

Vegetable Box Scheme in Cape Town, South Africa

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Although quite a number of experiences with community supported agriculture (CSA) and box schemes in Europe and the United States have been documented, there are not so many examples from the South. Abalimi/Harvest of Hope is a special case even in the South, as it is a social enterprise that works with poor people in urban areas who are the producers of the vegetables.

How it started

Abalimi Bezekhaya' (meaning "Farmers of Home" in Xhosa) is a civil society organisation working to empower the disadvantaged through ecological urban agriculture. Abalimi operates in the townships of Khayelitsha, Nyanga and surrounding areas on the Cape Flats near Cape Town. This area has a population of nearly one million people, the majority of whom are from the Eastern Cape - the former apartheid homelands of Transkei and Ciskei. Many are unemployed. Abalimi has been working with small-scale producers living in these informal settlements for 28 years. The producers (or micro farmers as Abalimi calls them) are poor people – mainly women – who are engaged in vegetable gardening in home gardens and community gardens in order to supplement their diet, improve household food and nutritional security, and provide sustainable additional income. Other benefits are community building, personal growth and self-esteem.

The central tool for the success of Abalimi (and Harvest of Hope) is the development of the "Development Chain". The rationale behind the Development Chain is that conventional approaches pull the urban poor into commercial production too soon, while they first need to go through a number of preparatory steps to enable social learning. Furthermore, without sufficient support (subsidies and training) the development that ensues is unlikely to be sustainable. A step-wise approach is necessary to deal with the socio-political, environmental and economic dynamics and challenges which the poor encounter on a daily basis, such as poor education, poverty mentality, gender/racial and class tensions, very poor soil and mass unemployment. The development chain has four phases: the survival phase, the subsistence phase, the livelihood phase and the commercial phase (read more on the development chain in Van Veenhuizen, 2009, p.160).

Over time Abalimi noticed that some of the producers in the subsistence phase had the ambition to sell (part of their



Harvest of Hope staff packing vegetable boxes
Photo: Femke Hoekstra

produce, but it was a struggle to sell their produce to a wider audience than their local community (selling "over the fence"). At the same time, Abalimi noticed a growing public interest in quality organic produce in Cape Town. This eventually led to the setting up of a marketing system selling boxes of organically grown, in-season vegetables on a weekly basis. A marketing unit within Abalimi was created, named Harvest of Hope.

The main goals of the Harvest of Hope initiative are to:

- create a sustainable and expandable market for producers in and around Cape Town;
- use this market as an engine for growth and an instrument for poverty alleviation in poor communities;
- give customers access to fresh competitive organic produce and contribute to fewer food miles.

Why a box scheme?

After a thorough market analysis, an organic vegetable box was chosen as the most promising marketing option for the producers for a number of reasons. The box system is sufficiently flexible to deal with crop failures, late harvests and poor quality, giving producers time to learn about consistent production, in terms of both quality and quantity. Varying the box content each week allows for yield inconsistency as producers build towards stable output targets, because quantities do not have to be exact.

The concept of the food box deals with various challenges that producers face: broadening the distribution chain (access to markets outside their local community), cash flow and liquidity issues (getting cash monthly instead of having



Labelled plots in a community garden

Photo: Femke Hoekstra

to wait an entire growing season), price fluctuations (a regular price is guaranteed), as well as seasonal fluctuations (contents of the box may differ).

Although the price that producers get for selling to Harvest of Hope is (often) lower than if they sold crops directly to the local community, Harvest of Hope offers them a regular market and a more secure and upfront source of income. The price set for the vegetables is based on a comparative analysis of prices at different supermarkets and wholesalers.

