Stories of Change Series: Story #4

‘We can get the vegetables for *isishebo* from the garden.’

WANA JOHNSON

How a food garden can change lives

GROWING FOOD FOR LIFE

FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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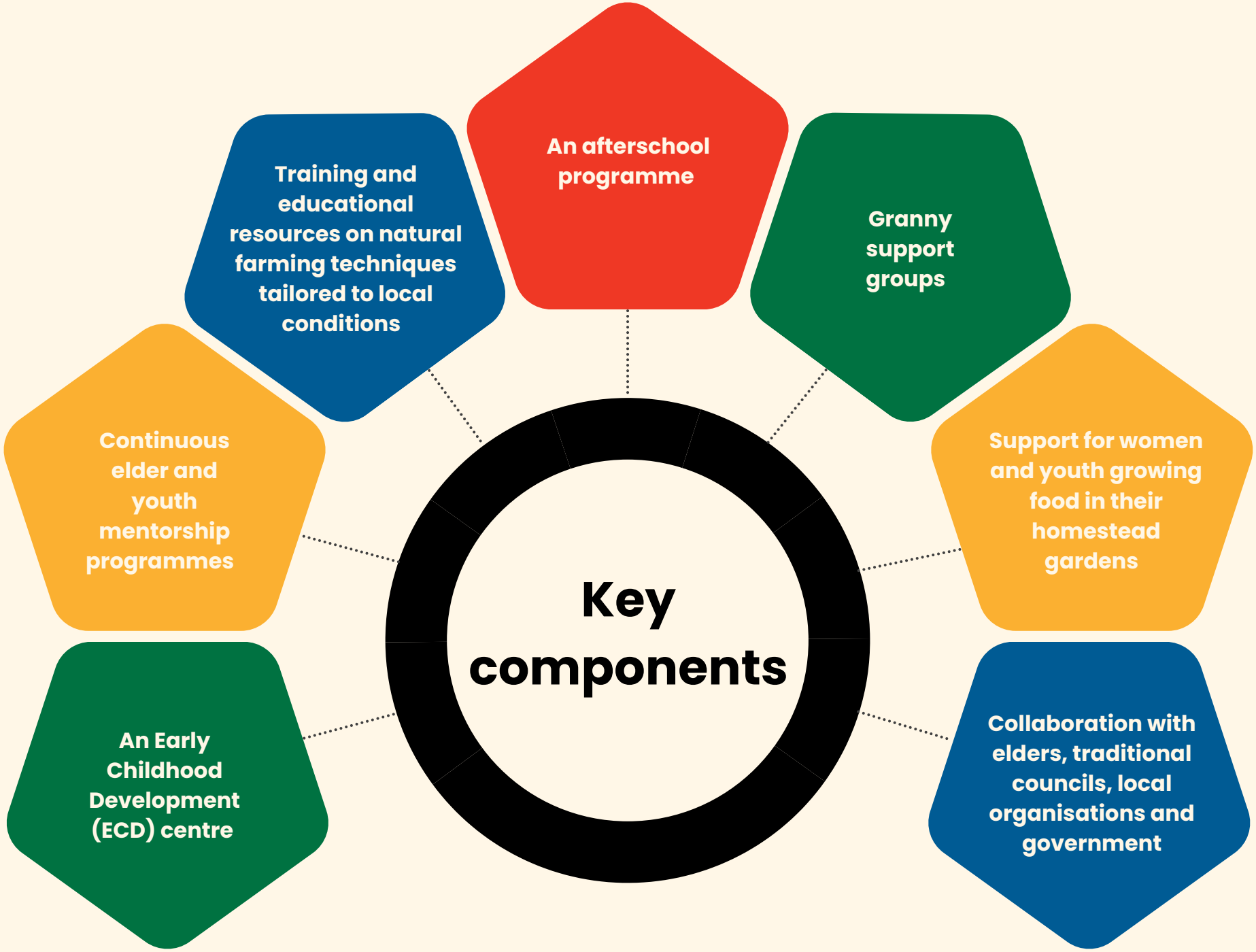
WHERE WE COME FROM

About the organisation

Wana Johnson Learning Centre was started in 2014 by the family of Wana Johnson as a legacy project, in honour of a social activist who dedicated his life to the development of indigenous people, particularly the amaMpondo of the remote, rural Wild Coast. The organisation is committed to supporting rural communities in achieving their rights to food security, nutrition and environmental sustainability through natural farming practices. For the past ten years, they have operated in Taweni, a remote rural area in the Eastern Cape province.

