

HOPE SPRINGS FROM THE SOIL



Christine Kaba,
operations director of
Abalimi Bezekhaya

Not everyone can say they've changed thousands of lives through training people to grow their own vegetables. But **Christine Kaba**, a powerhouse of motivation and determination, most certainly can. **Warren Glam** reports.

Twenty-four years ago Christine Kaba was a domestic worker growing a few vegetables in her backyard.

Today, the lush organic veggies she and her organisation grow are distributed across Cape Town and making money for up to 4 000 people.

Abalimi Bezekhaya, which means "Farmers of home", is an urban agriculture association that guides residents in township communities like Nyanga and Khayelitsha. Today it farms about 30 hectares in about 100 community gardens and 3 000 home gardens, with the help of about 4 000 men and women. Rob Small, resource mobilisation leader, has been integral to the project, making him and Kaba, who joined in 1989, co-founders.

"I never thought I could do it at first," says Kaba, 65, now operations director. "Then Rob said: 'Christine, from the cabbage you can buy a car.'"

Since 2008, Abalimi's Harvest of Hope marketing project has enabled township farmers to sell their excess produce into the suburbs via an organic box system. About 400 boxes go out every week from the central packing shed in Philippi. With farmers currently earning up to R3 000 per 500m² plot per month, the project is making a difference.

Kaba spoke to *The Big Issue* about how it all started for her, and how Abalimi is doing now.



Christine in the packing shed preparing vegetables for the Harvest of Hope organic box distribution system

“ I was born on a farm in the former Transkei. I lived there until I got married at 21. I came to Cape Town in 1984 and I worked as a domestic worker in Sea Point. Going from Khayelitsha (where I lived) to Sea Point was a lot of money, so I just left the job. My husband got upset and we started to struggle.

I started to grow vegetables in my backyard – I was raised on a farm. It was a small house but there was a lot of land at the back. I used that land to feed us. When I continued to grow the veg, somebody came to my house. It was a white lady. She said she was working with the community around Gugulethu and Nyanga, but she came to Khayelitsha too. She'd heard about me. She said to organise the other women. She helped us with seed and compost and she told us about Abalimi. I think it was 1989 when she said a project was going to open in Khayelitsha and she wanted me to run it.

I said that can't be my job! I only had standard two (grade four), not standard nine or 10. She said: “Christine, you've got skill. Just ask your son to fill out the form. I started [the job] in May of 1989.

I met Abalimi's resource mobilisation leader and board secretary, Robert Small, in 1991. He came to help at Abalimi. He taught farming methods.

It was difficult getting Harvest of Hope started in 2008. We'd been growing these vegetables for many years, but the people in our community didn't care at first if it was organic or chemical. They just wanted big cabbage. Now, it's all organic.

Rob organised workshops that showed us how to grow for the market, what different vegetables we could plant to make money and how to invest the money we were making.

Things are going well. To me, Christmas was short. The people didn't go to the Transkei. They see it [the benefits of staying in Cape Town] in the bank. The money is in the garden. Because when you're not there, who's going to watch your baby?

Harvest of Hope has changed up to 4 000 lives. In Kraaifontein, we've got three young men. When I met these boys they told me a farmer lent them land, but they only grew mealies. They sold them in the township. I said, “Guys, here's the phone number and the name of the trainer at Abalimi. Come to the training in Khayelitsha.” They got training. Today, those boys drive a nice blue Toyota.

This is job creation. I only need someone to help us with stipends because when the youths start, they haven't got the passion to work until the vegetables grow.

But if they've got stipends when they

Nokwandi Nkgayi, from the Eastern Cape, farms in Khayelitsha

“It was hard because we were buying vegetables from the shops – maybe two, three weeks old – and the cans are not good for our health. Here we get the vegetables straight from the ground to the pot.”

Lulama Jin, from the Eastern Cape, farms in Gugulethu

“[Before the project] I was unemployed and struggling to make ends meet. Now I have something to put on the table for my kids.”

Philipina Ndamane, from the Eastern Cape, farms in Gugulethu

“The ground is a helper. You can't suffer if you've got the ground. You can plant the potatoes, you can plant the vegetables, and you can eat.”

start the projects, to support them with something for a year, they'll see the money comes from the veg. It's bigger than the R1 000 you give them a month. When they see R3 000 in one month, they won't move out and look for a job where there's no job.

To me, Abalimi is a light for Cape Town's township people. Harvest of Hope is job creation. Because if you leave them [the township farmers] to grow their veg with no market, you kill them. We bring Harvest of Hope to make these people understand that the soil is money. ”

Courses Abalimi offers include organic vegetable gardening, for horticulture caretakers and integrated land use design workshops. Contact Abalimi on 021- 371-1653, or email info@abalimi.org.za. Contact Harvest of Hope on 021-371-1653 or 082-599-7902, or email harvestofhope@abalimi.org.za