

Small Grants Facility: Strengthening local community organisations sustains project investments and unlocks opportunities to access other financial resources

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Communal and backyard gardens are common establishments in South Africa's arid rural areas. These enable community members to form cooperatives aimed at addressing food security challenges and improving livelihoods. Over the years, these community-based subsistence farming practices have been negatively affected by changing seasonal patterns caused by climate change.

Through the implementation of the Community Adaptation Small Grants Facility (SGF) project in the Mopani District, the Ramotshinyadi HIV/Aids Youth Guide established a communal garden in the Mamanyuha village which has introduced climate smart agricultural techniques to improve food security.

Since accessing financial resources from the project, the Ramotshinyadi organisation has built its capacity to implement climate change adaptation interventions. These include practices such as agroecology, climate smart water storage, drip-irrigation techniques and poultry farming.

Additionally, accessing financial resources through the SGF project has improved Ramotshinyadi's organisational capacity to sustain investments beyond the financing period of the project.



Left: Ms Suzan Mathipa (centre) with farmers at the Mamanyuha communal garden showing a voucher from the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD); Right: Tomato harvesting at the communal garden.

With the prevalence of the COVID-19 Pandemic and subsequent National Lockdown, Ramotshinyadi experienced challenges in transporting locally farmed agricultural produce to

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sell to retail markets. Additionally, the National Lockdown meant that crop seedlings and poultry feed could not be purchased. This negatively affected crop production and livelihoods of the farmers.

Following an advertisement by the Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development on the interventions aimed at supporting smallholder farmers affected by the coronavirus outbreak in South Africa, Ramotshinyadi received relief vouchers to the value of R50 000. This helped Ramotshinyadi and the farmers to access and purchase supplies such as poultry feed, chicks, medication, and seedlings following the relaxation of the National Lockdown Restrictions.

Mr Fhatuwani Nemalamangwa from Ramotshinyadi mentioned that “this voucher comes as a reward from the capacity building work from the SGF project. Our farmers appreciate the opportunity to implement and deliver a project with a budget that is over a million rand. Our organisation really comes from nothing to a position where we can attract national attention to pressing social challenges”.

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A crisis within a crisis: Impacts of COVID-19 on food and nutrition security for smallholder farmers

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In South Africa, smallholder farmers contribute less than 5% of agricultural produce. This is linked to several challenges such as vulnerability to weather extremes such as droughts and floods, and limited access to inputs and extension services.

The participation of smallholder farmers in agriculture remains at a subsistence level and may not reflect global trends. However, smallholder farmers still have a huge role to play in sustaining food and nutrition security in rural communities during and post- COVID-19. Smallholder farmers play an important role in terms of food security at a household level.



Above: Smallholder farmers in one of their homestead gardens

The stringent COVID-19 lockdown measures have had a far-reaching impact on food and nutrition security of marginalised communities. Restricted movements created serious buying, marketing, storage and processing constraints that created problems for perishables.

The lockdown started at a time when most smallholder farmers were harvesting and selling their summer crops. Difficulties in securing help from casual labour and neighbours to harvest produce led to significant post-harvest losses. Even when they harvested, restricted movement for aggregators meant that obtaining access to their usual markets was difficult.

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Most did not have permits to go and sell their produce in nearby towns and could not go door to door to sell. The closure of local markets and suspended travel from hawkers and bakkie traders disrupted the distribution chain within the informal food system.

For the more vulnerable members of rural communities, that is the elderly, women and children, COVID-19 is impacting the ability to access food. This emerged from restricted movements, which limits where they can purchase food items, and the closing of locations where they could purchase food, such as local markets. The most vulnerable groups within rural communities have subsequently been made even more vulnerable, plunging them further into poverty.



Above: Group of smallholder farmers working in their communal garden

To secure the future of food, resilience in farming can be achieved in different ways. This crisis, like many others, points to the need for investments in social protection systems. For example, locating food processing and storage facilities closer to rural areas to ensure that smallholder farmers have access to better storage and investing in local, community seed and grain banks to provide easy access to food and inputs in times of crisis. Investing in local food production and consumption and supporting right to food policies and institutions is important, as is exploring ways for trade agreements and rules to better support the transition towards more sustainable food systems that support local production for local consumption.

There is a need to provide smallholder farmers with the necessary support to enhance their productivity and market access. This can be achieved by establishing collection or aggregation centres within communities where smallholder producers can bring their produce.

Providing storage will also help reduce post-harvest crop losses. Government can also purchase produce from smallholder farmers to establish localised strategic emergency reserves, especially for non-perishable commodities. Smallholder farmers need access to finance so that they can continue to produce.

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For its part, government has launched an intervention to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on smallholder and communal producers with a turnover of between R20 000 and R1 million per annum, and while a good initiative, the funding thresholds may result in many smallholder farmers being excluded.

Lessons from innovative projects such as the uMngeni Resilience Project (URP) can be used to build resilience. The project has implemented a suite of complementary gender-sensitive interventions focusing on i) early warning and ward-based disaster response systems; ii) ecological and engineering infrastructure solutions specifically focused on vulnerable communities, including women; iii) integrating the use of climate-resilient crops and climate-smart techniques into new and existing farming systems; and iv) disseminating adaptation lessons learned and policy recommendations, to facilitate scaling up and replication. In line with these interventions, several activities have been done in and around the uMngeni catchment to build resilience of vulnerable members of rural communities. The project has established a number of homestead and community gardens, and these have been providing a variety of fresh vegetables for the project members and the surrounding communities, who are comprised of elderly women and young people.

The project also offers farmers training and inputs such as seeds, seedlings, fencing, tunnels and more to grow food for their consumption and for sale. The URP has provided farmers with several training sessions on gardening and land preparation; seedling production; planting; crop, weed and pest management; harvesting; marketing; and on basic post-harvest techniques such as making jam and pickling to reduce the need for storage and food loss. These skills come in handy for mitigating post-harvest losses.

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The uMngeni Resilience Project is a partnership between the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, the South African National Biodiversity Institute, the uMgungundlovu District Municipality and the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Transformative Agricultural and Food Systems. The project is funded by the Adaptation Fund.