

The Siyazama Community Allotment Garden Association, Cape Town, South Africa

Urban agriculture has been practiced in Cape Town for a long time and involves many different types of activities. There is currently an increasingly organised community-based organic farming and gardening movement in the city. This movement is led by associations such as the Vukuzenzela Urban Farmers Association (VUFA). Abalimi Bezekhaya (Planters of the Home), which supports VUFA, is the leading urban agriculture organisation in Cape Town.

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SCAGA Garden how it has changed

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SCAGA Garden: how it was before

Abalimi Bezekhaya provides support services such as the supply of low-cost bulk compost, seed, seedlings, training and on-site project extension. Abalimi's two non-profit People's Garden Centres annually supply agriculture and horticulture inputs to, on average, 2,000-3,000 home-based survival and subsistence gardeners and approximately 200 community agriculture and greening projects. Abalimi projects are encouraged to be 100 percent organic. The economic potential for community agriculture is significant, as there is a high and ever-growing demand for organic vegetables in Cape Town. Organic markets and retailers both large and small are always under-supplied.

VUFA

The VUFA began in 2002 as an idea when - with Abalimi Bezekhaya's assistance - 70-100 community-based urban agriculture associations began meeting to discuss common issues. Since then, a draft constitution has been accepted - see objectives listed below. At present, the VUFA comprises about 72 community-based UA associations and is organised as two main branches in the two main black township areas - VUFA Khayelitsha area and VUFA Nyanga-Gugulethu-Phillipi area.

The VUFA's objectives and activities are related to lobbying and advocacy, marketing and training on micro-enterprise development and social development. Vukuzenzela Urban Farmers Association (VUFA) is currently networking with other emerging small farmers groups provincially. Abalimi assists VUFA in enhancing its national and regional links. It is hoped that, over time, the emerging national and regional organic small and micro-farmers associations will federate to increase their leverage on behalf of the poor.

Internal and external politics and capacity issues always play a major role in organisational effectiveness among community-based social movements. The VUFA is no exception. Already in its short history, the organisation has suffered a few leadership crises, been almost destroyed by external government and political agendas which influence membership loyalty and focus, and is currently re-organising. Abalimi Bezekhaya is introducing the services of an excellent partner organisation - Community Connections - which focuses entirely on organisation building and development among community-based organisations. Although Abalimi Bezekhaya is able to rally and mobilise the

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VUFA through various interventions (like horizontal learning exchanges between the VUFA members and with other farmer groups), providing structured OB/OD services is not its core business. Abalimi is thus building a partnership with Community Connections to enable the VUFA membership to build organisational capacity over time, using the inevitable crises as learning opportunities rather than experiencing them as entirely negative and unwanted events.

SCAGA

The Siyazama Community Allotment Garden Association (SCAGA) is a member of VUFA. Since 1997 its members have farmed 5,000 m² in a corridor previously under power lines (low-intensity feeder lines that were later decommissioned) in Macassar, Khayelithsa. SCAGA could provide 3-4 permanent, full-time formal jobs, but decided instead to become a Livelihood Level garden, with up to 30 subsistence “jobs”, on a mixture of individual and communal plots. These form the centre around which a number of other entrepreneurial and service initiatives have been or are being developed. In SCAGA’s case, a small seedling nursery, a craft group, and a tea and catering service have been developed, and plans are underway for a soup kitchen and child care facilities. Adjacent land within the same corridor – some 3 hectares of sandy wasteland – has now been fenced and is being developed to accommodate another 200-300 gardeners.

There have been positive impacts on the position and role of women as leaders

Each SCAGA member receives a minimum cash and food income, after costs, of R50-R100 per month (USD 7-14) – a lifeline to households with no discernable income. In 2005, the project hosted its fifth group of 30 people, successfully marketing high-quality organic produce. Group savings at year end, after costs and own consumption, have varied between R2,000 and R 20,000.

