

FOOD GARDENS IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Food Security in Urban and Peri-Urban Informal Settlements

Background

From May to August 2018, I worked with Community Systems Strengthening for Health (CSS), a three-year pilot programme that builds the capacity of health committees and community members to realize their health rights and promote community well-being. Funded by the European Union (EU) and in partnership with the University of Cape Town (UCT), TFT and Women on Farms Project, CSS divides health empowerment into four main programs: violence reduction, child protection, health education, and food and nutrition. The programs engage community members and non-government organizations in three main sites: Belhar, Klapmuts, and Gugulethu. My research, through film, interviews, and participation in the programs, focused on food and nutrition in all three sites.

By August, I filmed six long-form interviews of more than three hours each, as well as ten interviews under an hour each, that culminated to an hour-long documentary on the ways in which residents of informal settlements are taking food security into their own hands through home and community food gardens. My research, largely participant-driven, shows that with proper education and resources, individuals and families in the three sites can reap benefits from food gardens, such as saving money, feeling empowered, improving health, collecting an income, and strengthening their communities. Limitations that still stand include sustainability—both economically and environmentally—stigmatizations, funding, access to information, access to formal markets, networking, and the dangers of food gardens being seen as the sole solution to food insecurity.

The Western Cape Government generally recognizes that urban farming and food gardens are beneficial to economically disadvantaged populations and has constructed The Farmer Support and Development Programme (FSD) to assist small-scale farmers with their projects. This programme supports South Africa's constitutional obligation to realize the right to food, found in Section 27(1)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in which it states "everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water." However, with 80% of households in Cape Town either moderately or severely food insecure, many residents cannot access the limited resources offered by FSD. My research highlights a need for the Western Cape Government to put more funding towards the support of food gardens, as well as strengthen efforts to further research the multidimensionality of food insecurity, in order to implement holistic policies that get to the root of the problems affecting vulnerable communities. The Government should also support its residents by facilitating networks through which low-income and unemployed individuals can sell their produce upon the success of their gardens.

Research Findings

Organic food gardening is a large part of the skills participants learn in CSS's food and nutrition program, along with education on nutritional diets. A few participants already ran public food gardens, small-scale farms, and food cooperatives, and attended the lessons to better learn organic gardening. Many participants had home food gardens that they had been using to supplement their own cooking, yet wanted to learn how to expand their gardens to share the produce with their communities. The rest of the participants had little to no experience with food gardening, but expressed hope for the future of their gardens. Below is what I found to be the benefits and limitations of food gardening:

Benefits of Food Gardening

- *Empowerment:* Almost every participant with whom I spoke said that gardening made them feel good—feel happy. Many individuals stated that working in their garden gives them peace of mind because they can contemplate their lives while feeling one with the earth, and they feel satisfied and accomplished when they harvest their own food.
- *Cost reduction:* Every interviewee said that gardening has helped them reduce costs because the money they save from decreased spendings on groceries outweighs the money they have to spend on seeds and occasional supplies.
- *Form of income:* For some participants, their gardens have become a means of income because they can sell their excess fruits and vegetables to their community, and in some cases, to formal markets and grocery stores. This is especially true for those that are retired or unemployed and have the time and desire to invest in the health and expansion of their gardens.
- *Strengthening community:* Almost every participant expressed that gardening has brought them closer to their communities. When individuals are not selling their excess food, many choose to give it for free to their neighbors, local children, and soup kitchens. Several participants have created alliances with local schools in efforts to get students engaged in growing and learning about fresh and nutritious food.
- *Education:* All of the community members learned more about health and nutrition, and the majority of those interviewed said that having their own garden and understanding where their food comes from has actually changed their diets for the better. Many have or intend to spread this education to the youth in their communities.
- *Health:* All participants stated that the nutritional education led to an improvement in their diets, which has inevitably led to an increase in health, as all of the participants are also trained on food's connection to noncommunicable diseases. Furthermore, most participants expressed excitement about their food being organic and believe that eating organic food will have a direct positive impact on their health.

Limitations of Food Gardening

- *Environmental instability:* Cape Town recently experienced a severe drought, and all of the CSS participants were negatively impacted, with many having to shut down their gardens all together. Only one participant was able to obtain a borehole during the drought through help from an external non-profit organization. When asked if other CSS participants could receive support from the organization, he stated that the organization simply helped him with crowdfunding and advertising, and the staff is too small to take on multiple clients. Without more funding to access boreholes and other technologies that help farmers/gardeners withstand natural disasters, food gardens are not a sustainable solution to food security, especially for people living in poverty.
 - Besides financial support, individuals stated that it was helpful to learn which vegetables and fruits are in season because those seeds are more conducive with the season's soil and yield more successful products. Several participants also used their networks to access large buckets that they turned into containers to catch rain, but many could not access such buckets nor had the space to store them on their properties. Environmental sustainability does not necessarily outweigh all of the

benefits food gardening presents, but the limitation points to a need for better funding for resources and space, coupled with environmentally conscious education.

