

## **JFAC S4 Ep. 6: What do bees have to do with empowering communities?**

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** [00:00:00] First of all, it was Einstein that said without bees, mankind would have about four years of life left. And that's quite a significant statement to make, because what that tells us is that is that we need to protect them by all means. But what the masses are not aware of is that our bees are dying out.

It's been reported that globally we're experiencing a decline in bee populations.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** When did you last have a cup of coffee or enjoy tomato sliced up in a sandwich? Without one of nature's most famous pollinators, the bee, these favourite crops wouldn't exist. In fact, pollinators are instrumental in 35% of global crop production, according to the World Economic Forum.

**Planet A YT Clip:** animals are involved in the pollination of 90% of the world's flowering plants.

And when you think of [00:01:00] pollinators, the honeybee probably comes to mind. That's because honeybees and humans have an ancient relationship. Bees have been managed for thousands of years.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** You would think that farmers would embrace these humble helpers, but many of them are still learning about how bees impact their livelihood, having to change age old habits of smoking them out or poisoning them.

**Planet A YT Clip 2:** Industrial agriculture is the biggest threat to all bees. It uses harmful chemicals and relies on huge fields of one crop. Ideally, we change our whole food system, but on a personal level, supporting small scale sustainable farmers, if viable, also supports diverse habitats for wild bees. Even more can be done with a backyard, like leaving native plants alone or planting new ones.

Open, sunny ground or dead logs also make great breeding spots for wild bees. But most of all, they need more attention. We need honey bees but aren't in danger of losing them. With wild bees, it's another story.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Bees are a powerful [00:02:00] metaphor of how seemingly insignificant organisms play a vital role in a global ecosystem.

These important insects influence our food security, biodiversity, and our economy. They show how even slight shifts can change our climate in big ways. Even soil itself, or as some call it, dirt, is something we need to nurture.

**CNBC YT Clip:** People think, oh, soil is dirt and dirt is everywhere, but our lives depend on soil.

**CNBC YT Clip 2:** There are places that have already lost all of their topsoil.

**CNBC YT Clip:** What's happening to the soil and what's happening today is very scary.

**CNBC YT Clip 3:** The United Nations declared soil finite and predicted catastrophic loss within 60 years.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Welcome to season four of the Just for a Change podcast, powered by the Bertha Center for Social Innovation and [00:03:00] Entrepreneurship. I'm your host, Ntombini Marrengane. In this season, we're looking at unexpected connections, surprising overlaps, and unusual alignments in the work being done locally and globally that's moving our societies forward in positive ways.

Just a reminder that the view shared by our guests may not necessarily reflect the views of the Bertha Center. It seems that humans are still learning how important it is to look at ecosystems as a whole and understand how each part relates to the others. From combating climate change and improving farming and food security to solving poverty or unemployment, these challenges cannot be effectively addressed in isolation.

If we are to become more resilient in the face of an uncertain future, we need to work together to merge what we know and learn more. Later on, I'll be speaking to social entrepreneur Mmabatho Portia Morudi about how she is leaning on bees to help solve social issues in rural [00:04:00] communities. But first, let's hear from Esethu Mbooi from the Amaqanda Learning Garden in Philippi.

**Esethu Mbooi:** My name is Esethu Mbooi and I'm a gardener.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Philippi is an area on the outskirts of Cape Town created under compulsory urban segregation in the late 1940s. What

started as a small organic garden and chicken patch a few years ago is having a big community impact. Showing the benefit of an integrated approach, the resident hens aerate and enrich the soil, helping the wholesome produce to grow.

Vegetables and eggs are sold to the nearby communities at lower prices and also supply local cafes, hotels, and restaurants. The Amaqanda Learning Garden forms part of Phillip B Village, an integrated mixed use development with the aim of creating employment opportunities and upskilling local community members.

I asked Esethu to tell us more about what people can learn at the garden and why it is important.

**Esethu Mbooi:** My journey into [00:05:00] gardening started five years ago, with one small cucumber seed. I'd never been in a garden before that day, and I planted that cucumber seed. I was so sure that it was not going to grow, you know, because I've only seen cucumber, I mean, I've, I've seen gardens in the Eastern Cape and I've never seen a cucumber grow.

So I always thought that cucumber is some magical thing, you know, that you only get at the shop. And so when that seed came out, it became a seedling, it became, it became an entire cucumber, and I was harvesting cucumbers, and I was eating cucumbers that I planted. For me, that was a wow moment, was asking myself, do everybody know that they can plant their own cucumbers?

