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Challenging Neoliberal Paradigms: Non-State Organisations and Urban Community Gardens in Cape Town

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Abstract

The literature identifies a dual effect of urban community gardens, emphasising their potential to resist neoliberal urbanism while also acknowledging their inadvertent role in perpetuating it. This paper advances this discourse by analysing the paradoxical dynamics of urban community gardening in Cape Town, South Africa. It investigates the socio-political contexts and mechanisms that shape these dual dynamics, revealing how urban gardens simultaneously challenge and reinforce neoliberal governance. Drawing on qualitative methods, including document analysis, website reviews, and semi-structured interviews with non-state organisations in Cape Town, the study demonstrates how neoliberal environments cultivate gardens that uphold neoliberal values, often overlooking the structural drivers of food insecurity in disadvantaged areas. Crucially, this research identifies specific conditions such as the ideological orientation of civil society actors and their capacity to promote critical reflexivity and collective action that determine whether urban gardening initiatives resist or perpetuate neoliberal urbanism. The findings highlight the role of civil society organisations in raising awareness among urban gardeners and fostering participation in food justice initiatives that aim to empower marginalised communities and transform urban food systems. This paper underscores the importance of understanding the institutional contexts that mediate these interactions to advance equitable and sustainable food systems.

Keywords

political gardening, community garden, neoliberalism, non-state actors, urban agriculture, Cape Town

Introduction

Scholarship from the global North highlights urban community gardening as a tool to resist neoliberal urbanism by challenging market-driven land-use practices and reclaiming urban spaces for alternative resource management (McClintock, Miewald, & McCann, 2017; Rosol, 2018). These studies demonstrate how community gardens empower communities, promote inclusive spaces, and foster community cohesion, framing gardening as a form of protest against unequal food systems and neoliberal ideologies (Follmann & Viehoff, 2015; McKay, 2011; Quastel, 2009; Staeheli et al., 2002).

On the other hand, some studies on urban community gardening underscore its dual potential to challenge and propagate neoliberal ideologies, revealing these spaces as complex arenas of resistance and complicity (McClintock, 2014; Ginn & Ascensão, 2018; Véron, 2023). Drawing on McClintock's (2014) understanding, this article explores urban agriculture's dual role, both complicit in neoliberalism and resistant to it, by examining the interplay between community dynamics and supporting actors in Cape Town, South Africa.

While much of the academic discourse on urban community gardening has focused on its role within neoliberal urbanism, less attention has been paid to how non-state actors navigate and potentially perpetuate these dynamics (Bródy & de Wilde, 2020), particularly in the global South. This article shifts the focus to the role of civil society in shaping urban agriculture in Cape Town, investigating how these actors influence the institutionalisation of urban gardening and its connection to neoliberal citizenship.

The literature on neoliberalism and food gardening demonstrates that both state and non-state actors can unintentionally reinforce neoliberal ideologies through their involvement (Ernwein, 2017; Rosol, 2018; Bródy & de Wilde, 2020). For example, Rosol (2012) illustrates how the state deploys urban agriculture as a tool for neoliberal roll-back and roll-out strategies, while Wolch (2006) critiques the rise of voluntary organisations as a form of unpaid labour exploitation under neoliberal governance regimes. In the global South, urban cultivation activities are often framed as poverty alleviation initiatives (Gray, Elgert & WinklerPrins, 2020), which essentially shift food security burdens to civil society groups (Paganini & Lemke, 2020; Kanosvamhira, 2024). While this scholarship is invaluable, it largely overlooks the agency of civil society actors themselves and how their practices might institutionalise neoliberal ideologies or foster resistance.

This article goes beyond applying existing literature to a new context by addressing a critical gap: the role of non-state actors in Cape Town in shaping the relationship between urban agriculture and neoliberal subjectivities. While previous studies have focused on material contributions of civil society, such as resource access and coordination, this study delves into the socio-political implications of civil society's involvement. Drawing on insights from the global North (Bach & McClintock, 2020), it explores whether similar dynamics of reinforcing or challenging neoliberal frameworks are present in the global South.

By focusing on Cape Town, a city where urban agriculture is present in low-income areas, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how civil society actors shape urban food systems in socio-economically and politically unique contexts. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative approach (outlined in section 2) to examine how supporting actors mediate urban agriculture practices and foster neoliberal subjectivities. The findings and discussion follow demonstrating the complex ways in which civil society actors engage with urban farming initiatives, revealing both their potential to perpetuate and contest neoliberal logics. The conclusion synthesises these insights, offering broader implications for urban agriculture and neoliberal citizenship in the global South.