Currently, the Wana Johnson Learning Centre runs a demonstration garden with plans to expand into a school garden and eventually a market garden.

The centre helps rural communities grow nutritious food while also protecting and revitalising depleted water and soil resources. Through education, advocacy and collaboration, they seek to empower rural communities with the knowledge and tools to transition towards more sustainable farming methods. By promoting indigenous knowledge on regenerative agricultural techniques, the centre aims to improve soil health, conserve water and enhance biodiversity. It enables rural communities to become self-sufficient in food production while protecting natural resources, helping to build a more resilient and sustainable future for generations to come.


Key components
An afterschool programme
Granny support groups
Support for women and youth growing food in their homestead gardens
Collaboration with elders, traditional councils, local organisations and government
An Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre
Continuous elder and youth mentorship programmes
Training and educational resources on natural farming techniques tailored to local conditions

This is our story

This is a story of incredible resilience. It begins during a moment of uncertainty, when a main donor's programme came to an end, and the Wana Johnson Learning Centre was no longer considered viable because it was too remotely located to be optimally supported. It tells of the work and sisterhood that has continued even when the stipends stopped.

The garden remains a place of respite, even though it has not been possible to grow market crops at the desired scale due to unpredictable seasons and extreme weather caused by climate change. It's a complex journey of the group learning to trust the leadership and believing that they can collectively sustain their livelihoods over time.

The story is shared by three women who work at the Wana Johnson Learning Centre:

Khaya Mposula (Ma'Mbhele) - Founder of the Wana Johnson Learning Centre and coordinator of the Growing Food for Life project

Nombuyiselo Mgilane (Mam'Mgilane) – Project partner involved in the gardens

Ntombzandile Maphini (Mam'Maphini) – Project partner involved in the gardens

How we started with Growing Food for Life

Mam'Maphini: In the beginning, we'd just come to help in the garden with no expectations of any payment. I'd see *Sisi* [Khaya] always going into the garden. I'd knock on her door and offer to help. After helping her, I ended up enjoying it so much that I came every day. We got remarks in the beginning, people would say that I was going to help that woman who was just using me for her own benefit, while I got nothing.

Mam'Mgilane: I had a *piece job* [informal employment] around here, and I ended up coming to help Khaya with her work in the communal garden. She went on to start the preschool, and we learnt from each other. I learnt a lot from her. Some of the things I saw her doing in the garden were new to me, and other things I already knew. There are also children who come to get help with their homework on Saturdays, it's just nice. In the beginning, when people asked me what I was doing here, I'd say that I was just visiting.

Khaya Mposula: I returned home to Flagstaff, Eastern Cape, in 2014, and that's when the project began. When I got here, I'd see people going to town to get their grants, then go into Shoprite to buy potatoes and cabbages and come back home by taxi. People here still want to use their grants to buy vegetables or ingredients for their *isishebo* [vegetable relish]. So sometimes I find that this mindset has not changed. Even with men. I might ask a man to help us with some heavy lifting in the garden and offer him a head of cabbage in exchange. He'll refuse and say he'd rather earn the money to buy a cabbage. Their attitude is: 'I want you to pay me some money.' But if you follow their money, it ends up buying the same cabbage at the local spaza shop.

So all of these experiences motivated me to try and get more people to grow their own vegetables because the grants aren't enough to cover all their needs. From there, the project went on to have a preschool, and now we also have an afterschool programme, a communal garden, and some women have their own backyard gardens.