How the scheme works

The participating producers are trained in agribusiness systems. They sign simple contracts to grow specified crops in a designated size plot for pre-planned yields at pre-determined prices, to be harvested on targeted dates. The producers do the quality control, harvesting, cleaning and bunching of vegetables themselves. Harvest of Hope picks up the vegetables from the gardens once a week and delivers them to the packing shed, which is located on the perimeters of the Abalimi office and has all the equipment needed to process vegetables. There the vegetables are weighed (to record the amount of vegetables delivered by each garden), washed, cut and packaged or bundled, depending on the type of vegetable. An equal number of vegetables are packed in each box. The core packing staff consists of about five people, including Abalimi field staff. In addition, several producers work in the packing shed on a rotational basis to learn about the entire process of processing and marketing.

There are two types of boxes. The big box (sold at R95~10 Euros), a stackable crate, contains between 9 and 12 different vegetables depending on the costs of production. Standard vegetables in the box are potatoes, onions, carrots, a salad pack and bean sprouts. Other vegetables, depending on the

season, include tomatoes, green peppers, butternut, baby marrows, sweet potatoes, beans, peas, pumpkins, spinach, Swiss chard and beetroot. Boxes also usually contain a special and expensive vegetable, such as mushrooms, cherry tomatoes, red or yellow peppers, which are supplied by other farmers. The small box, which was introduced on demand in February 2009 (sold at R65~7 Euros), is actually a plastic bag (they are looking for a better alternative) containing 6 to 7 varieties of vegetables.

After the packing, the Harvest of Hope staff delivers the boxes to the collection points, most of which are primary schools (about 15-20 in total) in the suburbs of Cape Town, but also some institutions and a retail outlet. Schools seem to be the best distribution places, as parents can combine collecting their children with picking up a food box.

Harvest of Hope in numbers, April 2010:

- Harvest of Hope is the marketing unit of Abalimi. Since it was started in February 2008 it has grown from working with 8 producer groups to 18 groups (with 118 producers) and has increased the number of commercial subscribers to their weekly food boxes from 79 to about 180 in April 2010 (and the number of subscribers continues to increase).
- For each 100 boxes produced, 8,415m² of land is required. The total amount of land used for Harvest of Hope is 26,047m².
- Income per producer is up to R3,000 a month on an average plot of 500m².

Supporting the CSA movement

Running the business encompasses production planning, training and preparing producers for (semi-) commercial production, monitoring the producers' performance, and arranging inputs and finance. An intermediary organisation operating between the producers and consumers (in this case Abalimi/Harvest of Hope) is required, especially during the initial period. At operational level, the business is now almost entirely run by the target group, while being represented at management and board level by the main leader of the producers and other local black leaders from the target community.

Abalimi monitors the sustainability of all gardens on the basis of several pre-defined indicators to make sure that the producers are ready to become part of Harvest of Hope. Furthermore, Abalimi organises the production planning. Harvest of Hope developed a planning tool, which shows for each week of the year how much needs to be planted in each garden to obtain a certain amount of kilos per week per box (for a total number of boxes). Harvest of Hope plans for a production surplus of 10%. Through this surplus, they are able to cope with production loss and they can deliver their best produce to their customers. The surplus goes to charity projects, staff and volunteers.

In addition, Urban Producer Field Schools (UPFS, which are part of the RUAF From Seed to Table project) aim to look at weak areas in the production cycle and train producers in order to increase production. UPFS provide training sessions on subjects including quality control, soil management and pest management.

Abalimi provides inputs such as seeds, seedlings, compost, fertiliser and equipment. These are either free or subsidised, depending on the price of the input. Groups are starting to contribute (100% of seed and seedling costs, 10% of bulk cow manure costs) and this is deducted from their monthly

payment. At present the groups are only capable of contributing as they cannot afford to make new investments by themselves, but Abalimi believes that subsidies and services are necessary for any farming activity nowadays.

