Community Gardens as a Form of Urban Household Food and Income Supplements in African Cities: Experiences in Hammanskraal, Pretoria

Sibusiso Nkosi,1 Trynos Gumbo,2 Florian Kroll3 and Michael Rudolph4

Food shortages, unaffordability and inaccessibility in urban centres of the world at large and in the African continent in particular have become issues of concern since the turn of the twenty-first century. Admittedly, food insecurity is no longer confined to and experienced only in rural areas. Instead, it has become a common occurrence in cities, where millions are unable to either purchase or access enough food for themselves and their families due to a myriad of reasons. In an effort to address this ill, people in a number of residential areas have started cultivating community food gardens. The gardens are viewed as a viable and feasible vehicle for increasing food access and availability, as well as reducing the cost of food. To better understand and appreciate the role of community food gardens in the food availability and income generation, a case study of food gardens was conducted in the Hammanskraal township in Pretoria, the administrative capital of the Republic of South Africa. The study highlighted how community food gardeners in Hammanskraal are reaping meaningful benefits in terms of food supplementation and income that is generated from the sale of their produce. This policy brief proffers that a lot still needs to be done to support and encourage communities to expand and sustainably maintain their food garden projects. Long-term success can only be achieved if all relevant and critical stakeholders, including central and local government authorities, non-governmental organisations, local communities and individuals, make a concerted effort to support organised urban farming. There is a need also to build the capacity of urban poor communities, through the provision of funds, equipment, skills, and suitable and adequate strategically located land for this purpose.

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Introduction and Background

A shortage of food in terms of quantity and quality is no longer synonymous with rural areas. It has become common in urban centres globally as well, with millions being unable to either purchase or access enough food for themselves and their families. This inability to purchase or access enough food is due to a myriad of reasons.

The food shortage problem has become more pronounced in cities of developing countries, and the eradication of hunger has been receiving much wider attention since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000. Ever since, the United Nations (UN) has been encouraging countries to promote food security by improving the availability of food in the right quantities and qualities to all citizens by the year 2015. Yet the majority of people in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) are still far from being food secured, particularly in the rural areas and urban townships. One can only be considered to be food secured if they have both physical and economic access to enough safe and nutritious food at all times to meet their dietary needs while leading an active and healthy life.

In the RSA, studies on household food insecurity, such as the one by Battersby, have revealed that about a million households struggle to access adequate food, meaning that more than 12 million people are facing food insecurity and starvation. However, despite the high level of challenges to accessing adequate food, the country has recorded tremendous progress in reducing the percentage of citizens facing starvation: A 17 per cent reduction was recorded in the percentage of the population facing food shortages, from 29.9 per cent in 2002 to 12.9 per cent in 2011, in the quest to achieve the first MDG (to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger). One of the strategies that have been used to improve the availability of and access to food in the country’s urban centres, particularly in the townships, is the concept of community food gardens. Community food gardens can best be described as gardening arrangements by a group of community members who come together to plant and produce their own fruits and vegetables for either consumption or sale, and sometimes a combination of both. These gardens come in various shapes and sizes. Some may be based on shared tasks, whilst others take the form of individuals sharing one area but each cultivating a different plot.

It has been demonstrated that community food gardens can result in a massive transformation of poor communities. These gardens play a variety of roles that include the provision of nutritious food and decreasing the dependency on food aid and emergency relief food parcels from central and local government authorities and NGOs. When properly initiated and maintained, community food gardens assist in substantially subsidising household food supplies. This is realised through the sharing of fresh foods with family and close friends. This is mostly applicable in the African context, where urban agriculture has been recognised as a means to increase the scale of food available in households and the “nutritional status” of household members. Besides the promotion of food access, community food gardens also have the potential to increase the diversity of food and improve households’ disposable income. In addition, community food gardens are used by government authorities to engage citizens in meaningful economic activities that keep communities, particularly the youth, away from criminal activities. In the case of the RSA, the motivation to expand and sustain community food garden projects extends inter alia to the need to reduce the great dependence on commercially prepared and processed foods that in the majority of cases are not nutritious.

