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**THE SOIL FOR LIFE FOOD GARDENS
PROGRAMME**

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INTRODUCTION TO SOIL FOR LIFE AND ITS PROGRAMME

SOIL FOR LIFE is a registered not-for-profit NGO that was established in March 2003, formerly operating as the Western Cape branch of Food Gardens Foundation, a national NGO based in Gauteng. There are four full-time staff and seven part-time staff. The organisation has a Resource and Training Centre based at a school in Constantia and all operations are carried out from here.

Our vision is to make a significant and positive contribution to the health, self-confidence and family finance of indigent people in the Western Cape. Our aims include improving the nutritional and economic status of individuals and communities in urban and rural areas, to develop human potential and to balance human needs with nature's capacity to sustain life now and in the future.

SOIL FOR LIFE is implementing the following activities:

- We run hands-on practical education and training courses in: small-scale organic food and herb production, soil improvement methods, waste recycling, health and nutrition, including medicinal and culinary herbs, nursery skills and plant propagation, food processing and preserving. The latter courses have been given to equip groups with the skills necessary to start a home business to boost household income. Part of these trainings are implemented for the City of Cape Town and there are many gardens have been started as a result.
- Initial supply of compost, seed and basic tools
- We provide ongoing support and advice to gardening groups that have been trained by SOIL FOR LIFE. However, many of the groups that have been trained do not have any follow support, since SOIL FOR LIFE does not have the financial resources to support all these projects.
- We encourage the development of local networks and support groups.
- We form partnerships with related NGO's and Community-Based Organisations.

RESULTS OBTAINED

SOIL FOR LIFE's work in indigent communities is important because:

- People are enabled to put safe, fresh, nutritious food on the table every night.
- Exercise, fresh air, good food, and the reduction of stress (all spin-offs of the food-growing culture) build strong immune systems and help in the fight against AIDS, TB, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and poor mental health.
- A food-growing initiative within any community removes social, cultural and economic barriers.
- Raising living standards and generating local trade circulates income within communities and pays for education and social services.
- People create jobs for themselves and others.
- The re-use of waste by community gardeners reduces the burden on local authorities and landfill sites.

Food gardens make a significant difference to the lives of many people. The food gardeners are obviously eating better. Many people are eating large quantities of green vegetables (particularly important because of significant Vitamin A content) from these gardens (and this includes thieves!)

The food gardeners have some money to spend on things which they could not previously afford and they are getting all the advantages of healthy, outdoor exercise, companionship, new skills, a marginally improved life, and learning to work with other people as a group

Many people also have gardens at home – the transfer of skills and appropriate technology is what SOIL FOR LIFE wants to happen. It has also been noticed that well-managed and productive community and home food gardens catch the attention of locals who, in turn, are inspired and encouraged to attempt the same for themselves using SOIL FOR LIFE methods.

Lastly, with massive land degradation in South Africa, and alarming losses of topsoil, and the consequent loss of good agricultural land, how are we going to feed our burgeoning population? Consider what it would mean in terms of increasing the amount of cultivated land and reducing hunger if people could be encouraged to establish food gardens at their homes, community centres, clinics, churches, wherever there is vacant land; if everyone in South Africa had a food garden, no matter how small.



In 2004 a survey was implemented on the impacts of six food gardening projects that SOIL FOR LIFE implemented for the Department of Social Services and Poverty Alleviation, with the following outcomes:

- Between the six groups over four hundred people are being fed, as well as some of the food finding its way into the larger community. If more attention would be paid to replanting, (i.e.: just over one-half of the beds was planted at the time of the survey), there could be even more food available for community consumption.
- Sales of surpluses generate an average of R14.42 per week per seller, which in these communities is a significant amount and makes an enormous difference between a poor diet and shortage of food and an adequate diet, so contributing to improved nutrition in the community as a whole. With greater attention to better replanting and production methods, and more home gardens, the surplus for sale would undoubtedly increase.
- The people themselves are very aware of the difference these gardens have made to their lives. Nearly fifty percent of the gardeners no longer buy vegetables elsewhere, and must therefore save money in this way, as well as eating more nutritious food. Also nearly half of the gardeners indicate that the gardens made life easier, presumably because finding food, or money for

food, is now less problematic. Well over one third have found a great improvement in health, either their own, or their families. One tenth remark on how making money from vegetable sales has improved their livelihood. The impact appears to have been considerable, out of all proportion to the input.

- The areas in which these projects are located are often areas of transition, with a movement of many people into and out of the area, so stability of the garden projects is a problem. Additionally some, like Mfuleni, have aging populations and death and disease have taken a toll of a number of the gardeners. A typical example is Driftsands, where the original twenty-eight members were later joined by eight TB+ patients. Of the latter, four have died and only one remains in the project. Of the original twenty-eight, only twelve remain in the project, and there has only been one new member subsequently.
- Often there are also other internal problems. For example, Nolungile is a large garden located on a school property, and the school administration is not happy with the inability of the group to contribute to water costs. In some cases it has been difficult for SOIL FOR LIFE to operate without interference, from other groups or interested parties, in its methods and the administration of the projects. Yet despite these setbacks, there are some very positive results are evident.
- A disappointing aspect is the small number of food garden beds being made at gardeners' homes. This may be due in part to the absence of space and lack of security of tenure in the informal settlements. It is always considered best when the gardens are at the home of the producer.
- The range of vegetables being grown (twenty-seven different vegetables) is impressive and a good indication of the growth in the attitude to eating vegetables. It is also a good sign that these communities are eating a more varied and, probably, a more balanced diet. However, with the exception of green peppers, they are still eating the well-known vegetables.

