

Unveiling quiet activism: Urban community gardens as agents of food sovereignty

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Abstract

Urban community gardening is emerging as a form of quiet activism challenging the corporate food system. In urban community gardening, quiet activism subtly challenges the dominant corporate food system. However, research tends to overlook its presence and impact in global South cities, where issues of food insecurity and corporatisation are acute. There is a gap in research on urban community gardening activism, with a focus mainly on global North cities. Global South cities and populations face unique challenges in the corporate food system that require attention and exploration in scholarly literature. We draw on qualitative research conducted with urban community gardeners in Cape Town, South Africa. Through interviews and observations, the study investigates how these gardeners engage in quiet activism to challenge the corporate food system. We find that community gardens are subtle but potent platforms for bolstering local food movements and fostering healthier dietary practices by cultivating and sharing produce. Quiet activism through community gardening offers a nuanced approach to challenging the corporate food system. The study highlights the need to recognise and understand varying levels of activism intensity and their implications for reshaping urban food systems. We underscore the need to discern the distinct embodiments necessitated by different modes of activism. Understanding these different modes of activism is crucial for comprehending their varying impacts on challenging and reshaping the corporate food system. This nuanced approach reveals the transformative potential inherent in community gardening practices. Community gardening in Cape Town exemplifies the transformative potential of understated acts in food activism.

KEYWORDS

Cape Town, community gardens, food activism, Global South cities, quiet activism, urban agriculture

1 | INTRODUCTION

The multifaceted attributes of urban community gardens have received much attention in geographical studies. These gardens offer remedies for a spectrum of urban challenges—from enhancing food security to nurturing social unity and propelling sustainable urban

progress (Armstrong, 2000; Kanosvamaha et al., 2023; Veen et al., 2015; Wakefield et al., 2007). Scholars have also begun to explore the intersections between urban community food gardens and food sovereignty (Hoover, 2017; Furness & Gallaher, 2018). Food sovereignty, a concept central to these discussions, is the collective right of people to enjoy healthy and culturally

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appropriate food produced through socially just, ecologically sound, and sustainable methods. It encompasses the right of communities to define their own policies, strategies, and systems for the production, distribution, and consumption of food (Visser et al., 2015). This literature positions urban community gardens as vital conduits by which to re-establish communities' connections with healthier food sources. Gardens empower individuals to take control of their dietary choices by fostering the localised production, processing, and distribution of nutritious food alternatives, particularly in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods (see Alkon & Mares, 2012; Barron, 2017; Furness & Gallaher, 2018; Hoover, 2013; McClintock, 2010; Wilson, 2013).

Community food gardens can serve as counterweights to the commodification of food and can offer local alternatives to the corporate food system (Certomà, 2011; Clendenning et al., 2016; Kato et al., 2014). Thus, urban community food gardens become activism arenas of resistance to diverse challenges and inequalities faced in communities (Tomaghi & Certoma, 2019). The interplay between urban community gardening and activism can also transform multifaceted issues affecting culture, society, and economics (Follmann & Viehoff, 2014; Tornaghi & Certoma, 2019). Such activism ranges from vocal protests to subtle but equally potent practices such as seed saving initiatives, community education programmes on sustainable agriculture, guerrilla gardening, and the establishment of local food cooperatives (Kato et al., 2014; Pottinger, 2017).

Quiet activism has garnered attention among geographers, often in relation to a series of ordinary, localised actions capable of instigating societal transformation (Warner & Inthorn, 2022). Quiet activism in the form of social or political engagement tends to be subtle, is often conducted in a private or covert manner, and rarely involves highly visible or confrontational actions (McMellon et al., 2023). Among these less conspicuous means are, for example, seed saver groups whose actions challenge dominant food paradigms (Pottinger, 2017). Implicit quiet food sovereignty movements cultivate ecological sustenance, fostering lasting impacts within their communities (Pottinger, 2017; Visser et al., 2015). While this understated form of food sovereignty does not overtly challenge the overarching food system (Visser et al., 2015), it advocates prioritise individual economic benefits and ecologically mindful production for personal well-being, while fostering social connections, by, for example, exchanging self-cultivated food.

The interconnections between urban food gardens and food sovereignty have garnered attention in the global North and, with a few exceptions, in the global South (see Siebert, 2020). There, research continues largely to revolve around strategies for alleviating poverty (Gray et al., 2020; Kanosvamaha, 2023) through food security. In other words, the emphasis on food

Key insights

This research reveals that urban community gardens are agents of quiet activism countering the corporate food system. It addresses a global North bias in the literature by focusing on Cape Town, South Africa. Qualitative research reveals gardens as platforms for local food movements, fostering healthy practices. However, the scope of community gardening's impact and activism varies depending on local contexts and engagement levels. The study underscores the importance of recognising different activism levels and the varied implications of activism. Cape Town's gardens exemplify the potential of unassuming cultivation to challenge and reshape urban food systems. Thus, the research sheds light on the need to rethink existing paradigms.

security in the global South may overshadow more comprehensive and nuanced perspectives provided by the concept of food sovereignty, which considers access to food and issues of autonomy, sustainability, and community empowerment.

Other gaps in global South research on the subject could be addressed by reference to quiet activism, a lens that redirects descriptive and analytical narratives in ways that could unveil how community-based food cultivation extends beyond mere sustenance. Such research could evolve to challenge the corporate food system, not least in places such as the Cape Flats of Cape Town, South Africa—our case study. On that basis, we mobilise a new focus on quiet activism to argue that urban community gardening constitutes a form of activism, albeit one that stops short of overtly challenging the neoliberal food system. This perspective recognises the transformative potential of grassroots efforts in reshaping food landscapes and fostering alternative practices rooted in local empowerment and ecological sustainability. The rest of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 provides context to debates about food security and urban community gardens. Section 3 maps out how quiet activism may be seen as a conceptual framework by which to understand empirical cases. Then, Section 4 examines the socio-economic attributes of the Cape Flats study area, and Section 5 details the methods and data collection used to consider five gardens there. Sections 6 and 7 present findings, engage in an in-depth discussion deliberating on whether and how community food gardens are subtle but potent platforms to bolster local food movements, and foster healthier dietary practices by cultivating and sharing produce. The final Section 8

concludes the work and offers insights and avenues for future research.