Relevant stakeholders, which include government authorities at all levels, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local communities, civil society and individuals, have been taking the initiative in starting community food gardens as a solution to escaping hunger and improving the food situation in townships. Community food gardens have become a common sight in townships and are seen as a viable and feasible vehicle for increasing food access and availability and reducing the cost of food.

One township where such community food garden projects have been initiated and adopted is Hammanskraal in Pretoria. Hammanskraal is a growing township that faces challenges of high unemployment and poverty levels. To obtain a better understanding and appreciation of the contribution that community food gardens make towards food availability and income generation in this township, research in the form of a case study of community gardens in Hammanskraal was conducted under the leadership of the Wits Siyakhana Initiative. The case study sought to gather information on gardening activities by means of interviewing community members, carrying out observations and administering questionnaires to members of the community engaged in food garden projects. This policy brief summarises the findings of the study, starting with a review of the relevant literature and...
thereafter focusing on the variety of vegetables and fruits being grown in the township, their contribution to food provision and supply, and their role in generating household income.

**Experiences of Community Food Gardening in Hammanskraal**

Community food gardening projects were initiated in Hammanskraal mainly to promote the culture of preparing and eating food at home. The study revealed that the community grows a variety of vegetables and fruits. The variety and production levels as a percentage of total production are shown in Figure 1. Vegetables are more commonly grown in the community food gardens than fruits. Figure 1 shows that 20 per cent of the participants had planted tomatoes, followed by 15 per cent each of cabbages, spinach and onions.

Vegetables within the group of mealies (corn), beans and pumpkins are not commonly found within these surveyed community food gardens, as the pie chart shows, since all of them reflect the same contribution of 5 per cent. The pie chart further reveals that tomatoes contribute 20 per cent, which is partly explained by their use in preparing relishes from various vegetable types such as cabbage and spinach. The other reason for the prevalence of tomatoes within the surveyed community gardens is that they can be harvested in both summer and winter in frost-free areas. According to Nell et al., vegetables such as spinach, cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes, onions, carrots and beetroot are very common in food gardens across townships in South Africa. These vegetables are considered to be important in the daily diet consumption of people within townships; equally important is the preparation process.

However, it was discovered that most community food gardeners were not able to provide vegetables on a continuous basis. There are times when their gardens have no vegetables at all. What has been identified as a common cause of empty vegetable gardens is pests that destroy their plants and a general lack of preparedness in this regard, as they sometimes have to go without the required pesticides. This lack of a consistent supply of vegetables is cause for concern, given the low levels of income of the gardeners and the amount it cost for purchasing food, particularly nutritious food that provides a balanced diet consisting of adequate vegetables and fruits. The study also investigated the impact of community food gardens, and in particular the benefits derived from the vegetables that are harvested from the gardens. The results are presented and discussed below.

**Figure 1 Vegetable and Fruit Types**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vegetables</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tomatoes</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spinach</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beetroot, carrots,</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radishes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cabbages, chomolias</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beans</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mealies (corn)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pumpkins, squashes,</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>butternuts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beetroot, carrots,</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radishes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>berries (strawberries)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Contribution to Food Supplies**

It was established that the need to provide food from local sources at reduced costs has necessitated the establishment and operation of these community food gardens. All the participants indicated that they had ventured into food gardening to improve food access and diversify the food intake within their households. These households’ efforts to supplement their food supplies and replace their purchased food intakes with home-grown vegetables and fruits are timely and essential, given the skyrocketing food prices in most urban centres in South Africa. It was also revealed that during the appropriate season for gardening, community food gardeners are able to harvest fresh vegetables that can be consumed or used to supplement their relish at least three times in a week.

On being asked about the food they had consumed the previous day and night, participants in the research and the community food gardens revealed that grains were the most
commonly consumed food, followed by starchy roots and tubers (Figure 2). It is interesting to note that members of the community food gardening projects are increasingly depending on their locally produced vegetables, as indicated in the diagram. One of the gardeners remarked,

…the garden plays a major role within my household, because now we no longer have to worry about the purchase of meat. Whenever there is nothing to supplement pap [a local staple food], we are able to go to the garden and get a few vegetables to cook for that day. It is much better than going to bed hungry.

