

Blacks and whites garden together, sowing seeds of hope in SA

Fifteen black youths from the Mquatsheni community in a rural South Africa, where the KwaZulu-Natal province borders Lesotho, worked alongside 12 whites from Europe and the US in April to dig and plant vegetable gardens for those affected by HIV and AIDS. In stark contrast to the renewed racial tensions in South Africa - ignited by statements and songs by firebrand ANC Youth League leader, Julius Malema, and further fanned by the murder of rightwing extremist Eugene Terre'Blanche - this food security initiative saw people of different races digging new ground together from 3rd to 17th April - planting the seeds of hope for the beneficiaries, and in the hearts of all who participated.

This transforming event was part of a food security initiative run by the Khuphuka Project, a Public Benefit Organisation that operates under the umbrella of Dharmagiri Outreach, which works to assist those affected by HIV and AIDS in the rural communities around Underberg.

Seen against the historical context where it has often been blacks digging the ground of white-owned land, it was life transforming for some whites to be warmly invited into the heart of the community, while recipients within the community talked of how healing it was to witness whites digging the ground where they live, said Thanissara Weinberg, one of the directors of Dharmagiri Outreach .

It is also hard to encourage young African men to dig and plant the land, said Skhumbuzo Mlibeni, manager of the Khuphuka Project and a member of the Mquatsheni community. Their own culture understands it as women's work, while it also carries the stigmatisation of being "garden boys". Digging the ground is the last thing a young rural man wants to do. Instead he aims for the city where all too often the common fate is to join the hopeless statistics of the unemployed. However the simple activity of creating gardens was experienced as empowering and uplifting, he explained.

"My experience with the gardens was very good. I think because those who joined in were doing it from the bottom of their hearts. The households that we dug for are in real need of healthy food. Their situation is difficult because of the impact of HIV and AIDS. I was very surprised by our local youth volunteers. Their attendance was good which shows that they really understood the need for these gardens. A recipient of one of the gardens, Mrs Mthalane said it will make a very big difference for her family; not only the garden but the experience of white volunteers helping them out in such a way," said Mlibeni.

One of the volunteers from the UK, whose mother was originally from Hong Kong, commented on how the land they worked was so fertile and that in China every inch of it would be planted up. We could change this from work that is seen as demeaning, to work that is empowering, with the right kind of support, information and equipment, said Weinberg.

She explained that a similar gardening initiative was undertaken in another project facilitated by Dharmagiri Outreach called Woza Moya which operates the Chibini community near Ixopo, also in the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa.

"After some doubt as to its effectiveness, the community now has more than 660 door gardens that significantly contribute towards food security. However it is still not enough for those families and children left bereft by the sweep of the AIDS pandemic. All too often children go to bed on sugar water and to school on empty stomachs. Even with the most sophisticated Anti Retroviral treatment, now more available in rural South Africa, ultimately people will still die prematurely due to malnourishment," said Weinberg.

The garden experience has achieved more than increased food security for people like Mrs Mthalane from the Mquatsheni community. Anne Brouha, a professor of medicine from Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Centre in New Hampshire in the US, who helped to dig the gardens in Mquatsheni, was so moved by her experience that she has volunteered her services for three years at the hospital that serves Mquatsheni, which she described as: "one of the worst hospitals I've ever visited".

Brouha said she helped to dig a door garden for a woman in her 40's who is infected with HIV and TB. Despite being on the right drugs for her illness the woman continued to lose weight because she had no money to buy food, and was living on three half-meals of cornmeal porridge a day. "She is too ill to work or garden. Malnutrition due to poverty, compounded by illness, is threatening her recovery from acute tuberculosis. From a medical perspective, patients undergoing treatment for acute TB need several months of high-quality nutrition including daily protein, fat and vitamin-rich foods. A main focus of the Khuphuka Project is to create sustainable sources of food and income via the gardening project and by providing information and advocacy to assist HIV/AIDS and TB patients in applying for disability payments from the government. However, it will take months for this lady's garden to grow and for monetary assistance to reach her. So unless there is a temporary way of getting her adequate nutrition, she could die while waiting for these sustained food sources," said Brouha.

The Khuphuka Project specialises in responding to the impact of HIV/AIDS, but has a strong focus on community development and capacity building, including the training of community care workers, providing child support, HIV awareness amongst the youth, as well as providing information, support, and advocating for the needs of those both

infected and affected.