You know what I mean? Do anybody know that they can plant their own tomatoes and all of this, um, I'll say exotic vegetables that you get from the shop to people know that they can actually plant their own avocado tree. And then with that, I just dedicated my whole life into understanding the magic of the garden and also sharing the knowledge with [00:06:00] everybody, especially with them.

With the food insecurity that we are facing nowadays, I made it a mission that I'm going to tell people I'm going to plant a garden. And that's how I ended up at the Amaqanda Learning Garden, which I ran with three other brothers. Our approach is to advocate for Indigenous Um, we do a lot of practices.

Um, by this, I mean, how do we take care of the land? How do we take care of the land in the most gentle way so that the land can take care of us? How do we leave from the land in a way that it does not exploit the land, but instead enriches the land? So that's why we have the chickens in the garden that are helping put back nitrogen into the soil.

Um, we do practices like making our own compost. Everything that starts in the garden ends up in the garden. So how do we create a ecosystem, a sustainable ecosystem that does not require a lot of money? It does not [00:07:00] require a lot of knowledge. Just working with nature, mimicking nature and seeing how nature does things.

How do we all live harmoniously to take care of the land so that it takes care of us in return?

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Someone else who knows the value of getting in touch with the land again is our guest today, Mmabatho Portia Morudi. She co-founded the Village Market Africa, an online emporium with a vision of sustainable living in harmony with the environment.

A psychology graduate and former business school registrar, Mmabatho is passionate about eradicating poverty and developing Africa through education, entrepreneurship, and agriculture, especially in rural communities. Welcome Mmabatho. Thank you so much for joining me today. It's great to have you here.

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** Hi Ntombini. Pleased to meet you. It's awesome to be here.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** We're very excited to hear about the Local Village Africa today, but let's start with what role your upbringing in rural communities played in shaping your career. [00:08:00]

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** I think the role that my upbringing has played is that having grown up in a, in a village in Pretoria.

Uh, initially when I started out in my career, it was more in education, so I, I had no intentions of actually going into agriculture at all. But what I've, what I've picked up is that having grown up with a farmer on a farm in a rural community at a later stage, I found myself gravitating towards that type of work, gravitating towards rural development, gravitating towards.

Solving for why are people in deep remote villages still poor? What else? There's so much edible land and I'm finding myself now in my current

day career, trying to solve for that question to say how do we uplift people in deep, remote villages and [00:09:00] create industries within those areas. So I used to say to my grandfather that you never said I must become a farmer, but with how you've lived, I think automatically I found myself gravitating towards.

And we never lacked for food being on a farm. So that's another thing that's saying people shouldn't be poor. If they know how to utilise the land that they have, then we shouldn't be having these high poverty rates and people not having food to eat. It's just not necessary.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** You're right. It's quite a stark contrast to think about being surrounded by an abundance of land yet living in poverty.

You worked in education management for many years before you moved into this social entrepreneurial space. What inspired you to change and how did your foundation in education support your journey?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** I was driven out of education, um, because I was quite comfortable in, in my [00:10:00] career. And what happened is that I took on a role that I didn't quite enjoy.

And during that period, My grandfather at the time, I think he was 86, suggested that we go for a course in beekeeping. And the reason behind that was that having grown up on a farm, we used to have this room that bees would at a certain time settle in the ceiling. They would produce so much honey that the seedling would cave in and we would try killing them.

We use pests, we use smoke to try and get rid of them, but each year they would come back. Eventually he got tired of, of these bees and he said, Ah, he took all the grandchildren and said, let's go for a course in beekeeping. And from, from that, I realised that we could solve the problem. Development issue in rural communities and then bees that bees were dying out.

And [00:11:00] for some odd reason, after that knowledge, I quit almost immediately and went into agriculture, went into, into beekeeping. And that's how I found myself in the social entrepreneur space. So

**Ntombini Marrengane:** The bees were in fact the spark.

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** Yes, definitely. Definitely. Absolutely.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Your business is called the Local Village Africa. What does village mean to you?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** Village is an ecosystem. For me, village is people coming together and, and working together for the betterment of the community, the larger community. For us, village is community. is abundance. You know, we, we normally make reference to, to Thuo Nala. Thuo Nala meaning wealth in abundance.

And that's what village means for us. There's, there's indigenous knowledge in our, in our communities. There's togetherness, there's ubuntu in [00:12:00] our, in our communities. It's, it's just really adding that little bit of, I don't know, magic where people, you just open people's eyes to realise just the abundance that they, they have.



But for us village is people coming together for the betterment of the larger community.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** And the Local Village supports 12 community projects from Lagos to Limpopo. Please tell us more about these projects and their products.

