



Tshepo Khumbane runs her own farm just outside Pretoria, where she mobilises rural women around issues of household food security and indigenous agricultural practices. She has been associated with the Environment and Development Agency (EDA) since the 1970s, as an advocate of subsistence agriculture. She has also served on the board of the South African Broadcasting Corporation and the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC).

Indigenous knowledge Subsistence lives!

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In a world used to thinking in terms of historical epochs and timelines, South Africa is supposed to have made a clean break from its world-infamous apartheid rule. The truth is, the past of "New" South Africa is still very much alive. It has to do with people's access to land and their hopes that land is the key to breaking the poverty cycle. Tshepo Khumbane has worked for decades to restore people's links with, and love for, the land. She spoke with ACP journalist Dudley Moloi.

From their genesis in the early part of the 1800s to the mid-1980s, land policies had forcibly moved millions of black South Africans from their native lands and squeezed them into about one-eighth of the country's total land area in overcrowded and agriculturally unproductive "native reserves" or homelands.

Shocked into agriculture

A typhoid outbreak in one such native reserve changed me into someone else. I was working in my first post as a social worker in a hospital in Hammanskraal. This largely rural black settlement north of Johannesburg was made up of people who had been evicted from their native land in an area called Walmsdaal. Soon after their arrival in Hammanskraal there was a serious outbreak of typhoid - one of the worst I've ever seen. The hospital needed long-term solutions as well as short-term ones.

And so one Saturday I said to the chief doctor, "lend me a driver and an ambulance, I am going to [neighbouring white] farmers to ask for seed." And so I collected seeds by ambulance - emergency seeds. While the sisters dispensed drugs, I dispensed another kind of medicine - envelopes of seeds. There were many tuberculosis (TB) cases and I wanted to break the cycle, through preventative nutrition. I started a food gardens campaign, with women.

The agricultural approach was simple. There was little water infrastructure and so we relied on rain-water harvesting by building dams. We used all sorts of rubbish as fertiliser. I did not have the knowledge then but I had the passion, the consciousness and the drive. It was like fire and everyone was excited.

Stressing the "culture" in agriculture

In the olden days people produced their own food and had their own grain storage infrastructure to save food for bad times like drought. Traditionally people relied on dry-food production and their knowledge of wild plants for food and medicine. But this is all history. The knowledge is gone, only a few people still have it. Older people have not managed to transfer their knowledge and farming skills to the next generation because of the loss of land, loss of cattle, donkeys, goats and other simple means of production.

South Africa's land legacy has not escaped the new government, whose land reform programme aimed at restoring or compensating communities for land lost under colonial and apartheid rule. It also hoped to distribute 30% of arable land to the landless. To date less than 1% of agricultural land has been distributed - an

initiatives and agricultural production. I don't think I am anywhere near convincing people of this fact. Current government policies are not conducive to subsistence agriculture.

Food should come first - if you have food you have no worries and no stress. But you need to relinquish the voice that says you're stupid and you can't do it. We need to transform the extension service so that indigenous agriculture has the same status as commercial agriculture.

We need to rebuild what we have destroyed. We need to take people from one civilisation to the next and start looking at ourselves as human beings again. We need love and commitment if we are to get to that level - then we would have heaven on earth, plenty for everyone.

We need a food security strategy which begins with a concern when your neighbour doesn't have food. You can't quantify this in numbers and bags as agricultural scientists and economists do. And it is the

"give indigenous agriculture the same status as commercial agriculture"

excruciatingly slow pace. The major flaw is that the programme abandoned the idea of encouraging beneficiaries to use available land as a basis for food security and household-based poverty eradication. Instead it sought to turn the new landowners into small commercial farmers modelled on the 60,000 or so white farmers who are the backbone of the South African agricultural industry. This "market model" is making people ashamed of what they can potentially do best, namely "culture"-based food security

people who live below the poverty line who have to walk the road and discover it themselves. We can't live off mono-cropping. We can't eat just one crop. Diversity creates pleasure and sustainability. People have missed their priorities and have become greedy for money.

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