Stories of Change Series: Story #2

‘Smoke rising from people’s home cooking.’

Blood River Advice Office

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

We are a Community Advice Office (CAO) based in Blood River, a community of about 11 000 people and 2800 households. Blood River lies just north-west of Seshego, within the Polokwane Local Municipality in the Capricorn District of Limpopo Province.

The Bloodriver Advice Office is a human rights organisation that started in 1998 and officially registered as a non-profit in 2002. Our core team includes a social worker, a senior legal assistant, two paralegals, and a mediator to help resolve conflicts and provide comprehensive support. We are also supported by community volunteers who assist with outreach across our different programmes.

This is the story of our community garden, which we started in 2017 in response to the food insecurity and water shortages faced by many people in Blood River. Through the Growing Food for Life programme, we now have six full-time staff and three volunteers. Together, we support the elderly, people living with HIV/AIDS and others in our community, many of them face constant hardship in putting enough healthy food on the table and in accessing water.


Our Programmes
Legal advice & support
Community food gardens
Human rights education & awareness
HIV/AIDS prevention
Gender-based violence & femicide awareness
Family support services
ChommY (youth programme)

This is our story...

The story of Blooodriver Advice Office, as told by five community members who have been a part of this project:

Christina Mathiba
Food Activist

Lucy Manthata
Food Activist

Julia Gadebe
Food Activist

Mary Selona
Programme Manager

Daniel Mametja
Programme Officer

Where we started with food gardening

Mametja: We brought people together in 2017 because we noticed that many people were coming to the Bloodriver Advice Office asking for food parcels. We realised that food parcels were not a long-term solution and that it would be better to teach people how to grow their own food.

We were happy to see that people got really interested in the food gardening project. When we started, the soil was hard and packed down. It was very tough to dig by hand, and we didn't have money to hire tractors or other machines. Some people gave up because it was so hard. But others stuck with it, people like Lucy Manthata have been with us from the beginning. Over time, the soil got softer, and more people from the community came to help because they saw that the project was for the good of everyone.

Lucy: I remember not wanting to come to work because the manual labour was so hard when we first started. It was really tough at the beginning until we got used to it.

Christina: Digging the soil was hard. I remember looking at the gravelly land and losing hope. But Mr Mametja told us not to give up. I remember him saying that we will eventually plant on that piece of land. And it's true, we have planted on that land now! That's when I started to believe that anything is possible.

Mary: There are clear changes from when the Foundation for Human Rights (FHR) found us in 2022 and where we are now. What we needed the most was an office space to keep working on our agroecology and other projects. The FHR allowed us to use part of the funding towards this goal and we were able to pay for the construction of a building on the site. If it wasn't for the FHR, we wouldn't have managed it. All we can say is that *FHR, Mo le fitileng gona, go a bonagala* [where you've crossed our path, you've made a difference]. The only thing missing is the roof.

Mametja: It was really tough for us when people came to the office asking for food parcels. Imagine when people are desperate for food, and you can't help. So, we sat down at the Bloodriver Advice Office and asked ourselves: how could we solve this for the long term? We decided to start a food garden where the community could get involved and grow food for themselves and their families.

Now, we can see that it's working. When we look around, we see smoke rising from people's home cooking as they cook the food that they've grown themselves.

"I remember looking at the gravelly land and losing hope. But Mr Mametja told us not to give up. I remember him saying that we will eventually plant on that piece of land. "

We are fighting unemployment and changing our dreams

Julia: I joined when I saw that the project was directly providing food. I live close to the Bloodriver Advice Office, so I could see what was happening, especially since I wasn't working at the time.

Lucy: I joined as soon as I heard that the Bloodriver Advice Office was starting a food garden. I thought it could be helpful. I wasn't working full-time, just doing temporary jobs. I already had some gardening experience from many training sessions before joining this project. I appreciate the respect and recognition I've received for my knowledge. I've been here for a long time and have learned a lot. I try to be just as respectful and welcoming towards new people.

Christina: I was unemployed and I used to do door-to-door campaigns during elections. A lot of people were complaining about not having food. Then one day, I met Lucy and heard about this garden project. I joined because I heard they were growing spinach and then selling or donating it to the community.

My dream was to become a nurse. My family encouraged me to pursue nursing, but I didn't pass the right subjects. After that, I ended up running an informal business selling health products and working as a helper.

Julia: My dream was also to become a nurse, but things didn't turn out that way. I lost my parents at a young age and had to leave school. Farming wasn't my plan, but as people, we have dreams that God has not planned for us. But I've learned that this didn't have to be the end. Now I'm here, on Plan B, making it work... you must always have a Plan A and a Plan B.

Mametja: On a personal level, when I was growing up, I always liked helping people. When I saw someone in need, I wanted to help them. This made me think; what if I joined a well-run organisation where I could support people properly? The Bloodriver Advice Office gave me that opportunity. I've now been here for almost 12 years.


