

Stories of Change Series: Story #3



**‘Now, we can
plant, cook and
sell from our own
backyards.’**



How a food garden can change lives



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A close-up, top-down view of a field of green leafy vegetables, likely bok choy. The leaves are vibrant green with prominent white veins. The plants are densely packed, and the background shows some dry straw or mulch. Overlaid on the center of the image is the text "WHERE WE COME FROM" in a bold, white, sans-serif font, arranged in two lines.

**WHERE WE
COME FROM**

About the organisation

AFRA is a land rights advocacy non-governmental organisation (NGO) working to support marginalised black rural people, with a focus on farm dwellers. AFRA works towards an inclusive and gender equitable society where human rights are valued, realised and protected and where all citizens have access to the means to ensure a decent standard of living and quality of life. The organisation does this through promoting, realising and protecting the human rights of farm dwellers, to ensure that farm dwellers achieve an improved standard of living and quality of life, thereby restoring their human dignity as equal citizens in a democratic society. AFRA works intensively with communities in and around the uMgungundlovu District Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and extensively in offering support and advice.

AFRA's VISION is of an inclusive and gender equitable society where human rights are valued, realised and protected and where all citizens have access to the means to ensure a decent standard of living and quality of life.

AFRA's OBJECTIVE is to promote, realise and protect the human rights of farm dwellers, so as to achieve improved standards of living and quality of life, thereby restoring their human dignity as equal citizens in a democratic society.

AFRA's CORE VALUES are:

- Integrity
- Professionalism
- Transparency
- Empowerment
- Respect
- Accountability



This is our story

In the pages that follow, our story is told by three women who are members of Qina Mbokodo and live in communities within the uMgungundlovu District:



**Nini
Myeza**



**Tholakele
Ngidi**



**Makhosazane
Nkosi**

Where we come from with Growing Food for Life

Nini Myeza: My situation was very bad. It was really bad, I must say. It was hard for me as a widow, trying to feed my children by myself. I had land and thought about planting vegetables so we could eat, but I didn't have money to buy seedlings.

"Before joining the Growing Food for Life project, I had lost confidence in myself. I would sometimes be confused because although I have children, I had nothing, and I didn't have work."

My eldest child was struggling to find a job, and my younger children were still in school. I found myself with many problems. Life was tough before we started working on this project.

Tholakele Ngidi: What motivated me to work on the Growing Food for Life project with AFRA is that I live on the farm where I was born. AFRA works with people who live on farms owned by white people, since we don't have our own land to farm on. The farm-owner didn't want us to have spaces to farm on his land or to have chicken coops. AFRA helps you to get a space to farm on.

Makhosazane Nkosi: I started working on the Growing Food for Life project because I have a lot of children, and I was struggling. This project really helped me. When AFRA came to us with it, I had run out of strength. My daughter had passed on and left me with five children to take care of. I had no plan, and this project lifted me up and saved me.

Nini Myeza: I had no dignity. It was hard to ask people for help because when I showed up, people already knew that I had nothing. When you have nothing, people treat you as just a thing and you end up accepting anything that is thrown your way. I didn't even have any dignity in front of my children. People around me didn't respect me. It was difficult, very difficult. When I tried to hide my shame from my children, it showed, even when I dressed up nicely.

Tholakele Ngidi: Before working on the Growing Food for Life project, I didn't feel free at all. I didn't have any dignity in the community. I was just a small girl, who was nothing, with no money or a job.



We were struggling to put food on the table for our families

Nini Myeza: When it comes to food, I won't lie, I get the R350 grant. But before I joined the Growing Food for Life project, it was really hard. We would sometimes go to bed without eating because there was no food.

"No one was feeding us. A lot of times, we would just sit around without eating. I would just close the door in the house because I didn't know how I was going to put a meal together."

Tholakele Ngidi: Before I worked on the Growing Food for Life project, I had to wait for the grant so that I could buy what I could with it. The children were affected at school because we couldn't meet all their needs. Their grant money was feeding us. We had no other option until we got this support and we could then stand up for ourselves.