Consumer relations

It remains a challenge to keep all consumers satisfied. Consumers are informed by weekly emails and can participate as a volunteer or join a weekly tour to the gardens and the pack shed to become part of the CSA. A customer feedback survey (March 2010) among 56 non-active consumers showed why people decide to quit. This had to do with (a combination of):

- Size (concern for 23% of customers): either too much quantity leading to food waste or too little of everything;
- Variety (a concern for 25%): kind of vegetables offered (too much or too little variety, not enough of the basics (like potatoes), or not "child-friendly" enough);
- Pick up (25%): concerns with time, date or location. Some would prefer home delivery;
- Financial (7%): financial concerns, being able to find the same quality of food cheaper in supermarket;
- 5% had started their own garden and produced enough vegetables;
- 7% had issues with choice; some wanted to be able to select for themselves or know in advance what would be in the box so they could adapt their other shopping based on this information;
- Others have either moved; are buying more readymade food (cut, peeled and prepared); found another supplier; or don't know how to prepare the vegetables (although a recipe is always included).

Furthermore, when the schools close during the holiday there is no alternative market outlet, so sale volumes can be very low. This year box numbers dropped from 195 to 131 during the most recent holiday.

Masikhanye garden in Khayelitsha

Photo: Femke Hoekstra



The future

Since 2008, Harvest of Hope has developed from a small-scale initiative to a well-organised, complex logistical marketing business. It has created access for small-scale producers to a new market and is working towards the

Note

1) Abalimi is one of the local RUAF partners and Harvest of Hope is part of the From Seed to Table programme.

References

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creation of an alternative food system. In 2010, Harvest of Hope won the Impumelelo Innovations Award, which “rewards exceptional projects, which involve partnerships with the public sector that enhance the quality of life of poor communities in innovative ways”.

In some community gardens, the average age of producers is as high as 60 years and the levels of production remain relatively low. The low level of participation of younger people may have sustainability implications in the long run.

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Developing an Organic Box Scheme in Accra, Ghana

The demand for sustainably produced and healthy vegetables and fruit is growing in Ghana. This provides an opportunity to set up sustainable local value chains. A consortium of farmer cooperatives and traders in Accra, supported by the Netherlands-based NGO Agro Eco-Louis Bolk Institute (LBI), is developing an organic fruit and vegetable box scheme.

Organic produce grown in Ghana is currently mainly exported. Growing crops for the local as well as the international market will enable the (often small-scale) farmers to diversify their farms, thereby reducing their financial risks and also benefiting the soil, water conservation and biodiversity.

The partners

This initiative is the work of the Forward Ever Youth Cooperative (supported by the Ghana Organic Agriculture Network), Ideal Providence Farms, and Quin Organics.

Forward Ever sites are located around Woe, a suburb of Keta in the South East of Ghana. Established in 1997, the cooperative has 45 registered members, all of whom are full-time vegetable farmers. These farmers will provide vegetables for the box scheme including cucumber, lettuce, cabbage, green pepper, chilli, eggplant and okra. The farmers grow these crops according to organic agriculture principles and are in the process of acquiring organic certifications. Ideal Providence Farms, established in 1998, manages the production of tropical fruits and herbs on two farms covering a total of 85 acres. This company is also active in organic wild collection: about 150 women in Northern Ghana collect shea nuts, which are processed into shea butter for export to European and other markets. Quin Organics is a certified organic farming and processing business in Ghana that deals in vegetables, herbs and spices. In addition to running a nucleus farm, it also coop-

erates with farmer-based organisations in the Keta District through an out-grower scheme and a training scheme. Quin Organics focuses on both the local and the export market. It will provide fruits and herbs for the box scheme and is in the process of building a pack house for processing and storage.

The box scheme

Interested consumers will register and receive a weekly box of organic vegetables and fruits for a fixed price. The box can be delivered to an office or residence, or picked up at one of several locations in town (including fruit stalls, supermarkets and gas stations). The box scheme targets high- and middle-income Ghanaians in Accra as well as expats, since these people are willing and able to pay a bit more for the quality products.

The initiators aim to make the box scheme financially independent once it is up and running. The farmers will receive a fair price, which includes a premium for the organic products and sufficient extra to cover the costs of assembling, packaging, marketing and distribution. It is estimated that some investment will be needed at the start of this initiative, for which funds are currently being raised.

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Sample of a large organic vegetable box in Accra