

What dedication can do: Chuma's story.



In 2021-22 the [Environmental Entrepreneurs Support Initiative \(EESI\)](#), supported Chuma Mgcoyi, permaculturist and social entrepreneur, in her work to promote, enable and support cultivation of diverse indigenous perennial food and medicinal crops by existing urban food gardeners in Langa. Her goal has been to link environmental stewardship with improved livelihoods and quality of life in this under resourced community, in the hopes that this example can inspire people in other communities as well.

Building on nearly a decade of experience as a farmer and permaculturist, she had already established her own NGO, Tyisa Nabanye (“Growing Together” in Xhosa), to support urban food growing among vulnerable people living in informal or otherwise precarious circumstances.

As a participant in the EESI programme she was challenged to broaden the range of communities she worked with and to see herself as an agent of broader change. She took up this challenge and made the choice to move into the community of Langa, a reflection of the dedication she has to enhancing the lives of others through urban food growing.

Despite this commitment and her previous experience, once she moved into the community she faced a new set of challenges and realities that began to stretch her as a farmer and as a person.

“I’m not from this community but I have worked here and come here before, so it was not so hard to find my place when living here. And working with the farmers, I feel like I have a family. But things are not easy for people in Langa and there have been break-ins where I am staying and things stolen, also my phone more than once. It makes things harder.”

Chuma also lost a close friend through violence in the community, which, on top of the toll of the pandemic, has been particularly difficult for her. But she also draws strength from the farmers she works with – particularly the women.

“So sometimes farming is therapy because it takes you out, maybe you left your house with no food on the table. By being in that garden it’s your therapy. It’s powerful to see women who are trying to balance that.”

One of the farmers, Nontembisa Sizani, returned to working the soil as part of her training as a traditional healer, and has found Chuma’s role and support essential to her work as farmer and healer.

“Chuma gives me more knowledge. I have done agriculture in school [back in the former apartheid-era Homeland of Transkei, now the Eastern Cape], but you know that one from school [was part of Bantu Education]. So when I came here [to Cape Town] I didn’t think about gardening, I only looked for a job. And now Chuma is giving me back that connection. And at my age, I am 57 now, it’s ok now. This is something I just want to go on with.”

Through her work in the EESI programme Chuma has helped these farmers to add 1100m² of planted biodiversity supporting 7200m² of growing space at 31 food gardens from end-to-end of Langa. This increased biodiversity has helped the farmers with pest management, wind breaks, pollination of crops and in other ways, but has also created a mind shift for the way they think about the importance of biodiversity.

“They are noticing the biodiversity more now and thinking about it as farmers. They want it. But I also want them to understand how everything interconnects, that we are part of this nature.”

In addition to the 31 food gardens, Chuma has opened up new areas of opportunity through a project to establish food gardens at the 42 early childhood development centres (ECDs) that are part of the Langa ECD Forum. She’s been tasked to help bring biodiversity and food gardening into the lives of the teachers and children at these schools.

“I believe in permaculture ethics, caring for earth, caring for people and sharing the surplus whatever is there. I love the fact that I’m able to bring this to the children and help them grow up to have a different connection to their food and to the natural world. It really inspires me to do more and not want to stop.”