Our plan for running the Growing Food for Life programme was to say: Here's an opportunity, with the ultimate goal that we become sustainable over time. So, I believe that the type of Early Childhood Development [ECD] centre we are building – linked to growing food gardens – is going to take us somewhere. If you look around, there is no preschool in the area, apart from ours, that has a garden. The primary and high schools have gardens, but there isn't anything growing in them. So, to me, the ECD space is where this whole mindset of being dependent on handouts is going to slowly change.

I also picked up that with the previous funder, our programme took on people who had never been in a work environment. It was about growing a work ethic. Getting people to understand that 8 o'clock means 8 o'clock, that you need to be here on time. The project partners had to learn when work ends, when they can take lunch, how to negotiate a contract, and so on. We literally had to spend a day with the traditional council going through their contracts, clause for clause, highlighting the 'dos and don'ts' to make sure that people could understand their contracts. So, it was actually a beautiful learning experience, seriously; having that funder on board.

"At the beginning of Growing Food for Life, what kept us coming back was that we were happy to be meeting up as women, including uGranny [the grandmother]. We got to talk about things in our lives that were not sitting well with us."

Khaya: We were initially worried when David [the mentor from the previous funder], who was advising us, said we should respond to the Growing Food for Life call for proposals, because we didn't even have a bank account. Luckily, there weren't many application requirements.

Mam'Maphini: At the beginning of Growing Food for Life, what kept us coming back was that we were happy to be meeting up as women, including *uGranny* [the grandmother]. We got to talk about things in our lives that were not sitting well with us. By the time we went home, we didn't feel stressed anymore. This was very helpful and important for us. It was powerful.

"We were happy when FHR accepted us without much experience or any formal qualification. This programme welcomed us, just as we were."

Mam'Mgilane: When we got together to farm, we also worked with our hands to knit and make hats. You'd leave feeling like *thyini* [an expression of pride, loosely translated as 'indeed'], you'd learnt something new and made something for yourself. We really enjoyed that kind of work. It helped us forget the stresses we were dealing with at home.

"If you look around in the area, there is no preschool apart from ours that has a garden. The primary and high schools have gardens but there isn't anything growing in them. So, to me, the ECD space is where this whole mindset of being dependent on handouts is going to slowly change"


WHERE WE
ARE NOW

The reality of climate change has also changed our dream

Khaya: My dream is gradually changing from what I had in mind when the garden project began, before we joined the Growing Food for Life project. When we first started, our dream was to plant and sell our produce. But now, since joining the Growing Food for Life project, my dream is for each and every house in the village to have a small food garden with just enough to feed the family. That is my dream now. My initial dream was to have a market garden where we grew cash crops, like spinach and cabbage, in such big volumes that we could sell them to retailers in Flagstaff, such as Boxer and Shoprite. We have now realised that was just a dream. After ten years of the project, we are only now starting to sell.

My original dream has also been changed by the reality of climate change – and the fact that you can never grow large numbers of vegetables. Initially, we were looking at chemical farming to produce large volumes: synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. But then the reality of what we were saying hit us –what about the environment and the health of the people who eat our produce?

All of these things changed our dream. In fact, just this morning, I was telling Mam'Mgilane that I had even participated in some genetically modified organism [GMO] projects, including one that worked on maize. But eventually, you start to question why you'd want to do that type of farming when you understand its impact on the environment.

So, that's how the dream has changed. Honestly, it was more about climate change, about being consciousness of people's health, looking after the environment and animal welfare.

Going forward, we can see that we work very, very hard. We're also trying to use indigenous farming methods, but our yields aren't improving. We can't get to the market-garden phase because of climate change. We're struggling with sustainability. Our efforts are constantly being challenged by the weather.

