The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at:
https://www.emerald.com/insight/1443-9883.htm

Qualitative Research Journal

261

Roots of resilience: a qualitative exploration of youth driven community food gardens in Cape Town, South Africa

Tinashe P. Kanosvamhira
African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa and Department of Geography, Environmental Studies and Tourism, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa

Received 14 May 2024
Revised 23 August 2024
21 October 2024
Accepted 11 November 2024

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the dynamics of youth engagement in urban agriculture, particularly through youth gardens in distressed neighbourhoods of Cape Town. This examination is crucial due to the limited involvement of youth in urban agriculture, which poses a threat to the sustainability of these practices despite their recognised contributions to urban development.

Design/methodology/approach – The research employs a qualitative methodology to explore the motivations, challenges and experiences of young urban farmers. Semi-structured interviews with youth participants from selected urban community gardens, complemented by virtual ethnography, form the core of the data collection process. This approach provides an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing youth participation in urban farming.

Findings – The study reveals that youth engagement in urban agriculture is motivated by various factors, including entrepreneurial aspirations, environmental justice activism, and a dedication to food justice. These findings suggest that for urban agriculture initiatives to be effective in such settings, they must acknowledge and address the specific motivations and contextual challenges faced by young people.

Research limitations/implications – The study's findings are context-specific to the distressed neighbourhoods of Cape Town, which may limit their generalisability to other urban settings. Future research could expand the scope to include a comparative analysis with other cities.

Practical implications – The insights gained from this study can inform the design of urban agriculture initiatives that better engage youth, thereby fostering community development and sustainable urban practices.

Originality/value – This research offers novel insights into the underexplored area of youth engagement in urban agriculture within distressed urban environments. By focusing on the voices and experiences of young urban farmers in Cape Town, the study contributes to the development of targeted policies and programmes that aim to promote inclusive and sustainable urban agriculture practices, particularly by enhancing youth involvement.

Keywords Youth, Gardening, Cape Town, Qualitative, Urban agriculture

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Urban agriculture refers to the cultivation of plants and the raising of animals for food and other purposes, conducted within and around cities and towns (DeMarsh, 2022). The activity is recognised as a crucial intervention for enhancing food insecurity and advancing sustainable

© Tinashe P. Kanosvamhira. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/legalcode

Declaration of conflicting interests: The Author(s) declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Erratum: It has come to the attention of the publisher that the article, Kanosvamhira, T.P. (2024), "Roots of resilience: a qualitative exploration of youth driven community food gardens in Cape Town, South Africa", *Qualitative Research Journal*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-05-2024-0108, was published without Tinashe P. Kanosvamhira ORCID ID included. This has now been corrected in the online version of the paper. The publisher sincerely apologises for this error and for any inconvenience caused.

Qualitative Research Journal
Vol. 26 No. 2, 2026
pp. 261-274
Emerald Publishing Limited
1443-9883
DOI 10.1108/QRJ-05-2024-0108

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

livelihoods, particularly in urban areas marked by socio-economic disparities (Cilliers *et al*., 2020; Hallett *et al*., 2016). However, the literature has over the years began to explore the significance of urban agriculture, its immediate benefits, and the youthful population (Tiraieyari and Krauss, 2018; DeMarsh, 2022). Young people are pivotal in addressing the opportunities, challenges, and crises confronting African cities. With 70% of sub-Saharan Africa's population under the age of 30, urban youth are poised to significantly influence development outcomes across African cities in the forthcoming decades (Banks *et al*., 2022). Therefore, in terms of urban agriculture and its associated benefits for sustainable cities (Anzure *et al*., 2019), this activity could potentially offer opportunities for the youth in urban areas.

The literature indicates that urban agriculture serves as an educational platform, empowering young individuals to contribute meaningfully to society while fostering democratic decision-making and community action (Russn and Gaus, 2021). Moreover, urban agriculture can improve the mental well-being of the youth (Lam *et al*., 2019). This underscores the potential of urban agriculture not only in enhancing food security and promoting sustainability but also in engaging and empowering the youth to play active roles in shaping the future of their cities. The realisation of this potential hinges on the involvement of youth in urban agriculture initiatives. Both present and future generations of the youthful population must be motivated to engage in urban agriculture for it to achieve the above-stated objectives. Despite the benefits of urban agriculture for the youth, there remains a notable deficiency in youth engagement in such activities globally (Tiraieyari and Krauss, 2018; Othman *et al*., 2019), including countries like South Africa (Thornton, 2008).