- *Financial instability:* Many of the individuals in the CSS programme were unemployed, and most of those that had employment lived paycheck to paycheck. The participants that started their own food and nutrition programs used their own money to buy food for the children. Some of the participants had to shut down their gardens all together and were waiting until they got more money to start them back up again. When asked if they applied for money from the Government, the majority of the participants did not know the Government had funding opportunities. One participant was in the process of applying for Government funding to start a food cooperative, but they stated that the Government requires the farmers to downpay several thousand rands, and he and his team were struggling to save enough money. Arguably, the largest concern amongst participants was that in order to receive most Government funding, the participants need to be part of an accredited organization, which also requires money for registration. Since many families are starting gardens to feed themselves and their neighbors, the process of accreditation does not seem worthwhile.
 - Financial instability points to a need for not only more funding, resources, and technology, but also efforts to make community members aware of the funding opportunities. Additionally, there needs to be a means for non-accredited individuals to receive resources if Cape Town wants to increase the popularity of food gardens. Understandably, accreditation allows the Government to better track the spending of money, so I suggest it would be most beneficial to support non-accredited individuals through resources like boreholes, water containers, seeds, gardening tools, education, and small plots of land. Insofar as financial support, the Government should lower the monetary down payment required for individuals to receive support, as it is currently too high for low-income residents to get involved.
- *Not a panacea:* It would be dangerous to consider food gardening as the sole solution to hunger, obesity, and malnutrition. Due to rampant poverty and environmental instability, these issues are too complex to be solved through small gardens. However, the popular method of increasing the number of supermarkets and lowering the cost and subsequent quality of fruits and vegetables has proven to decrease hunger but increase noncommunicable diseases.
 - A more dynamic approach to food security would be to increase household incomes by increasing minimum wage. By increasing household incomes, residents will be able to strengthen their gardens and purchase what they cannot grow at local stands and supermarkets.
- *Not only for poor people:* Food gardens should not be understood as an activity for poor people. When an idea or activity is stigmatized as such, it de-incentivizes people to get involved because they do not want to be seen as poor, due to social and cultural norms. Rather, food gardening should be seen as an exciting opportunity for everyone from all classes to form a better relationship with their food and create a more healthy and sustainable community at large.
- *Access to formal markets:* Participants that were able to grow excess food expressed difficulty accessing formal markets to sell their produce. A popular organization amongst Western Cape informal settlements, Abalimi Bezekhaya runs a project “Harvest of Hope” to connect local gardeners to potential consumers; however, in recent months, they have had to scale back the number of local gardeners which whom they connect due to lack of funding and resources. Participants working with Abalimi speak highly of their training programs, but it is clear Abalimi needs support actually connecting their trainees to formal consumer markets. The Government

should look into partnering with non-profit organizations like Abalimi in order to better connect low-income communities with avenues of profit.

Conclusion

In 2002, South Africa rolled out The Integrated Food Security Strategy for South Africa based on its constitutional obligation that “the state must by legislation and other measures, within its available resources, avail to progressive realisation of the right to sufficient food.” The strategy, however, does not make clear which local agencies must take responsibility for carrying out its goals. In the Western Cape in 2016, a Household Food and Nutrition Security Strategic Framework was applied across agencies to relevant programmes grappling with food security, such as the Western Cape Working on Wellness Programme, the Strengthen Food Security Work Group, and the Western Cape Healthy Eating Guide. While efforts to strengthen such programs are well-intended, the lack of a centralized agency makes it confusing for low-income communities to understand where to access support. The Farmer Support and Development Programme within the Western Cape Department of Agriculture offers an opportunity for centralization, but its programs focus primarily on established farmers, leaving out residents that are interested in food gardening without already established roots. Should the Western Cape wish to fully realize the Household Food and Nutrition Security Strategic Framework and, ultimately, the constitutional right to food, the Government first and foremost needs a centralized agency that directly deals with strengthening environmental, financial, and institutional sustainability for informal communities in Cape Town. The CSS programme proves that individuals are more than willing to work for their food security when given the appropriate opportunities and support.

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