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** With Local Village, what we aiming for is to say, can we create communities that become part of our supply chain?

And what that basically means is that we go out into communities, we provide them with training. And then we buy back the produce from them. So similarly with, with beekeeping, we would go into a community in the Eastern Cape, train community members in beekeeping, provide them with implements. And then we buy back the honey from [00:13:00] that community and similar with our indigenous crops.

So you look at in Malawi, we would be buying the hibiscus flower from Malawi communities, but also giving them support. We call it enablement. We're enabling them to be able to produce and then we buy it back from them to create access to markets, which we are finding is, is the biggest challenge. So yes, we have set out, um, recently our 13th initiative, which is in the Eastern Cape, which is around beekeeping and buying back the honey from the community. And then those are some of the products that we're taking out into the retail mainstream markets.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Can you tell us a bit more about the journey of the products from the local producers to you, to the larger retail outlets?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** So we, we refer to this as what we call conscious sourcing for us, whereby we saying, how do we [00:14:00] get communities to derive a greater value from the immediate environment as opposed to exploiting it? And then when they get that benefit, from that benefit, which is us buying those products and sending them out into the markets, we're finding that it's a, it's got a spiral effect.

So how, how this works is that we've got an NPC. A non non-profit organisation that goes and does development work in the communities. So we call this the village co market NPC, the NPC would go out, would find communities that we then train and we provide them with the implements and then we take them through a mentorship and support program over a certain period and then we sign off, take agreements with them and we start.

Buying back the produce from them. And then we've got a for profit company, which is Local Village Africa. Local Village Africa is about [00:15:00] getting these products into the mainstream markets. So Local Village Africa buys these products from the communities, and then we send them out into markets. But basically what we're trying to do is create good quality products, but sourced, the main source is from communities.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** And what's been the attitude of retailers when you, when you present this opportunity to them to actually focus on conscious sourcing?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** It's still, I must say, from a retail point of view, it's still a small market. People are interested in the story. I must say, the

story is quite exciting for the retailers, but it's still a small market that we targeting.

Uh, if you're talking conscious sourcing, most of our people, majority, they're not quite bothered by what they eat. It's a small market that says I'm going organic. I'll buy organic. I'll buy because you're supporting community right now. [00:16:00] Most of the retail, they're still focused on the price point.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** That's a really important shift that you're, that you're talking about in the way that consumers identify and select the goods that they purchase.

An important shift. If we could just turn back to the bees now. As a beekeeper, you aim to protect these important pollinators while teaching rural farmers to learn beekeeping skills themselves. What environmental problems are your beekeeping practices aiming to combat?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** First of all, it was Einstein that said without bees, mankind would have about four years of life left.

And that's quite a significant statement to make because what that tells us is that we need to protect them by all means. But what the masses are not aware of is that our bees are dying out. It's been reported that globally we're experiencing a decline [00:17:00] in bee populations and habitat loss is one of the main issues.

Use of harmful insecticides and pesticides is another, is another big issue. So what we're trying to, to solve for, is really preserving earth for

future generations because without bees, it means we do not have food. If we don't protect the bees, we're not going to have enough pollinators. We're not going to have a lot of food products that we're currently enjoying on the shelves.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** I believe one of the bee farms you have set up is specifically for people living with disabilities. Could you share more about that?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** What we found with beekeeping is that we, we can't exclude. Anyone. We find ways. To involve everybody. So our first initiative was to train people living with visual disabilities, whereby we trained them in actually [00:18:00] producing the beehives that the beekeepers would then use and then set them up with the, with the bee farm.

This was specific for people living with, uh, visual disabilities. Secondly, most recently we set up a hive manufacturing facility made up of people that are living with different. types of, of disabilities. And this, uh, hive manufacturing facility has been functioning top notch, producing good quality beehives, even though they can't do the actual beekeeping themselves.

But they are part of the value chain in that they're producing the hives needed.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** What challenges do you face in your work with getting people on board with your approach?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** From a community point of view, the mere fact that bees are considered to be pests, a lot of people still, a lot of people don't, Want to hear anything about bees?

So number one, trying to convince communities that they can make a [00:19:00] living from, from bees is always a challenge. I think from an investment on a, on, on more the business side, what we found is that you sometimes find resistance from working with communities. You find an investor that's interested in the business, but then they say, But get rid of the communities, and we've got, we can work together.

And for us, that's a, that's a, it's a no no. But we've, we've had those whereby they're saying, but why carry communities? You could just build a stunning brand and move on. Basically, that's a low hanging fruit. But for us, we've, we've committed. There's no business without the communities.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Yes, because your approach is actually fundamentally grounded in inclusiveness.