Research conducted in South Africa highlights a notable trend wherein the participants engaged in urban agriculture predominantly belong to the elderly demographic, typically of pension age (see Paganini *et al*., 2018; Olivier and Heinecken, 2017). This underscores a concerning pattern indicating insufficient youth involvement in urban agriculture, despite its recognised multifunctionality and positive impacts on sustainable urban development (Russn and Gaus, 2021; Anzure *et al*., 2019). This demographic imbalance raises uncertainties about the future sustainability of urban agriculture initiatives in South Africa, emphasising the need for strategies to encourage and integrate younger generations into this critical aspect of urban development and food security efforts. Furthermore, in the South African context, there exists a gap in understanding the extent and nature of youth participation in urban agriculture initiatives. Existing studies predominantly focus on broader community impacts and sustainability aspects, often overlooking the unique perspectives and contributions of youth participants. This gap is largely attributed to the predominance of elderly individuals engaging in urban agriculture activities (Paganini *et al*., 2018), resulting in a limited comprehension of the role of youth in these initiatives. Understanding and addressing this gap is imperative for fostering inclusive urban agriculture practices that harness the potential of youth for community development and resilience.

This research aims to bridge the existing gap by investigating how youth engagement in urban agriculture contributes to empowerment, skill development, and community resilience. Specifically, it will examine two youth-led urban agriculture initiatives in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, to understand how social relationships, networks, and community connections facilitate or hinder the development and sustainability of these initiatives. Khayelitsha represents a microcosm of the socio-economic disparities prevalent in Cape Town, characterised by high unemployment rates, food insecurity, and extensive informal settlements (Reuther and Dewar, 2006; Paganini *et al*., 2021). In response to these challenges, urban agriculture initiatives have emerged as one of the multiple strategies to tackle food-related issues and enhance community well-being.

By delving into the experiences and perspectives of youth engaged in urban agriculture in Khayelitsha, this study uncovers the mechanisms through which these initiatives empower young individuals, facilitate skill acquisition, and contribute to community resilience. The research sheds light on the role of youth-led urban agriculture in fostering social cohesion, addressing food insecurity, and promoting sustainable development within marginalised urban settings. Through this investigation, the research informs policy and practice aimed at

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

maximising the potential of urban agriculture to empower youth and promote inclusive and resilient communities.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the conceptual underpinnings of the research are explored in Section 2 by looking at the social capital theory and how this presents an important lens to examine the topic. The materials and methods section (Section 3) explores the context of the study location relevant to urban agriculture activities and then focuses on the methodological influences used to achieve the aim of the study. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings in relation to the literature in the region and beyond. Finally, the research concludes by providing recommendations for further research.

2. Theoretical lens

In this research, I draw from the social capital theory as conceptualised by Putnam. The social capital theory is particularly suitable as it provides a framework for understanding how social networks and relationships among youth in urban agriculture influence their ability to access resources, foster collaboration, and build community resilience. The literature indicates that social networks play a crucial role in the implementation and maintenance of urban agriculture practices (Artmann and Sartison, 2018). As a result, the nature of these relationships can either facilitate or hinder the mobilisation of targeted actions (Glover *et al*., 2005; Artmann and Sartison, 2018).

Social capital, as defined by Martin *et al*. (2000), refers to the social relationships that involve individuals and communities, encompassing networks, group affiliations, and degrees of trust and reciprocity. The level of social capital a person has is influenced by the extent of their network and the amount of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital held by the individuals within that network. Putnam (2000) identifies three distinct forms of social capital—bonding, bridging, and linking, each playing a pivotal role in shaping the resources and opportunities available to urban farmers, particularly in the context of urban agriculture.

Bonding social capital refers to the horizontal connections within homogenous groups, typically characterised by close-knit relationships among individuals who share common characteristics, such as family, ethnicity, or locality. These bonds foster a sense of mutual support and solidarity, enabling individuals within the group to share resources, skills, and information. In the context of urban agriculture, bonding capital is crucial for the creation and maintenance of tightly organised community gardens or local farming cooperatives. Such strong in-group ties help build trust, which facilitates cooperation and resource-sharing among members.

Bridging social capital, on the other hand, facilitates connections between individuals or groups that are more socially distant, typically linking people across different social, cultural, or economic divides. This form of capital enables urban farmers to access resources, knowledge, and opportunities beyond their immediate community. Bridging social capital brings together diverse actors—such as individuals from different neighbourhoods, professionals from varying sectors, or even international organisations—thereby expanding the reach of urban farmers. In urban agriculture, this could mean connecting farmers with experts in sustainable farming techniques, researchers, or external markets, enhancing the transfer of innovative practices and knowledge. According to Olivier and Heinecken (2017), bridging capital is particularly effective in disseminating information, especially when addressing complex issues such as climate-resilient farming or food sovereignty. By forging broader networks, bridging capital promotes adaptability and collective problem-solving, often leading to the mobilisation of external resources and partnerships.