WHERE WE
ARE NOW

We are growing food that heals our community

Mametja: We decided we didn't want to use insecticides, and we told our community about the dangers of these chemicals, how they affect our health and the soil. We agreed that our garden would be completely organic. This change was tough at first. For example, plants like tomatoes were hit hard by insects, and we didn't know how to deal with this. But through the training we attended, we learned that we could use things like a mixture of chillies, vodka and garlic to manage pests.

Now we raise awareness about the health benefits of eating vegetables, instead of eating pap and meat all the time. I also hope this awareness will help people understand food shortages in the community.

Christina: My biggest worry was always what to eat with pap. Buying mealie meal is easier than finding something healthy to have with it. I remember my daughter didn't like eating spinach with her pap, so I had to teach her why it's good for her. I also remember talking to my neighbour about switching from traditional *morogo,* which is only available in season, to vegetables like spinach and beetroot, which you can get all year round.

Lucy: It was the same for me. At home, my children didn't want spinach; they wanted meat. But since I joined the Bloodriver Advice Office, and with what I knew from previous farming experience, my children have somehow changed. Now they eat vegetables even more than I do. They ask what we are planting, what we are harvesting, and they even ask me to bring home different vegetables from the garden.

"I also remember talking to my neighbour about changing from traditional morogo, which is only available in season, to vegetables like spinach and beetroot, which you can get all year round."

Gardening has reduced our stress and improved our health

Christina: I was always stressed about finding food for my family. Since I started gardening work, the mental stress has gone down. I have also started noticing that my body is feeling better. I know it's because of the healthy, organic food we're growing and eating.

Mametja: We want our community's health to get better. We are working to end the problem of eating harmful foods. We are also teaching people about living in a responsible way – taking charge and holding the right people accountable.

Christina: I am also grateful to the Bloodriver Advice Office for making it possible to socialise with other workers.

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Lucy: Before, when I wasn't working, I was always worried about asking people for help.

Mametja: Many people are healing. One thing I'm proud of is teaching people the difference between alkalinity and acidity and encouraging them to choose alkalinity. I can see that the knowledge is spreading – people here and in the community are choosing healthier, organic food.

Julia: I was also not feeling great. As a woman with children, I was always worrying, especially trying to figure out what to put together for dinner. Now that stress has gone down. We are no longer thinking too much or wondering if we will have food for dinner – life is moving forward.

"Teaching others about the differences between alkalinity and acidity and encouraging people to choose alkalinity is something I am very proud of. I can see that the knowledge is spreading in the community and also among our colleagues here at Bloodriver Advice Office."

Our work helps our communities

Lucy: The community no longer has to go to the mall to buy vegetables at Shoprite, which means they save on travel costs. They can walk to the garden site easily, which is a big cost-saving factor. We can see that the community appreciates what we are doing. We are also selling our vegetables to independent traders, who buy directly from Bloodriver and then sell door to door.

Christina: What I have seen in the community is that people enjoy the food we are growing. They are also making suggestions – like asking us to sell seedlings. Some ask for weekly supplies, so we prepare weekly boxes for some families, the Early Childhood Development Centre and some individuals. One woman, who lives with her small child, told us not to bring too many vegetables at once because she stores them so carefully.

"We see that this is working because we can see the smoke rising from people's home cooking as they cook the food that they've grown themselves."

Lucy: I remember I was sent to deliver vegetables to some community members. In one of the households, a woman thanked us so much and said, 'You know what, through this project, hunger is gone and illnesses are getting better.' This woman was chosen to get a supply of vegetables because she was sick, although I can't say what was going on with her out of privacy. But I just remember how grateful she was. She said, 'Since I started receiving a regular supply of vegetables, my sickness is not getting worse.' Moments like this show us how important the project is for the community.

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Christina: One day, we were trimming spinach, and I took some of it to the house of a man I know whose health is not great. When I arrived, he was sitting with another man who once provided plumbing services to the Bloodriver Advice Office. The man jokingly said, 'Why are you not sharing with me? I'm also like a staff member.' This made me happy because when people see the results of the project they contributed to, they are proud and want their name to be linked to it.

Mametja: There are some stakeholders who refer people to us, including survivors of gender-based violence [GBV]. Unemployment often fuels GBV, so we encourage survivors to learn gardening skills and start backyard food gardens. Some were struggling to access water from their homes, so we also taught them about using grey water. We can now say that survivors and those vulnerable to GBV, and maybe even those who were the likely perpetrators, are all receiving skills training at our office.

Julia: I am just happy that we are eating and the community is also eating. They come and buy from us. Some even give us advice, even though they ran away from the hard work at the beginning. It's exciting to see that we have support from the community now.

"It's exciting to see that we have support from the community."

We are working together with young people

Lucy: What I like is that our community is keen and most of the people who ask if we have openings are young. That's interesting because usually young people are not interested in manual work like gardening. But I think that when they see their peers involved, they want to join the project too.

Mametja: We have young people who have been with us from the beginning and they're still here. Learning gardening skills helps them stay away from the temptation of drug abuse, especially because of the high rate of youth unemployment.

Julia: This garden project has changed our lives as young people. So we understand the situation and those who are struggling with drug abuse are welcome to come to us.

