






# Urban farming produces more than food: social networks are a key spinoff

February 9, 2017 10:12am EST



Building social networks is one of the greatest benefits of urban agriculture. Author supplied

-  Email
-  Twitter 109
-  Facebook 713
-  LinkedIn
-  Print

Urban agriculture, the cultivation of crops and animals in an urban environment, is known to increase access to [healthy food](#). It is particularly important for poorer people in cities where food is mainly accessed through cash purchases. Healthy fresh fruit and vegetables are more expensive per kilogram than many of the processed foods. But these are low in fibre and high in artificial flavouring.

In many African cities, urban agriculture is one of the [main ways](#) that fresh produce is supplied to local markets. For example in Dakar, Kinshasa and Accra almost all the leafy greens you can buy are grown in the city itself.

While urban agriculture in Cape Town, South Africa, might not play as significant a role in the city's food system overall, the [6,000 urban farmers](#) who are growing their own food and selling surplus on Cape Town's Cape Flats find it an irreplaceable part of their livelihoods.

For such farmers, it is well-known that growing their own food helps them diversify their family's diet, and selling surplus provides additional income. But our research shows you don't have to farm at a large scale to reap significant benefits.

By talking to the farmers we found that even having a small backyard food garden puts you in touch with neighbours, NGOs and local government, which in turn creates a wealth of spin-off benefits.

Our [research](#) shows that building social networks is one of the greatest

Author



**David W. Olivier**  
Postdoctoral Research Fellow,  
Global Change Institute,  
University of the Witwatersrand

Disclosure statement

David Olivier is a researcher part of the Africa Climate Change Adaptation Initiative (ACCAI) programme entitled "Co-producing knowledge on food systems for development in Africa" which is funded by the Open Society Foundation, via the Global Change and Sustainability Research Institute. Empirical findings are based on research funded by the National Research Foundation.

Partners



UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND JOHANNESBURG

University of the Witwatersrand provides support as a hosting partner of The Conversation AFRICA.

[View all partners](#)

[Republish this article](#)



Republish our articles for free, online or in print, under Creative Commons license.

benefits of urban agriculture in poor areas. This research was conducted on the Cape Flats, a vast residential area of mainly low-cost council housing and shacks.

As a legacy of apartheid-era racial segregation, the Cape Flats has high unemployment rates, limited access to amenities and prevalent crime. In such an environment, fear and mistrust [curtail positive social interactions](#), while economic hardship limits access to [adequate healthy food](#).

In this context, the real value of urban agriculture is not only in generating income for the economically marginalised, but it is found in expanding social networks. These networks help farmers draw on emotional and practical support during tough times.

The [research](#) involved interviews with 59 farmers throughout the Cape Flats, from home gardeners to larger commercial farming groups.



Urban farmers were not trying to maximise their profits, but were actually forming strong social networks by working together to plant gardens. Flickr/Gemma Pilcher

## New findings

Most studies have been focused on the [economics](#) of urban agriculture. Only a couple of case studies done in Cape Town and Nairobi indicated that the benefits to urban farming were [far more nuanced](#).

By asking more qualitative questions, these studies revealed something startling. Urban farmers were not trying to maximise their profits, but were actually forming strong social networks by working together to plant gardens.

Inspired by these findings, we decided to see if the same applied on the Cape Flats. The research took me on walks from house to house in areas such as Khayelitsha, Lavender Hill, Vrygrond and Mfuleni – some of Cape Town's most resource-constrained areas. The farmers interviewed increasingly confirmed that urban agriculture creates valuable social networks.

Our findings show that social networking occurs on three levels. These are:

1. creating friendships between neighbours;
2. broadening networks of acquaintance with other farmers; and
3. improving access to influential contacts in government, civil society and the market.

This means that urban farmers not only develop the kinds of friendships they can draw on during tough times. But they also develop broader networks with other farmers, with NGOs, with government and with local markets that allow them to build a career.

These new findings show that by focusing on income generation alone,

much of the existing research underestimated urban agriculture's potential for building sustainable livelihoods in poorer areas. The findings prove that even at a small scale, urban agriculture contributes to building social networks that provide much-needed practical and emotional support.

Based on our findings, we believe it is crucial for development practitioners to understand urban agriculture holistically, rather than focusing disproportionately on outputs or profit margins. Improved collaboration between NGOs and local government is also highly recommended to help benefit these farmers.

There are excellent examples of urban agriculture on the Cape Flats, and much potential still exists for this sector to expand sustainable livelihoods and improve quality of life, with the right support.

[Agriculture](#) [Farming](#) [Urban farming](#) [Urban agriculture](#) [Cape Town](#) [Cape Flats](#) [RandD](#)

[Tweet](#) [Share](#) [Get newsletter](#)

#### You might also like

**How urban farmers are learning to grow food without soil or natural light**

**Why tackling sexual violence is key to South Africa's decolonisation project**

**Fixing cities' water crises could send our climate targets down the gurgler**

**Governments can't be trusted to deliver welfare standards for chickens**

#### 4 Comments

[Oldest](#) [Newest](#)

[Sign in to comment](#)

[Show all comments](#)

#### Most popular on The Conversation

A Danish word the world needs to combat stress: Pyt

5 ways life would be better if it were always daylight saving time

America's schools are crumbling – what will it take to fix them?

Kashmir conflict is not just a border dispute between India and Pakistan

Mining the Moon

Food is medicine: How US policy is shifting toward nutrition for better health

How SpaceX lowered costs and reduced barriers to space

Why your brain never runs out of problems to find

How electric cars could make America's crumbling roads even worse

#### Expert Database

Find experts with knowledge in:\*

[Search](#)



#### Want to write?

Write an article and join a growing community of more than 80,700 academics and researchers from 2,759 institutions.

[Register now](#)

#### THE CONVERSATION

Community

[Community standards](#)

[Republishing guidelines](#)

[Friends of The Conversation](#)

[Research and Expert Database](#)

[Analytics](#)

[Our feeds](#)

[Donate](#)

Company

[Who we are](#)

[Our charter](#)

[Our team](#)

[Partners and funders](#)

[Resource for media](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Work with us](#)

[En Español](#)

Stay informed and subscribe to our free daily newsletter and get the latest analysis and commentary directly in your inbox.

[Subscribe](#)

Follow us on social media