It was our expressed wish to become sustainable – that's why we are doing these agroecology practices. We'll plant – and it'll get too hot, and we can't cover our crops. We'll plant – and we don't get any rain because the rain season is delayed. Our water tanks eventually run dry. We've got a beautiful irrigation system, but we just can't predict the weather. So, it means that at some point, we'll always be hoping for support from funders because the dream of a market garden has been delayed by factors beyond our control. So, the dream is moving further away.

Working through our challenges

Mam'Maphini: The difficulty I faced when I joined the project was not having any money. Before the project began, the situation wasn't good at all. We even turned to making bricks for people building houses because we were unemployed. We would get paid R150 for making a hundred bricks. Life was not good at that point, and we did brickmaking to try and survive.

Having money makes you feel alright. You're not thinking about too much. The only thing is that you must make sure not to waste it.

Mam'Mgilane: I also had that challenge when I joined the project; not having any money. Where we could, we'd do household duties for money. We used what we made from those domestic jobs to buy mealie meal when we were running out of food, or to buy school shoes for our kids.

Khaya: For me, it's still difficult because I'm so remote. I worked in Joburg for many years, then I relocated to Durban – and eventually things just gravitated, and I ended up here. My family is in Durban. This situation is ongoing and so I do feel isolated. People say it's lonely at the top!

So yeah, the actual project challenges are just trust issues. There are trust issues in any situation, but trust is a big one for me, personally. In business, it's a bit awkward when you come to a remote area and you find there's issues like: 'She's educated, so we can't trust her. She might pull something on us, you know?' And I think people have trust issues like this because people have been promised so many things, whether it's by the government or the church. We've been promised things all along the way, but those promises are never kept. I struggle to get peoples' buy-in. It's like they can never get enough of asking, 'Why would she really leave the city and come and live here?' And it seems like they're thinking: 'Oh, maybe she failed in the city and that's why she came here.' The issue with trust is an ongoing thing. You can hear throughout our conversations that the issue of money still comes up.

When an opportunity turns up, we all hope that it will come with money. Even when we were informed by the FHR that we were getting uniforms and personal protective equipment, I was hesitant to talk to the ladies about it because the expectation is that if we wear a uniform, it means we are working for an organisation that is paying us. It's tricky explaining this to the project partners because although they may agree to wear the uniform, in the background, they are questioning: 'What happened to the money? Why are we not getting any money? Why is Ma'Mbhele [Khaya's clan name] agreeing to us not being paid? Is she taking the money and not giving any to us?' It's not like it's against me as a person – that I can't convince or make them trust me. It's just that the minute money comes into the equation, you can't satisfy people enough because we are all looking for this elusive money.

Mam'Maphini: When I met the FHR team, some were wearing uniforms, and I got excited. I love the uniform! I thought to myself, 'I'd like to see myself in the same uniform.' Wearing the uniform makes me feel proud when I picture myself working and earning money. Seeing your teammates wearing uniforms made me feel like you're here to discuss serious business, and that what you're offering is going to benefit us a lot.

Khaya: In the ten years of operating as Wana Johnson, even the things that I thought were straightforward and easy to understand have become so muddled by the question of money.

Gardening is improving our emotional health and social connections with other women

Mam'Maphini: I was feeling a lot of stress because there was so much going on in my life when I joined. I could tell you a long story but, after sharing my troubles with the women here, I felt encouraged. I became stronger thanks to the ladies from the project. What makes us happy about being here is that we get to wake up and leave our homes. We get to leave behind the things that stress us at home. We get to avoid conflict and a lot of things that can hurt you, because you are not at home much during the day.