Makhosazane Nkosi: My situation was also hard even though I was working on a farm. I struggled to take care of my grandkids. We would go without food, and so I would borrow money from loan sharks who charged interest. I earn little money where I work but it helps me to support my grandchildren. Since there are five of them, I pay R1 000 a month for their transport to school. They also have to pay school fees, R2 500 for each child per year. It's only my son and I who are working, and he's also feeding his own children.





**WHERE WE
ARE NOW**

Working through our challenges

Tholakele Ngidi: We started working with AFRA as a group of around eight women. At first, we didn't get along and didn't work well together. The farm-owner also wouldn't allow us to put up our structure for the chickens.

About two years went by with us not working and making any money. AFRA intervened and helped us by speaking to the farm-owner. We also decided to separate and work as individuals. Each person started their own backyard garden and saved their own money. Maybe if we hadn't started that way, we would be further along in life today.

Nini Myeza: In the beginning of my farming journey, my biggest challenge was not having access to water. I had to fetch water from the river. It would really help to have water closer to home because I'm not young anymore! Another problem is that we live very close to a game reserve, so the buck eats our chillies and green peppers. I told my son that one day I want to sleep in a tree so that I can see the buck for myself. I need to protect what I have been trusted with, very much. I need to fight to protect our garden from being damaged so that I can improve our lives.

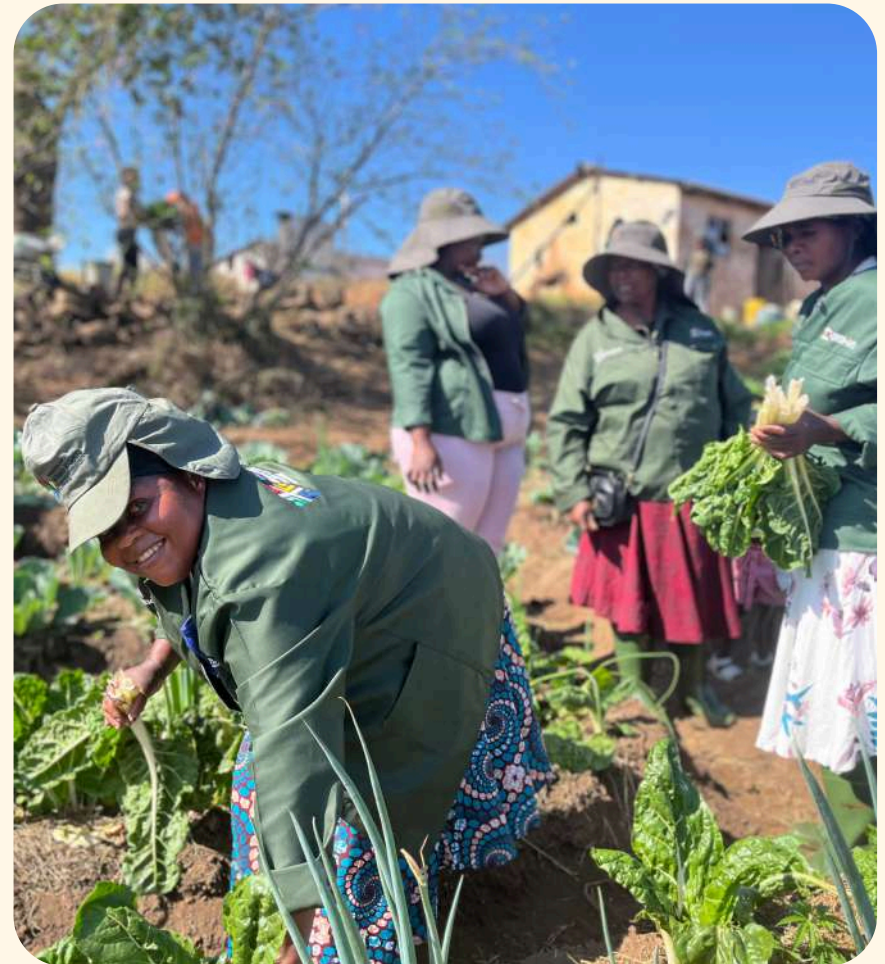
Makhosazane Nkosi: My challenge was that bugs kept eating my crops. The AFRA team advised me to spray dishwashing liquid mixed with water onto the plants because it chases the bugs away. Hailstorms are another challenge because they completely destroy our plants.



