

Permaculture results in healthy children – inside and outside school

“Before we were introduced to permaculture techniques, we had never seen anything like it. My colleagues and I agreed that permaculture was either going to be crazy or brilliant. In fact, it turned out to be brilliant. The difference it has made to our school’s food garden is amazing.”

That’s the verdict of Shandor Potgieter. Originally a musician and community activist, he has been project manager of the food garden at Tjhabelang Primary School in rural Bainsville, near Bloemfontein, since 2013. His vision for the garden is simple but powerful: “We want to ensure that our learners never go hungry – either in or out of term time.”

Achieving that vision has not always been straightforward. Initially, Shandor and his team made encouraging progress by establishing a food garden consisting of fruit trees, medicinal herbs and vegetables. Learners collected chicken manure to fertilise the plants and each classroom played a role in maintaining the beds.

It was a well organised system, but the garden was not productive throughout the year. Worse still, many learners who were healthy and active during term risked becoming undernourished once term ended as their families couldn’t always afford to maintain their nutrition levels.

With support from Checkers and its implementation partner, Food and Trees for Africa, the school’s groundsmen received training in sustainable, permaculture-based farming. Checkers also provided tools, plant and educational materials, water management facilities and a crop cover to protect the plants from birds and manage weeds.

The monthly permaculture-training workshops have been taking place since September 2017 and the improvements to the garden have been dramatic. It is now helping to reduce the school’s monthly food bill by providing a regular supply of fresh produce to the school feeding programme which provides learners with breakfast, lunch and regular snacks. In addition, the school sells its surplus produce to community members who simply cannot afford to buy food in mainstream shops or even travel to them.

There have been other benefits along the way. Learners are starting to share their gardening skills with their families and cultivating food gardens at home. Long-term, this will help develop a sustainable solution to the wider community’s fight against hunger.

For now, Shandor and his colleagues remain determined that their learners will never go hungry.