2 | FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND URBAN COMMUNITY GARDENS

Food sovereignty is a response to neoliberal corporate globalisation (Blom et al., 2022; Satgar & Cherry, 2020). The concept was first proposed in 1996 by La Via Campesina (LVC), a global movement of peasants and rural peoples. It has since been embraced by thousands of global organisations and social movements. The Nyéléni Declaration (2007) outlines the *Six Pillars of Food Sovereignty* that should shape a comprehensive framework for food and agriculture policies. The LVC movement advocates for the universal right to sufficient, healthy, and culturally appropriate food, especially for vulnerable populations. The pillars promote localised food systems and local control over resources, resist inequitable international trade, emphasise the importance of local knowledge and skills, and endorse sustainable, nature-centred agricultural practices. For example, the LVC champions agro-ecological modes of cultivation during territorial disputes with capital and agribusiness as a way to fight the corporate food system.

Food sovereignty as described above is thus rooted in *rural* social movements (Mann, 2019; Satgar & Cherry, 2020). However, in urban contexts, food sovereignty remains underexplored and conceptually fluid (Blom et al., 2022; García-Sempere et al., 2018), despite being a critical issue, especially in Africa. In 2008, delegates at the Fifth Conference of LVC in Maputo made the pivotal decision to relocate the LVC's International Operational Secretariat (IOS) to Africa by 2013. The members collectively proposed that the IOS be hosted by the Zimbabwe Organic Smallholder Farmer's Forum (ZIMSOFF) (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2014). Situating LVC's International Secretariat in Zimbabwe symbolises a profound understanding of African vulnerabilities to threats such as land-grabbing, climate impacts, and corporate exploitation—all indicative of persistent and ongoing challenges in the realms of agriculture and markets.

Food sovereignty can be measured in terms of food access, production, consumption, transformation, and the social fabric affecting all of those (see García-Sempere et al., 2018). In a global South urban context, *access and availability indicators* include measures about family garden cultivation, animal husbandry, affordability, and physical access to organic foods; food sources; food price volatility; school gardens; and information about foods. *Production indicators* encompass measures such as organic and agroecological production, agrochemical use, organic waste reuse, safety and hygiene, and irrigation water. *Consumption indicators* cover processed foods, nutritional adherence,

consumption of organic foods, gender roles in food responsibilities, cultural diet fit, consumption outside the home, and preference for local products. *Transformation, distribution, and commercialisation indicators* account for food containers, wasted food, safe transport and handling, and channels for agroecological product commercialisation. Last, *social fabric indicators* encompass cooperatives, civil agroalimentary associations, community gardens, food trading, cooperation practices, and food-policy councils.

Some food sovereignty scholars contend that hunger is driven by food commodification (Alkon & Mares, 2012). Therefore, they posit that urban community gardening embodies autonomous, non-commodified food production untethered from the neoliberal food system (Wilson, 2013). Others note that the limited impact of growing produce for a local community might not induce systematic change (Barron, 2017). However, urban community gardens serve as hubs for food movements, uniting food activists, researchers, and policymakers to facilitate policy influence from the bottom-up (Wekerle, 2004).

These conceptual, political, evaluative, and liberatory agendas matter in geographical research because they illuminate the transformative potential of urban community gardens as sites of quiet activism, challenging dominant food paradigms and fostering community resilience against the commodification of food. At the same time, those agendas have particular salience in terms of the scales at which they operate—from highly visible international forms of activism to more quiet and local forms, and these are the primary focus of our work in this article.

3 | QUIET ACTIVISM AND URBAN COMMUNITY GARDENING

Activism is a part of actions that can be loosely classified as resistant activities (Hughes, 2020). Activism generally describes actions to influence social change. Activists' varying social, political, or environmental aims mean that they use diverse tactics to meet their goals. Resistant actions are essential for societal change (Hughes, 2020), and tactics employed can encompass protests, riots, cultural opposition, and do-it-yourself (DIY) practices, among others (Crossan et al., 2016; Tornaghi & Certoma, 2019).

Recent scholarship highlights the transformative potential of mundane practices in effecting communal change (Martin et al., 2007). Consequently, human geographers advocate for fluid understandings of resistance, emphasising unassuming, everyday expressions of goodwill, camaraderie, and ingenuity over risky and demonstrative behaviours (Hughes, 2020; Sandover, 2020). Everyday activities such as can help transform conditions for distressed communities (Hughes, 2020; Martin

et al., 2007; Pottinger, 2017). While definitions of activism have focused on significant actions fuelled by collective emotions—particularly anger (Turner, 2007)—quiet activism highlights the importance of subtle and continuous emotional engagement in activities such as urban agriculture (Askins, 2014; McMellon et al., 2023).

Much such activism relies on modesty, routine engagement, and a lack of fanfare—subverting traditional associations with grandiose public displays of resistance (Horton & Krafft, 2009). Consider James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), which famously demonstrated how Malaysian villagers resisted the Green Revolution using silent tactics such as foot-dragging, dissimulation, and sabotage to safeguard their interests and control the distribution of resources. Scott's main argument was that although such actions were small and often invisible, they were powerful, especially when a significant number of people adopted them. According to Scott, in general terms, such forms of defiance are easy to adopt because they are the first resort for the oppressed, especially when open defiance is likely to result in danger. Moreover, these forms of defiance require little planning or coordination and thus are different from more organised forms of resistance. Scott's intervention has since been reconceptualised as small (Winter et al., 2020), modest (Taylor, 2022), quiet (Wetherell et al., 2019), implicit (Horton & Krafft, 2009), and everyday political practices (Winter et al., 2020).

