

GWERU COMMUNITY GARDENS: RENEWED HOPE FOR VULNERABLE URBANITES

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ABSTRACT

In 2010, the city of Gweru experienced an unprecedented spring of donor-funded community gardens in which urban farmers participated with unparalleled determination. The study sought to determine causes of the spring, as well as the criteria used to select beneficiaries of the community gardens. It also assessed the socio-economic implications of the gardens and compared the cropping calendars of the community gardens and the hitherto dry land urban farming. Interviews were held with relevant stakeholders involved in the establishment and day-to-day running of the community gardens. Purposive and convenience sampling were used to select questionnaire respondents amongst the beneficiaries while the global positioning system hand receivers were used to map the gardens in Arc View Geographic Information System. Water samples from garden boreholes were chemically analysed to verify water suitability for human consumption since it doubles as 'potable' water in the face of the city water crisis. Results reveal that the gardens were initiated by CARE International to help vulnerable and less privileged groups recover from the debilitating hyper-inflationary period of 2000-2009. Beneficiaries revealed that gardens have enabled them to get a balanced diet, clothe their children, as well as send them to school. The study also revealed that these irrigated community gardens are more productive and have fewer risks than dry land urban farming. Given the popularity and benefits of the community gardens, Gweru Municipality should consider designating new areas where such gardens become permanent features of the cityscape.

Keywords: Urban community gardens, CARE International, Beneficiary, Food security

1. INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that about 50% of the world's population is in cities and with the global population expected to soar, there is need for increased food security (Harris, 2009). It is also projected that about 250 million hungry people live in the world's cities and by 2015 about 26 cities are expected to have a population of 10 million or more (Lawson, 2005). To feed a city of this size, around 6000 tonnes of food must be imported each day. Such trends have triggered different response mechanisms including the proliferation of urban community gardens. Reid (2009) defines an urban community garden as a single piece of land which is allocated to a group of people for small scale farming in urban areas. Urban community gardens on a global scale date back as early as the 19th century as a response to poverty and food security concerns during the Second World War and lately as an environmental health measure (Smardow, 1988). In recent years, community gardens have been developed as a way of meeting different goals at global, continental, national and local levels. There are different organizational models in use for urban community gardens; some are run by appointed officials, others by some non-profit organizations, churches, schools, universities or communities.

New York City has had success stories with community gardens where low income residents suffer from high rates of obesity and diabetes and these have been greatly reduced by the garden which provide fresh fruit and vegetables. In China, Shenzhen has for years embarked on community gardens in urban areas. This has allowed sustainable management of the city unlike in other cities where pollution of the landscape is rampant. As a result, the Chinese government has facilitated the establishment of urban gardens which are now spreading to the villages of Shenzhen with environmental management as one of the motives. Lawson (2005) however, notes that the initiative of these gardens in some sense was purely meant to promote healthy communities. He notes that in England, these gardens were meant to ensure that there was fresh produce available for urban communities. In recent years an increasing number of urban community garden projects were also found in Berlin. It is acknowledged that as the world's population of the urban grows so too does the population of the poor living in urban areas (Beal