Mametja: We also get young people sent to us from rehab centres to learn gardening skills and then they can fit back into their community. They come to us on a monthly or quarterly basis. The idea is that when they return home, they can take up permaculture, so they don't just sit idle and risk falling back into drug abuse.

We have created a safe space for learning and skills-sharing

Lucy: I've gained a lot of knowledge in permaculture. My dream is to have my own place where I can teach and run a project based on permaculture. I already knew a bit before joining Bloodriver, but I've attended many more training sessions, and it's improved my understanding. If someone asked me to train others, I could do it. I feel confident that I can teach.

Christina: I grew up in a farming environment. I later found out that my aunt, who moved to Botswana in the 1950s, is also a farmer, and that's how she has supported herself.

Julia: This was not my first experience in farming. I used to work on a grape farm, and I also have experience in cotton farming. I feel sure I can share my knowledge with others who, like me, struggle with unemployment. The stipend is not much, but it's something.

Mametja: I share my skills in agriculture with my colleagues and encourage them to share theirs, within the team and among the community.

"This is what motivates me to get up and come to work, especially when I see these skills spreading to people who are not directly involved in the project."

Julia: I contribute through physical work. The progress that is visible now at the Bloodriver Advice Office gardens is because of my hard work and that of my colleagues.

Lucy: I am happy here. Most people found me already working when they joined. I appreciate the respect and recognition that I've earned as someone who has been here for a long time and learned a lot. I try to be just as respectful and friendly towards new people.

"I appreciate the respect and recognition of my knowledge as someone who has been here for a long time and learned more. I am also very respectful towards new people and work in a friendly way."

We have created ways of working as a team

Lucy: The way we group our teams also encourages a mix of older people and the youth, three of each in every team of six.

Mametja: We teach that when you are out in the community, you're representing the Bloodriver Advice Office. When there's conflict between employees, we come together and follow the evidence until we find out where and how the problem started. The person in the wrong takes responsibility and apologises if needed, and then we close the case. We also go back to everyone who witnessed the conflict and let them know it's been resolved. This helps maintain a culture of transparency and prevents issues from simmering.

Julia: What I've learned is that when we make mistakes or hurt each other, we address it through our line managers. The key is that when we leave through the gates of the Bloodriver Advice Office at the end of the day, whatever challenge we were dealing with stays behind.


WHERE WE
ARE GOING

Working through our worries

Mametja: I wish people's human rights could always be met. People have the right to water, and so they should get a water supply. If they need housing, they should get housing. People shouldn't have to fight for their rights, especially for their basic human rights.

Christina: I wish the Bloodriver office could get more resources, like other organisations. Then we could be as good as experienced farmers. We want to be seen as working for a good organisation with decent salaries and uniforms that show we work in the food garden.

Mary: My biggest worry today is the safety of our things because there is a lot of theft in our area. I don't want us to be scared to move forward with our food growing programme because of this. In December 2023, a water pump was stolen. When we came back in January 2024, we had to replace it. We still need to finish the roof, and we're hoping to be able to afford security cameras and alarms.

Mametja: I think having a tractor would reduce the physical burden on our employees. I'd also like to have a bakkie. Sometimes we get requests to supply bulk vegetables for funerals, but we don't have a bakkie to make such deliveries. Having both would move our project forward. We could even use the tractor to help with employees' backyard gardens and generate income by offering ploughing services to the community.

Lucy: I would like poverty to end. It makes life very hard when people have to fight for water, for food, when a child needs things like data for school and you can't provide it, or when they need clothes and you have no way to buy them. It's very difficult.

Looking ahead with our plans and goals

Mametja: Because of the work we're doing, traditional leaders have started to recognise our contribution. After hearing about us in community meetings, they decided to give us more land so that the project can grow and become more sustainable.

"As we speak, we have a 1-hectare plot that we wouldn't have gotten if we hadn't started this food gardening project. We will plant there and donate to families who can't afford food and sell to those who can buy to help keep this project going."

Christina: I would like to see the project grow to the point that our tribal leaders can talk about it during their meetings with neighbouring villages. Maybe then those villages will see the Bloodriver Advice Office as a potential supplier of vegetables.

Mametja: The Bloodriver Advice Office has always highlighted human rights. We want people to take charge of their rights. And we want to grow the project to where we can hire more people and pay them proper salaries. We're not there yet but that's the goal.

Julia: I also wish I could start a project like this myself. I've noticed that in places like Zebediela, there are no projects like this. People don't know about the possibilities of food gardening. I'd be happy to share the skills I've learned so others can make a living too.

Mametja: We're hoping that this project will grow and reach larger markets where we can sell in bulk. We also want to make sure that people can get vegetables at a good price.

Lucy: I'm happy working in the garden. We work Monday to Friday, and at the end of the month, there's some money coming in – it feels good to be able to do what we need to do. My hope is that the Bloodriver Advice Office and our gardens grow so that we can hire more people and be able to pay them properly.

Mametja: We want steady growth for the organisation and for everyone involved. We're already seeing progress. Ideally, we would like to be selling at local markets as well.

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