We can put food on the table for our families and the community

Makhosazane Nkosi: It's not like before when I was very poor and dying of hunger. This project is really helping me. I work on my backyard garden in the afternoon after work, and my grandchildren water it before school. I eat what I harvest with my children and sell the extra produce. Now, I can plant, cook and sell from my own backyard garden. I send the children to buy what we are short of, such as teabags or oil. I don't lack much now, when I have cooking oil and onions, I can put together a meal with other vegetables from my garden.

Nini Myeza: This food gardening project has brought a big change to our community. People can now buy vegetables from us – they don't have to go to town, which is far. I walk about three kilometres just to catch a taxi to town on the main road. We can't carry all the heavy groceries from the main road, and the taxis charge us R300 to drop us off at our homes. We have to wait until the employed people go to town so that we can share the delivery fee between us. It's just so hard, *hayi* [no]. When I was only getting the R350 grant, there was little left after paying for transport. I would have to wait for someone to go to town and then ask them to buy vegetables for me.



Tholakele Ngidi: There's been a big change, even in the community. People are not as hungry as they were before. If a neighbour is hungry, I can lend them a cabbage, and they pay me back at the end of the month. That's unlike going to Spar, where they want cash. I help in the neighbourhood to make sure that everyone eats. We spend around R200 or R250 on a taxi to town because we are very far from shops. We've just been thrown away. I allow *omama* [mothers] to borrow some spinach, and I let them pay later. Now, no one goes hungry while I have something to give.

Nini Myeza: Now, I can put food on the table for my children, and we can go to sleep having eaten something.

“ I make up for what we are short of in the house by selling vegetables from my garden. I don't have to go out begging any more, not knowing what to do. Working with the Growing Food for Life project has turned me from nothing into a person. ”



Growing food has restored our dignity, we don't have to stay in abusive situations

Tholakele Ngidi: What's making me happy is that I've got my own money. I'm no longer needy. I'm not asking people for things – I'm standing on my own two feet. I feel free because my life has really changed.

"I studied but I couldn't get a job. Now someone who works can come and borrow money from me. I sell and I grow food – all while being at home. I now have dignity, even at home. My family can now ask me to buy mealie meal or a bag of mixed chicken portions. "

When I'm in the yard, my presence is felt, unlike before when no one paid any attention to me. Back then, they wouldn't even dish up food for me because I wasn't working. I even dress nicely now and I can go into shops and buy clothes. I walk freely.

Nini Myeza: Working on the Growing Food for Life project has really helped me a lot because it brought back my dignity as a mother and a woman. I am so happy because my dignity and self-confidence have been restored. I can go to sleep with a full tummy; I don't have to ask my neighbours for food and then resent them when they don't share anything with me. I can eat vegetables from my garden.

If I don't have any cooking oil, I can sell some vegetables and buy some. Growing food has been very helpful to us as women, you no longer have to stay in an abusive relationship only because your abuser feeds you. Today, we're able to feed ourselves so that we don't have to stay in abusive situations.

Tholakele Ngidi: AFRA fought for me, and I got space from the farm owner to put up a chicken coop and have my own backyard garden where I can grow enough food to survive. Working on this project gave us a way forward, now we can be independent. I now have a structure for my chickens even though the farm owner didn't want me to. I found freedom when I started working on the Growing Food for Life project, and I still have it.

Makhosazane Nkosi: I'm happy now because my life is better than it was before I joined the Growing Food for Life project.

Nini Myeza: I feel relaxed, free and happy. I can see that I'm growing.



We now have one spirit, a spirit of unity

Tholakele Ngidi: After starting as a group of around eight, our group now has ten women – a mix of young and old people. We work well together. Even at meetings, we communicate well with each other. Our Project Manager from AFRA also communicates well with us. Overall, our communication on the project is very good. If you have a problem and you don't have airtime to call, you can just leave the Project Manager a missed call and they will call you back. Everything is great.

