiate and maintain permanent organic food growing and nature conservation projects as the basis for sustainable lifestyles, self-help job creation, poverty alleviation and environmental renewal. A report by Nantke Garrelts.



Tembakazi Sotyantya with Nantke Garrelts.

Credit Camille Van Tornhout & Nantke Garrelts

The abundance of green leaves and dark soil comes as a surprise under the massive power line towers that cut through the yellowish grassland forming the buffer zone between traffic and homes. But the gardens that line up to the right of the path are real.

Passionate gardeners like Tembakazi Sotyantya have built them up. The 49-year-old works for the Western Cape Association of People with Disabilities (APD) and coordinates a group of about 15 mentally and physically disabled people who live in the nearby settlement.

Every morning, they make their way to the garden to harvest the ripe crops, pull weeds, and enjoy a bit of fresh air. The gardeners can take their harvests home and use them for their daily serving of healthy food.

"It is very nice to cook every day with the veggies from our gardens", says Sotyntya who is trained in hygiene and food security and tries to pass this knowledge to her co-workers. "I like the smell of the vegetables and I never cook them longer than five minutes".

As an HIV and TB positive person, she is happy about the natural healthcare. "I eat everything to be healthy and also encourage the group members to come and work here".

But the microfarm is more than a source of fresh food and money that guarantees a degree of security in an environment that is meant to be temporary. The garden gives a daily task and the feeling of being useful to people who are often excluded from the labour market. It also enables them to be creative and realise own projects.

The Abalimi training course has encouraged Tembakazi Sotyantya to build up sharply defined beds as her trainer Vatiswa Dunjana taught her during the basic training course. She bursts with energy when she shows visitors around her garden and even starts to sing and dance when she talks about her work. "We are going to feed the children" is the translation of her favourite song she sings while caring for the veggies. She has made this song her slogan.

Between the grey belt of the highway and the first shacks that form the informal settlement of De Noon, there

lies an oasis. Besides a large variety of vegetables like spinach, cabbage, spring onion, green pepper, beans and beetroot, she has also big ambitions to grow more extraordinary vegetables. Proudly she points out the garlic plots, her aloe plants, sweet potatoes, mealies (maize) and her seedlings she grows to sustain the micro-farm in the long term.

The garden has already expanded to the other side of the sand path and now covers a surface even bigger than the original garden. The APD group also collaborates with a group of HIV positive people who farm next to them. Tembakazi Sotyantya has big plans for the future. "I also want to grow ginger", she says and bends down to carry on with her work.

Learning to grow

Nowetu Mbekeni, 53 years old and Nokuntu Zamkana, 48 years old, both attended the basic training seminar in February 2013.

They are now working in a community garden in Khayelitsha, the St. Kizito micro farm, selling produce to Harvest of Hope, which is the marketing arm of Abalimi. Harvest of Hope supplies customers with a weekly supply of fresh, seasonal vegetables. The

training has enabled them to make a living out of the micro farm - and even improve their quality of life through a fulfilling task.

"Abalimi has taught me to do everything that a garden needs," says Nowetu Mbekeni. "Fencing, watering, fixing the soil and growing my own seedlings. My parents were also farmers, so we were born with the talent to grow. We have to keep on doing it. The garden is my baby. My day is not complete without going to the garden. Sometimes I just walk between the plots and look at the plants. I have the feeling that they talk back to me.

"One of the ladies from the course even went back to the Transkei and started a garden there. I think it is also about skill development and transferring the knowledge: Take the skills from the course and take it to the Transkei (Eastern Cape). It is also about changing your points of view. Many people think that they need a big piece of land. Now I know that you can plant everywhere: In bottles, tyres and bags. But I am still going on with the training and I want to learn more. There is always space for improvement".

"What I liked best about the training seminar was the practical part," says

Nokuntu Zamkana. "Now I know how to prepare the soil for light, medium and heavy feeders.

I also learned about the planting calendar, when to plant which crop according to the seasons. Another important thing to know is how much water a plant needs.

"I did take some notes during the seminar, but the biggest part is in my head. When I plant cabbage, for example, I know it is a heavy feeder, so I have to put more manure and I know that the distance between the plants has to be rather big. Apart from earning money through the micro farm, it also does a lot for me as a person. When walking through the garden, it makes me feel happy. I am feeling proud when people are watching me work in my garden. I feel I am important, because people ask me about my plants and admire them".

Nantke Garrelts, who was a volunteer at Abalimi Bezekhaya, works for the EU agency called GLEN

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Nowetu Mbekeni and Nokuntu Zamkana

Credit Camille Van Tornhout & Nantke Garrelts