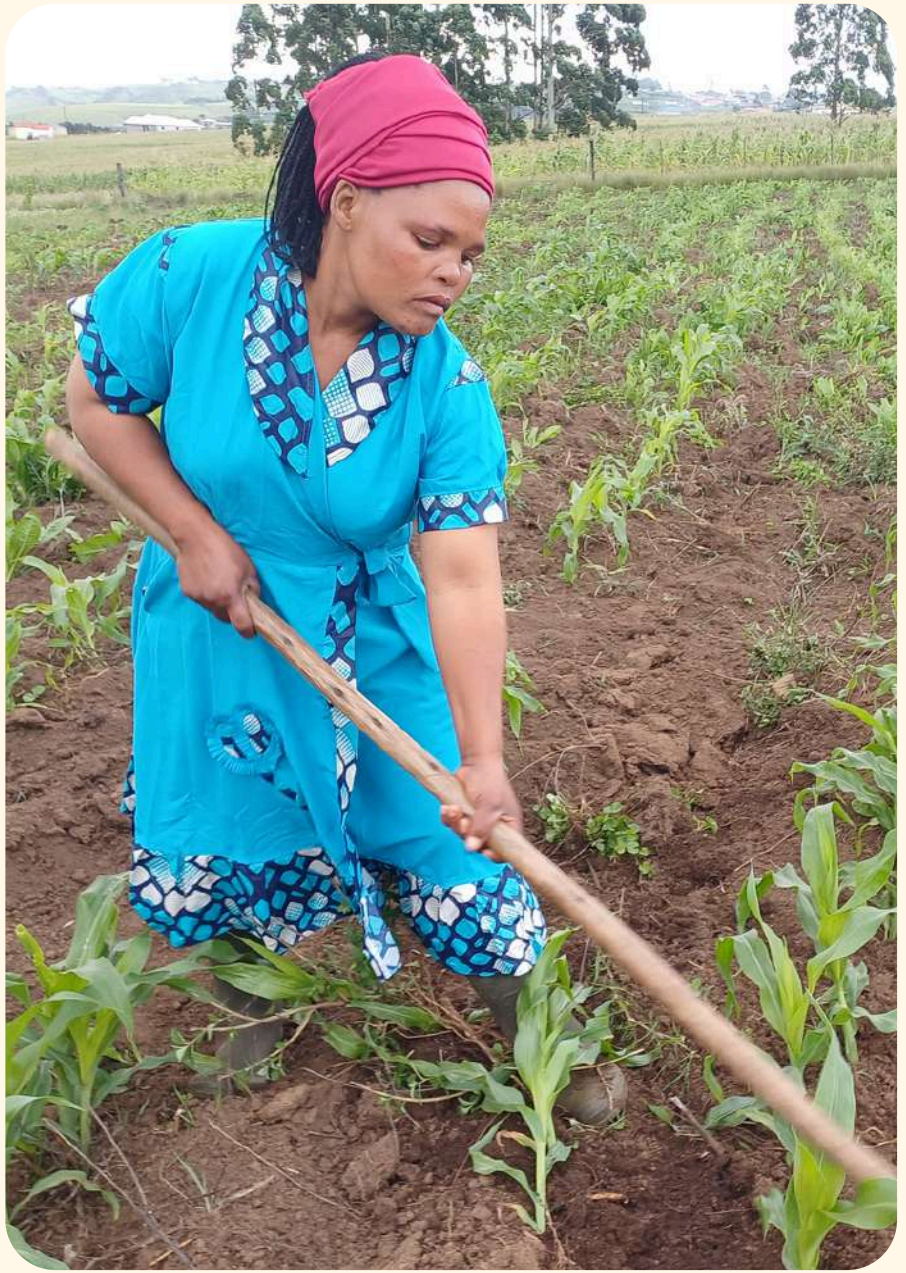
I joined as a widow with older kids, so being a part of the project helped me keep busy. It helped me to be productive and not go gallivanting in the streets. I decided that I should love gardening and working with my hands. That's what helped me to love being part of the project.

Khaya: For me, it's similar to the other ladies. I like the fact that there are a lot of people in the yard because I live alone on this big site. I like literally just having people around me. As much as we are here to farm or to learn, we also get to chat. I wish the other ladies wouldn't go home on some days. Having the other ladies as part of the project has been a wonderful addition to the journey. I think that my confidence levels have improved.

