

JFAC S4 Ep.9: What do balconies have to do with food security?

Renschia Manuel: [00:00:00] There's a lot of stigma towards, um, hunger or if you're in that situation and having to go out and to asking people for bread. That shame that you have and, and I don't want the next person to go through the same thing of having to go out of their home and asking, I'm looking for bread, I'm looking for food for my kids or so on.

Ntombini Marrengane: Food is one of the most basic needs. We need energy from food to live and healthy nutrition in order to thrive. As a species, we have been growing our own food for millennia. As South Africa's Human Rights Commission states, we all have the right to access food and feed ourselves, either by producing our own food or by buying it.

The right to food is linked to our right to life and dignity. This is why food security and sovereignty are more important than ever to the cause of social justice.

FoEM YT Clip: Food sovereignty supports a [00:01:00] food system designed to help both people and the environment. This includes moving away from industrial agriculture and instead introducing farming models that follow agroecological practices, support local communities, promote trade policies and practices that give people the right to a safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.

It prioritises local and national markets and guarantees fair prices to producers, thus preventing ecological damage.

Ntombini Marrengane: Food insecurity is a major social justice issue in South Africa. The country's history of inequality has left a legacy of poverty, unemployment and homelessness. In recent years, these have been worsened by COVID and rising food prices, making it even more difficult for most of the population to afford and access nutritious food.

In 2021, about 2.1 million or 11.6 percent of South African [00:02:00] households reported experiencing hunger. Every person should be able to access proper nourishment and be able to choose high quality, locally grown food. Each person should be able to access food that reflects their culture, doesn't harm the planet or the wellbeing of those who produce it.

How can we make this happen? Talking to each other is a good starting point.

Phillipi Village YT Clip: So I think that having dialogue around food systems is so important because, um, we, we definitely know that in different communities, food shortage is a major issue. COVID highlighted that like it amplified the need of just for food to grow in our communities.

So, once we have open dialogues about, you know, what food is available, what isn't available, what is nutrition, what is not nutritional, but also have dialogues around, we have so many informal traders in our communities and how can we bring the produce closer to them?[00:03:00]

Ntombini Marrengane: Welcome to season four of the Just For A Change podcast powered by the Bertha Center for Social Innovation and 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 Centre.

According to the 2023 report, State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, small food businesses, which are often run by women, can help to increase the supply of healthy food in rural communities, but they're often overlooked by policymakers and struggle to get the financial or operational support to help them flourish.

Our guest for this episode, Renshia Manuel, founder of GrowBox Nursery, [00:04:00] is one success story bucking this trend with its mail order, wooden planter boxes, amongst other offerings. But first let's hear from Nicole Paganini, programme lead at Urban Food Futures.

Nicole Paganini: Hello, I'm Nicole Paganini. I'm a Geographer by training.

Ntombini Marrengane: Her interests include the right to food, the co-creation of knowledge with local communities, and feminist research approaches. Nicole's research at Urban Food Futures focuses on informal settlements and low income urban neighbourhoods that are largely locked out of formal service provision and governance structures.

I asked Nicole to tell us more about how informality can help us transform food systems and achieve the right to food for all.

Nicole Paganini: The informal sector keeps the city alive, it's really bustling economy. There's a lot going on a lot of trade, a lot of transport, a lot of care work also, which is really crucial for for our [00:05:00] societies.

And often these work relationships are built on a system of trust so one example for that, um, our research, we work very closely with a network of women who run community kitchens. They, most of them started to cook for their communities during the times of, of the lockdowns, um, to cope with crisis, to provide food for the neighbourhoods.

And what I found really telling is that how strong the sisterhood is, um, the social capital is really the backbone of informality. Yeah, and how best to support that from government's perspective, I think, first of all, is also to acknowledge that a lot of the bylaws are really critically impacting, um, the informal sector to, to thrive.

And I think that's also one of the key points that I often hear from the community organisations I'm working with, that's really tricky to find an entry point into government [00:06:00] systems. I think the city is, by design, also a city of poverty, I mean, we all know that Cape Town is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, but it's also one of the most ugliest cities in the world with a system designed to exclude people.

And still, 30 years after the end of apartheid, still excludes people from accessing the wealthier parts and keeping people at the margins, so the urban planning system per se isn't an inclusive system. What we found in our research is how important it is to look into the topics of social justice

and transformation from a feminist point of view or from a woman's perspective and really include the gender component into the work.