Those working on quiet activism have also borrowed from feminist scholarship (Warner & Inthorn, 2022). For instance, Martin et al. (2007) have proposed a theory of feminist activism that challenges traditional notions of intentional and wilful activism. They suggest that everyday actions by women to foster new social networks and transform power relations constitute a form of feminist activism. While not immediately recognisable as political, these actions contribute meaningfully to societal progress. Horton and Krafft (2009) have elaborated on that idea by reference to what they call implicit activism, which emphasises modest, unassuming actions that leave little tangible impact and are not explicitly tied to a specific philosophy or identity. Implicit activists often do not recognise themselves as such and focus on pragmatic steps to achieve specific goals without seeking structural change.

The term quiet activism has also been applied to various activities, including knitting, seed-sharing, doing domestic crafts, and fostering cross-cultural friendships within local communities. For example, Warner and Inthorn (2022) have explored how older women in England contribute to their communities by volunteering in local textile craft groups, filling gaps in filling gaps left by diminishing public services that once were delivering social and recreational activities. With

the use of qualitative interviews, they reveal a range of expressions of quiet activism, emphasising volunteers' political engagement and capacity to engage in greater advocacy to challenge systemic failures and reliance on unpaid labour. Similarly, Askins (2014) characterises quiet politics as a nuanced form of interpersonal engagement, where individuals forge new social connections within everyday spaces, interconnecting across different geographic contexts. Hence, according to these examples, quiet endeavours are an alternative to established ideas about activism and politics that often are characterised by overt demonstrations and confrontations.

Activism has also been adopted by those seeking to understand how urban agriculture activities implicitly challenges the corporate food system. The literature shows that activism in gardening activities is not always vocal and confrontational (Kato et al., 2014)—it is, indeed, quiet. For example, Pottinger (2017, p. 216) has applied the term to gardening and seed saving, describing quiet activism as a form of engagement that is characterised “by qualities of gentleness, slowness, subtlety and subversion.” Pottinger suggests that links between seed saving and activism in the United Kingdom, in organisations such as the Heritage Seed Library and the Seedy Sunday project, are expressions of quiet activism intended to subvert that same corporate food system.

In line with such literature, we argue that urban community gardens in Cape Town constitute sites in which gardening activities can be viewed as a form of quiet activism, albeit one that stops short of overtly challenging the unequal food system, primarily due to its localised focus and limited capacity to address broader structural issues within the food system. In the next sections, therefore, we deploy ideas about quiet activism to reveal select dynamics of urban community gardening in Cape Town in the context of food sovereignty movements. By using the lens of quiet activism, we extend our understanding beyond traditional notions of activism outlined above, considering the significance of subtle, everyday actions that contribute to societal transformation and are more akin to Scott's framework. With the use of qualitative research with urban community gardeners, we explore whether and how gardens serve as platforms for quiet activism to challenge the corporate food system and foster local food movements. We test the idea that there are quietly political dimensions to urban gardening, highlighting its role as a particular form of resistance within the constraints of the unequal food system. In the process, we augment existing conceptual understandings of activism in urban contexts and point to the potential for quiet activism to effect meaningful change, even—and especially—in the absence of overt confrontation.

4 | STUDY AREA

Cape Town—South Africa's second-largest city—has a population of approximately 4,758,433 residents (CoCT, 2021). Poverty is a significant problem there, especially among those labelled Coloured and Black African during the apartheid regime. Approximately 53% of households earned a monthly average income of ZAR 3500 or less in 2020 (CoCT, 2022). However, this figure masks geographical income variation, because low-income families are more likely to be located in the townships. Inequality is also gendered, with men employed at a higher rate than women and generally in receipt of higher incomes (Tsegay & Rusare, 2014). Consequently, female-headed households tend to experience greater levels of food insecurity. Although South Africa is classified as food secure at the macro level, significant numbers of citizens at the micro level continue to experience food insecurity (Simelane, 2024). South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with a Gini coefficient of 0.63¹ (CoCT, 2022). In urban contexts, residents with low incomes invariably have limited resources to meet their basic food needs. A household survey on the Cape Flats revealed that 54% of the households surveyed experienced food insecurity with many experiencing severe food insecurity (30.6%) (Paganini, Adams, et al., 2021). This household food-insecurity problem is rooted in apartheid spatial planning but has been exacerbated by policies and practices adopted by post-apartheid majority-rule governments (Paganini, Adams, et al., 2021).

South Africa's post-apartheid neoliberal agricultural policies² have bolstered the uneven food system at both national and provincial levels. The manufacturing and retail industry influences household food access and choice through food pricing (Tsegay & Rusare, 2014). For example, a handful of food corporations control 60% of the country's food market (Tsegay & Rusare, 2014) and determine food-related policies, food production, supply, and distribution (Greenberg, 2017; Kanosvamhira et al., 2023). The uneven food supply and distribution system has marginalised small-scale producers and suppliers thereby perpetuating food and nutrition insecurity, especially in low-income urban neighbourhoods. Large-scale food corporations have also transformed consumer dietary patterns by providing highly processed food options (Greenberg, 2017).

Urban food security is an issue of financial and geographical access (Kroll, 2016). Food insecurity affects urban households that must rely on income to purchase food (Greenberg, 2015). Although supermarkets have rapidly expanded into low-income areas, they often do not stock healthy foods—in contrast to the situation in wealthier neighbourhoods (Battersby & Peyton, 2014). These supermarkets are often placed in malls, alongside fast-food chains that have transformed consumers' dietary patterns by providing ultra-

processed food options that are generally energy dense and nutrient deficient (Greenberg, 2017). This dietary shift is linked to chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension (FAO, 2022). The Western Cape province has South Africa's highest obesity rates (Otterbach et al., 2021; Tsegay & Rusare, 2014; WCG, 2016). Accessible but unhealthy options perpetuate food insecurity and health issues and reinforce poor dietary choices in low-income townships.

