Food garden helps grow self-sustaining community

In a country where poverty is rife, it's important to equip communities with the tools to sustain themselves rather than having to rely on handouts. This philosophy is the driving force behind the Moabelo Foundation.

Started by farmer Ashley Lebogang Moabelo in 2010, the foundation aims to support poverty-stricken communities in the Vanderbijlpark area that have high unemployment rates. Initially, they concentrated on providing nutritious meals at creches and ensuring that families have clothes and shoes.

"But then, in 2016, we realised that we should do something for the community to help them sustain themselves, so that they don't have to rely on handouts," explains Moabelo. "And that's how we started doing the vegetable garden."

Situated on a 326ha maize farm, the 1ha garden has been producing spinach, chillies and green peppers.

While getting to this point is an exciting achievement, it hasn't been a simple or easy process. Moabelo had to invest a substantial amount of his own money into getting the garden up and running, after which it took some time to convince the community of its worth.

"Because I had started it with my own money, getting the community to understand that it is not my project, but theirs was the most difficult thing," he says.

Now, three years down the line, the garden has six project members and provides vegetables to six local families, as well as pensioners and homeless people. The rest of the vegetables are sold to other community members and further afield in neighbouring townships like Sebokeng.

Inspired by the great work Moabelo Foundation is doing in the Vanderbijlpark community, the Shoprite Group through its partner Food & Trees for Africa provided fencing, garden & irrigation training. Support also included tools and seedlings for the garden, as well as the funding for their new irrigation system.

The garden for the first time participated in Market Day at Checkers Hyper Arcon Park in Vereeniging.

"Market Day was really good, because it helped us understand how to sell to and interact with customers, which is very important and something we never had before," says Moabelo.

More than just providing the community with fresh vegetables, the Moabelo Foundation garden has become a central hub for all things healthy.

"Once a year, we started hosting the Moabelo Foundation walk at the farm to encourage the community to cultivate healthy habits. After the walk, families gather and cook their own healthy meals with vegetables from the garden," says Moabelo.

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CAPTION: Celina Mpondo volunteers at and benefits from the Moabelo Foundation's food garden in Vanderbijlpark.