

# Gardens of fresh hope drained by deep-rooted challenges

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AS VIBRANT as the Cape Flats may be, unemployment, drugs and violence make life extremely challenging – to the extent that some people succumb to despair and hopelessness.

While there are no easy solutions to these pressing social problems, one way to tackle them is through urban agriculture, which is the cultivation of crops and animals in an urban environment.

Whether practised on a small or large scale, urban agriculture provides rewarding work, increases positive interactions, creates friendships and empowers people to give back to their communities. It builds and bridges community relations that have been destroyed by abject poverty, crime and hopelessness, and contributes to a sense of belonging, trust and reciprocity. Urban agriculture also offers opportunities for collaborative interaction between community members, government and NGOs.

In this way, urban agriculture addresses the deep-seated issues surrounding poverty and related social ills by changing the way people think about themselves and those around them.

These are some of the major findings of my recent doctoral research, which showed that some of the greatest benefits of urban agriculture in Cape Town are in fact social.

Having been supported and promoted for almost 30 years by a handful of NGOs, urban agriculture in Cape Town currently helps an estimated 6 500 urban cultivators who use highly specialised organic



**UPLIFTMENT:** Grabouw residents work in community gardens to put food on the table and sell the vegetables to local shops and neighbours. *Picture: TRACEY ADAMS*

cultivation methods. More recently, local government has come on board with the 2007 Urban Agriculture Policy for the City of Cape Town, making Cape Town one of Africa's most supportive municipalities in this regard.

The cultivators interviewed as part of the study were primarily unemployed or retired female household heads who assume responsibility for the food security of their household. They rely on welfare grants and financial assistance from adult children or an income-earning partner. Few have completed their formal schooling.

They all emphasised the social benefits of urban agriculture. The vibrancy of a flourishing garden as a source of pride was highlighted by a woman from Khayelitsha, who said people visit her "every day" to "chat about the garden being beautiful", as well as to ask her for advice for their own gardens.

Apart from its social benefits, urban agriculture contributes to food security and food access for low-income households on the Cape Flats. It also provides some kind of economic benefit in terms of reducing household expenditure, the availability of additional stocks with

which to barter, or simply participating in reciprocating kindness.

However, although urban agriculture helps to improve the lives of people on the Cape Flats and to promote community development, its future is uncertain.

Red tape makes land access extremely challenging, even though there is much land available. Furthermore, local government does not have the capacity to provide the consistent personal support required to raise urban cultivators. This is being done by NGOs, whose potential to spread and develop urban agriculture is limited by a lack of necessary political, legal and financial support.

The future of urban agriculture in Cape Town, and its continued social and physical benefits, depends on government and NGOs working together to streamline land access, scale up training and provide inputs without creating dependency. Given these challenges, there is much still to be done.

● *Olivier works as a researcher with the Southern Africa Food Lab on a project linking social protection and agricultural livelihoods in southern Africa. This article is based on his recent doctorate in sociology at Stellenbosch University.*