Food sovereignty activism in South Africa has developed across diverse channels following LVC's advocacy (Satgar & Cherry, 2020). Various stakeholders have embraced the notion of food sovereignty, including those in the agrarian sector, proponents of food justice, climate justice, and the solidarity economy. For example, the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (SAFSC) was formed in 2015 as a collaborative effort by more than 50 organisations to create a unified national platform to coordinate grassroots movements (Satgar & Cherry, 2020).

The Cape Flats, situated to the east of central Cape Town, emerged as a significant area shaped by the apartheid policies of South Africa. In 1950, under the Group Areas Act, the apartheid government forcibly relocated people of colour to outlying areas like the Cape Flats, segregating them from central business districts. This area, historically characterised as a wasteland due to its origins in forced removals during apartheid, became home to many families displaced from inner-city areas. The Cape Flats' troubled history of forced removals and social dislocation has been closely linked to the development of gangsterism and social challenges within this community.

While there are no official figures, about 6000 urban gardeners are estimated to cultivate in the Cape Flats, with hundreds operating in groups (Paganini, Swanby, et al., 2021). Most gardeners cultivate on school or municipal land under insecure tenure conditions and receive crucial support from civil society and the state (Kanosvamhira, 2019, 2024). Such support includes infrastructural support, inputs, and training resources for the cultivators. Most community food gardens outwardly promote goals such as food security and income generation; however, the beneficiaries also mobilise to achieve goals beyond those intended by the benefactors.

5 | MATERIAL AND METHODS

The work that follows draw on qualitative research was conducted from 2020 to 2021. The University of the Western Cape issued an ethical clearance certificate (Reference Number: HS19/9/2) before the data collection process started.³ We focused on 34 intentionally selected urban community food gardens in Cape Town's Cape Flats neighbourhoods: Mitchells

Plain, Ottery, Gugulethu, and Khayelitsha. Garden selection involved purposive and network sampling, initially facilitated by non-state organisations engaged in urban agriculture initiatives. Later snowball sampling included gardens without connections to civil society. The five case study gardens considered below are representative of the diverse range found in Cape Town in terms of demographics, objectives, and locations such as school grounds and public land. They also reflect unique approaches to food sovereignty. This sampling diversity was crucial for capturing the nuanced nature of their engagement with food sovereignty.

The study employed both formal and informal semi-structured interviews with representatives from all the community gardens. On-site semi-structured interviews lasted 45 to 70 minutes, delving into each garden's history and considering how food sovereignty was promoted. Follow-up phone interviews were recorded using a phone recorder. The semi-structured interviews with garden representatives revealed insights into the motivations, practices, and beliefs underlying work in the food gardens. The interview transcripts were systematically analysed to identify emerging themes.

The interview transcripts were systematically analysed using thematic analysis. This process involved coding the transcripts to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to motivations, practices, and beliefs underlying work in the community food gardens. Themes were identified through iterative review and discussion among researchers, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how food sovereignty was promoted within each garden. One of the researchers also undertook participant observation in various food dialogue workshops, including Food Dialogues: Cape Town 2020, 2021. This event featured people sharing diverse perspectives on critical issues related to the food system.

Garden names and participants are anonymised—the latter using a code designating the participant number, sex, and age.⁴ The aforementioned food dialogue workshops were then used to contextualise the interviews, and first-hand observations added depth and context to the discussions surrounding food

sovereignty and the dynamics within community food gardens. These observations enriched our understanding of the motivations, practices, and beliefs underlying the cultivation and promotion of food sovereignty within these settings. We acknowledge that our own positionality and active role as researchers have shaped the depth and richness of the data gathered. Constant reflexivity enhanced the authenticity of the study, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation that accounted for the socio-cultural context of urban community food gardens in Cape Town.

6 | FINDINGS

The following sections profile the community gardens included in this study.⁵ All five garden leaders indicated that they had diverse reasons for cultivating, ranging from personal health and nutrition goals, community empowerment, and social activism to addressing food insecurity, promoting food sovereignty, and fostering environmental sustainability through urban agriculture initiatives (though some motives have evolved over time). Each garden's unique focus reflects a blend of personal passion, community engagement, and a commitment to challenging prevailing food systems and promoting alternative, equitable approaches to food production and distribution within their respective neighbourhoods. Table 1 identifies the elements of food sovereignty that each project addresses. Table 1 presents a concise overview of surveyed community gardens, summarising their basic characteristics such as size, membership, location, and alignment with key food sovereignty themes including access, production, consumption, transformation/distribution/commercialisation, and social fabric.

6.1 | Garden 1

Garden 1 was established in a vacant area in Khayelitsha (under power lines where housing was prohibited) and is part of a collective of gardens known as the power-line

TABLE 1 Characteristics of surveyed community gardens and alignment with food sovereignty themes.

Garden name	Garden size m ²	Members	Location	Food sovereignty themes				
				Access	Production	Consumption	Transformation, distribution, commercialisation	Social fabric
Garden 1	5000	5	Open space	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Garden 2	200	13	School land/state land	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Garden 3	300	3	School land	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Garden 4	200	5	State land	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Garden 5	250	3	School land	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

project. Generally, these gardens are established to cultivate vegetables for personal consumption, provide food for the immediate needy, and sell surplus to generate income. The gardeners sell their produce in both the local and external markets, and they welcome individuals who are interested in learning about the benefits of cultivation.