Qualitative pathways to understanding urban agriculture in Cape Town

This paper is based on research conducted in Cape Town, which is the second-largest city in South Africa, harbouring a population of approximately 4 004 793 citizens (CoCT, 2017). The city is located in the Western Cape Province, which is one of nine provinces in South Africa. Unemployment levels are rising, and Cape Town faces several social and economic challenges. Despite the abolition of the apartheid system, poverty is a visible feature in the metropole. During the apartheid era (~1948 to 1994[1]), most Coloured and Black people were forcibly relocated from their areas of residence to the 'Cape Flats[2],' which is now home to the majority of the city's townships. The townships in this area are deemed to be among the worst in the country. The Cape Flats townships are marked by inadequate recreational and social facilities, as well as limited industrial and commercial centres, in stark contrast to the more affluent suburbs. Home to some of the city's poorest townships, including Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, and Nyanga, the region faces significant socio-economic marginalisation. Challenges include poor housing, poverty, unemployment, inadequate services, gangsterism, limited public open space, and poor environmental quality. In response, municipal and provincial governments have implemented interventions to address poverty and food insecurity. These include supporting urban agriculture projects through policies that provide subsidised inputs, such as seeds and manure. Additionally, several non-state organisations such as non-profit organisations (NPOs) provide inputs, training, technical support, and access to markets (Battersby & Marshak, 2013, Kanosvamhira & Tevera, 2020). Despite these supportive efforts, research shows that urban cultivation does not significantly contribute to food security or income due to various constraints such as land tenure insecurity and poor soils in the city. It is estimated that there are approximately 6000 urban cultivators on the Cape Flats and hundreds of these cultivators cultivate in groups on school and municipal land (Paganini et al. 2021; Kanosvamhira, 2025).

This paper is based on a qualitative research study conducted between 2020 and 2021. The research is based on the analysis of organisational documents, websites, and programs of supporting actors. Semi-structured interviews with state organisations, non-state

[1] The apartheid era in South Africa officially began in 1948 with the election of the National Party, which implemented a system of institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination. Apartheid laws were enforced until the early 1990s when the system was dismantled following negotiations and the eventual democratic election of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first black President in 1994.

[2] De Swardt, Puoane, Chopra, & du Toit (2005) describe the Cape Flats as a sandy expanse separating the wealthy northern and southern suburbs: this is consistent with a more general understanding that the Cape Flats are a generally flat and sandy stretch of land located on the outskirts of the city.

organisations, and leaders of urban food movements in Cape Town were conducted in addition to the initial analysis of textual materials. Initially, a desktop analysis, which refers to the process of reviewing and extracting information from digital sources such as organisational websites and programmes, was conducted remotely using a computer. This analysis aimed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the organisations, including their aims, operations, and impacts.

I then conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 civil society actors who supported urban cultivators in the area. The interview questions focused on understanding their programmes, implementation strategies, and outcomes in addressing structural issues within the food system. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Most interviews were conducted online, with a few held via telephone based on the interviewees' preferences.

The interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by varying levels of lockdown regulations in South Africa. Conducting interviews online proved advantageous as I was able to record the sessions, which facilitated transcription and a detailed post-interview analysis using online tools. Additionally, I conducted individual interviews with two food activists from urban gardening movements in the Cape Flats: the Gugulethu Urban Farmers Initiative (GUFI) and the Western Cape Urban Farmers Initiative (WCUFI).

Table 1: Key informants interviewed and the rationale for their selection

Interviewee	Reason for the interview
Non-state officials	
Abalimi Bezekhaya Interim Manager Abalimi Bezekhaya Field Team Manager FoodFlow South Africa Representative Food for Trees Africa Senior Programme Manager Local Wild Founder Slow Food South Africa representative Soil For Life Founder & Director South African Urban Food & Farming Trust Executive Manager People's Health Movement South Africa Programme Coordinator Philippi Economic Development Initiative (PEDI) AgriHub Project Manager OASIS Founder Oribi village Programme manager UCOOK Social and environmental impact coordinator Western Cape Economic Development Partnership Programme Lead	To obtain information on how the organisations were assisting urban gardeners and how they coordinate activities with other players.

Gardeners	
Founder – GUFI Founder – WCUFA	To obtain in-depth information on gardener organisation, general aims and activities.

Source: Author

I recorded the semi-structured interviews with the permission of the interviewees, and I later transcribed and studied them iteratively to identify emerging themes. I used thematic analysis to ensure that the emergent themes were clearly presented from the transcripts. Using Clarke and Braun's (2017) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, I systematically analysed semi-structured interview data to identify patterns and themes. This process involved transcribing the interviews, familiarising myself with the data, generating initial codes, and grouping these into overarching themes, which were then reviewed, defined, and refined for clarity and coherence. By iteratively comparing participants' experiences, I identified key themes that illuminate the nuanced role of civil society in shaping urban gardening initiatives. Additionally, I tabulated the aims and operations of the civil society organisations (CSOs). Before commencing the data collection process, I obtained an ethical clearance certificate (Reference Number: HS19/9/2) from the relevant ethics committee. Throughout the study, I strictly complied with the ethical guidelines and Covid-19 protocols to uphold participants' anonymity, confidentiality, consent, and safety.