One of the key findings is that gender based violence is so strongly related to hunger. Our research has shown that people who [00:07:00] suffer food insecurity have more likely experienced any form of gender based violence. And I think Cape Town, the Cape Flats, are one of the most dangerous places for, for women to live in.

Ntombini Marrengane: As Nicole explains, and as the saying goes, teaching a man to fish or a woman to garden with proper structural support can go some way towards food justice. A social enterprise that aims to do just that and strengthen marginalised communities' access to food sovereignty is GrowBox. Entrepreneur Renschia Manuel, our guest for today's episode, is the founder.

GrowBox helps provide skills, resources, and support for organic, sustainable, and nutritious food gardens. GrowBox also offers convenient veggie boxes for balconies and small urban spaces to those who don't have land to grow their own vegetables. Hello, Renschia. Thank you for joining me today. It's great to have you with us.[00:08:00]

Renschia Manuel: Thank you for the invitation. I'm happy to be here.

Ntombini Marrengane: We're very excited to have you with us today to learn about your journey as a social entrepreneur and that of GrowBox, your company. What circumstances led you to founding GrowBox and what was your education or farming background before then?

Renschia Manuel: So having been unemployed at the time and being frustrated of not being able to find work, I started a vegetable garden, you know, in my own backyard. And we had an abundance of vegetables growing, and that would literally be our supper. You know, the kids would go, they'd harvest, and it would be my duty to cook the food. And at that stage, I just had my matric certificate and a driver's licence on my name, um, I had no agricultural background. But I had a love for gardening and I had a love for garden centres.

And both my parents are from, are from farming communities. So my mother's family is from Goedverwag and my father's family is from Robertson and during the school holidays, we'd often [00:09:00] be, um, in the farms. And that would kind of be our playground during the school holidays.

Ntombini Marrengane: What is so important about urban agriculture and food security? And how does it play a role in the value proposition of GrowBox?

Renschia Manuel: So urban agriculture is very important because the spaces that we have available to us are getting smaller and smaller. If you look at residential complexes, for instance, that they're building now, the spaces around those homes are small.

And then on the other hand, you get RDP houses, which have no spaces available to them whatsoever. So the developers are trying to cram so much space houses into small parcels of land. Um, and that's why I think urban agriculture is so important because the resident, the residents that

live in those homes, you have the working class living in apartment complexes or residential complexes.

And then [00:10:00] you have the underprivileged people or underprivileged households living in RDP houses. And they have absolutely no access to land spaces in order for them to grow their own food. Problem number one being that people do not have access to food, organically grown food or good nutritious food.

And problem number two being that people do not have money for food. And that brings us to our value proposition, whereas we train these residents with regard to the skills and we, with a support, how to grow food near their own homes.

Ntombini Marrengane: So I'm very curious. What happened in between you starting your own vegetable garden at home and you starting to work with community members? What made you share your lessons and share your journey?

Renschia Manuel: When I was growing food, the problem was that everything was so far away um, if you need supplies, the garden centres are far. People [00:11:00] in our situation on the Cape flats in informal sectors, they don't have access to the inputs, the compost, the seedlings, all those things for food gardening.

And then there is the problem of spaces. People don't have access to spaces, either they live in informal structures in someone else's backyard or they living in an informal structure or they live in apartment complexes. Like

we call the flats where there's absolutely no spaces available. So it was how can we teach people to utilise everyday items in order for them to grow their own food?

So it's like using old baths, um, two litre bottles, five litre bottles, making vertical gardens, turning any land spaces that they have available into a food garden.

Ntombini Marrengane: So did people kind of volunteer to join you on this urban agriculture journey, or did you go out and recruit people to join [00:12:00] you?

Renschia Manuel: It was a journey because it was having to change the mindset of certain people.

Those most vulnerable of households, the most vulnerable of communities that we serve, they want food now, they need to eat now, the hunger is there now. So it's having them see the long term vision and walking the path with you and making them seeing food gardening in its holistic form, you know, from the soil nutrition to the environment, to water saving, all those things.

And then, uh, once they had that mind shift, then it was like easier to get everyone on board. And it also helps working with schools because school kids get very excited when they see the things, when they see how the tomatoes are growing, when they see the green peppers and then, you know, the eyes kind of light up.

It's just not like, you get it in a plastic bag in a store, this is how it grows. So when the kids get excited, then the parents get excited [00:13:00] and when

the parents get excited, you know, then everybody's excited. So, yeah, it's kind of a journey, but, um, one journey that I love very much.

Ntombini Marrengane: What are some of the mindsets that you came across when you first introduced the idea of communities growing their own food?