While some of the gardens are primarily focused on income generation and employment opportunities, the interviews revealed various other developmental aims for the community. For instance, the garden typically had two pricing tiers: one for the market and another for local residents. Interviewees explained that they sold produce directly to the local residents at a lower-than-market rate. This income helps cover the operational costs associated with maintaining a sustainable garden, among them electricity to power boreholes and irrigation systems. Therefore, selling the produce was essential to sustaining infrastructure and purchasing necessary inputs for the garden.

The garden also had a hall for meetings, training sessions, and community gatherings and regularly operated a soup kitchen to provide meals for those in need. There was a strong culture of sharing produce, especially with vulnerable groups within the community. For instance, an elderly woman gardener summarised her goals: “The main aim is to eat and sell the extra and donate to the needy” (F2/60+). Most of the community gardens, including those within the power-line project, donate food to the needy in their community. Some community gardens, particularly those situated on public school land, also contributed a portion of their produce to school feeding programmes at no cost. The garden was also actively engaged in various food-related movements in the city, including the SAFSC. It served as a conduit for promoting organic and healthful food options in the local community.

6.2 | Garden 2

Garden 2, located in Mitchells Plain, serves as a training centre dedicated to advancing home gardening and the cultivation of organic vegetables in the local community. Notably, this garden’s primary focus was not the sale of produce. Rather, its objectives revolved around specific community-oriented goals, such as advocating for social, environmental, and health advantages associated with cultivation.

The garden emerged from Neighbourhood Watch and its collaborative efforts to enhance safety in the area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the neighbourhood watch group reoriented its objectives to address the pressing food needs of the community. This shift led to expanded initiatives like soup kitchens, donations, and leveraging home gardeners and community gardeners’ expertise to promote urban community

gardening. The Neighbourhood Watch embarked on a community gardening initiative to make a positive change in the community. As one participant explained, “This garden serves as a platform for learning, and our goal is to harness gardening as an empowering tool for the community, fostering personal food production and environmental enhancement” (F7/40–49). The participant was hesitant to embrace the “activist” label, stating, “I would not use that word, it’s a strong word, but I see myself more of being a change agent? And make a positive difference in the community? Okay, that would be the preferred way, I think, I do not need that term activist.” While the term “activist” was too robust, she did recognise the efforts to enact positive transformations within the community.

The garden was set up to equip community members with the skills to independently cultivate wholesome vegetables and reduce dependence on mainstream commodity markets. The garden also raised awareness about the benefits of growing produce using available household spaces. Five members had oversight of day-to-day operations. Community-building initiatives were fostered through family-oriented events hosted in the garden, exemplified by “Fun Days” (Figure 1) that invite the community to participate. The garden also offered complimentary introductory training sessions. Approximately 50 residents remained in regular communication with the garden through in-person interactions and a WhatsApp group. These communication channels facilitated knowledge-sharing and allowed novice home gardeners to seek guidance from more experienced peers.

6.3 | Garden 3

Garden 3 in Ottery was founded by a reformed gang member who wanted to give back to the community and create safe spaces within the gang-ridden township. At first, the garden only utilised public school land but has since extended into the communal spaces between the residential flats. This move was a direct attempt to discourage using the open space for illegal activities and, instead, to create places where the community could come together and engage in social cohesion. One participant explained that the “aim is to educate the immediate community on the value of organic produce in the community and get the youth and the elderly involved in it” (M3/50–59).

The original goal was ensuring that reformed gangsters could reconnect with the community—urban agriculture was a form of “horticultural therapy.” Members were enabled to improve skills including and beyond gardening, among them leadership and bookkeeping. Community youths could engage in productive activities to stay off the streets. The garden partnered with the local library and maintained a strong social media



FIGURE 1 Activities offered by the garden.

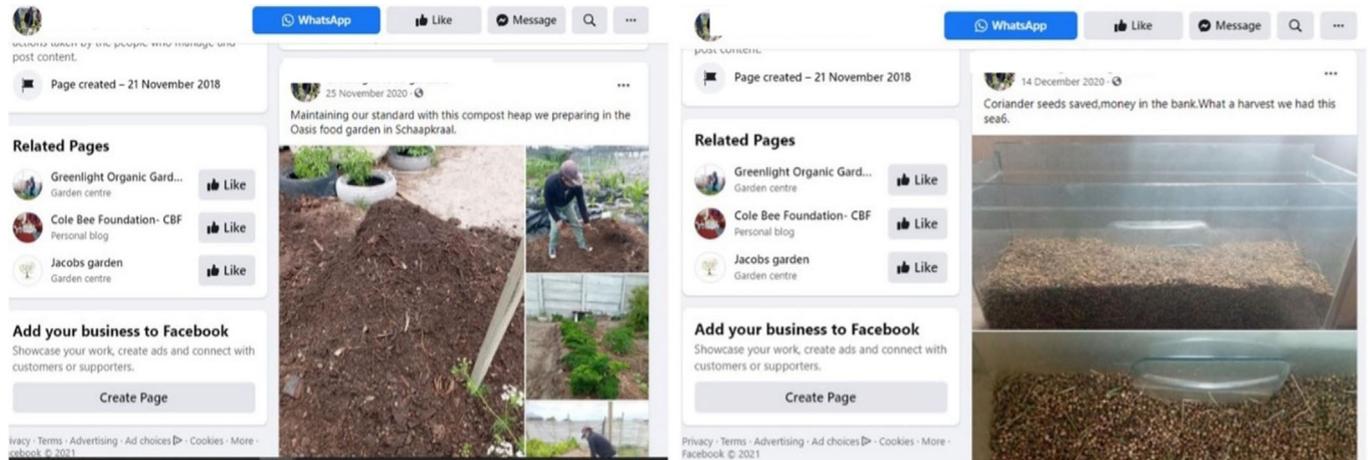


FIGURE 2 Garden 3 social media presence.

presence, where it advertises its activities through platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp (Figure 2).