Nini Myeza: What I like about our group is that we have one spirit – a spirit of unity. If my garden is not looking good, I can go to Makhosazane or Tholakele [Growing Food for Life colleagues] when I can see the difference in their gardens. They advise me on what to do, which really helps me. It's nice to be working in unity.

Makhosazane Nkosi: I think the group is great because we have unity and get along. We learn together, and we get to see how each person's garden looks. We share what's working and what's not, and that's how we learn and improve.





**WHERE WE
ARE GOING**

Looking ahead with dreams and goals

Nini Myeza: My dream is to see myself as an independent businesswoman with my own things. Even though I live far from town, I'd like to have my own shelter in town to sell my vegetables. Even if it's not exactly a shelter, but something like the more established farmers' gazebos. I don't want to spend money on rent, just my own table and tent. I'd also love to be a livestock farmer, to have cattle and goats. I have enough land in my yard!

Makhosazane Nkosi: I'd also like to be someone who goes out to sell their produce and not be stuck in one place. Going to sell in town would give me a different experience and I'd get to meet new people. I would also like to farm pigs, because I love them. I want to raise them, sell some and sell their meat too.



Tholakele Ngidi: My dream is to have a shelter that clearly belongs to me. I'd sell my produce and chickens from such a shelter. We do currently have a shelter, but we share it with other people from the project. We all meet once a month and sell together from one table. Each person brings what they have, and we help each other to sell our produce close to the stores in town. My wish is to just have businesses that supply big stores like Spar and Supersave, not just supplying community members. I also want a machine where I can incubate my own eggs until they become chickens. I want to manage all the chicken operations by myself without spending money on suppliers. Suppliers give me a hard time when I order chicks. I can go two months without selling chickens because the supplier didn't have any stock. I want to hatch my own chicks to reduce delays in selling. I'd also like at least twenty egg-laying chickens so that I can work with them while I'm raising the ones for meat.



Nini Myeza: My wish is to go beyond only planting, to develop and learn a lot of new things. For example, if I've planted cabbages, I can make sure that while I'm harvesting them and selling them to stores, another vegetable is already growing. I'd like to also learn how to process my cabbage into things like *atchaar* [a kind of chutney] so that I'm not only selling one thing. At the end of the day, it's also my wish that I supply stores, or that I have my own shelter where I can sell my produce.



Makhosazane Nkosi: I also want to have something else besides the garden because the vegetables take time to grow, and we can't eat them before they are ready.

We believe our work will change the lives of other people in our community

Tholakele Ngidi: I believe that growing our own food will benefit the community more in the future. The more we develop our gardens, the more community members we'll eventually be able to hire to work for us.

One day you might hear that I've hired two people to help me with the chicken coops and the garden. Someone could clean the chicken coops and earn enough money to buy food so they can go to sleep with something in their stomachs. We need to be responsible with the opportunity that the Growing Food for Life project has given us. Since AFRA is working with ten of us, we need to be responsible so that their funders continue to fund us, and also support others. We need to show that we are trustworthy.



Nini Myeza: I also see our work making a major change in the community. As a farmer, someone can buy my produce to start their own business. I can eventually hire someone who can sell my produce while I'm working in the garden. People can get opportunities to work while I'm growing at the same time.

I hope that this project doesn't just end with us. It must also show the youth that they can live off their own crops and livestock farming. Young people mustn't just wait to be employed by a boss, they must understand that they can do it for themselves.

The Growing Food for Life project will help us a lot to open our minds in the long run. We want to bring back the indigenous ways of living– the way our ancestors sustained themselves without hunger or lack. The Growing Food for Life project has brought back our self-confidence and opened our minds. The youth must learn from us. I'm an old woman but I'm still energetic.

“I was saying recently that I have calloused feet, but this is my dream – I still wake up and go to the garden, even if there are thorns and it's cold in the mornings, I still go and work in my garden. My son says that it looks like I dream about my garden when I'm asleep.”





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Supported by:

Ford Foundation