Renschia Manuel: Oh, the things I hear often is that, Oh, it takes too long or, Oh, I don't have green fingers, I kill everything that I grow, or we don't have spaces, you know, those, those things are generally the the comments that I get. But it's a nice thing because in our sessions you know we do everything from how to grow in crates and old pots we do in vertical gardens in old two litre and five litre pots um basically turning any space into a garden.

Um, we pick up junk and we turn them into gardens, which is cool.

Ntombini Marrengane: GrowBox is based on the property of a high school in Hanover Park, which clearly tells [00:14:00] us that some unique partnerships had to be established. How important is collaboration with schools, local government, and funders in your work?

Renschia Manuel: It's very important. I don't think that for us as a social enterprise, we would have gotten this far if we didn't do collaborations. I didn't have sufficient land space and there's the stigma of Hanover Park, you know, it's gang area. So people wouldn't easily come to my home, so I had to get another place where we can operate from.

And that's why I reached out to the local school and luckily for me, my son was attending the school at the time. And I spoke to the principal and he

said, sure, it's a great idea you know. I think it's a good partnership between the school and yourself. So he gave us the space in order to grow. So I think that collaboration between community, social impact and schools is very important.

If all sectors could work together for a greater good, I think we [00:15:00] can have so much more impact.

Ntombini Marrengane: Please tell me more about skills development. How do you educate your customers and the wider community on growing their own food?

Renschia Manuel: So we've got a broad curriculum, you know, we teach everything from how they can make their own pesticides, you know, simple things like using garlic and chillies and a little bit of fish oil and dishwashing liquid and when to use it and at the right time because often people will be spraying in like sunlight or broad daylight and and that is not good for the plants because it might get burnt.

And then we also do certain things of like what to plant in what season because certain crops grows in certain seasons. We're going into winter now, so it's more your stewy type things, cabbages, cauliflowers, carrots and so forth. We teach them how to make their own fertiliser, how they can start a little worm farm, so they can take that worm tea and use it for their plants, how to [00:16:00] make their own compost.

So it's all about organic, sustainable food gardening, um, which can be used anywhere.

Ntombini Marrengane: Renschia, please tell us, how did your initial garden at your home turn into a community wide venture?

Renschia Manuel: I had the garden space in my backyard and it was very small. And I was looking for another space where we could have, um, our operations.

So I reached out to the high school close by me and that's how we got them involved, um, yes, actively youth organisations coming here, they're doing planting, we're doing workshops with them, or a sports organisation will bring their kids around. So there's always different organisations or institutions coming around, bringing learners around for workshops.

Youth engagements, or even things like, um, talking about the social enterprise and what we do, or from a business [00:17:00] aspect, how they could use a business idea like I did, and propel it to the future for an entrepreneurship venture. So there's various opportunities that we've engaged the youth in until now.

Ntombini Marrengane: What is the Urban Farm and how did it come about?

Renschia Manuel: The Urban Farm, we started in 2019. Okay, picture this, it's the height of COVID, right? The president, Ramaphosa, says companies must close, it's lockdown. Nobody's allowed to go anywhere. So We were essentially, initially for the first weeks of lockdown, we were stuck at home, but then the president said that agriculture can go ahead and agriculture is seen as an essential service.

So, at that point I went to work and we were growing every day, but we had all these seedlings that did not have anywhere to go, we do [00:18:00] deliveries, but still we were left with these thousands of seedlings that could not be sold. And then I kind of reached out to my network because, you know, I was panicking, yeah, it's COVID and we don't know how long it's going to get.

And I reached out to everyone that I know and I sent them emails and I was looking for support. And then this one organisation, African Artists for Development, asked me, what do you need or what does your community need? and I said, well, my community needs to eat because there's no food and people are hungry.

So they said, okay, fine. We will give you the funding to start the farming infrastructure. You have seedlings, will you be able to grow food? And I said, yes, and that's how the urban farm started. They gave us the initial funds to set up the irrigation systems. We put up fencing for protection, and then we literally started farming with all those seedlings that we had.

We got the local community involved, we fertilised the ground, we tilled the ground, and [00:19:00] then we started planting. And within two months, we started harvesting fresh vegetables for the immediate community during COVID. But now we've pivoted the urban farm, so now it's a training centre, so, when we have workshops, in our classroom we'll have the theory, where we do the theory based lessons.

And then the beneficiaries of those workshops will each get an allotment section or section for them to put their theory to practise. And that is where

they have an opportunity to learn how to grow their own food through practical training.