This social media presence is crucial for disseminating the garden activities to the community and connecting with other networks and potential partners. The social media presence also allows other stakeholders to reach out and obtain assistance, training, and technical support for gardens in their institutions.

In 2020, Garden 3 took a significant step forward in fostering quiet activism by spearheading the establishment of the Western Cape Urban Farmers Initiative (WCUFI), a registered non-profit organisation (NPO)

dedicated to uniting and empowering urban gardeners throughout the province. With a membership base spanning approximately 50 individuals from diverse communities such as Khayelitsha, Ottery, Langa, and Emfuleni, WCUFI serves as a pivotal platform for collective action and advocacy in the realm of urban agriculture. Central to its mission is the provision of support and guidance to urban gardeners in navigating the intricate landscape of institutional structures, particularly concerning access to land and essential resources for cultivation. By facilitating connections and sharing knowledge, WCUFI aims to promote best practices in

farming and foster a culture of urban cultivation across various spaces within its operational areas. Through these concerted efforts, WCUIF embodies the principles of quiet activism, effecting change through grassroots engagement and collaborative initiatives aimed at enhancing community resilience and food sovereignty.

6.4 | Garden 4

Garden 4 registered as an NPO in 2014 to address the health needs of its members and the broader community in Gugulethu. The founder, who identifies as a community activist, had lost family members to cancer, so he decided to cultivate organic produce to improve his diet. The three-member garden is located on school land and cultivates vegetables for household consumption. They also supply vegetables for the school feeding programme. While the community garden initially set out to improve access to nutritious food, its aims have broadened to include educating children about the benefits of cultivation and mobilising the community. The founder collaborates with schools to establish and maintain vegetable gardens to inspire youth.

The community garden also tackles the problem of fresh produce leaving the community (see Kanosvamaha, 2023a). Most garden produce was being sold outside of the community as, in wealthier suburbs, “there is a demand for this kind of produce which is a different story in our communities where they look down on the produce coming from the gardens and that is where we want to do a lot of education and mobilising to make sure that the produce stays local.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, the garden expanded to promote nutrition and healthy lifestyles through a community-wide social movement in Gugulethu. They promoted their produce to the middle class and encouraged members to join local Food Security Councils to influence change. As the lead gardener explained:

GUFI (Gugulethu Urban Farmers Initiative) is a product of the lockdown we are unique in that we not just a gardening project, we realised that what attracted the majority of us is the lifestyle we are living and we realised that GUFI is a lifestyle-related movement, so our main drive is health and nutrition ... We want to make sure that the food we produce does not go out of the community and there should be enough healthy food that circulates in the community (M2/50-59).

Amidst the unfolding challenges brought about by the pandemic, a subtle yet significant transformation occurred within the city’s soup kitchens, evolving them

into Community Action Networks (CANs). These networks quietly emerged as pivotal agents of change, extending their support not only to well-resourced areas but also to those facing underprivileged circumstances, offering essential aid in the form of food relief and other vital services.

In response to this quiet call for collective action, garden 4 partnered with the Gugulethu CAN, birthing the Gugulethu Urban Farmers movement (GUFI). This grassroots initiative, while operating discreetly, forged powerful connections among township gardeners, fostering a shared commitment to enhance food security, promote nutrition, and cultivate healthier lifestyles.

By the close of 2020, this silent revolution had silently garnered the support of 30 diverse members, each dedicated to the cause of community well-being. Through carefully coordinated endeavours such as regular mutual assistance project called *iLima*, backyard and community gardeners found themselves empowered to contribute to the silent yet profound transformation of their neighbourhoods. Ensuring the sustainability of their endeavours, the movement quietly adopted innovative funding strategies, including fundraising initiatives, subtle membership fees, and unobtrusive entry contributions. These financial resources, while often unnoticed, silently fuel various programmes and activities, from the discreet recruitment of trainers to the covert attainment of broader community development objectives, quietly embodying the principles of quiet activism in action.

6.5 | Garden 5

EGP is located on public school land in Khayelitsha. According to the co-founder, the project was established to educate people in Khayelitsha on food production and sustainable livelihoods. The participant explained that “this is a training centre to inspire the people in our community to produce. Growing your own food is very radical in my own opinion because we are used to the capitalist society of supermarkets” (M4/29). According to the co-founder, people should grow food in their homes as an act of defiance and rejection of passive consumerism in the food system. The co-founder was inspired by a gardening project he observed while visiting his grandmother in the Eastern Cape and hoped a similar urban project could address issues affecting his community.

The six-member project was established in 2014 after negotiating a lease agreement with a primary school. Since its founding, the members have engaged with like-minded people beyond the township’s borders, even in other countries like Italy and Tanzania. The garden promotes its objectives by hosting workshops and events about food politics. It also partners with several food networks such as Slow Food Youth

Network, a global food activist network. The garden pushes to establish food gardens across the city, with one gardener organising a food garden at a local university to expand tertiary students' ideas on food rights. There are limitations to gardening on school land, but it ultimately is a means to an end through which they can promote the activity and what it symbolises to the immediate community. They use the garden to disseminate information and plug into several social movements at various levels. As the co-founder explained:

For people to start such projects, we still utilise the land at school and which is also state land. The land question is central but we are part of the food sovereignty social movement and challenging the land issues so we organise and we do picket lines, workshops and awareness activities. (M4/29)

Mobilisation and lesson sharing were crucial components of their activism, as they learned from other social movements in and beyond the Western Cape. Nonetheless, the co-founder understood that activism was a slow process:

Change will not materialise immediately, but we have had several young people who have come forward to learn the skills ... you can go and visit them, you will see they still have gardens. To me, those are small, but they are milestones, social ills cannot be transformed in a day. (M4/29)

7 | DISCUSSION

Building on the understanding that several small and mundane activities can serve as quiet agents of change (Askins, 2014; Hughes, 2020; Martin et al., 2007; Pottinger, 2017), it becomes evident that urban community gardens in Cape Town are intricately linked to broader global movements advocating for ecologically sustainable and locally sourced food. In acknowledging the inherent limitations of neoliberalism and the injustices perpetuated by corporate dominance within the food system, these community gardens emerge as quiet beacons of resistance. As such, urban gardening transcends mere cultivation practices; it embodies a silent yet potent form of activism aimed at challenging and subverting the prevailing structures of food injustice.