The role of non-state actors in shaping urban gardening in Cape Town

This research examines the role of non-state organisations in supporting urban gardening initiatives in Cape Town, focusing on how they respond to and potentially challenge neoliberal urbanism. The analysis is structured around five main themes: First, it highlights the increasing involvement of non-state actors as a response to state withdrawal, stepping in to provide resources and services previously offered by the state. Second, it shows the variation in how non-state actors operate, shaped by vastly different underlying ideologies and adapting their strategies to local conditions. Third, the study identifies the prevalence of market-driven approaches within urban gardening projects, which may reinforce neoliberal ideologies by prioritising entrepreneurial goals and individualistic solutions to systemic problems. Fourth, it addresses the dependence of these initiatives (gardening projects) on non-state support, revealing the vulnerabilities and challenges that come with reliance on external funding and market connections. Finally, the research examines the transformative potential of urban gardening initiatives, while acknowledging the structural barriers they face, and suggests pathways toward more equitable and sustainable urban food governance.

The role of non-state actors in the context of state retrenchment

The study underscores the growing involvement of non-state actors, such as NPOs and civil society groups, in supporting urban gardening initiatives in Cape Town, driven by the state's declining capacity to provide essential social protection and welfare services. This trend mirrors broader patterns seen in other contexts of state retrenchment, where non-state actors step in to fill the gaps left by reduced government services. Non-profit organisations

(NPOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private entities, and civil society groups have become key stakeholders, often serving as the most accessible sources of support for local gardeners. The number of non-state organisations working on urban agriculture in Cape Town has grown significantly (Figure 1), with estimates suggesting over 100 NGOs engaged in such initiatives (Battersby et al., 2014)[3], a figure that has increased to approximately 130 in more recent reports (Olivier & Heinecken, 2017). These organisations play a critical role in providing the resources and services that the state no longer offers, contributing to the sustainability of urban gardening efforts.

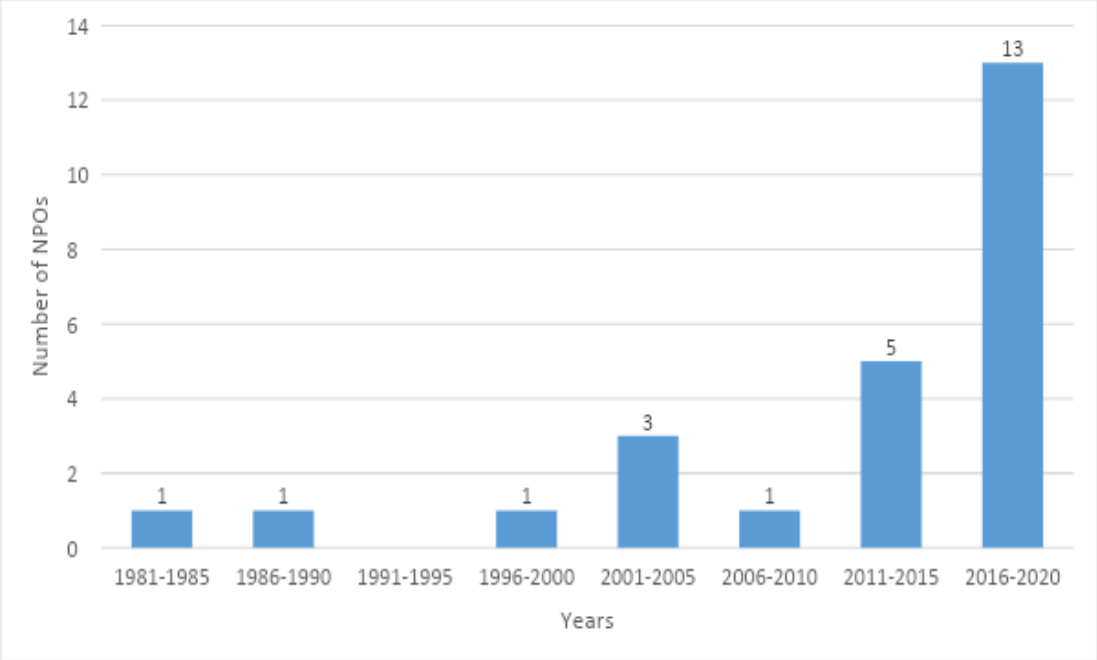

Figure 1: Emergence of non-state actors in the study area

Non-state actors play a crucial role in providing essential resources and technical support to urban gardeners, particularly in underserved areas such as the Cape Flats. These organisations supply a range of inputs, including compost, seedlings, seeds, and infrastructure like boreholes, which are vital for the sustainability of community gardening projects. For example, the study discovered that Abalimi Bezekhaya operates garden centres in Khayelitsha and Nyanga, offering gardeners access to seeds, seedlings, compost, and tools at subsidised rates, contingent on a minimal annual membership fee. In addition to these material resources, non-state actors frequently provide technical assistance, such as activity monitoring, pest identification, and soil testing, to enhance the effectiveness of gardening initiatives. This support is integral in addressing the challenges faced by urban gardeners, enabling them to optimise production while ensuring the ecological and economic sustainability of their operations.