Ntombini Marrengane: How are shared farms like this managed in terms of fair access for everybody in the community?

Renschia Manuel: It's available to all provided that they go through the training with us. It's generally open to all. Anyone can come in at any time if they have questions, um, if they have concerns. Even you, if you're struggling with your cabbages is being eaten by [00:20:00] caterpillars and you want to know what you must do or what type of fertiliser to add to your cabbage, you know, well, yeah, we don't actually have an appointment structure.

People just walk in and ask what they want to ask. If it's a big organisation, obviously they'll have to make an appointment, but yeah, um, we're open to all.

Ntombini Marrengane: What are some of your favourite success stories to share from this venture?

Renschia Manuel: Two years ago, I had a group that was working with us. Um, and they were actually brought in through the EPW programme and they were eight participants of that programme.

Six of them have actually started their own cohort and they are now growing on another school premises. And the nice thing about the growth is that is that they're actually supplying vegetables to the Ipping market right now. It's not as a large scale as the Philippi farms behind us, but yeah,

they're making quite a good income for themselves and their households and I'm very proud of them.

[00:21:00] They've done exceptionally well.

Ntombini Marrengane: That's amazing. Can you please share more about what customers can order from your online shop?

Renschia Manuel: On our e-commerce online shop, we have seeds available, organic pesticides, we also have the seedlings, and then our very eco-friendly and hassle free veggie boxes. I love the veggie boxes.

So it's basically a garden in a box that we delivered fully supplied with a grow medium and the seedlings. So it's easy for the client to just maintain and harvest those gardens. So basically we do all the dirty work so they wouldn't have to.

Ntombini Marrengane: Tell us more about your two for one model. For every two veggie plants in a box sold, one will be sponsored to a disadvantaged household.

Why did you decide to do this and how does it work?

Renschia Manuel: We decided to do this so that we could get the veggie boxes out [00:22:00] to more beneficiaries but also because of the cost of the boxes. Disadvantaged households can't afford the cost of a wooden veggie box. The prices of wood is rising every day, um, so we were looking for an alternative.

How can we get these boxes sponsored? And then we thought, you know, the clients can help sponsor a box so that's why we have the, the, the mission that for every two boxes sold, one box will be sponsored to a disadvantaged household. So we do the distributions on a quarterly basis and the beneficiaries of those boxes, they have workshops and training with us first.

And once the training is done, then they'll get the box because you can't just give someone a garden that they don't know what to do with. So that's why it's very important that they first get the training and then as a bonus, after the training, they get a veggie box to take home.

Ntombini Marrengane: What was the significant challenge in starting GrowBox [00:23:00] and how did you overcome it?

Renschia Manuel: Or everything um I, I just have matric and a driver's licence behind my name. So I didn't know how to do presentations I didn't know how to reach out to other businesses for help um, also I didn't have any savings or any income so I didn't know where I was going to get funding for this idea. So I'd go on the internet and find free courses or free training and I'd apply and over the years I've done many pitches, I've done many presentations, I've reached out to many businesses, um, sent in proposals, and that is how GrowBox has grown over the years. I've literally built the whole infrastructure from nothing.

Ntombini Marrengane: I'm sure there must have been points at which you found yourself feeling a bit discouraged, not necessarily having knowledge

of where to access the help that you eventually did manage to get. What made you keep going? [00:24:00]

Renschia Manuel: Twofold. One, I want to leave a legacy for my children. I want it to be something that they can look back on and say, you know, that's something that my mother brought. And the second thing is I wanted to do something for my community and something for other communities like mine. A place for people to go to, you know. I, I love Hanover Park and, um, often, you know, you only hear the bad things about Hanover Park.

And I wanted a place where people can come together, sit, you know, a peaceful area. No offence to the green leaf areas, but there's such a lot of peaceful areas there, you can go to parks, you can sit, it's peaceful, you can bring your dogs, but we don't have those communal spaces in areas like ours. And I think we've accomplished that because often even so the school kids, they come around and they sit there, they do their homework.

They will talk about plants or just whatever they want to talk to, and that's what I want to [00:25:00] build, uh, not only in Hanover Park but within other communities like ours as well.

Ntombini Marrengane: That's really powerful. What you've just explained really helps to paint a picture about how all these things are interconnected and, and, and really influence not only food security but the quality of life.

What has been the impact of your work so far and what plans do you have for the future, especially considering that Cape Town has had a drought not too long ago and climate change is a considerable risk for the future?