Linking social capital represents the vertical connections between individuals or groups across formal power structures, such as relationships between community members and governmental bodies, NGOs, or financial institutions. Unlike bonding and bridging, which focus on peer-to-peer networks, linking social capital facilitates access to resources controlled by higher-level authorities or institutions. For urban farmers, linking social capital can be critical in securing formal support, such as land tenure, funding for agricultural projects, or

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

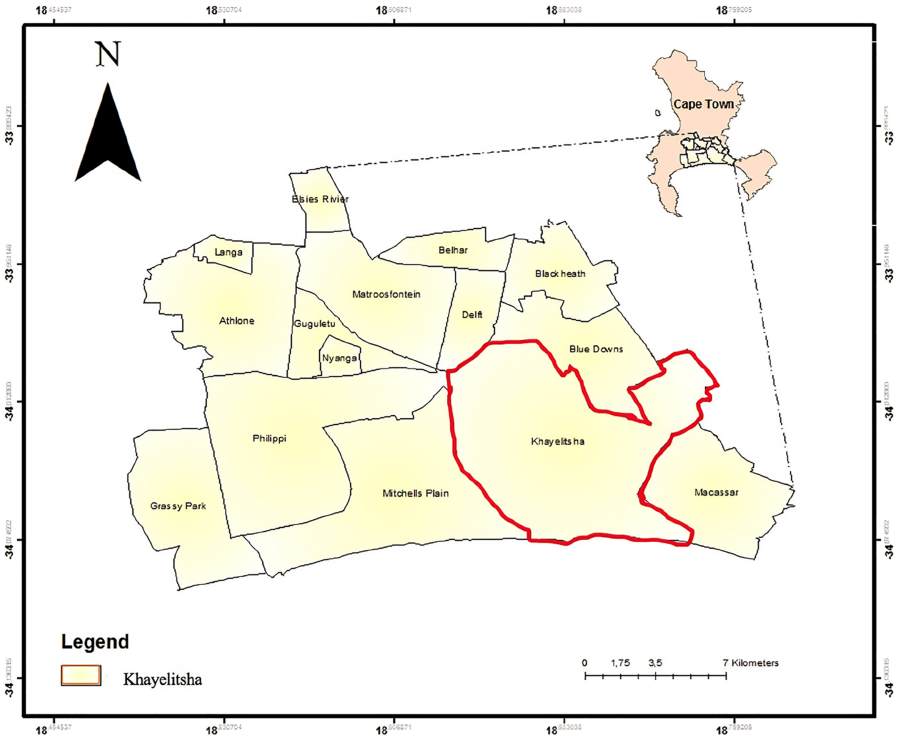
access to policy advocacy. Putnam (2000) emphasises that linking social capital is essential for marginalised or resource-constrained communities to engage with formal structures of power, enabling them to leverage resources that are otherwise unavailable locally. In urban agriculture, strong linking capital can help urban farmers navigate regulatory frameworks, secure agricultural grants, or influence urban planning policies to support sustainable food systems.

Putnam's social capital theory offers a valuable framework for understanding youth engagement in urban agriculture by highlighting the importance of social networks and relationships. Through the concepts of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, the theory reveals how young people in distressed neighbourhoods, such as Khayelitsha, leverage these connections to navigate challenges and maximise the benefits of urban farming. It enables a nuanced analysis of how these social ties contribute to community development, empowerment, and overcoming barriers to youth participation, providing crucial insights for designing effective, sustainable urban agriculture policies and programmes.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Study area

The term "Cape Flats" denotes a flat and sandy expanse located on the periphery of Cape Town's central business district. According to De Swardt *et al*. (2005), it serves as a geographical boundary, separating the affluent northern and southern suburbs of the city. Within the Cape Flats are numerous townships such as Langa, Mitchells Plain, Gugulethu and Khayelitsha (new home) that were established during the apartheid era and continue to exist today (see Figure 1). The population of the area is predominantly composed of Coloured



Source(s): Author's own work

Figure 1. Location of Khayelitsha

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

(59%) and Black [1] (34%) racial groups. Historically, the region experienced limited housing development due to its unfavourable soil composition; however, this has gone unchanged post-apartheid. The landscape is characterised by sparsely vegetated dunes, often subjected to strong south-easterly winds during the summer and occasional winter flooding (Lukas-Sithole, 2020). The townships in this area are marked by inadequate social and recreational amenities, limited commercial and industrial centres compared to wealthier areas, and significant challenges related to food security, community development, and environmental sustainability (Paganini *et al*., 2021).