Community gardens in the Cape Flats actively addressed food sovereignty concerns with visions outlined by global social movements for ecologically friendly and healthy local food consumption. They recognised the limitations of the corporate food system

that promotes food deprivation and scarcity, and they were driven by the insight that food injustice stems from the corporate-dominated food system (Paganini, Ben-Zeev, et al., 2021). Therefore, urban gardening is perceived as a form of resistance against this food injustice.

The paucity of nutritious options in supermarkets exacerbates an unequal spatial distribution of infrastructure, leading to inadequate diets and health problems in low-income areas (Battersby & Peyton, 2014). This scenario mirrors a nutritional transition in Cape Town, whereby the food system excludes marginalised communities from nourishing choices, giving rise to low-income neighbourhoods that are characterised by unhealthy food offerings. In this context and within these food scapes, the community gardens emerge as vital havens that provide healthier food alternatives. The struggle against the food system is on two fronts that aim to bolster access to nutritious food and to challenge its commodification. These community gardens are educational and mobilisation centres, and in addressing the inadequacies of the corporate-driven model, their gardeners pursue food sovereignty and embody the values advocated by global social movements such as the LCA. This recognition underscores the importance of community gardens as agents of change, contributing to a broader movement that seeks to transform the way food is produced, distributed, and consumed in ways that prioritise health, equity, and ecological sustainability.

In the Cape Flats, community gardens counter the food system by growing fresh, organic produce used by the gardeners and their local communities. While they do not guarantee food security, the gardens offer healthier nutrition options than calorie-dense foods. Gardeners sell their produce at reduced prices and supply schools thereby improving access to nutritious and fresh vegetables. Community gardens thus play a critical role in providing school children with healthy food that would otherwise be sourced from alternative markets or not provided at all. In the past, gardeners often directed their produce to wealthier neighbourhoods, reinforcing food system inequalities (Paganini & Lemke, 2020; Paganini & Stöber, 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a shift to promoting local consumption, and that may have fostered the growth of more sustainable local markets (Kanosvamaha, 2023a). During the pandemic, most community gardeners struggled to sell produce in their regular markets in wealthier areas because of closures, compelling them to focus on local promotion (Kanosvamaha, 2023a). This shift helped to establish beneficial local markets with fewer transport costs and provide healthy produce for the community (Paganini, Adams, et al., 2021, p. 129).

Despite the overall context of national food security in South Africa, localised food insecurity persists. In Cape Town, the corporate food system has excluded

low-income groups. Scholars increasingly advocate for food decommodification to counter the capitalist system (Tornaghi, 2017; Wilson, 2013). This advocacy for food decommodification is particularly important in the city, where food security hinges on access rather than availability (Kroll, 2016). Community food gardens offer a practical example; they grow vegetables to replace produce bought from supermarkets, yielding direct cost savings. Gardeners often cultivate crops for communal good rather than profit, sometimes attaching no monetary value to their produce but instead sharing it with vulnerable community members like the elderly, homeless, and orphans.

Decommodification bridges the gaps created by a system where income is a prerequisite for accessing essentials like food. It is a significant alternative given the ongoing impact of commodity price fluctuations on food access (Ben-Abdallah et al., 2021; Wilson, 2013). Community gardens that share produce with vulnerable members exemplify a more equitable resource distribution. For Wilson (2013), community food gardens are an autonomous food access alternative that ensures safe, free access in contrast to the capitalist model. While critics contend that small-scale gardening does not drive systemic change, Cape Flats gardeners use gardening to counter the neoliberal food system within their limited space and financial means.

Community food gardeners acquire diverse skills and engage in food-related movements (Staehele, 2008). These gardens provide knowledge about food, the intricate food system, and social inequalities, which gardeners then share with peers and activist groups. Engagement with groups such as SAFSC and Slow Food Movement increases awareness of food rights and systemic challenges. While some gardeners do not identify as activists, their cultivation constitutes a form of quiet activism against the neoliberal food system. It gives them control over their food choices and fosters a sense of active citizenship. This consciousness extends beyond individual gardens to permeate the broader community (Pottinger, 2017).

Some community gardens identified in this research actively participate in social movements to advocate for food sovereignty beyond their own vegetable cultivation. They promote accessible, ecological food and promote education about essential food preparation skills and behaviours. The gardens often operate on school land, which extends their educational opportunities and allows them to contribute to school feeding programmes. Gardening transforms perceptions of the food system, emphasising not just resources or space but the act of nurturing vegetables and gardens *per se*. Community gardens expand consciousness and establish networks of knowledgeable home gardeners to stand against the neoliberal system. They ultimately aim to make every citizen an active participant in the food system (McClintock, 2014; Siebert, 2020).

Urban community gardening enhances citizens' political efficacy and promotes transformative participation—including in policy domains (Levkoe, 2014). Networks such as GUFU and WCUFU bring gardeners together (Kanosvamhira, 2023b) to bolster their policy influence. In Cape Town, these networks address corporate food system deficiencies by engaging stakeholders to counter shortcomings. Participation in food forums empowers gardeners to drive local changes in line with the National Food and Nutrition Security Plan (2017–2022) (see also Wekerle, 2004). These networks can address gardener challenges and induce systemic food system changes alongside stakeholders like local government, academics, and civil society (Paganini, Adams, et al., 2021).