The emergence of non-state actors in Cape Town parallels observations made by Rosol (2012, 2018) in other urban contexts, where civil society steps in to fill the void left by state retrenchment, assuming roles traditionally held by governments. For instance, in Berlin, the

[3] Food System and Food Security Study for the City of Cape Town Report 2014 commissioned by the City of Cape Town.

decline in state support for maintaining urban green spaces led to an increase in non-state actors taking responsibility for urban gardening projects (Rosol, 2012). This shift towards greater civil society involvement reflects a broader response to austerity measures and neoliberal policies, which have exacerbated social and environmental challenges. In Cape Town, a similar trend is evident, with various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups emerging to address poverty and other socio-economic issues in low-income townships. These organisations serve as adaptive responses to state withdrawal, compensating for gaps in welfare provisions and highlighting the growing reliance on civil society to tackle the urban challenges intensified by neoliberal governance.

Variations in Non-State Actors' Approaches and Underlying Ideologies

The involvement of non-state actors in Cape Town's urban agriculture landscape reveals a fragmented civil society, shaped by neoliberal rollback mechanisms, where diverse actors, each with varying ideologies, compete for influence and resources. This competition is particularly evident in the urban gardening sector, where civil society organisations have increasingly assumed roles traditionally played by state actors. The study's findings highlight a proliferation of non-state organisations offering a diverse array of services to urban gardeners on the Cape Flats, often with overlapping goals but differing strategies and underlying ideologies (see Table 2).

Longstanding organisations, such as Abalimi Bezekhaya, exemplify this variation, providing crucial technical expertise on water conservation, soil improvement, and the adaptation of farming techniques to local environmental conditions. These organisations, often operating within a context of resource scarcity, facilitate the adoption of water-saving practices and chemical-free farming methods, which are essential for cultivating organic produce in challenging environments. However, despite the gardeners' prior agricultural knowledge, often rooted in different regional conditions such as those of the Eastern Cape, their engagement with non-state actors enables them to adapt to the unique challenges of Cape Town's climate and terrain. As one informant from Abalimi Bezekhaya noted,

> Many of our gardeners come from the Eastern Cape, where the soil and climate are vastly different from Cape Town's conditions. They often struggle to adjust to the dry, sandy soil here, which requires a different set of skills, especially around water management and soil preservation. (Abalimi Bezekhaya Field Team Manager, personal communication, 2021)

This highlights the critical need for specialised training tailored to Cape Town's unique challenges, underscoring the role of non-state actors in equipping gardeners with the tools and knowledge necessary to adapt their practices. Thus, the interaction between these organisations and gardeners underscores not only the diversity of non-state approaches but also the central role these actors play in facilitating localised knowledge transfer and capacity building within the constraints of neoliberal urban governance.

Similarly, entities like the Food & Trees for Africa (FTFA) play a pivotal role by providing training programs that promote organic and permaculture production, alongside essential inputs and business capacity-building initiatives. For instance, its community market gardens programme empowers small-holder producers by providing the skills, resources, and infrastructure for sustainable agriculture. It promotes food security while fostering social and

economic development through bio-intensive farming, ensuring ecological sustainability and land fertility. The diverse crops grown support local food economies and nutritional diversity. With FTFA's training, business tools, and market access, farmers can manage operations effectively and earn stable incomes. Beyond agriculture, the gardens act as community hubs that encourage collaboration, environmental stewardship, and pride in local neighbourhoods, building a more resilient and prosperous community.

Table 2: Non-state organisations supporting community gardens

Organisation	Main focus	Assistance provided
Abalimi Bezekhaya*	To assist impoverished groups and communities within the Cape Flats to establish and maintain their vegetable gardens to supplement their existing, inadequate supply of food and create livelihoods	Subsidised resource materials and technical capacity to community gardens
FoodFlow*	To facilitate small-scale farmers to viably feed their local communities	Marketing of produce
Food for Trees Africa (FFTA)*	Focuses on food security, urban greening and environmental sustainability	Subsidised resource materials and technical capacity to community gardens
Fresh Life Produce*	To provide an alternative to the thinking that we need to have a few large-scale producers to feed households and entire cities	Training of urban gardeners on sustainable production methods
Impilo Yabantu market*	To create spaces for fostering healthy township lifestyles by improving access to organic produce and healthy meals	Local markets for the community and awareness of healthy food choices
Local Wild*	To promote local wild foods as a way to address societal and ecological challenges	Awareness
People's Health Movement (SA)*	To improve the capacity of individuals and communities to realise their right to health and health care.	Awareness campaigns and workshops on food politics through workshops
PEDI*	To build Philippi into a thriving urban hub where businesses choose to invest and grow, and where people choose to live, work and play	Provides subsidised resource materials and technical capacity to community gardens
SEED	To promote resilience in people and communities, using permaculture education and skills to redesign our cities and settlements.	Subsidised resource materials and technical capacity to community gardens
Soil For Life*	To teach people how to grow their own food, improve their health and well-being, and nurture and protect the environment.	Awareness & workshops on food, improve their health and well-being, and nurture and protect the environment.