I'm now learning a lot more about indigenous practices and traditional crafts, which I knew nothing about. I'm learning how things like reed baskets and grass mats are traditionally made. When the ladies talk about how things were done in the olden days, I get so curious and ask questions like: 'How are reeds grown? Where do they get reeds from?' Although I was born here, I moved to town, so I had lost touch with the traditional ways of living and doing things.

Mam'Maphini: The excitement I feel is from having a backyard garden, even though it still needs to be properly fenced and protected from livestock.

"What makes us happy about being here is that we get to wake up and leave home. We get to leave behind the things that stress us at home. We get to avoid conflict and a lot of things that can hurt you because you are not at home much during the day"



Fetching water was always a problem, but we then introduced Hippo Rollers

Mam'Maphini: Backyard gardens are not common in our area since people usually farm on large family fields. Some people don't have backyard gardens because they are lazy. And others don't have fenced yards. Another common issue is the lack of water – and you can't grow plants without water.

Khaya: I still find the water problem to be a big deterrent. When I encourage the community to grow food gardens, they say, 'But Ma'Mbhele, where do I get water from?' So, a big focus of the Wana Johnson Learning Centre is to provide water to our communities. To me, we can't talk about food if there is no water.

The first thing that we introduced was the Hippo Roller, which is a drum that holds 90 litres of water. And you can push it home. Children are now also able to fetch water. Boy children were very hesitant. After a certain age, they stop going to fetch water. Now that there's the Hippo Roller, everyone takes on this chore. The Hippo Roller has been our number one solution.

We've also asked around for the funds to get something called Spring Protection, which involves taking an existing water source, however small, cleaning it up, containing the water and using pumps to bring it closer to the community. So, we've completed quite a big Spring Protection project in *Dolophini,* the village Mam'Maphini is from. On a two-kilometre stretch, they now have eight standpipes. All from one little spring in the valley.

Mam'Maphini: If I were to speak about my village, Dolophini, where I come from , since *Sisi* [Khaya] came here, we are living in a better way. People don't fetch water from the river anymore. She installed taps that are only about two to five minutes from our houses. We don't have to go far to fetch water or to wash our laundry. We are happy, it's very beautiful. Since we got our Hippo Rollers, our small children, from as young as four or five years old, can now fetch water. We are very happy. And we trust that we're going to get even happier.

"To me, even before we can talk about food, it can't happen if there is no water"

We have one less thing to worry about because we no longer struggle to get *isishebo*

Mam'Mgilane: I am personally seeing a difference since we started working on our own backyard gardens. We no longer struggle with getting *isishebo*. At least, if we struggle, we'll just be struggling to get mealie-meal. We can get the vegetables for *isishebo* from the garden.

Mam'Maphini: When people have some food at home but no vegetables, they can buy them from here and not in town.

Khaya: I always wanted us to help people grow their own vegetables to get *isishebo*, so people can have something to cook and they can sleep having fed their families.

Mam'Maphini: I have a vision to plant potatoes, cabbages and spinach. I don't want to go and buy vegetables anymore. And I want other people to buy them from me as well.

We want Wana Johnson to be the centre that tried it all for our community

Khaya: I think that Wana Johnson should eventually become a one-stop centre. The thing that Mam'Maphini was talking about is that even if people have to buy mealie meal in town, they can always get their vegetables here. So, we think that this one-stop centre could solve many other problems. Such a centre could have anything and everything that the community needed. I'd love the Wana Johnson Learning Centre to be known one day as the centre that tried it all.

Mam'Mgilane: My hope is that we can build something that won't ever end, that we can go the distance with and get something from. Something that will bring some change to the village.

Khaya: Currently, because we now have a preschool, Mam'Mgilane, for example, can come and work on the project without having to worry about childcare. We don't charge the project partners any school fees because they can't afford it. Children also need an afterschool programme. And so we don't charge the project partners a set fee to bring their children. Holistically speaking, the project is sort of slowly moving towards sustainability with this intervention. Because of it, we can keep young people in our space to encourage them to also start enjoying the gardening aspect of food security. So, at the moment, we'd also like to advance these school programmes so that we are able to provide a good learning environment.