LESSONS LEARNT

Factors influencing the success or failure of the urban agriculture projects

Lead by example. Whether it be home or community gardeners, nothing works as well as seeing other inspiring examples of productive gardens. By encouraging networks and support groups, standards are set and people are excited to emulate what they have seen.

It is important to have a well-trained and motivated community person co-ordinating the project and to have a train-the-trainer programme in place.

Working with groups of women, rather than men. *If you want something said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman* (Margaret Thatcher). Older women tend to have better staying power and motivation.



Working with people who have a rural background, and who are not too sophisticated. In other words, people who are not aspiring to white- or blue-collar jobs.

It is important to take into account that many participants in these projects are characterized by:

- Poor nutrition levels – low energy and interest
- Low energy levels – either of infected people, or those who are affected by infected family members because they act as carers.
- Apathy and ignorance. Low self-esteem/lack of self confidence. No vision.
- Dependency syndrome and the mindset ‘no money, no work’.

A mentorship programme (subsequent to the initial training course) which lasts for at least two to three years, during which time farming groups undergo an extension of the training, problems are sorted out, techniques are checked for correct implementation and people are motivated and supported. The importance of a follow up programme cannot be expressed strongly enough. It not only ensures correct implementation, but also provides opportunities for further training and motivation and the solving of problems, either with crop production, or with people.

Service providers need to stay with projects for five, six or seven years. This is not generally possible with the way funding occurs. And therefore few groups reach the status of true self-sufficiency or sustainability. There is, however, the problem of changes within the group over this period.

It is no good teaching people how to grow food without teaching them about good health and nutrition. People also need to learn other skills associated with

sustainability: food processing and preserving, food storage, seed-saving with a capital S.

Access to resources

- *Small* is beautiful, and bountiful. Large pieces of land are not necessary to make a difference to a family's (or a community's) nutritional status. Use production methods which are high yielding in limited spaces. Reduce soil compaction, and increase levels of organic material. Even simple mulching improves the harvest.
- To increase the area of land under cultivation, food gardens must be established in individual homes, community centres, clinics, schools – wherever there is a small bit of earth capable of producing food.
- South Africa is a semi-arid country and water is a problem. Water harvesting off roofs and other flat surfaces – can be achieved with minimal effort and simple technology using urban waste. Grey water usage, drip irrigation and water-conserving methods of production (e.g. mulching) should be encouraged.
- Use of labour saving and easy to manage technologies: mulching, no till, raised beds, crop rotation, vermiculture, drip irrigation

In order to reduce external resources needed:

- Optimal use of locally available resources i.e. reuse of urban wastes and
- Sourcing of second hand tools and equipment
- Local production of own seedlings in seed beds and simple nurseries and seed collection from crops and trees.
- Exchange of tools/services/products among community gardening groups and households: Trade vegetables for labour, manure, compost with community members and join the Community Exchange System (CES) and trade with a local currency (not money).



Production aspects

Food gardening, the SOIL FOR LIFE way, produces high yields of top quality, much-needed food in small spaces quickly, easily, cheaply. Within eight to ten weeks of planting, a household can be eating.

SOIL FOR LIFE methods work along the maxim – healthy soil, healthy plants, healthy people; and people are taught how to first feed the soil. South Africa loses about 500 million tons of topsoil every year and, along with it, go about six million tons of plant nutrients which are not replaced. It has been estimated that fertiliser use accounts for the addition of 1kg of nutrients for every 19kg lost forever. No wonder there is widespread malnutrition and depressed immune systems.

Mulching is strongly advocated since it solves a myriad of problems.

Liquid fertilisers – from seaweed, manure, compost, weeds and so on – boost plant growth and production.

The production of leafy green vegetables are encouraged: NZ spinach, morog, CM Kale, walking stick cabbage, sou sou marrows, etcetera. All high in Vitamin A to boost immune systems.

Especially the production of “cut and come again” crops is promoted (e.g. New Zealand spinach, CM kale and red Chinese mustard) since these are not only hardy, highly productive and nutritious but also important labour savers.

The main (technical) problems we face are:

- Upgrading the soil. Getting sufficient supplies of organic waste to fill trenches, mulch and make compost is a time-consuming and frustrating exercise. Partnerships with local councils, businesses etc help.
- Installing and maintaining drip irrigation systems.

Keep it simple. The attempts to increase food production through intensification and increasingly complex technology will only lead to increasing degradation of soils and soil erosion, and an increasing need of materials and resources. Apart from climate problems, lack of assured water supplies, poor fertility and difficult topography there are other problems such as poor communications, long distances from markets, lack of transport, high input costs, lack of credit. We need a type of ‘survival agriculture’ where illiteracy, lack of infrastructure and other such problems do not limit food production by every kind of community at every stage of development. There are methods to turn things around.

Organisational and institutional aspects

Things happen slowly. No major changes happen overnight.

Partnerships with other NGO’s and community-based organisations strengthen our efforts in the field. Partnerships with Local councils and provincial government are important to get access to land and for the provision of organic waste, infrastructure etc.

A productive and cost effective strategy to multiply our efforts are train-the-trainer type of programmes for staff of other NGO’s, clinics, church groups and other organisations that work specifically with HIV-AIDS patients and other vulnerable groups. This training allows these organisations to implemented urban agriculture projects with their own people.

There is a scarcity of funds to get projects well off the ground and on their way to self-sufficiency. Sustainability does not occur overnight. It takes a long time and therefore requires funding for a quite lengthy period.

Our main sources of funding for these projects are the Department of Social Services and Poverty Alleviation. The Department of Agriculture has supplied some infrastructure. Other potential sources include the Department of Health, the City of Cape Town and private corporations.

Sustainability comes faster if all available resources in communities are used maximally.