

# Africa's urban gardens

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Congo - are examples of what many aid experts believe could save hundreds of thousands of people from hunger and malnutrition: urban gardens in the developing world's fast-growing cities.

For the first time, global population estimates this year show that more people live in cities than in rural areas. By 2020, according to the international Resource Centre for Urban Agriculture and Forestry, some 75 percent of the world's city dwellers will live in developing countries - many of them in poverty. Already in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, according to the UN, almost three-quarters of city residents live in rapidly growing slums.

These trends present a huge challenge when it comes to food and nutrition. Bringing rural-grown produce to people living in infrastructure-poor cities is difficult. In any case, many impoverished city dwellers do not have money for fresh groceries.

Many aid workers worry about a wave of city-based hunger. UN organizations and independent aid groups have started trying to find new ways to ease these stresses. And many see urban gardens as one possible answer.

"At the health centers, we noticed that children were regularly coming in malnourished," explains Mbuyi Joseph, who now runs a Kinshasa-wide urban gardens project.

"There were feeding programs, but the programs would last three months, and after they ended, the kids would be malnourished again. We needed to do something to stop this problem. We needed to help

them farm produce - at least something."

"Gardening is one of the things you can do to help families," he continues. "It's not expensive to start up. You don't need a lot of capital."

The idea of city farming is not exactly novel. There are many small gardens in American cities, although these plots rarely mean the difference between life and death for their tenders. Throughout urban Africa, as well, it is common to see brittle corn stalks peeking out from behind crowded shacks.

But it is only recently that aid organizations - many of which for years believed that feeding programs were the best response to hunger - have increased their support for this type of agriculture. Now, many of the large UN agencies such as UNICEF, the World Food Program, and the Food and Agriculture Organization have teamed up with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to teach urban farming skills, distribute seeds and tools, and help new city farmers grow the right foods to maximize family nutrition. From Accra, Ghana, to Hyderabad, India, groups of NGOs are working together to build urban agriculture networks.

Kinshasa was one of the early test centers for urban gardens. In 1995, the "Programme Presbyterien de Jardinage" (PPJ) - a Presbyterian gardening project - received funds from Catholic Relief Services to manage an urban agriculture project here, focusing on the families of malnourished children. It organized a team of local volunteers called "Mama Bongisa" ("mom improver") to teach mothers in some of

Kinshasa's most impoverished neighborhoods about nutrition and farming.

The project reported rapid results: After only three months, the percentage of families in the program who kept gardens increased from 54 to 73, and the amount of land each family planted more than doubled. At the beginning of the program, according to PPJ, 64 percent of the children in targeted households were malnourished.

After five visits from Mama Bongisa, that number dropped to 20 percent. The gains continue.

"So many times in Congo you start something and then it falls apart. That didn't happen here," says Larry Shreshley. He and his wife, Inge, helped set up the PPJ garden project in the mid-1990s. "A critical mass of information gatherers, and then you see neighbors helping neighbors," he adds.

### From backyard to the market

A drive through Kinshasa today shows some of these lasting results.

Leafy green beds sit plush between cinder-block homes and shacks, on median strips, and along roads crowded with pollution-spitting taxi vans. According to Inge Shreshley, many successful home gardeners eventually become market gardeners, offering their produce for sale.

Some people, such as Mulopo Wally, have even turned urban gardening into a full-fledged business. Wally gardens along one of Kinshasa's main arteries, in what used to be a vast, abandoned swath of weeds.

Today, he has 300 beds of spinach, manioc, and other greens.

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