

Urban agriculture research in Southern and Eastern Africa has concentrated largely on the use of questionnaires and surveys, usually with a view to understanding the economic benefits accruing to those who practice urban agriculture. For researchers, the focus has been on identifying and analysing the contribution of urban agriculture to income generation, subsistence and food security or on considering its environmental and planning implications.



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Thobeka growing cabbages in Langa, South Africa

# Women's Involvement in Cape Town

## *a social development perspective*

In Cape Town, the economic benefits of urban agriculture are limited. In 1989, an investigation found that, where practised, urban agriculture contributed less than one percent of household income (Eberhard 1989). Nevertheless, people in low-income townships in Cape Town continue to cultivate in backyard plots and communal gardens (1).

So what are the dynamics behind urban agricultural activity in this context? Why do people living in low-income settlements in Cape Town invest time and money in agriculture in the absence of economic benefits?

### A NEW APPROACH

To try and answer this question, an alternative analytical and methodological approach was developed and applied during 10 months, in 1996, of interviewing in three townships in Cape Town (see for more detail Slater, 2001). The approach relied on an understanding of how people came to live in Cape Town and the impact of apartheid on opportunities to find work and a place to live. An understanding of post-apartheid urban agricultural activity was impossible without first understanding the conditions under which people lived in Cape Town and the various ways urban authorities used to remove them from the city during apartheid.

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Rather than being preoccupied with the economic benefits that accrue to urban farmers, the alternative approach sought to understand the dynamics behind urban agriculture, by focusing on social relations and divisions of labour within households and communities. The various different ways in which people might become empowered through urban agriculture were also analysed within this new framework.

Finally, the analytical framework was used by employing a methodological approach that involved qualitative methods and life histories. Whilst gender and women's experiences can be very difficult to make explicit and understood through the application of surveys and questionnaires, life histories made it possible to chart women's involvement in agriculture throughout their lives and to understand changing gender relations in households where urban agriculture was practised.

In Langa, Khayelitsha and Lower Crossroads settlements, 169 people were interviewed and the life histories of fourteen women recorded. Through the use of an alternative framework, urban agriculture was found to be important in the following ways:

### SYMBOL OF WOMEN'S PERCEIVED STABILITY IN THE CITY

Under apartheid, the South African government prevented the movement of black people to cities designated as the workplace and residence of whites alone.

This was achieved through legislative measures including laws that permitted black people in cities only if they had the correct papers certifying their rights to work and reside (temporarily at least) in the city. The laws of urban apartheid also entrenched the authorities' rights to remove illegal squatters, destroy unplanned settlements and imprison or fine people found in the city without pass documents.

Almost all the women whose life histories were recorded had spent years being forced from one squatter camp to the next under apartheid. They fled from either the bulldozers that destroyed their shacks or from the violence that resulted

**The life history enables a great level of trust to be built**

from overcrowded living conditions, poverty and intense competition over land and the right to stay in the city.

After apartheid, people began to cultivate small gardens, many of them for the first time. Women *put down roots* in the city – both literally as they began to till the soil and symbolically as their investment in gardening symbolised their sense of security in the city. They were willing to invest in a backyard garden only at a time and place where they felt they at last had some security of tenure in the city.

Thokozile, a resident of Section D, Khayelitsha, spoke of 'playing hide and seek with the pass inspectors' as she tried to avoid arrest. Another woman, Vuyelwa, held the correct papers certifying her right to live and work in Cape Town. However, because she could find no place to stay in the overcrowded formal settlements, she was forced to build a shack in a squatter camp. She rarely slept in her shack. In the 1970s she spent years sleeping in the bush because squatter camps were raided at night or in the early morning to try and catch people without documents when they were sleeping.