Slow Food*	To prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and counteract the rise of fast life and combat people's dwindling interest in the food they eat	Awareness
South African Urban Food & Farming Trust*	To build stronger urban communities through food and farming	Awareness, workshops, input provision
UCOOK*	To contribute to socio-economic, environmental, and food security in South Africa	A marketplace for organic produce grown by small-scale gardeners
Oribi Village*	To capacitate social entrepreneurs	Training, mentorship
Umthunzi Farming Community (now-defunct)	To create empowering economic opportunities for small-scale gardeners.	Provides a marketplace for organic produce grown by small-scale gardeners
Western Cape Economic Development Partnership*	Improve the performance of the Cape Town and Western Cape socio-economic development system.	Facilitating dialogue between various actors

Source: Author

These examples illustrate that multiple organisations offer similar services but cater to different niches. The literature indicates that neoliberal roll-back mechanisms lead to a fragmented civil society, creating a competitive environment that hampers the ability of civil society groups to drive social change (Wolch, 2006). In Cape Town, this phenomenon is evident, as non-state actors, particularly non-profit organisations (NPOs), have assumed a more prominent role in supporting urban agriculture than state actors (Kanosvamhira & Tevera, 2020, 2021). NPOs often act as intermediaries, channeling funding from donors, businesses, and government entities. However, civil society is not homogeneous; it consists of organisations with diverse goals and interests. Paganini and Lemke (2020) note that while this diversity could foster collaboration, a lack of transparency and conflicting interests often hinder effective urban agriculture initiatives. Thus, the neoliberal context fosters the emergence of multiple actors with varying, sometimes incompatible objectives, underscoring the need for greater collaboration among civil society organisations (CSOs) to overcome these challenges (Haysom & Battersby, 2016; Kanosvamhira, 2019; Paganini & Lemke, 2020).

Market-Oriented Strategies in Urban Gardening Initiatives

A key theme emerging from the findings is the increasing influence of non-state actors in promoting market-oriented strategies within urban gardening initiatives, reflecting the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideologies that prioritise entrepreneurship and market-driven solutions. This shift towards enterprise development within urban gardening corresponds with neoliberal values that emphasise individualism and economic self-sufficiency (Alkon & Mares, 2012). Such strategies often encourage gardeners to grow crops that cater to market demands, which can lead to the diversion of produce to higher-value markets, thereby disconnecting gardeners from their local communities and reinforcing neoliberal logics within community-based projects (Kanosvamhira, 2024).

One example of this market-driven approach is the Partnership for Economic Development Initiatives (PEDI), which supports community gardens in the Cape Flats. Established in 1998 in collaboration with the Western Cape Provincial Government, PEDI operates an agricultural academy that provides training in crop production, quality control, and agro-processing. PEDI also facilitates organic certification for its members through a participatory guarantee system. In 2019, PEDI launched an agrihub to connect urban gardeners to commercial markets, further embedding entrepreneurial practices into local food systems.

PEDI's training programs emphasize entrepreneurship, supported by partnerships such as with ORIBI Village, a non-profit incubator focused on building entrepreneurial capacity through skills development and mentorship. In response to the pandemic, ORIBI launched the "Entrepreneurship Programme for Sustainable Food System Solutions," aiming to strengthen social entrepreneurs in the food sector for greater resilience. Participants, including businesses like Umthunzi, FoodFlow, and various gardeners, have reportedly benefited from this mentorship.

Similarly, Abalimi Bezekhaya's Harvest of Hope, though now closed, previously helped establish market access for gardens, facilitating direct sales to institutions like schools and restaurants. Non-profit organizations supporting urban gardens typically focus on poverty alleviation, healthy food promotion, and environmental sustainability, with poverty alleviation as a central goal. This conditions gardeners to operate their initiatives as businesses to sustain livelihoods and activities (Table 2).

This research aligns with the literature indicating that market-driven urban gardening initiatives reflect neoliberal ideologies (Barron, 2017). In Cape Town, some non-state actors focus on cultivating local entrepreneurs, positioning social enterprises as central to solving food security challenges and creating a more just food system. The increasingly dominant role of these non-state organisations in distressed communities highlights the state's shift of responsibility for addressing social issues onto the voluntary sector. As noted in previous studies on the Cape Flats, gardeners often join urban agriculture projects with the aim of generating income (Tembo & Louw, 2013). However, such aspirations are frequently unrealistic due to the physical and structural constraints impacting urban agriculture (Battersby & Marshak, 2013). In an effort to address income generation, non-state actors promote the production of high-value crops that cater to market demands, often at the expense of local consumption needs.