It's quite surprising that, um, potential partners would ask you to remove that critical part of your organisational development and your, your view of the business. [00:20:00] How do you make sure that your suppliers are ethical businesses when you have such challenges as investors wanting to circumvent the community?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** That's the interesting part because the minute you include communities in your value chain, it's a, it's a continuous wheel of mentoring and support. And that's why sometimes investors

then just say, leave that part we in, but interesting enough is that through that mentorship and support, that's how we ensure.

That they remain ethical. That's how we ensure that the quality of our, uh, products, the, the quality of the work that happens on the ground is still top notch. So what we tend to find is that we do not exit from initiatives quick enough. So especially in the beginning whereby you, you let communities become independent, uh, you find that you, you with them much longer than you'd [00:21:00] expect.

And you'd expect to holding their hand, making sure that they're doing it right. As opposed to saying, okay, I'm stepping back now. You, you do it on a, on your own. And then you buy back the purchase. We finding that we so involved with all these initiatives that we working with, but it helps us.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** The development worker in me says that's exactly the right thing.

I think too often we try to solve problems through a transaction. A plus B equals C minus D. That's the end. And actually in order to, to seed and see blossom the kind of systemic change that you're promoting, it's not a quick and dirty exercise. It actually takes a lot of trust building, a lot of relationship management and a long term partnership. I think that's admirable.

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** And as well as a mind shift, you must remember that you, you go into [00:22:00] communities where people have been hit. Uh, people have experienced disappointments because

they had hoped, um, for better and it hasn't happened. Uh, there's a level of mistrust. I've, I find when we go into communities, people don't believe that you come with good intentions.

They, they just think you coming to take, take, take. It takes time to build confidence in themselves. To be able to, to say, okay, we can do this. We can run this business. Um, it takes time for them to make decisions on their own. They still dependent. Yes, we are enabling them because we want them to run sustainable businesses, but it takes time.

If we look at it from a project point of view, then you exit quickly. But if you looking long term, you realise that it's, it's a marriage Yeah you, you can't it's, it's a marriage,

**Ntombini Marrengane:** yeah,

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** yep.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** I think, I think that's a, that's a really good [00:23:00] analogy. That's a really good analogy and an important distinction from the way that.

Um, a lot of times development projects or community development work is perceived by people who are external to the community. They think you can just sprinkle some money there and then the problems disappear. But it actually, it's actually much more complex than that.

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** True. And involving the actual community members in, in, um, In driving the interventions, I, I found if you come into a community, you can dictate to them what will work in the community.

It's the same as beekeeping. I cannot go into a village in Mozambique that I've, I've never been to, and not listen to, An elder saying to me, Oh, we see bees coming in at a certain time of the year. We experienced a lot of bees at a certain time of the, of the year. That information I'm not privy to. The community members are privy to that type of [00:24:00] information.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** And I think you, you've, you've hit on something very important there, which is that very often when investors come or specialists come, they come with scientific knowledge. They come with economic knowledge, but they don't actually have the lived experience of that community and they don't understand the dynamics on the ground.

And actually to create systemic change, there has to be a co-production process where everyone's knowledge is equally valued. Just to get back to the bees being a pest, not only are bees not pests, but they actually guard against pests. I believe you were involved in a fascinating project to deal with some troublesome elephants.

Can you share more about that?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** So we, we had a challenge in Gazini, which is on the border of Mozambique where migratory routes of elephants would pass through communities. These elephants would raid [00:25:00] crops, eating whatever there was planted. So we saw a study by Dr. Lucy King in Kenya on how they were working to sort of deter elephants and how that, how they've done it is that they built what we call beeline fences.



It's a line, it's a fence that's got beehives on and a trigger point whereby when the elephants pass, it triggers this, uh, beehive. So it shakes, the bees come out, and elephants don't like bees because bees can sting inside their, the trunk. And now because elephants have such good memories, they realise, okay, this route, because there's bees there, we avoid completely.

And we found that these beeline fences worked to deter elephants from the communities. So the bee is what now is bringing, it's the solution that we found worked and it's working to this day.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** It's bringing back harmony and [00:26:00] balance. What have been some of the highlights of your journey thus far?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** Personally, the biggest highlight is coming to a realisation that since starting in 2012, the number of lives that we've been able to change. Completely by chance, had the old man not said, let's go for each course in, in beekeeping, I look at these community projects. I look at people starting to, to earn an income, especially that first, it's always a highlight that first income that people, the first monies that they get after having worked, because how we've set up an initiative is that people don't get paid until the first harvest.

