

## **Determined Women Breaking Ground in the Eastern Cape**

During a Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project field visit to the Eastern Cape from 7–10 April, a team from the Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT) and the Southern African Faith Communities Environmental Institute (SAFCEI) met many of the outstanding women driving these projects.

The communities they visited face a bleak combination of drought, land scarcity, and limited resources. Yet against these odds, women-led gardens are producing abundant, diverse food for families, schools, and local markets. Armed with little more than machetes, bottles of collected rainwater, and determination, these gardeners are turning overgrown hillsides and bare plots into thriving communal food sources. Their success is also a vindication of the RACR model: small grants, hands-on training, and trusted local partners proving that modest, well-targeted support can unlock extraordinary results.

### **The Mancu Group**



*Nontembiso Kala (left in yellow) and Asavela Ndamase (right in yellow) are among the determined leaders of the Mancu group who are clearing thick brambles on the hillside with machetes to plant a food garden after being granted this land by the tribal authorities for planting. Here they hold squash that they have grown on another plot.*

Meet Nontembiso Kala, dressed in a yellow jacket and gumboots despite the heat. Her smile blazes like the sun as she hacks away at dense brambles with only a

machete on a steep slope. Over Easter, Kala and four other female gardeners started clearing this remote hillside, about an hour's drive from Port St Johns in the Eastern Cape, to plant a food garden here.

Kala's actions reflected the Mancu women's determination to grow crops for subsistence and to sell. The tribal authority granted them a plot of land just before Easter, and they lost no time clearing this thorny thicket. They want to cultivate vegetables and fruit and have applied via the RACR project for a small grant to fund a JoJo water storage tank. They need to collect rainwater to keep their crops alive in this drought-stricken area.

The RACR project was launched six years ago to advance empowerment projects like this, which help rural communities adapt to climate change, and staff visited six of them on this trip.

RACR grants flow through local development agencies such as the Port St Johns Legal Advice Centre and the Mount Frere Paralegal Advice Office. These respected community-based centres support projects with hands-on training in areas like agroecology and water conservation.



*Mount Frere Paralegal Advice Office programmes manager Fennie Kakaza (on the right) with field worker Thembisa Madikane (on the left) at their office.*

Kala and Asavela Ndamase - who receive a stipend from the government's Expanded Public Works Programme - wanted to demonstrate they have a proven track record of growing healthy produce, so they sprinted across the hills to another garden where they had already harvested vegetables.

They brought out squashes bigger than soccer balls, pockets of potatoes and more. The owner of that garden wanted her land back for cultivation when she saw their bountiful crops, and that is why they must start again. What's clear is that the RACR recipients and prospective grantees know how to garden, how to work as a team, how to work hard and have 100% commitment.

### **Thobela Go-Getters**

The Thobela Go-Getters garden is further proof of the RACR model's success. Our first stop outside Mount Frere, this communal food garden was a model of how to plant for a good yield. Many vegetables and fruit trees flourished on their gently sloping land, which had water channels and a collection point for rainwater.

Gogos Nomakaladi Kinase and Thobeka Ngubentombi proudly pointed to their crops, which feed the local primary and high schools and which they sell at the market. During our visit, they discussed mulch, composting and permaculture methods with SCAT senior programme office Vuyo Msizi.



*Nomakaladi Kinase is one of the gogos farming at the Thobela Go-Getters garden, which has a diversity of vegetables and fruit trees. They provide fresh produce to the local primary and high schools and sell their produce. To her right is Mam Thobeka Ngubentombi, who plays a driving role in the Go-Getters communal garden.*

Another communal garden in the region, protected by a scarecrow, had been damaged by heavy rains. Hundreds of cabbages were killed, though some mielies and squash had survived. The RACR project programme coordinator for Mount Frere, Yamkela Rasmeni, has encouraged them to diversify their crops even more, like Siphumlo Jijana's communal garden.

His garden was a riot of colour with aubergines, red and green peppers, tomatoes, carrots, chillis, peach and other trees and is a vivid example of how this works.

Jijana, who has a leg impairment, also raises goats and chickens, and he mentors young people who help him with the gardening.

But communal gardens run by women, like the Dangwana communal gardening project near Port St John's, are prioritised by RACR and Thembakazi Mthembu, the Port St John's advice centre paralegal, took us to them.

### **Dangwana Communal Gardening Project**



*Ntombuzuko Mdingwa (in yellow) is one of the leaders of the women's group who want to plant the Dangwana communal garden on land they have been granted as their own.*

Ntombuzuko Mdingwa is among the women applying for a grant to support the establishment of a food garden on land that has just been granted to them, at the bottom of a steep dirt road.

At our last communal garden, Elizabeth Bolani danced down the road and welcomed the RACR team with singing. Like many applicants, the women gardeners here would like funding for a JoJo tank. They need a reliable water source to keep their crops alive during a drought. They have collected rainwater in bottles to water their tomatoes and other vegetables; however, they looked parched.

The harsh conditions have sharpened the focus on the communal gardeners to produce fresh, healthy food for their families and communities - an attitude which spurs their success.



*Elizabeth Bolani welcomes the RACR team to their communal garden with singing. They are among the gardeners requesting funding for a jojo tank to keep their crops alive in conditions of drought.*



*Port St Johns Legal Advice Centre team (left to right) paralegal Thembakazi Mthembu, finance manager Nozuka Noxaka and PSJ manager Nomboniso Gaya.*

*The Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project empowers rural communities in South Africa to build resilience against climate change. By partnering with community-based organisations and faith leaders, RACR enhances the social, economic, and environmental well-being of rural populations, particularly in the Eastern, Western, Limpopo, Free State and Northern Cape provinces. The project is funded by the Embassy of Ireland.*