This logic aligns with *the belief that the market can resolve social problems, a cornerstone of neoliberal subjectivities* (Alkon & Mares, 2012:349). Under these market-driven conditions, this research identifies that the ideological orientations of civil society actors and their capacity to foster critical reflexivity and collective action are pivotal in determining whether urban gardening initiatives resist or perpetuate neoliberal urbanism. While some actors may foster resistance by promoting more sustainable and community-centered practices, others may reinforce market-oriented solutions, further entrenching the neoliberal framework in urban agriculture initiatives. Thus, the focus on market-based solutions, though intended to address food security and poverty, often leads to limited tangible benefits, ultimately perpetuating neoliberal ideals under the guise of development (Davies et al., 2021).

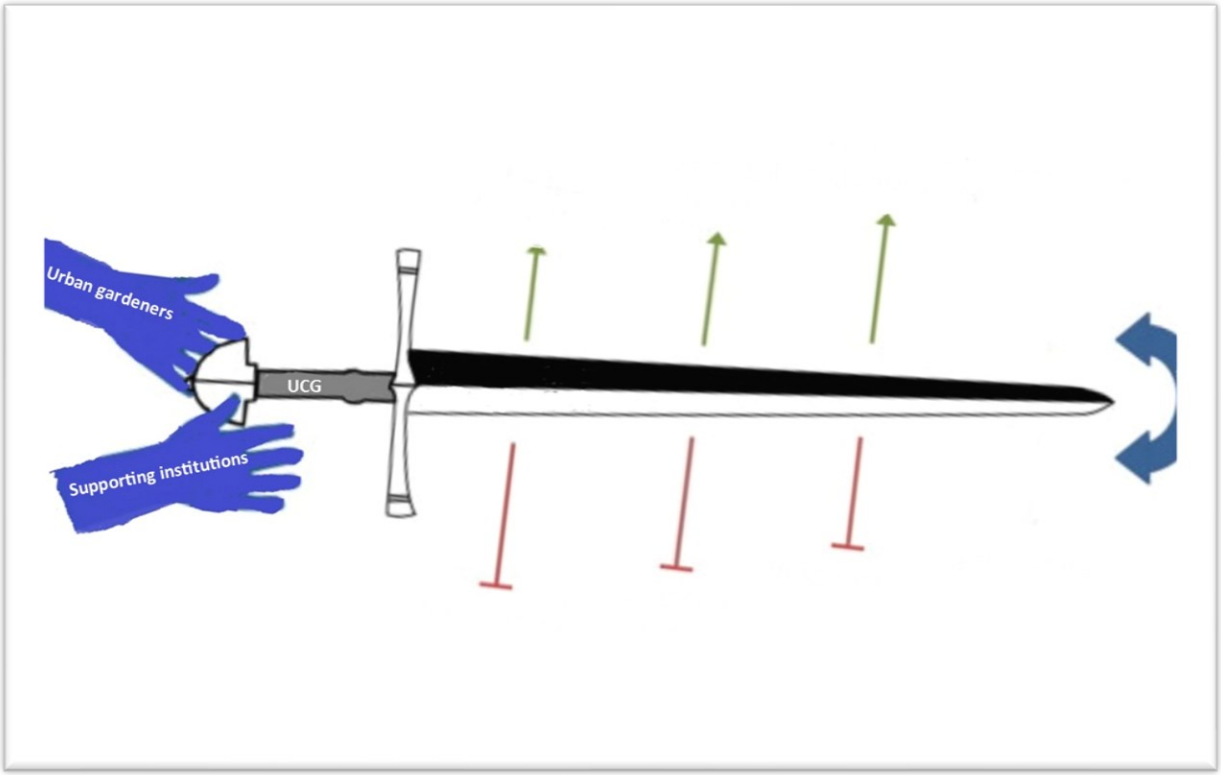

Figure 2: The urban community gardening dichotomy (source: author)

The Dependency on Non-State Support and Its Implications

The heavy reliance on non-state organisations for resources and marketing underscores the precarious dependency of urban gardens, which can undermine their long-term resilience and autonomy. This dependency on external funding renders urban gardening initiatives vulnerable to the risks of donor fluctuations and market-driven dynamics. Non-state organisations often promote the cultivation of high-value crops to facilitate income generation, yet this focus can displace locally consumed produce and deepen market dependency. Key informants from PEDI highlighted the challenge of accessing markets, noting a high demand for marketing opportunities that remains unmet, particularly during crises. Despite efforts to facilitate sales during the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns led to the closure of hotels and restaurants, thereby limiting market opportunities for gardeners. In response, gardens redirected their produce to local kitchens, with soup kitchens becoming significant clients.