This demonstrates in a practical way the value of the community food gardens in helping households participate in projects that enable them to supplement their available food, thereby improving their food security.

**Contribution to Incomes**

As was alluded to earlier, the primary objective of establishing and operating community food gardens in townships is to supplement food supplies and to reduce the cost of household food supplies. However, the study revealed that the gardeners sometimes produce surplus produce that is sold to generate income that is used, in turn, to buy other basic foodstuffs. As regards the selling behaviours of the gardeners, in the study revealed that participants in the community food gardens have different preferences and approaches. Figure 3 depicts the selling behaviours of gardeners who earn an income from the produce cultivated in the community gardens. As can be seen on the graphical representation of selling behaviours, 50 per cent of the community gardeners prefer to sell most of their garden produce. To such members, income generation seems to be the most important factor behind their participation in the food garden projects.

However, to some members of the community garden projects, consumption is the main objective of their participation in the projects, as has been highlighted before. 42 per cent of gardeners consume all their produce, thereby substantially supplementing the food they purchase from shops with their locally produced food – a positive development in the quest to secure the country’s food situation. Only 8 per cent of the studied community food gardening participants sell the surplus that remains after first making provision for their own household food needs by holding back most of their produce.

The study therefore revealed that the income from the gardens serves to improve community...
livelihoods. One of the gardeners stated that a single crate of tomatoes could be sold for R100, and this income is useful in meeting some of their daily needs. 95 per cent of the participants in the community food gardening projects mentioned that during the peak of the harvesting season, they generate up to R664.50 a month by selling their surplus produce (refer to Table 1).

Although the income generated from the garden projects fluctuates, this income has reduced communities’ dependence on government assistance. The other benefit of selling some of the produce to the local community is that people within the township are provided with the opportunity to purchase relatively cheaper freshly grown vegetables within their proximity. Having a community food garden provides both the gardeners and the local community with an opportunity to save money by not having to purchase relatively expensive vegetables from a commercial market.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The Hammanskraal case demonstrates that community food gardens are potentially an effective tool for coming against the food shortages and income problems that confront many South African households. Community food gardens have been very useful in subsidising the food basket of many households in the townships. This is a very important contribution, especially against the backdrop of skyrocketing food prices. Furthermore, food gardens provide a way of promoting urban agriculture, which is a key component of sustainable urban development. Not only is there infrastructure to cater for the population, there is also food available for the unemployed. This policy brief therefore makes the following policy recommendations:

- Additional support is needed for the food gardening activities of the urban poor in the country’s cities. The most urgent support concerns the financing and sourcing of equipment required for use in their projects. More investments can be directed towards acquiring land for community food gardening and liaising with local schools’ governing bodies and officials to allow participants to initiate gardens on school premises.
- A culture of information sharing should be developed and promoted. This can be done by setting up group meetings where gardeners are able to share skills, seeds and tools.
- In cases of water scarcity, solutions such as organic mulching should be considered by fruit and vegetable gardeners. Organic mulching also has the capability of reducing weeds in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household economic indicator</th>
<th>Beneficiary average</th>
<th>Community baseline average</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td>R3 047.50</td>
<td>R2 839.39</td>
<td>208.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly food expenditure</td>
<td>992.8571429</td>
<td>R1 152.78</td>
<td>-159.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly garden earnings</td>
<td>549.5</td>
<td>R664.50</td>
<td>-115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly saving</td>
<td>323.75</td>
<td>R457.00</td>
<td>-133.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Monthly Savings and Earnings from the Selling of Produce
a food garden and minimising expenditure on fertilisers.

- There is a need to organise and motivate communities to adopt gardening as a career. Gardening is an activity that can be carried out throughout the year, ensuring a perennial supply of vegetables and fruits, rather than practising it as a seasonal hobby. This demands the setting up of appropriate structures, and developing relevant skills courses for gardening activities.

References


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