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Lukhanyo Community Farm and Hub / Urban Think-Tank

Urban agriculture systems - transforming the lives of
people in informal settlements

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This case study originally appeared in *Cities for the future: Innovative and principles-based approaches to urban equity, sustainability and governance* (published in April 2015).

Cities for the future is the biannual flagship publication of the Global Compact Cities Programme and is financially supported by the Research and Innovation Portfolio at RMIT University.

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Cape Town, South Africa



Urban agriculture systems – transforming the lives of people in informal settlements

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The award-winning Abalimi is helping South Africa's Cape Town residents initiate and maintain organic food growing and nature conservation projects with long-term social and environmental benefits.

Urban agriculture and environmental action association Abalimi – meaning ‘the planters’ in Xhosa – is at the forefront of a growing international movement enabling informal settlement residents to engage in meaningful food production, making a significant contribution to the fight against food insecurity. The organization’s focus is on improving sustainable food production through the development of ‘microfarms’, which take the form of individual and community gardens within the Cape Town townships of Nyanga, Philippi and Khayelitsha, as well as surrounding settlements. The townships are located in the Cape Flats, an expansive sand dune area situated to the southeast of the central business district. Currently, over 4,000 microfarmers and their families are registered, in addition to over 200 community projects.

Like many informal settlements, Cape Town’s townships are composed of areas of densely packed shacks and more substantial homes adjacent to open land where construction is prohibited. The demand for space means increasing numbers of people are building shacks within the floodplain, the inevitable consequence being that their homes flood regularly.

Abalimi has negotiated access to numerous neglected spaces for township residents to practice urban agriculture, including areas of land where construction is prohibited (often sandy scrubland), land around public buildings, along roads and under power lines. Taken together, these areas of cultivation generate a fertile landscape that raises the quality of the overall environment in aesthetic and ecological terms, while also helping participants to realize their potential as food producers.

Well-organized urban agriculture systems are providing

bottom-up solutions to some of the key challenges facing informal settlements, namely, decreasing food security, increasing unemployment and associated social problems. Food security means that safe and nutritious food is available consistently and remains reasonably priced. A recent study undertaken to assess the level of food security in Cape Town’s townships found that 80 per cent of households are either moderately or severely food insecure – a figure rising as high as 89 per cent in Khayelitsha, South Africa’s largest and fastest growing township. The dual phenomena of rapidly growing populations and increasing disruptions to food production due to climate change demand increased energy and resources. This was also the conclusion of a December 2013 report by the UN Commission on Trade and Development, which highlighted the need to address food security in informal settlements worldwide by developing methods of small-scale urban agriculture in line with Abalimi’s approach.

The global urban agriculture movement has a long history – three decades in the case of Abalimi – of devising systems to enable informal settlement residents to achieve food security and even generate meaningful income through their own endeavours. Participants in the Abalimi system embark on a step-by-step journey, where skills and knowledge accumulate as participants move through the ‘Farmer Development Chain’ – from survival, to a semi-commercial stage and then potentially a fully commercial stage. The semi-commercial stage is achieved when a microfarmer has guaranteed food security and produces a surplus to sell within their own township, as well as externally to residents throughout the rest of the city. The semi-commercial stage is relatively straightforward to reach. Becoming fully commercial is a significantly harder step and does not appeal to all participants. By this stage, people will have acquired the

transferable skills and increased confidence to enter the formal employment market. Moving through the Farmer Development Chain requires serious commitment. Financing is available through funding sourced by Abalimi.

Crucial to the system's success is the effectiveness of communications strategies that target township residents, focusing on the benefits of participating and what is required to succeed. The main vehicles used are two not-for-profit education and support sites called 'People's Garden Centers', located in Nyanga and Khayelitsha. In addition, mobile educators teach groups within their communities. The centres supply free advice, information and subsidized agricultural inputs such as soil improvers, seeds, ground covers, basic tools, wind breaks, safe pest control solutions, trees and – in the future – access to micro-finance. The majority of the people progressing through the program are women, who represent whole families and are typically the most open to self-help initiatives. Encouragingly, however, the participation of men and youth has expanded in recent times.