During the pandemic, organisations like UCOOK collaborated with PEDI and Abalimi Bezekhaya, raising funds to purchase produce from gardeners for redistribution as food parcels to under-resourced communities. As noted by an informant from UCOOK, the organisation's ability to purchase produce was made possible through targeted fundraising efforts, which allowed them to support local gardeners and feed vulnerable populations. This initiative, in collaboration with FoodFlow, highlights how external funding and market dependencies can shift the focus of urban gardening projects from local food sovereignty to market-driven solutions, further entrenching reliance on non-state actors for sustainability.

While some NPOs support gardeners from production to marketing, others specialise in specific aspects. For instance, Umthunzi Farming Community, established in response to a

produce surplus crisis in Cape Flats gardens, operated as an intermediary to market small-scale gardeners' produce to clients outside the community. Although Umthunzi was operational during the data collection phase, it ceased operations in April 2021. PEDI, focusing on production practices, partners with organizations like UCOOK to market produce via vegetable box schemes to wealthier communities, facilitating gardeners' transition from subsistence to profitable gardening.

Previous research highlights the heavy reliance of Cape Flats urban gardeners on supporting organisations for resources and marketing (Kanosvamhira & Tevera, 2020; Paganini, Lemke, & Raimundo, 2018). This dependency is driven by the accessibility of NPOs and the significant resources required for sustainable gardening. However, when donor support is withdrawn, the sustainability of these gardens is jeopardised, particularly in terms of produce sales. Many gardeners struggle with market access and often sell their harvests in wealthier neighbourhoods to secure higher prices for organic produce. This practice inadvertently fosters a disconnect between the gardens and their communities, undermining the potential for local food security.

This situation reflects how civil society actors promote neoliberal ideals among the urban poor, framing self-sufficiency programs like urban gardening as solutions to food insecurity (Figure 2). These initiatives shift focus away from the systemic issues such as historical inequalities and neoliberal policies that contribute to food insecurity. By emphasising individual efforts over structural change, these programs paradoxically limit access to healthy food for the very communities that need it most.

Transformative Potential of Urban Gardening Initiatives

The research discovered that non-state actors in urban gardening initiatives, can also present a transformative potential, allowing gardeners to counter the systemic challenges they face. For instance, the Impilo Yabantu Market, established in Khayelitsha in 2016, represents a social justice movement that recognises the neoliberal context of farming. It provides a local platform for township residents to access organic produce, thereby promoting healthier lifestyles. Similarly, the Slow Food Movement in South Africa, including its youth network, challenges corporate food systems and advocates for a more equitable and sustainable food system. Through workshops, social media, and local engagement, it raises awareness about exploitative food practices while partnering with community gardens in the Cape Flats to foster localised food sovereignty.

In alignment with this, the Gugulethu Urban Farmers Initiative (GUFI) and the Western Cape Urban Farmers Initiative (WCUFI) have aligned themselves with the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (SAFSC). Founded in 2015, SAFSC advocates for food sovereignty principles and works with Cape Flats gardeners to promote local, ecological food systems. The Local Wild Movement also collaborates with Cape Flats gardeners, supporting the cultivation of indigenous foods like dune spinach, wild rosemary, and sour fig. These activities are geared towards contributing to broader food sovereignty and ecological restoration efforts.

These are some initiatives that reveal the complex interplay between local, grassroots movements and the broader structural challenges imposed by neoliberal systems,

underscoring the potential for transformation while also highlighting the persistent barriers to equitable and sustainable food systems.

The growing consciousness among urban gardeners in Cape Town is reflected in their increasing involvement with progressive movements. Leaders of the Gugulethu Urban Farmers Initiative and the Western Cape Urban Farmers Initiative reported that several community gardens joined local Community Action Networks (CANs), fostering collaboration and grassroots organising. This culminated in the establishment of the Gugulethu Urban Farmers Initiative, a movement focused on addressing food insecurity, promoting healthy diets, and mobilising communities towards healthier lifestyles.

Some members have also engaged in food security forums to advocate for systemic changes within the food system. However, the initiative's co-founder expressed caution about partnerships with civil society actors, stressing the need for alignment in goals and values before forming such alliances. Ultimately, these movements aim to strengthen the local food system and promote healthier food choices within their communities.

The pandemic accelerated collaboration among civil society actors, offering new hope for consolidated efforts in urban agriculture initiatives. Supporting organisations noted improved coordination, particularly among non-profit organisations working in this space. While many NPOs address similar issues, their geographic focus and service offerings vary, enabling complementary partnerships during project implementation. For example, despite the closure of Harvest of Hope, Abalimi Bezekhaya continues to connect gardeners with market access organisations like PEDI, while PEDI collaborates with Fresh for Produce to enhance sustainable cultivation methods, such as vertical hybrid hydroponics for water optimisation.