Mam'Mgilane and I are going to THANDA [another Growing Food for Life partner] in Port Shepstone. We're going to check out their holistic programme. We want to learn how we can develop our ECD and afterschool efforts and incorporate them into our food gardening project.

Mam'Maphini: I wish that we can have a programme that won't end. One that would employ many people so that they don't have to only find employment in cities like Durban. I wish for a project where humble people are working with good attitudes and who are respectful. That is my wish.

Khaya: People generally take a taxi to go and scan a document or to type their CVs in town. So we just started this little print shop facility. But we're unable to advance this plan because we're using little machines from Game and not the proper multifunction machines for big jobs. Also, it's still very difficult because even when you have a young person working there, how are they going to get paid? What if there are no customers that day? We haven't been able to promote it very well. But these are some of the things we try to do.

"As much as we are here to farm or learn what we are learning, we also get to chat. I wish they won't leave on some days"

Making gardening interesting for the youth is challenging, but we keep trying

Khaya: We had a youth employment programme before the Growing Food for Life programme and so we are still hoping to get more youth interested. The 12 months of that employment programme didn't go well. The young people were constantly reminding us that they had submitted their CVs to the municipality, so they wouldn't be able to stay long in 'this thing' because they were waiting for a call from the municipality. With the R350 government grant, the youth are now starting to see themselves as having money. Many of them live with their parents without any responsibilities. They see a plate of food appear in front of them every day. They don't think it's necessary to garden and come work on the project with us.

Mam'Mgilane: Our children don't like working on the project with us. They say they don't want to work with old people.

We still hope that some income will come from the project

Mam'Mgilane: Even though we don't get stipends anymore, I haven't lost strength – I'm still turning up. We have a lot of hope that we will earn some income, because we are still here.

Khaya: I think, for me, I have mixed feelings. On some days, we get discouraged and that's expected. I do feel discouraged sometimes and I also feel stressed. It is stressful because people are looking to you to make something happen – 'Surely there's something you should be doing!'

Sometimes, you even struggle with communication, you are not sure how you will communicate. Sometimes, you speak but then you notice that people are still confused, maybe they've misunderstood what you said. You hear people saying you said there might be an opportunity to get paid, and you think to yourself, 'But I didn't say that!'

So, I do feel the strain. Physically, I can feel it. I'm not as strong as I used to be. The other day, I had a container on my back while I was spraying cabbages. The next day, I couldn't get up because my back was so sore. Just recently, after we had finished harvesting, Mam'Mgilane, went down, she was sick and lying down flat. I don't know how she felt, but it frustrated me because when she isn't around, you can really tell that she's not here. These things have an impact on you – the fact that we aren't young anymore.

Mam'Mgilane: When we were initially getting stipends, it gave me hope: if we kept going for longer, I could eventually have enough money to start a business, selling chickens. In the beginning, I would come to work with someone, but she stopped coming because she got tired of working for no money. When we started getting a stipend, she wanted to come back. But she couldn't because the stipends were for project partners only. It was bad when we stopped getting stipends because before we had hope. Our houses had started falling apart because we didn't have money to fix the old structures. With the stipends, we had started rebuilding them. It was really hard when that funder left us.

Mam'Maphini: When we started getting stipends, people started taking our work seriously. They saw that there was something benefitting us here. They wished that they were also involved in the project.

Khaya: I can say that it was traumatic when the funder, who gave us stipends, left. You can still see the effects in the landscape. It's just not the same. From having fifty participants on the project, two days a week, to suddenly having to swap around four people to cover the whole week just hasn't been easy.

Within that group of fifty people, there were different skill sets. For example, when we got a water tank from another programme, we knew that we had builders on the project who could build a stand for it. If there were holes in the fence, we had men who could easily fix them for us. Even for cutting grass. There were people on the programme who could cut grass for us with the brush cutter.