Khayelitsha, one of the townships located in this area epitomises stark socio-economic disparities prevalent in the city, characterised by high unemployment rates, high levels of food insecurity and a significant proportion of households residing in informal dwellings (Reuther and Dewar, 2006; Paganini *et al*., 2021). A recent study indicated that a total of 55% of the residents sampled in Khayelitsha were food insecure (Paganini *et al*., 2021). The literature indicates that dietary habits and obesity in Khayelitsha are influenced by the affordability of healthy food (Dinbabo *et al*., 2017). The study revealed that healthy food tends to be more expensive, making it unaffordable for many individuals in these areas. Despite having knowledge about nutritious food choices, people often struggle to access or afford these options, as noted by the same source. The health sub-district in Khayelitsha exhibits alarming health indicators, particularly notable for elevated mortality rates due to non-communicable diseases compared to the broader Cape Town region (Smit *et al*., 2016). All these issues were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns (Battersby, 2020).

The historical backdrop of Khayelitsha's segregated development traces back to the early 20th century, reflecting successive relocations of black Africans to increasingly distant and isolated townships, culminating in the establishment of Khayelitsha in 1983 as a remote residential enclave with limited access to essential services and employment opportunities. Despite post-apartheid urban renewal efforts, Khayelitsha remains characterised by a mix of formal and informal housing, reflecting enduring socio-economic marginalisation amidst broader city-level transformations reinforcing spatial and economic divisions (Smit *et al*., 2016).

In response to high levels of food insecurity, civil society actors, local and provincial government have promoted urban agriculture in Khayelitsha and the Cape Flats region more generally (Battersby and Marshak, 2013). Supporting actors have in the past assisted with farmer training, subsidised inputs, monitored production, and facilitated the sale of produce (Kanosvamhira, 2019). Approximately 3,000 backyard gardeners cultivate vegetables on plots measuring only a few square metres each, while about 80 small-scale food gardens range from 100 square metres to 1 hectare in size (Paganini *et al*., 2018).

3.2 Research design

Historically, social scientists have embraced a comprehensive approach to studying food and nutrition, emphasising the interconnectedness of various components within the food system through methods such as historical analysis, direct observation, and documentary research within communities (Jagganath, 2021). Unlike traditional qualitative methods involving participant observation and face-to-face interviews, this study was conducted during the first and second waves of COVID-19 lockdowns in Cape Town, South Africa. Consequently, the research methods employed reflect a blend of these approaches, adapting to the fluctuating lockdown conditions.

This research is based on qualitative research conducted between 2020 and 2021, focussing on two youth-driven gardens in the township of Khayelitsha (Table 1). The gardeners were all between the ages of 20 and 28 years old. The selection of these gardens involved purposive and network sampling, initially facilitated by a non-state organisation called Abalimi Bezekhaya (AB) (planters of the home) that works on the Cape Flats area to empower individuals and

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

Table 1. Basic profile of the gardens

Garden	Date established	Aims	Land occupied	Male participants	Female participants	Garden size (m^2)	Leadership style
Garden 1	2020	Entrepreneurial and promote environmental management in the township	ECD Land	2	0	350	Informal
Garden 2	2014	Promote food justice	Primary school land	5	1	300	Informal

Source(s): Author's own work

groups from the local community to participate in urban agriculture activities. AB, established in 1980, aims to support small-scale urban farmers on their journey without owning farms of their own [2]. AB provides training, support, access to seeds, seedlings, and manure, as well as market access to a range of independent community gardens in their areas of operation. AB operates two hubs, with one located in Khayelitsha. These centres are community-based and managed by fieldworkers from the community, ensuring accessibility for grassroots communities. As a result of their track record and presence, this organisation was used as an entry point into the community.

The study employed semi-structured interviews with representatives from the two urban community gardens. The interviews were conducted on-site and by telephone, lasting 45–70 min, to explore each gardener's history, challenges, motivations, and community engagements. For one garden, telephonic interviews were utilised due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions in South Africa, necessitating alternative communication methods. Follow-up phone interviews were also conducted, with consent obtained and interviews recorded using a phone recorder. These semi-structured interviews revealed insights into the motivations, practices, and ideologies underlying the food gardens, and transcripts were systematically analysed to identify emerging themes.