These partnerships reflect a growing alignment between civil society, government, and the private sector to address food security challenges. PEDI, for instance, receives funding from multiple government levels, demonstrating this cross-sector collaboration. Additionally, platforms like SAUFFT have played a pivotal role in fostering dialogue among stakeholders, exemplified by its inaugural Food Dialogue in 2014 and a follow-up in 2020 during the pandemic. Such dialogues provide a crucial space for addressing the systemic issues of the food system (Wortham-Galvin et al., 2017), highlighting the potential for collaborative solutions amidst evolving challenges.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, increased dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders were pivotal in addressing the food crisis. With the City of Cape Town limited in its response, civil society organisations led emergency food relief through Community Action Networks (CANs), supported by the City's compilation of a list for food distribution. The Philippi Horticultural Area was repurposed as an agri-hub, enhancing food distribution and storage. The Western Cape Economic Development Partnership (EDP) coordinated efforts, bringing together non-profit organisations, government agencies, and other actors through forums. These initiatives highlight the growing importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships in tackling food security and socio-economic challenges. Monthly meetings under the Western Cape Food Forum continue to foster collaboration among civil society, urban gardeners, and academics, advancing resilience and addressing food system issues.

Food justice-oriented organisations can thus shape urban farming by prioritising equity, sustainability, and community empowerment. Their focus on collective action aligns

with farmers committed to food sovereignty and social justice. Partnering with such organisations offers urban gardeners a chance to resist neoliberal frameworks and promote a more just, sustainable food system.

Conclusion

This paper has illuminated a paradoxical dynamic within urban community gardening initiatives in Cape Town's Cape Flats: these gardens simultaneously reproduce and resist neoliberal urbanism. In line with previous scholarship (e.g., Barron, 2017; Bródy & de Wilde, 2020), the findings reveal how civil society actors, in collaboration with the state, inadvertently contribute to the neoliberalisation of citizens. Through mentoring, skill development, and the provision of tools, non-profit organisations (NPOs) support urban gardening initiatives that ostensibly promote self-sufficiency and income generation among low-income residents. However, these efforts often align with neoliberal rationalities that shift responsibility for systemic failures such as food insecurity onto individuals and communities rather than addressing structural inequities in the broader food system.

Importantly, this study moves beyond confirming existing literature by identifying specific conditions and mechanisms under which urban gardening initiatives challenge or reinforce neoliberal urbanism. For instance, while some organisations uncritically advance neoliberal ideologies by focusing solely on behavioural changes, others foster critical awareness among participants about the structural injustices in Cape Town's food system. In these cases, urban gardeners, rather than internalising neoliberal norms begin to embrace food justice-inspired models of operation, creating alternative networks and practices that subvert the dominant system.

This finding demonstrates that urban gardening's potential to either reinforce or resist neoliberalism depends on several factors: the ideological orientation of the supporting NPOs, the extent to which these initiatives prioritise collective action over individual empowerment, and the gardeners' capacity to form alliances advocating for systemic change. These insights are particularly significant in the South African context, where entrenched socio-economic inequalities and spatial injustices exacerbate the challenges faced by urban gardeners.

From this perspective, the study's primary contribution lies in highlighting the dual role of urban gardening as both a product and a potential challenger of neoliberal urbanism. By revealing the transformative potential of community-based food justice initiatives, the research underscores the importance of moving beyond surface-level interventions and instead addressing the structural inequities embedded within urban food systems. This requires recognising urban gardening not merely as a strategy for food production but as a site of quiet activism and systemic contestation.

Based on these findings, the study provides several recommendations to enhance the transformative potential of urban gardening initiatives. First, civil society organisations should prioritise integrating food justice education into gardening programmes to foster critical reflexivity, enabling participants to understand and engage with the structural causes of food insecurity. Second, fostering collaboration between civil society, government, and private sectors is vital for scaling up food justice initiatives and creating equitable food systems. This requires transparency and trust-building among these stakeholders in order to address

competitive dynamics and conflicting interests effectively. Lastly, initiatives should prioritise collective action and community empowerment over individual entrepreneurialism, as this approach is more likely to challenge neoliberal norms and build resilient, inclusive food systems. These recommendations aim to strengthen urban gardening as a tool for systemic change while advancing food justice in contexts shaped by socio-economic inequities.

Future research could explore the long-term impacts of these approaches, particularly in terms of their sustainability and resilience against external shocks such as climate change and economic crises. Comparative studies across diverse urban contexts would also deepen understanding of the conditions under which urban gardening initiatives can most effectively resist neoliberal urbanism and advance systemic change.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on neoliberal urbanism and community-based responses to food insecurity by offering a context-specific exploration of the contradictions inherent in urban gardening initiatives. By centring the experiences of gardeners in Cape Town's Cape Flats, the study demonstrates the importance of addressing both the symptoms and root causes of urban food insecurity. Through ongoing dialogue and collaboration, stakeholders can work towards more just and sustainable urban food systems that empower marginalised communities while challenging entrenched inequalities.

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