### FAMILY LIFE

For some of the women whose life histories were recorded, particularly those who were more recent rural-urban migrants, life in Cape Town under apartheid was bewildering. The livelihood strategies that they had pursued in rural areas, including their role in agriculture and the cultivation of a backyard garden producing food for daily household consumption, gave way to new livelihoods either in formal employment (which was very scarce) or the saturated informal retail and food processing economy. Women spent many years under apartheid living without their husbands and children, since they were usually not allowed to live with their husbands (who resided in single sex hostel accommodations) and frequently had to leave their children in the rural areas with relatives. After the repeal of many laws supporting urban apartheid in 1986 and the beginning of the transition to democracy in 1990, women were able to resume family life and some of them reverted back to their traditional roles. For those women, cultivating a small backyard garden to provide regular food for the household was an important part of their roles as wives and mothers.

### POWER RELATIONS

Other women, rather than reverting back to traditional roles, used their gardens as a site through which they began to question and renegotiate household gender relations. Whilst their husbands might have been the main income earners in the household, women gained a sense of self-worth through the cultivation of vegetables that could supplement the diets of their families. Women without work felt less dependent on their working husbands when they could contribute in a

tangible way to the sustenance of the household. Gaining a sense of their self-worth was the first step in a long process of women's empowerment. Proud of their achievements in their food gardens, some women even began to use the production of food to renegotiate patriarchal authority relations in households. They produced and prepared crops that were traditionally eaten only by women (according to Xhosa custom) and began to take more control over the allocation of household food to men, women and children. Some women questioned the cultural rules that restricted them from eating certain types of food. Thus, urban agriculture was one activity through which women might begin to overcome gender oppression in their households.

### SOCIAL NETWORKS

Women in Cape Town's low-income settlements cultivate both on individual and communal plots. In both cases there is strong evidence that their agricultural activity contributes to the development or reinforcement of strong social networks that enable women to become more empowered, in their households and also in the wider community. In Khayelitsha, for example, women who work together in their home food gardens support and counsel one another when they face problems, and have worked together when people in the community have been victims of rape, violence and child abuse.

The long periods of interviewing that are required to record the life history of a respondent enables a great level of trust to be built between researcher and respondent. Furthermore, the ways in which women develop a sense of their own self-worth, the ways in which they renegotiate household gender relations and the ways in which they form social networks through urban agriculture are intangible and difficult to identify and measure. The narratives about rape, violence and child abuse, and the ways in which women in Cape Town respond to them could not have been recorded in a

### REFERENCES

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questionnaire or survey. Thus, it is only by using an alternative methodological approach to try and understand urban agriculture that these less tangible and difficult-to-measure aspects of urban agriculture are brought into the foreground.

### COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The research in Cape Town raised questions about how urban agriculture is interpreted and represented throughout Southern Africa in terms of its contribution to social development. First, research into the economic aspects of urban agriculture continues to achieve a great deal, not least through effective advocacy of urban agriculture to urban planners based on its quantifiable contribution to livelihoods. Urban authorities in Cape Town could be encouraged to include space for urban agriculture in their planning schemes, not solely because of its contribution to household economics and urban food supply but also because of its positive social benefits. Could the non-quantifiable benefits of urban agriculture be used as a way to justify acceptance and support for urban agriculture?

A second question concerns the relevance of the research in Cape Town for the rest of Africa. Perhaps life histories are useful in understanding the social benefits of urban agriculture. Especially when the economic benefits are undisputed, but little is known about the ways in which urban agriculture might contribute to establish stronger social relations and community networks. Research in Maputo and Lusaka (2) suggests that there are, in fact, important social development implications.

### NOTES

- (1) This article is concerned with cultivation rather than the rearing of livestock or other forms of urban agriculture. Whilst there are many livestock owners in Cape Town, in the case of this research, it was the focus on small-scale backyard and communal gardening that allowed a shift away from preoccupations with the economic benefits of towards an understanding of activities which would not be considered 'economic'.
- (2) Fieldwork, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, is taking place between June and October 2001 in Maputo, Mozambique and Lusaka, Zambia in an attempt to understand the sorts of social benefits that accrue to urban farmers in different urban contexts.