This community-oriented project of SCAGA has had far-reaching impacts, both within the local community and on policy development in Cape Town. It has sparked hundreds of applications from

new groups and has given planners solid proof to argue for community-managed open spaces and for self-help job creation. SCAGA is repeatedly visited by VIPs, including local government ministers and senior officials. The Western Cape Department of Agriculture (in contrast to its national counterpart) has recently begun to give some solid support to community organic agriculture projects, mainly in the form of improved infrastructure.

The most (potentially) helpful government-support programme of all was launched three years ago by the City of Cape Town – Dept of Economic and Human Development. Stanley Visser of the City of Cape Town reported on this in issue no. 16 of the UA-Magazine (Stanley Visser *et al.* 2006). This is the process by which an Urban Agriculture Policy for the City of Cape Town, plus linked support programmes, was launched and tested. The policy is now in the final stages of ratification and will provide for long-term and rational support to UA practitioners, especially among the poor.

Impacts on the local environment have also been quite substantial. Soil fertility inputs have decreased, while pests, once a large problem, are hardly mentioned now. Improved health is also becoming evident, as are the medicinal use of fresh organic food to strengthen the immune system and the awareness of the therapeutic value of organic growing. New members often show signs of malnourishment, have low energy and little money. After one season, remarks about their generally improved health are often heard.

There have also been positive impacts on the position and role of women as leaders, through, for example, Ilima – traditional mutual-help work events. These have now become a practical tool in increasing women’s empowerment and mobilisation, facilitating community support and muscle power for SCAGA projects. It began with SCAGA women recruiting unemployed men to do heavy work by re-introducing a traditional rural practice of serving traditional beer and food after the work is done. These events cost very little, but more importantly the women earn wide respect and support in the community through the work they do. SCAGA is now firmly women-led, and women-run projects in VUFA are now the norm. On

occasion, husbands and sons come to help female members with heavy work in the gardens, thus alleviating the women’s additional responsibility of managing households. But friction arises whenever the men insist that all the food produced has to be sold. Such problems are now being minimised as female leadership is more generally accepted. It has recently been decided that men, while needed for the heavy work, should run their own gardens separately!

But women are not perfect either. Organisational dynamics are the single biggest obstacle to community-level development and are the main cause of most lapsed projects. Problems with land, water, inputs, capital and skills are all relatively easily solved in comparison. In the world of poverty alleviation and work and income creation among the poor, people cannot operate in isolation; they have to co-operate and problems always arise. After nearly falling apart many times due to personality and leadership dynamics, the SCAGA group has chosen to work only in plenary decision-making format. In other words, all decisions are taken by everyone together. No single person is mandated or permitted to take executive powers on any important issue. This approach was recommended to them by Abalimi. Independent field research has confirmed that it is more viable than attempting to build corporate structures prematurely. As a result of this way of working, SCAGA is running smoother, with fewer disagreements. However, decisions can take a long time and SCAGA, like any other group, has to evolve in order to deal with the increasingly demanding economic and legal necessities related to every aspect of running an organisation. For instance, SCAGA has applied for non-profit registration from the National Dept. of Social Services – maintaining this registration is, on its own, a sophisticated task and requires production of financial reports. Thus the pressure is always on to develop a more sophisticated organisational structure. But there are no ready-made models for grassroots cooperative organisations among the poor and SCAGA – like most of the emerging movements Abalimi services – has to evolve its own structure step by step. As already mentioned, however, Abalimi is bringing in a new partner (Community Connections) to assist with this process.

Furthermore, once commercial factors are considered, money management becomes a litmus test for organisational health. Dividing profits equitably can be problematic, as can mixing up different types of money. In SCAGA's case, all members work equally on the communal commercial section (50% of the garden) and thus share the profits from this section equally. They do as they please with the profits from their own plots. They have also separated their personal group savings bank account from their project bank account. Profits from sales of vegetables grown on their communal commercial section go into the project account, and money earned from sales of vegetables from the members' individual plots goes into their personal savings accounts. This solution sounds simple, but it is a good example of the kind of elementary management decisions that have taken much time for SCAGA (and other groups) to arrive at.