In addition to the primary methods of data collection, a multi-sited virtual ethnography was employed, recognising the growing significance of virtual spaces in human life (Crichton and Kinash, 2003). This was particularly a useful method of research during the pandemic when various lock-down regulations restricted movement of researchers (Jagganath, 2021). This approach involved an in-depth exploration of various gardens online and attending food related engagements across different virtual platforms. Desktop research was conducted to gather additional information about garden activities on social media, alongside media reports and other online platforms. The researcher actively participated in webinars hosted by local and international food security organisations, such as the Food Dialogues: Cape Town 2021 virtual event held in October 2021, providing important contextualisation for the research. This information proved valuable for corroborating data collected through primary data collection tools.

The results from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Terry, 2017). After transcribing the data into textual format, the process involved reviewing the data for overarching themes. The next step involved coding the themes in line with the research aims, using a reflexivity diary to track analytical processes. Analysing for themes entails identifying patterns within codes, which may lead to the identification of subthemes reflecting significant aspects of the data. Subsequently, themes are critically evaluated to ensure they accurately represent the data and align with research objectives, refining them as necessary to enhance specificity and relevance. Finally, themes are finalised and described in detail, ensuring they

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

are well-aligned with the research aim, thereby concluding the thematic analysis process. The results were presented according to these themes, which are detailed in the findings and discussion section. Direct quotes from participants were also included to supplement and enrich the thematic analysis findings.

Ethical clearance for the data collection process was obtained from the University of the Western Cape (Reference Number: HS19/9/2) before commencement. Constant reflexivity enhanced the study's authenticity, allowing for a nuanced interpretation considering the socio-cultural context of urban community food gardens in Cape Town. The study ensured anonymity of garden members and anonymised identities of gardener representatives using a designated code for interviewees' number, sex, and age.

4. Findings and discussion

The literature suggests that urban agriculture attracts only a small proportion of young individuals (Tiraieyari and Hamzah, 2015; Tiraieyari and Krauss, 2018; Othman *et al*., 2019). Limited youth engagement threatens the sustainability of urban agriculture, jeopardising both its future continuity and its role in fostering sustainable cities. This research explored youth-led urban agriculture initiatives in Khayelitsha, examining how social relationships, networks, and community connections influence the development and sustainability of these efforts. This section presents findings and discussions from semi-structured interviews and desktop research focussing on the identified urban gardens. The themes identified encompass *youth empowerment and skill development through transformative agricultural platforms*, *community development*, and *social resilience fostered by active engagement and partnerships*, *highlighting the crucial role of education and collaboration for sustainable urban agriculture, and innovative strategies employed to overcome challenges in urban farming landscapes*.

The findings from this study illuminate the transformative impact of youth engagement in urban gardening, exemplified by the operations and motivations of Gardens 1 and 2 in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. These youth-led initiatives extend beyond simply cultivating vegetables; they foster empowerment, community resilience, and sustainable practices within underserved urban areas. Furthermore, a significant theme emerging from the study underscores the link between urban agriculture, youth empowerment and skills development. Gardens 1 and 2 serve as pivotal platforms for empowering young individuals and nurturing their skills, challenging conventional perceptions of agriculture among the youth.

The two gardens have strategically leveraged social capital of bonding, bridging and linking (Putnam, 2000) to establish community gardens within their respective communities. For example, the co-founder of Garden 1 drew on bonding social capital, connections within his friend's family to secure access to land at an early childhood development centre. This network illustrates how strong local ties within a homogenous group can unlock resources and opportunities for urban agriculture. Garden 1's mission of generating income and producing quality crops reflects a proactive approach to overcoming economic challenges, while simultaneously nurturing agricultural skills and collective empowerment. Through this initiative, bonding capital plays a crucial role in enhancing both individual and community-level benefits.

For Garden 1, the importance of mastering small-scale operations before scaling up illustrates the willingness of the youth to cultivate their skills. This approach not only develops practical skills but also instils a sense of responsibility and entrepreneurial spirit among participants, which is essential for long-term engagement and success. The founder's sentiment, "*Why should I wait for the government to do something for me? Why not utilise what I have and take action?*", underscores a proactive mindset towards self-initiated change and highlights the influence of subjective norms in shaping intentions and behaviours.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

The garden operates approximately 30 beds, cultivating vegetables for the market and donating 30% of the produce to the community centre. This dual focus on addressing food security issues while creating economic opportunities and promoting environmental conservation reflects a positive commitment to sustainable practices. The garden's success illustrates how bonding social capital, through the effective use of local networks and strong community engagement, contributes to the resilience and sustainability of urban agriculture initiatives (Caldas and Christopoulos, 2023). Bonding capital, by strengthening relationships within a close-knit group, enhances resource-sharing and cooperation, which are crucial for such initiatives to thrive. The literature further supports the role of urban agriculture as a significant source of youth employment, offering a sustainable solution to food production in response to increasing urban populations (Padgham *et al*., 2015). With appropriate investment and support, youth-led initiatives like Gardens 1 can continue to play a pivotal role in fostering youth empowerment, skills development, and sustainable urban development, demonstrating the vital function of bonding capital in driving these outcomes.

