

# Towards a Social Gardening movement in the townships

## An overview of Abalimi Bezekhaya's work in Cape Town

by Rob Small, director of Abalimi and Ashoka Fellow

Driving into Cape Town from Somerset West or DF Malan international airport, with Table Mountain on the horizon, one notices thousands of tin shacks perched and piled all over the landscape on either side of the N2 highway.

One million and more people are encamped in the sand-plains, at the gates of the City. New arrivals come in at about 1200 per month. The greatest number of new arrivals are Xhosa speaking people from the Eastern Cape, the former apartheid homelands of Transkei and Ciskei.

Why do they come?... The answer is simple...hope. Hope warms the lives of those who dwell in the sand, among the thousands of shanties and "RDP houses". Here, even if you live in a shack, water from a municipal tap is usually no more than 50 meters away and even squatters get electricity. Social services are accessible and, if you know where to go, there is help at hand. Advancement is at least a possibility!

In the Eastern Cape, possibility for individual advancement is zero. Unemployment is growing rapidly towards 100%. People can walk kilometers every day to queue for domestic water. Electricity is often a pipe-dream and schooling facilities regularly appalling. Essential services, like close-by medical care and access to markets are non-existent or at best inefficient.

It is no wonder, then, that people continue to pour into the flat windy sandlands outside the "City of Hope". Here, there is an abundance, although about 40% of the city population (average unemployment in Cape Town) cannot buy fruit and vegetables regularly.

What can be done? Feeding schemes, social grants and short term public works opportunities are good and without them food riots would be common. Yet the number of people who are chronically unemployed grows. Our economy creates jobless and ruthless growth – healthy incomes for the few, desperate struggle for the many.

But much hope can be found among the "desperate many", in particular with those who are organising a way forward together, aided by competent NGO's. One such an NGO is Abalimi Bezekhaya – "the Planters of the Home".

Abalimi's core business is to assist the disadvantaged to set up organic gardening and micro-farming projects which provide nutrition, income, work and a healthy natural environment.

Abalimi services and supplies over 3000 gardeners and over 200 community gardening and greening projects per annum. These projects include backyard home gardens, street greening groups, community gardens, an award winning community park, environmental education teacher projects at schools, environmental street theatre events and more.

One of Abalimi's most exciting achievements is an organized organic urban farmers movement in the townships, led by women and the first of its kind in the history of South Africa. They are determined to become serious players in the burgeoning organic produce markets, local and international.

But there is a long way to go, and outsiders always ask "why do the townships look so bleak? Why don't 'they' clean and plant their environment?"

The fact is that almost everyone (if they think about it) 'wants' a beautiful garden, plentiful fresh vegetables from their own plot and a nice clean environment. But scarce cash is used for more compelling purposes – long-life groceries, clothes, schooling, electricity, paraffin. And intensive gardening skills adapted to the Cape Flats sand and wind are rare.

This is where Abalimi comes in, providing training and start-up support to would-be organic gardeners and gardening groups.

Organic group gardening among the poor almost always produces magical health enhance-

*Ikhwezi project at Kwamfundo High School in Harare - a typical community garden*



Cape Town, 2004

ments. People start out tired and often bloated with malnutrition. Once first harvests are being eaten and sold, however, a change starts and within two seasons, unhealthy fat drops off, clear eyes and sunny smiles appear.

The gardeners often comment on how good they feel physically.

This sense of renewed well-being feeds goodwill and a culture of mutual help. This culture is, of course, inherent in the Xhosa people, often spoken about as 'Ubuntu'. But it comes under severe pressure and breaks down rapidly where *cash value* replaces all *other values*. Cash is of course the main medium through which individualism exerts its will today, as it is easily 'owned' and isolated from every other influence, except of course the 'owners influence' and the influence of other 'cash owners' if invested.

But at survival and subsistence level, *cash is all but absent*. Those who garden organically together to survive and subsist, *rediscover their connectedness*, with each other and with nature, *quite spontaneously* and without any special facilitation. Gardeners at this level quite naturally share labour and food, helping each other out and gifting each other with help. To survive and subsist, they also have to build and maintain soil fertility, plant indigenous flora hedges, learn



to tolerate the interrelationship between “pests” and “predators”. All of this happens naturally and simply, with minimal training and start-up support. People spend months working very hard together to produce delicious high quality organic vegetables, which are mostly consumed or sold locally, to neighbours and friends.

