Gardens of Hope
ABALIMI BEZEKHAYA

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It’s a windy, dusty morning in the Cape Flats area just outside of Cape Town. RDP houses, shacks and sand flats, a wasteland of political failures and economic disrepair. Taking a second look, you see small patches of lush green fortresses battling the wind-swept flats, small islands of hope to those who tend to them.

These gardens of hope are the products of 28 years’ worth of hard, physical grafting and fighting the elements. What started off as a small group of individuals with the hope of feeding a few by cultivating subsistence farmers on the Cape Flats has grown into an organisation with projects all around the country. The heart of the organisation is described by its name; Abalimi Bezekhaya directly translates means the ‘farmers of home’.

‘Abalimi started with the aim of assisting poor black people in surviving poverty during apartheid,’ said Rob Small, Resource Mobilisation Manager of Abalimi Bezekhaya.

Globally, famine and malnutrition is a harsh reality faced by millions of people every day. Research over the years has shown that a lack of essential micro-and macro-nutrients has adverse effects on a person’s physical and mental performance and as such hinders socio-economic growth. The Cape Flats and surrounding areas are populated largely by economic refugees of the apartheid homelands, and new arrivals into Cape Town by economic refugees of the apartheid and mental performance and as such hinders have adverse effects on a person’s physical

‘Our main motivation has evolved from mere assistance into ensuring food security and a healthy lifestyle for the poor, through micro-farming projects,’ said Rob.

What is micro-farming and how does it work?

Micro-farming, also known as urban agriculture, is farming on small plots of land. One ‘micro farm’ is tended by between four and five farmers, predominantly women, although more and more men are starting up their own micro farms with Abalimi’s help. Micro farms can easily support families of up to five members year round.

‘I was alone at home and needed to help my family with food and money. I came to the project to help my children,’ said Ms Nomelzo Mqathazana, a subsistence farmer in Nyanga.

Abalimi’s target areas are predominantly situated in densely populated areas, so in order to effectively grow and maintain year-round productive gardens small plots of between 100m² and 500m² are allocated for growing purposes.

These farms are run at a cost of only R100 per month, this includes soil, manure, seedlings and training. It takes four days to train a micro-farmer and Abalimi trains between 100 and 150 farmers per year. Abalimi soon realised that there is an opportunity for the micro-farmers to make a living, and started the Harvest of Hope project. As a result, growing their own fruit and vegetables now not only provides fresh, organic produce to the poor, it also gives them the means to earn a living by selling what they do not need.

‘When the micro-farmers started to grow crops all year in response to the Harvest of Hope marketing initiative in 2008 – this was a truly quantum leap forward and a huge achievement for the micro-farming movement,’ said Bridget Impey, project coordinator for Harvest of Hope, when asked what their biggest achievement has been to date.

Harvest of Hope collects any extra produce from farmers and sells it in boxes available at schools and restaurants throughout Cape Town. This way, the farmers can earn a living while feeding themselves and further investing in their farms; expanding the growing capacity and further extending earning potential.

‘Selling my vegetables gives me money at the end of the year to go Transkei for Christmas. Eating vegetables helps us save money and gives my children nutritious food in the family,’ said Ms Novatile Gova, a micro farmer from the Cape Flats.

Abalimi Bezekhaya is also involved in the ‘greening’ planting trees and creating community parks – of communities throughout South Africa. This is an initiative that has seen communities grow from unsightly, wind swept and dusty wastelands into beautiful suburbs with tree-lined avenues and parks where families can enjoy the outdoors together.

‘This land was dirty and unhygienic, but now it is being used productively. It makes me happy,’ said Ms Gova.

The total number of micro-farmers in the Western Cape alone is estimated at around 3,000, of which there are between 1,500 and 2,000 home-based vegetable gardens and 50 to 100 community gardens.

‘We believe that getting involved in and supporting the organic micro-farming movement among the poor is the most powerful thing that you can do to help the earth and its people,’ said Rob.

Abalimi’s impact on the communities involved

Having identified the need for an extensive, low-cost urban agriculture network and initiating micro-farming programmes early on, Abalimi quickly grew to the point where it now feeds more than 15,000 people annually.

Because vegetables are grown and consumed locally, many positive, social impacts can be seen filtering into all communities involved. The framework not only supports the well-being of people and communities involved, but because the micro farms are a 100% organic, the impact they have on the environment is substantially less than conventional farming projects of the same size.

‘I am here, I am glad and I always feel fresh at the garden. If I’m feeling sick, I feel better when I come to the garden,’ says Ms Mqathazana.

Thanks to Abalimi and Harvest of Hope, more sibling organisations have grown into thriving enterprises. One of these is the School’s Environmental Education and Development (SEED), a small, NGO based in Mitchell’s Plain, which educates young learners on environmental ethics and how to care for the earth.

How can members of the public get involved?

Abalimi is an NGO and as such relies on sponsorships, donations and funding from interested parties.

We might not always be able to contribute financially, but giving some of your time is just as important as offering financial assistance. Both Abalimi Bezekhaya and Harvest of Hope have a limited capacity for permanent staff, so rely heavily on volunteer workers.

When asked what the ‘average Joe’ can do to aid organisations like Abalimi, Rob Small had the following to say: ‘Spread the word, join the Harvest of Hope veg box scheme and, if possible, enable the further development and permanent essential support for micro-farmers by donating R100 towards a micro-farm.’

What does the future hold for Abalimi?

Family micro-farming has proved that, by simply putting in some effort, a little money and a lot of heart, we can alleviate socio-economic problems by investing in urban agriculture.

The progress made by Abalimi Bezekhaya and Harvest of Hope far exceeds that made by governments in the last 50 years or more. If government is serious about alleviating poverty, creating jobs and ensuring food security, they will endorse the micro-farming movement and replicate the model throughout more areas in South Africa.

‘Abalimi is a national role model which can be replicated at a low cost, with proven results, even internationally...’ said Rob.

To find out more, check their site: www.abalimi.org.za.