

Community food garden rises from the ashes of xenophobia

It is almost a decade ago since Boksburg was traumatised by a series of xenophobic attacks on non-South Africans living in the area. But ten years on, this dark episode has produced an inspiring outcome thanks to the dedication and vision of local community activist, Elaine Appies.

This story started in 1997, when Appies established the Community Crisis Centre in Reiger Park. Initially her aim was to care for the area's senior citizens. But over the years, her focus expanded to include orphaned and vulnerable children and child-headed households in nearby settlements. Appies was galvanised into establishing a food garden at the Community Crisis Centre when the xenophobic attacks erupted in 2008, leaving hundreds of people without food.

"At first, the idea was to produce food parcels for victims of the violence," explains Appies. "But the fact is that too many people from all backgrounds are at risk of starvation around here, especially children. Nowadays, our aim is to make sure that no-one in our community ever goes hungry – regardless of their background."

Today, the Community Crisis Centre's food garden produces a reliable supply of organic vegetables including herbs, spinach, potatoes, onions, peppers, tomatoes and pumpkin as well as various types of fruit. Around 80% of this produce is sold to the community, 10% supplies the centre's feeding scheme while the rest goes towards the community members who work in the garden.

Alongside men and women from Correctional Services, they include young people who left school without matriculating and now cultivate crops under the supervision of community elders. "As well as growing food, we also want to encourage a long-term interest in agriculture among our local youngsters," Appies explains.

Achieving her aim has become a lot easier thanks to the ongoing support from Checkers, which first became involved with the Community Crisis Centre's garden on Mandela Day in 2014. Recognising the food garden's rich potential, Checkers and its implementation partner, Food and Trees for Africa, recently completed an assessment to identify the best ways of further supporting Appies and her team.

Meanwhile, the Community Crisis Centre's food garden continues to go from strength to strength with record harvests. And to ensure that this success story lasts, the gardening team is busy teaching the next generation how to be self-sufficient in food by sharing their skills and knowledge with local schools.