The community impact of Gardens 1 and 2 extends well beyond food production, contributing significantly to broader themes of community development and social resilience. These gardens are using their social skills to actively engage with local residents, addressing food-related issues, promoting economic opportunities, and conserving the environment. For instance, Garden 1 donates 30% of its produce to the nearby Early Childhood Development Centre, and Garden 2 follows a similar pattern. The co-founder of Garden 1 highlighted the importance of this action, citing the prevalent food and nutrition insecurity in the township, underscoring the need to initiate change at the local level before aiming for broader impact. The donation of produce to local centres exemplifies how these initiatives bridge gaps and foster community cohesion. By participating in these activities, the youth perceive themselves as capable of making tangible contributions to their community, which bolsters their intentions to engage in further community-oriented actions.

In addition to feeding the local community, a key goal of these gardens is to address food injustice. Previous research has highlighted how a significant portion of vegetables produced in the area often ends up in wealthier neighbourhoods, neglecting the food and nutrition needs of the Cape Flats, which experiences significant food insecurity (Paganini and Lemke, 2020; Kanosvamhira, 2024). Moreover, research indicates that low-income neighbourhoods often provide greater access to food sources that promote unhealthy eating (Hilmers *et al*., 2012). Hence in the context of Khayelitsha, selling produce within the community is one strategy employed by the gardens to address this issue. By prioritising local sales, the gardens challenge the prevailing norms of food distribution and promote positive attitudes towards consumption of local food.

Currently, the gardening projects sell their produce locally and beyond Khayelitsha using both traditional and contemporary marketing methods. Garden 1 utilises bonding social capital by relying on word-of-mouth strategies to attract local customers, strengthening ties within the immediate community. At the same time, the garden leverages bridging social capital by utilising social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to reach a broader audience. This dual approach not only improves local food access but also contributes to economic sustainability and promotes healthier food options within and beyond the community. By adopting these diverse marketing strategies, the gardeners demonstrate a high degree of bonding and bridging capital. Bonding capital helps familiarise the community with their activities and build trust, while bridging capital extends their reach to more distant networks, enhancing their market presence and ensuring a solid base for their produce. This combination of social capital types plays a critical role in ensuring the long-term viability of the urban agriculture initiative.

Education emerges as a central theme in the discussion, with Gardens 1 and 2 promoting knowledge-sharing on sustainable farming practices, healthy eating habits, and environmental stewardship. By hosting workshops and engaging in advocacy efforts, these initiatives challenge conventional food systems and empower community members to take ownership of

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

their food production. Word of mouth activities, partnerships with local institutions and international networks underscore the significance of collaboration in advancing shared goals and mobilising resources for sustainable urban agriculture. For instance, Garden 2 has a more food justice inspired more of operation. Inspired by a gardening project observed during a visit to his grandmother in the Eastern Cape, the co-founder envisioned a similar initiative within an urban context to address community concerns. Previous studies have highlighted the capacity of community gardens to organise and mobilise communities, suggesting that these youth gardens serve as platforms for organising and educating around these issues (Shepard, 2012).

Moreover, the literature recognises that urban community gardens are able to generate social capital by strengthening social bonds and connections between neighbours (Glover, 2004). Therefore, the youth gardens in question leverage their social capital to organise and educate the community on several issues in the community. For instance, the co-founder of Garden 2 indicated that the project was established as an educational centre in Khayelitsha to inform people about food production and sustainable livelihoods. Since its establishment, it has been able to engage various food issues. Its members have been invited to engage with like-minded people beyond the township's borders to other countries such as Italy and Tanzania. The garden pursues various activities to promote its aims, such as hosting various workshops relating to food events about food politics. It has leveraged linking capital to establish partnerships with food networks, for example, the Slow Food [3] Youth Network, a global food activist network. The garden is also pushing to establish food gardens across the city; for example, one of the gardeners was organising to establish a food garden at a local university to extend their ideas of food politics and sustainable livelihood to the tertiary students. The members are also aware of the current limitations of gardening on school land, but this is a means to an end for them. In other words, they use the garden to disseminate information, but at the same time, the garden is plugged 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 were 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, events and we did occupation . . . for instance we took land from Citrusdal which was not occupied but you need to mobilise because you cannot do it alone (M4/29-).

For this garden, mobilisation and lesson sharing are crucial components of their activities as they believe there is a lot to learn from other social movements elsewhere beyond the Western Cape. Nonetheless, the cofounder indicated that he was not naïve to understanding that activism was a slow process.