We have noticed that these people begin to talk to each other of their problems, discover new friends and gather emotional support. While this may not be unique to gardening groups, what is unique is that the ‘garden meeting’ almost always leads on to new ideas and initiatives, to do something else, or to produce more – always a new rush of individual and collective courage and hope for the future ensues. People who join group organic gardens often find that they ‘suddenly’ have the opportunity to take a new step in their lives, even if it is a small one. For example, a member who decides to take a training course in sewing, or who decides to retry for her matric.

Women report how, through gardening, they are given the power and will to hold their families together under extraordinarily negative circumstances.

Because serious money can now be made from small plots (no less than R500-R3000/m per 500m<sup>2</sup>), there are more and more men joining the women on the land, rather than looking for the

non-existent “job”. A big problem with men and women from the past, is the cultural division between “men’s work” and “men’s food” and “women’s work” and “women’s food”. Growing vegetables and eating a mixture of vegetables and maize meal (imifino) was “women’s work and food”. Bringing home the bacon (cash from ‘the job’ for meat) is “men’s work and food”. Deep agony in the men is caused when no job can be found. And when the woman provides plenty of imifino to eat, but no “men’s food”, all hell can break loose. Similar tensions have been experienced in all cultures.

But men are now adopting women’s work and women’s food, because it can ‘make money’. Thus women and their food gain dignity in the eyes of men, and a culture shifts happily into a new paradigm. The beauty of group organic gardening is that it picks up the men and women and gives them a new dignity, at the same time allowing them to transform custom.

Yet another ancient custom – called ‘iLima’ (mutual help to do heavy work) – is being revived and applied in a unique way! Neighbours, in the form of unemployed men, are hailed off the streets to join the gardeners for a party, of umqumboti (sorghum beer) and food. But first! .... the men are asked to dig a few trenches. Thus, the heavy work is done, the women’s backs are saved and the men feel useful and are filled, at a tiny fraction of the cost of the ‘jobs’ which would otherwise be needed for such work. The local community around the garden glows for a while and the gardeners bask in approval.

These are some examples which have inspired me to see that group organic gardening is about far more than producing food, jobs or physical health. Working together organically on the land has enormous *social value*. Social gardening and farming is perhaps the highest form of gardening or farming there is. And the highest form of community may be one which incorporates group organic farming and gardening at its core.

An interesting challenge, as can be expected, is to find a way to carry the natural social benefits of survival and subsistence gardens into the competitive ‘market garden stage’. New problems begin with the advent of cash profit, often with an argument over what can be sold (the men often want to sell everything) and what can be eaten (the women often want to eat more than is sold), leading on to quarrels over entitlement to equal profit share.

Here we are looking towards helping to forge some form of ‘new’ cooperative business structure, which can cope with differences in member aspirations and worldview, while fairly apportioning profits.

But the problem of social impulse being annihilated by business is not unique to market gardens among the ‘poor’. Worldwide, we are now beginning to understand that competitive business is not and cannot be *inherently* socially beneficial – even to its own closed community of worker families, owners and shareholders. The collapse of society and nature is now quite clearly being driven by our ‘modern economy’. Ironically and wonderfully, the same modern economy is populated by warm human beings who make social grants available which enable organisations like Abalimi to thrive!

Abalimi and I, therefore, are enabled to work for the birth of a sustainable Social Gardening and Farming movement, among the so called ‘poor’, capable of regenerating whole communities and their natural environments, even in the shacklands on the outskirts of what we call civilisation today. ■

## “Art And Freedom”

from the notebook  
of Beni Kleynhans

Art transcends the limitations of Science. It can leave the Artist in the realms of objectivity and subjectivity. In the subjective he finds a personal freedom and in the objective an objective freedom. These two aspects of freedom are ruled by the greatest power the Artist can work with - CHOICE.

The genius of the Artist lies in the recognition of these two realms. When he becomes a vessel for both - the inner and the outer expression, only then has he reached his own totality, has he grown full Artist.

The personal unites him with himself and alienates him from the All. The universal unites him with the All and alienates him from the self.

Between this point and periphery stands the Artist, alone as between Science and Religion. Yet never is the Artist alone, while he still has his movement in Art, while he is still the gesture of his own self and of the Universe.

Art is the doing, the moment, the process between beginning and ending a work. That which is not seen is the Artist’s greatest mystery and it is that with which he can sway unknown worlds.’

Beni Kleynhans 1950 - 1991



Members of the Vukuzenzele Urban Farmers Association (VUFA) plan their structures and way forward