Now we are just left here, on our own. It's just traumatic. And it's the things that make you think that the community must be laughing at you, saying, 'She was on a high the other day. The project garden was green, it was beautiful, and it was full of life and activity.' Suddenly, there is nothing happening. It is traumatic.

Mam'Maphini: We do still have hope. Because we once worked on a project with a stipend and we are keeping up with the work, we are hopeful that one day there will be something. I have hope that although we got negative comments at first, we didn't stop working on the project, even when the stipend support stopped and we were not getting anything.

In our hearts, we still have a lot of hope. We're happy. We're watching the kids. We're just working in the garden and nothing is troubling us.

"In ten years of being in the project, we are only starting to sell now"


WHERE WE
ARE GOING

Looking ahead with our dreams, goals and sustainability

Khaya: Our biggest focus is on programmes that will accommodate and cater for widows and for people who are in this age group that is not being looked after [35-years-old and upwards]. They don't want to be looked after, actually, they just want programmes that are relevant, that encourage and inspire them to do more to look after their families.

We feel we're so remote. We're too far from mentorship programmes and interventions. If we could just have more assistance. Because we're here alone, we don't know when we do things incorrectly. We don't know what else we could be doing. We need some experts who could probably help us to do better with proposal writing and attract more funding partners.

I think we also need more capacity building or more partners whose farms we could visit and observe other programmes doing similar work, under similar conditions, but who are making it work. When David [from the previous funder] was guiding us, we felt like we had a mentor, someone who came and taught us things. We felt like we had power. David would connect us with initiatives like Growing Food for Life.

Mam'Mgilane: We need support with keeping poultry and candle-making. We know how to make candles but we don't have the wax.

Khaya: The biggest thing I'm really looking at getting are tunnels ['polytunnels' are widely used in sustainable and small-scale agriculture to provide shelter for plants from harsh weather conditions]. Maybe one big tunnel, so we can keep some crops under cover as well as have something to improve our irrigation. Our water reservoir facility is not sufficient at the moment. So we need the system, which is connected to a spring not far from here, to pump more water into the garden. Basically, we need water and a shade covering for some of the crops to protect them from harsh weather conditions.

Mam'Maphini: We're happy with being in the project, but what's not sitting so well with me is that there are some gaps in our fence that let animals get in and destroy our crops. Part of my budget for next year, if God helps me, is to also fence my yard. We need more fencing because livestock enters through the gaps in the fence.

Khaya: I suggest that we can also learn baking and become a local bakery. We could bake bread and some cakes, here, locally for the little ones' birthdays. For the preschool, we really need play equipment for the little ones because we don't have the budget to build them a jungle gym. We've got a little bit of the gardening stuff for them to do, but we still need to have a small outdoor play area.

By the way, Mam'Maphini always tells me that she won't die before learning to drive and having a car. I think she has forgotten now but she always tells me that this is her dream. So, if this project goes well, there's no reason why some people can't achieve such dreams.

Mam'Maphini: What I would love is for someone to teach us how to drive and how to get our driving licences. That would be very helpful. I've planned that, this year, even without having any money, I'd get my driving licence. Being able to drive, I'd even consider working for the funeral parlour and driving for them.

Mam'Mgilane: It would also be helpful if we could get a car, to drive around the community selling our produce instead of doing it on foot. This whole week, I've been walking around selling brinjals and cabbages.

Khaya: One day, I'll probably leave to go look after my grandchildren [gets choked up with tears and stops to collect herself]. The dream keeps on changing because of circumstances that we can't control. The children are getting older. I have a granddaughter, and I would like her to be part of my life. But I can't because I am so far. And when you think about it, I don't even have my own place.

So, some of these factors do have an impact on me. I think it's because of the discussions we have about sustainability and continuity. How can we, or how do we, work without it being a case of: 'I've done my best… and I need to leave at some point'?

The project wouldn't be where it is if these women weren't here. The gates would've closed a long time ago. Their contribution is huge and with the dreams that we spoke about today, this project will continue.

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