Similarly, although Garden 1 adopted a more entrepreneurial approach, the co-founder indicated that environmental activism was close to his heart, and he made efforts to promote environmental conservation in his neighbourhood. He indicated that "*I consider myself an activist for greening the world. . .. particularly in greening Khayelitsha*". The cofounder indicates that changing or encouraging people was through actions rather than talk. This was expressed in the following sentiments:

> Farming is not only growing food and making money it is also about the environment, the land and soils, the air and you as a person, I consider myself as an activist through action in greening the world. I can give you a lot of detail and convince you that green is the way to go and the only way to green Khayelitsha but I start little by little because now I want to collect their kitchen scraps, waste as well I need to find at least 50 drums and place at different houses and they dispose there and the 50 people get discounts when it comes to my harvest and that ill engage them in that way (M5/29-).

The establishment of these youth gardens reflects a broader movement to empower communities through food production and sustainability education. By encouraging home gardening and providing educational resources, these projects challenge the passive consumer

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

role within the dominant food system, aiming to inspire self-sufficiency and environmental consciousness among residents in Khayelitsha.

Despite their positive impact, urban gardens in South Africa face significant challenges, particularly concerning limited resources and access to land (Suchá *et al*., 2020). Both Gardens 1 and 2 are situated on land that they do not own, presenting ongoing uncertainties and potential disruptions to their operations. For example, Garden 2 was established in 2014 through a negotiated lease agreement with a primary school, requiring periodic lease renewals contingent upon the school's decisions. Similarly, Garden 1 operates on premises belonging to a private day-care centre in Khayelitsha. Following completion of a horticultural course, one of the co-founders actively sought out land to apply acquired skills, eventually securing access from a day and night centre. However, the tenure of these arrangements lacks long-term guarantees, motivating the founders to aspire towards acquiring private land for sustainable operations in the future.

Acknowledging the constraints of their current cultivation spaces, the co-founder expressed that the garden serves as a practical hub for honing and developing skills before transitioning to a larger, permanent site. As articulated by the co-founder:

> the plan is to start small scale not to go on a bigger scale without mastering the small scale and everything as a gardener when it comes to rotation, calendar and deliveries . . . if I can master them here then I will be ready so now I am ready, finding land is not easy especially when it comes to the black society in townships . . . but I believe if you start somewhere, there are some people who are going to join you and say you doing the right thing, that is the best way for a black young man to get the land, if I was writing to the Department from January asking for land do you think I will be sitting on 30 beds now? (M5/29-).

The challenges faced by youth-led urban gardens, such as limited access to resources, underscore the importance of social capital in ensuring their sustainability and success. Drawing on the concept of social capital, as discussed earlier, these gardens have strategically cultivated both bonding and bridging social capital to navigate obstacles effectively. For instance, Garden 1's partnership with organisations like the AB program and local tour operators exemplifies the role of linking capital in mobilising external resources. This collaboration, established in March 2022, not only provided the garden with crucial financial support but also enhanced its visibility and impact within Khayelitsha and beyond, demonstrating the transformative potential of linking social capital.

These partnerships have been instrumental in amplifying the gardens' influence, illustrating how social capital fosters resilience and adaptability in urban farming. Other studies in Cape Town have indicated that urban gardeners utilise their bridging and linking social capital to mobilise resources they may not have access to (Olivier and Heinecken, 2017). The experience of Garden 2 further highlights the value of bridging and linking social capital in overcoming resource limitations. At its inception, the garden secured funding from the National Youth Development Agency, which was critical in purchasing essential items such as seeds and spades. This support, facilitated by linking social capital, enabled the garden to establish itself within the community.

Moreover, the innovative water management solutions implemented by these gardens, such as the use of makeshift irrigation systems like the modified Ricoffy container [4] in Garden 1, reflect the resourcefulness that social capital can engender. As one interviewee described: "*I use the huge Ricoffy container and make holes and use it as a water container so we innovate*." This ingenuity is a testament to the role of social capital in fostering collective action and problem-solving within the community. By leveraging their networks and relationships, these youth-led gardens have not only addressed immediate challenges but also laid the groundwork for long-term sustainability.

These initiatives exemplify the critical role of social capital in driving the success of urban agriculture. Through the strategic use of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, these gardens have demonstrated the power of collective action, resource mobilisation, and innovation

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

in overcoming challenges and making meaningful contributions to their communities. In doing so, they serve as a model for resilience and resourcefulness in sustainable urban agriculture, illustrating the broader implications of social capital theory in practice.