The development continuum is a clear step-by-step pathway for the creation of sustainable community gardens among the poor

THE DEVELOPMENT CONTINUUM

Based on Abalimi's experience with organisations like SCAGA, a step-by-step development continuum and sustainability index for community-based agriculture has been developed. It is currently being field-tested and is almost ready for distribution. The development continuum and sustainability index evolved from actual field experience over the last 12 years. Before 1994 (when South Africa's first fully democratic elections took place) it was not possible to work developmentally among the poor, who were mostly black and involved in a vicious political struggle. The notion of a development continuum is not new, however, a clear step-by-step pathway for the creation of sustainable community gardens and micro-farming projects among the poor definitely is.

The development continuum and sustainability index was created to support urban agriculture development projects. At the moment, energy is being wasted by donor

agencies attempting to enable survival-level farmers produce at a commercial level too quickly, while the beneficiaries themselves are confused about which level they would like to achieve, or even about whether they want to be farmers at all!

This continuum and measurement system (sustainability index) tracks the development of community agriculture projects through four levels: from survival, through subsistence, into livelihood and then to commercial. These levels have been identified from field experience, and sustainability measurements have been defined for each level. The continuum takes into account social dynamics such as group conflicts and the "flow-through" of members, enabling these to be seen as positive events rather than limiting factors. It is now known that new groups need about seven years to establish a relatively stable organisation for community agriculture, while sustainable-level skills and knowledge take approximately three years to acquire within each level. The physical infrastructure for community agriculture, in contrast, can be created within one year – with the exception of fertile soil. The development continuum takes the limiting factors into account and allows for a constructive and empowering "flow-through" of participants who have other aspirations and use farming or gardening only as a temporary stepping stone.

Based on this continuum, Abalimi (in partnership with the South African Institute of Entrepreneurs - SAIE) is developing a special training programme to provide community farmers and gardeners with sustainable assistance, while allowing for the "flow-through" of temporary farmers. The training enables both illiterate and literate people farming at survival level to progress to the level that suits them, or to eventually achieve the commercial level. The training model also takes account of a new type of community garden that is emerging at survival, subsistence and livelihood levels – this is the "treatment support garden", which supplies fresh organic vegetables to the chronically ill (*CSI Handbook*, 2006).

SERVICES

To further extend the community development potential of SCAGA, Abalimi's organisation-building arm uses tried and

tested interventions to build farmers' and gardeners' skills and organisational capacity (since 2000). Horizontal learning (farmer-to-farmer) exchange, action learning and savings mobilisation are key development activities. Micro-credit will be available in the near future to groups with consistent savings records through projects aimed at the livelihood and commercial levels of the development continuum. Periodic farmers' markets, tunnel greenhouses, cold-storage rooms and value-adding packing sheds will follow in subsequent years, supplying a wide range of produce for cooperative marketing and creating new livelihood and job opportunities for the poor. Bulk organic certification is now being sought by Abalimi and VUFA. This would allow association members to obtain certification more cheaply and thereby increase the external marketability of their products.

Abalimi is also determined to ensure that organic certification does not act as a deterrent to emerging players. Together with SAIE, it is developing a "Master Gardeners" training programme (now called Agriplanner 2) that, once accredited, will enable illiterate gardeners and farmers to move from survival through commercial development levels. This will also form the basis of a capacity building programme that will enable genuine organic farmers to return to abandoned Eastern Cape lands.

With its social objectives and relative economic success, SCAGA is South Africa's first example of sustainable urban community organic farming as a permanent lifestyle choice. Consistent with the best intentions of community development, there is no limit to what can be achieved by Cape Town's urban farmers once they find ways to work again on the land with trust and goodwill.

The greatest single hurdle facing sustainable farmers' organisations among the poor is the achievement of group-organisation integrity in a neo-liberal competitive world, given the usually very limited resources available to enable their development. This integrity cannot be achieved if driven from the top down. It must be built member by member and association by association at micro-level in order for meso and macro arrangements to have real effect.