One of Abalimi's key innovations is the development of the 'Harvest of Hope', a social marketing business that collects, packs and delivers surplus organic vegetables to families living in the formal areas of Cape Town. It is effectively an economic bridge between the informal and formal sectors, serviced by microfarmers at the semi-commercial stage of the Farmer Development Chain. Participating in Harvest of Hope provides microfarmers with regular income by contracting them to grow seasonal organic produce at guaranteed prices. Around 100 previously unemployed microfarmers are currently contracted. In the medium term, the number is set to increase to 300, while longer-term potential exists for thousands of microfarmers to supply Cape Town's demand for vegetables and grains. This innovative

economic connection between informal and formal markets can be replicated in other settlements with similar conditions.

The adoption of urban agriculture projects sees multiple benefits flow through to the overall settlement community, including increased interaction between residents, improved cooperation, the horizontal transfer of skills and knowledge and greater social cohesion within and between townships. The opportunity remains to impact townships on a much larger scale. In order for this to occur, enhanced cooperation between existing stakeholders and new partnerships are needed to increase available resources to fund microfinance from the mid-livelihood level, when microfarmers are able to budget based on predictable income streams. Worldwide interest and participation in social investment is growing rapidly. Abalimi represents a proven model for investment and expansion.

Cape Town has significant potential to develop the scale and sophistication of its urban agriculture sector, which will ultimately benefit the entire city. There are numerous examples of other cities around the world that have embraced urban agriculture successfully. Singapore, for instance, is fully self-reliant in meat and produces 25 per cent of its vegetable needs. Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, one of the world's fastest growing large cities, now has 67 per cent of families engaged in farming compared with 18 per cent in 1967.

The necessity of embracing small-scale agriculture in urban areas to mitigate growing food insecurity is clear. The challenge lies in devising successful methods to communicate the work of Abalimi and likeminded organizations to informal settlement residents worldwide, positioning the development of urban agriculture as a fundamental element of the evolving urban fabric. Future



Harvest of Hope is a social marketing business that collects, packs and delivers organic vegetables to the formal areas of Cape Town and provides an economic bridge between the informal and formal sectors. Image: Alexandra Farrington-Schomburg Misereor, July 2013.

expansion of urban agriculture in sites with similar conditions to Nyanga, Philippi, Khayelitsha and their surrounding settlements can be achieved by applying a context-sensitive version of the Abalimi model, bolstered by the crucial support of residents, not-for-profit actors, government and business networks.

New Lukhanyo project

Lukhanyo Community Farm and Hub is located on an area of 1.2 hectares of unused land owned by the Department of Education. It is being developed with a neighbouring informal settlement community living in an area called the BT Section. The community's participation is being led by the community leader Phumezo Tsibanto. The development will include a range of community functions, such as planting areas, a covered market space, an orchard, public spaces and energy creation. The focal point will be a multi-functional community building with a range of functions, including pre-school and adult education classes, a creche, a kitchen, a community event space, community meetings area, a Wi-Fi hub and a library. The building will have flexible spaces and be designed to enable future upgrading, with architect Maurits der Staay developing the building design.

Many schools across Cape Town's townships have large areas of unused land that have the potential to be made available for urban agriculture. Lukhanyo is being developed as a potential prototype for replication on this land supported by the Department of Education Circuit Manager and the Principal Spatial Planner for Khayelitsha. The process is being documented and

will be communicated via manuals for residents of the informal settlements and for professionals to help catalyze the development of other urban agriculture projects and similar community hubs on unused land in South Africa's townships.

The project is being developed in parallel to the Empower Shack Project, which is a groundbreaking informal settlement upgrading project developed as a partnership between the BT community, Urban-Think Tank and the Informal Settlement Upgrading NGO Ikhayalami. Andy Bolnick, the founder of Ikhayalami, and Scott Lloyd from Urban Think Tank are leading this development.

The Empower Shack project will introduce an integrated approach to the upgrading of South Africa's growing informal settlements, merging design innovation with community-driven spatial planning and livelihoods programming. The livelihoods programming will include urban agriculture. The long-term aim is that the community will reach a production level that will enable people to create a steady income selling through local markets such as the Harvest of Hope. The South African Government, post the May 2014 election, has significantly increased funding for small-scale farming in urban, peri-urban and rural areas, which can open the way for thousands of residents of informal settlements to engage in urban agriculture as a means to achieve food security and move into the formal sector of the economy.

The City of Cape Town committed to the Ten Principles of the Global Compact in 2013.



Masikhanye, Khayelitsha township, before and after the implementation of urban agriculture projects. Participating in the Harvest of Hope provides microfarmers with regular income by contracting them to grow seasonal organic vegetables at guaranteed prices. Image: Ben Mansfield.