However, while gardens and gardeners contribute to the quiet food sovereignty principle, their diversity introduces specific challenges that could undercut their roles in activism. For instance, obstacles must be surmounted to establish a robust food sovereignty movement, and we argue that gardeners should unify divergent interpretations of food sovereignty and security and reduce social fragmentation to improve mobilisation and collaboration (Kanosvamhira, 2019). This outcome can be achieved through engaging in regular community workshops and dialogues to foster shared understanding and collective action among urban gardeners, ensuring that they work towards common goals and strategies. Establishing collaborations is vital for promoting food sovereignty in urban settings (García-Sempere et al., 2018). It is too early to tell if the GUFU and the WCUFU communicate and engage with one another effectively to overcome fragmentation. However, it is clear that urban community gardeners must establish connections that leverage their commonalities to enhance mobilisation efforts. Despite differences in approaches, aims, and objectives, there is always room for collaboration and partnerships (Kanosvamhira, 2019; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2014), which are all vital in increasing the scale and impact of their activities.

It becomes apparent that urban community gardens in Cape Town are not merely spaces for cultivation but serve as dynamic agents of change within the broader context of food sovereignty activism. By recognising the limitations of the corporate food system, these gardens emerge as sites of quiet resistance against food injustice, echoing James Scott's (1985) concept of "weapons of the weak." They embody modest yet powerful tactics that challenge prevailing structures through everyday actions such as growing food, sharing produce, and promoting local consumption. Drawing from Scott's concept, these community gardens actively address concerns outlined by global social movements advocating for ecologically friendly and locally sourced food consumption. The shift towards promoting local consumption amid the COVID-19 pandemic signifies a pivotal moment in fostering sustainable local markets and challenging existing food system inequalities. This

shift exemplifies how quiet activism, grounded in small, routine engagements, can contribute to broader transformative efforts in reshaping the food landscape and advancing food sovereignty agendas. In revisiting Scott's ideas, these gardens exemplify the potency of everyday actions in subverting dominant systems and fostering alternative practices that prioritise community well-being and ecological sustainability. They demonstrate that even seemingly modest activities within community gardens can constitute forms of resistance against corporate dominance and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of food justice and sovereignty agendas.

However, while these community gardens exemplify the principles of quiet activism in their everyday practices, their diversity introduces specific challenges that could potentially undercut their collective activism. Establishing collaborations and partnerships among urban community gardeners is essential for promoting food sovereignty and enhancing mobilisation efforts in urban settings. Yet, it is crucial to approach collectivisation with caution, as ramping up efforts and scaling operations may inadvertently disrupt or dismantle the very essence of the quiet tactical work being done. While strategic collaboration can amplify impact and promote broader change, there is a risk that increased scale and formalisation could dilute the grassroots nature and autonomy of these community initiatives.

Therefore, while fostering collaborations and networks is essential for advancing food sovereignty agendas, gardeners and activists must remain vigilant in safeguarding the integrity and effectiveness of their quiet activism. This entails careful navigation of partnerships, maintaining autonomy, and continuously reflecting on how collective efforts can enhance rather than undermine the transformative potential of community-based food initiatives.

8 | CONCLUSION

This article augments an existing literature on food activism (Pottinger, 2017; Visser et al., 2015) and, by examining urban community gardening projects in Cape Town's Cape Flats area, enhances understandings of food sovereignty movements, particularly in the global South. We contend that these projects exemplify subtle forms of quiet activism against the corporate food system, revealing the presence of food sovereignty movements in Cape Town, albeit in a somewhat fragmented manner. This internal tension underscores the complexity inherent in quiet activism, where efforts to challenge dominant systems can sometimes result in fragmented or decentralised actions that, while impactful at the local level, may lack cohesion or coordination on a broader scale. The essence of quiet activism lies in its ability to effect change through diverse, often decentralised initiatives

that resist traditional power structures. While these projects demonstrate the existence and resilience of food sovereignty movements, they also reflect the challenges of mobilising collective action in ways that maintain grassroots autonomy and diversity of approaches. This tension invites critical reflection on the nature of activism itself, highlighting the need to balance local empowerment with broader strategic goals in advancing transformative agendas within the food system.

By examining the community gardens in Cape Town, the research provides insights into how urban community gardening represents a form of political activism within the constraints of the unequal food system. It underscores the multifaceted nature of activism, beyond traditional notions of overt confrontation, and highlights the potential for quiet activism to effect meaningful change, even in the absence of overt confrontation, thus contributing to a nuanced understanding of activism in urban contexts. Further investigations across global South cities are recommended to better comprehend the roles of urban food gardens in advancing food sovereignty.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, T.P.K. The data are not publicly available as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research adheres to the highest ethical standards, ensuring the integrity and ethical treatment of all participants and data. The research methodology was reviewed and approved by the institutional ethics committee of the University of the Western Cape, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines and regulations.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Gini coefficient ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 indicating a perfectly equal country and 1 indicating a perfectly unequal country.
- ² The ANC came to power in the 1990s. They faced an already widespread international neoliberal consensus propagated by international institutions like the International Monetary Fund.
- ³ Strict compliance with the ethical certificate and covid protocols ensured that participants' anonymity, confidentiality, consent, and safety were upheld.
- ⁴ For instance, the second man gardener representative in the 50–59 age category was identified as (M2/50–59). The age ranges used for the interviews were 29– (29 years and below), 30–39 (30–39 years),

40–49 (40–49 years), 50–59 (50–59 years), and 60+ (60 years and above).

⁵ All five gardens are classified as community gardens, despite the diversity of names (e.g., “farm”) that reflect each garden’s various aims.

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