So you find community members working purely on hope that after this four months of hard work, we are going to see our first income coming in. The praying, the dancing that you see [00:27:00] when you make that first pay out to them and they see that this thing is working, it's, it's a continuous highlight. For me, that's the beauty of seeing people realising

that in their communities, there's so much wealth that they didn't even realise was there.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Yeah, you, you put a big smile on my face because actually it's the journey of people starting to realise their potential. And we, when we started speaking, we were talking about an abundance of land, but still, um, grinding poverty and then to help a community move from that to investing sweat equity and their time and their energy into this hopeful project and then seeing it bear fruit.

Uh, that's, that's really sounds amazing. What are your plans for the future?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** Our plan is to see the whole of Africa, the deep remote villages. If we [00:28:00] can share the same message of this potential in your community, we can create industries. In deep remote villages of Africa, there's so much potential that is untapped and just being able to open somebody else's eyes that you're sitting on wealth, which is what we're finding now in Winterbelt.

Winterbelt was one of the few areas where black people were allowed to buy plots and own that land. Now what we're finding is that all those farmers have passed on. The young people have abandoned those pieces of land. It's most of them are just. Um, because they don't have the knowledge of what to do with the land now.

So the easiest thing to do is to abandon the land, move to the city, in a squatter camp, in a township somewhere, and leave a 10 hectare farm. Teach even young people, and that's what we want to do throughout

Africa, to teach young people about this wealth that they have, and [00:29:00] doing it right.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** This is such important work, Mmabatho, and I can't help but think there's an opportunity to educate our children to think differently about bees.

Are you doing any work in this respect?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** Yes, so we've got a program called Future Gardens. Future Gardens is focused on school children. Basically going into schools, teaching nutrition, and as well as distribution of seeds, um, bee friendly seeds and seeds that kids can take home to plant to eat, but as well as a book.

We've got a colouring book that teaches children on indigenous crops that are available in a coffee table book and the book is called the African Harvest Table book, which can be found on our website, but basically we're trying to educate children from an early age on the importance of food, agriculture, bees. Start them while they're [00:30:00] still young.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Absolutely. And they'll be our champions. I didn't think when we started this conversation that I would be so excited about bees, but though the passion that you have for your work, um, it absolutely comes across. I now want to ask you two questions that we're asking all of our guests this season.

And the first is what does social justice mean to you?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** It goes back to opening people's eyes. I think everybody deserves decent work. All the work is in our hands. All the work is in the soil. Social justice for me is saying, how do we then teach or make people aware that they've got the soil and they've got their hands.

That's really the two things that God has granted us that can change the trajectory of one's life completely. Farmers have been able to take their children to school by farming the land, but over the years we've been [00:31:00] sort of moved away from this noble job career that is, that is agriculture for, for other, for other work.

So social justice for me says, going back and teaching our communities how to use the soil and how to use their hands for the betterment of their communities.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** And our second question is, why do you do the work that you do and what makes you hopeful?

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** I think it's a calling. I, I, I've got no, any other way of explaining it except to say, it's a calling.

I found myself in a space that I didn't think I'd, I'd find myself in, but either way, I'm completely grateful and it's a calling that I've taken on with, with both hands. I do it because just seeing people's lives change that normally wouldn't have thought anything was possible for them is [00:32:00] enough, is enough for me.

It takes, it takes a lot. It takes a lot on the family. It takes a lot on one with the travelling and, but it's, it's, it's the most fulfilling thing. I don't think money can, can buy. seeing somebody praying because their lives have been changed for the better. Money cannot buy that, and that's why we continue doing it.

That's why we walk the forests and face all these challenges, because somebody needs to do it. That's the social justice, that somebody needs to go out there and do it.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** Thank you so much, Mmabatho, for spending time with us and for sharing your story. Um, it's been very inspiring. And I think I will think twice next time before I swat away a bee. Thank you so much so much for being with us..

**Mmabatho Portia Morudi:** Thank you so much Ntombini, thank you for the time.

**Ntombini Marrengane:** If you're interested in purchasing the African Harvest Table Colouring and Activity Book, please check our show notes for more details. [00:33:00] In this episode, we've seen how humans, by working closer with the land, its fauna, and each other, can help heal the soil, feed each other better, and uplift communities.

Sustainable agriculture and food businesses hold the potential to solve many of our country's interconnected challenges. Thank you for tuning into season four of the Just for a Change podcast, powered by the Bertha Center for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship. If you're interested in hearing more about unexpected connections, then make

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