Renschia Manuel: We've impacted or worked with over 3,000 school kids thus far, over a thousand ECD learners, and close to 2,000 beneficiaries of either our workshops or our training sessions.

The plans for the future is to have GrowBox hubs across the country, um, that's currently what I'm working on. To have structural hubs in each province would be [00:26:00] ideal for me and also to have GrowBox outlets across the country that be selling our seedlings or our veggie boxes or whatever products we have available.

Ntombini Marrengane: Renschia, can you share with our listeners, what do window boxes have to do with food security?

Renschia Manuel: Window boxes are twofold. The first being that affluent clients are able to purchase our veggie boxes and in turn they're able to sponsor um a veggie box for someone who are less fortunate as themselves but not only the veggie box is also the training that goes with it and a veggie box so it will give them the opportunity to grow their own food.

And then secondly the veggie box to our beneficiaries are that it gives them access to a land space so to say where they are able to grow food so they can place the boxes on a balcony if they do have one [00:27:00] or close to their homes. So it makes it easier from a security standpoint, but also they're able to watch it and nurture it and they're able to grow their own foods near their own homes.

Ntombini Marrengane: Speaking of growing, what are some common misconceptions about what can be grown in an urban garden or window box?

Renschia Manuel: So, one of the misconceptions are that people think that you need a lot of land spaces and often it's just having to tweak a few things and change it into miniature versions because you, you get a big spinach plant and then you get baby spinaches, which are more nutrient rich than your bigger leafy spinach varieties.

The same can be done with cabbage. Cabbage grows a big head, but you can swap the cabbage for a brussel sprout. So brussels sprouts will go grow tall with lots of small miniature cabbages, um, growing on the stalk. Small tweaks like that can let [00:28:00] you optimise the space that you have available.

Also growing more nutrient rich foods or superfoods as they call it within that small spaces. So then it allows you to get in double or sometimes triple the nutrient content into your body than the average vegetable would like for instance, um beetroot, kale, okra are super foods that you can eat and if you add it to your diet it will be a lot more beneficial to you.

So it's just knowing which foods you can grow as a super food, which foods can you grow in that space, and also knowing how to utilise the space that you have available, because I mean you can grow in anything.

Ntombini Marrengane: So this season we've been asking our guests the same two questions at the end of each episode.

And now I'd like to ask you, so why do you do the work that you do and what makes you hopeful?

Renschia Manuel: I do the work that I do because I know what it feels [00:29:00] like to go hungry. I know what it feels like for your kids to ask, is there anything to eat? and then you know that there's nothing. I know what it's like to, you know, go out there and sorry for my saying but there's a there's a lot of stigma towards um hunger or if you're in that situation and having to go out and to asking people for bread that's that's shame that you have, and, and I don't want the next person to go through the same thing of having to go out of their home and asking, I'm looking for bread, I'm looking for food for my kids, or so on.

And also, I'd like to work towards crushing that curse of generational poverty, because often we've seen it in our communities, as grandparents, and parents and children standing in the same lines waiting for food hand out and waiting for food.

So that generational poverty, I'd like to [00:30:00] crush that and that's why I work so hard in doing what I'm doing and that's why we keep pushing in the work that we do and what can be accomplished because we'd like to make a difference in that to stop seeing families standing in the lines, um waiting for food, waiting for ,you know, a meal and giving people or making it easier for people to get access to food.

Ntombini Marrengane: The second question is, what does social innovation mean to you?

Renschia Manuel: Social innovation means not having to redesign the wheel, but just finding another way of making things easier. Working on the ground level, seeing what the challenges are, and just trying to find a solution to the challenges that people have around you. It's as easy as that. Communities need to eat, so we need to find a way around it.

Um, and seeing how [00:31:00] we can get food here to the communities that need it the most. As simple as that.

Ntombini Marrengane: Thank you so much Renschia for sharing this time with us and for sharing your journey with GrowBox with me and with our listeners. Thank you again.

Renschia Manuel: Thank you.

Ntombini Marrengane: Even a small balcony or windowsill can become a site of resistance against food insecurity. By growing more of our own food and supporting local small scale farms, even in urban areas, we can challenge the status quo. Social innovators like these are helping to create a more sustainable food future for all. And it's inspiring to hear about this work already being done.

Thank you for tuning in to 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 sure you subscribe to this podcast so that you don't miss any of our [00:32:00] upcoming episodes. If you've enjoyed this podcast, please rate and review it wherever you listen to your podcasts, and feel free to share it

with your friends, family, and colleagues. Let's stay inspired and keep changing the way we're changing the world.

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