5. Conclusion

This study illuminates the role of youth engagement in urban farming, as exemplified by the experiences of Gardens 1 and 2 in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Through qualitative research the study unveils the transformative impact of these initiatives on community development, empowerment, and resilience. Youth-led gardens not only cultivate vegetables but also nurture empowerment and skill development among participants, challenging traditional perceptions of agriculture and fostering fostering an entrepreneurial spirit. Moreover, these urban community gardens serve as platforms for community development, addressing food-related challenges, promoting economic opportunities, and conserving the environment. By donating produce to local centres and forming strategic partnerships, youth gardeners bridge social divides and contribute to community well-being.

Despite facing challenges such as limited resources and land access, innovative strategies and collaborations with organisations like AB demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of these initiatives. Education emerges as a central theme, with youth gardeners promoting knowledge-sharing on sustainable farming practices and advocating for food sovereignty. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of fostering youth leadership and agency in sustainable urban agriculture, offering valuable insights to inform policies and programmes that promote inclusive and resilient communities in Khayelitsha and beyond.

The research findings have significant practical implications for practitioners and civil society. Recognising the potential of youth gardens to enhance food security, sustainability, and social equity, there is a need for supportive policies that facilitate access to land, provide financial incentives, and promote inclusive strategies for youth participation. Policymakers should consider developing targeted interventions that leverage the lessons learnt from Gardens 1 and 2, thereby fostering inclusive and sustainable urban food systems.

Future avenues for research could explore the scalability and replicability of youth-led urban agriculture models across diverse urban contexts, investigating how similar initiatives can be effectively implemented and sustained. Understanding the broader systemic implications and policy frameworks necessary to support and expand youth-led urban agriculture initiatives would be crucial for advancing inclusive and resilient urban food systems.

Notes

1. The term ‘Black’ is frequently employed in South Africa to describe all groups that have been historically marginalised, although these groups were categorised as Black, Coloured and Indian under the apartheid regime. apartheid race laws.
2. http://abalimibezekhaya.org.za/garden-centres/
3. Slow Food is an international movement comprising local groups and activists who are united in their mission to guarantee that everyone has access to food that is good, clean, and fair.
4. A Ricoffy container is a packaging unit commonly used for instant coffee, specifically the brand Ricoffy, which is popular in Southern Africa. Typically made of plastic or glass, these containers are designed to preserve the freshness of the coffee while providing an easy and convenient way for consumers to dispense the product.

References

Anzure, G.A., Amponsah, O., Peprah, C., Takyi, S.A. and I (2019), “A review of the role of urban in the sustainable city”, *Cities*, Vol. 93, doi: 10.1016/j.cities.2019.04.006.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

Artmann, M. and Sartison, K. (2018), "The role of urban agriculture as a nature-based solution: a review for developing a systemic assessment framework", *Sustainability*, Vol. 10 No. 6, p. 1937, doi: 10.3390/su10061937.

Banks, N., Starc Card, K., Dessie, E., Marcus, R. and Nicolai, S. (2022), "Youth empowerment and development in African cities", African Cities Research Consortium.

Battersby, J. (2020), "South Africa's lockdown regulations and the reinforcement of anti-informality bias", *Agriculture and Human Values*, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 543-544, doi: 10.1007/s10460-020-10078-w.

Battersby, J. and Marshak, M. (2013), "Growing communities: integrating the social and economic benefits of urban agriculture in Cape town", *Urban Forum*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 447-461, doi: 10.1007/s12132-013-9193-1.

Caldas, L.C. and Christopoulos, T.P. (2023), "Social capital in urban agriculture initiatives", *Revista de Gestão*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 92-105, doi: 10.1108/rege-03-2021-0043.

Cilliers, E.J., Lategan, L., Cilliers, S.S. and Stander, K. (2020), "Reflecting on the potential and limitations of urban agriculture as an urban greening tool in South Africa", *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities*, Vol. 2, p. 43, doi: 10.3389/frsc.2020.00043.

Crichton, S. and Kinash, S. (2003), "Virtual ethnography: interactive interviewing online as method", *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology/La revue canadienne de l'apprentissage et de la technologie*, Vol. 29 No. 2, doi: 10.21432/t2w02t.

De Swardt, C., Puoane, T., Chopra, M. and Du Toit, A. (2005), "Urban poverty in Cape town", *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 101-111, doi: 10.1630/095624705774481713.

DeMarsh, N. (2022), "Redefining the role of young farmers: participatory action youth-led urban agriculture", *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 42 Nos 7/8, pp. 727-742, doi: 10.1108/ijssp-01-2022-0004.

Dinbabo, M., Karriem, A., Penderi, S., May, J., Fuclher, C., Belebena, M., Mogatosi, T., Zinja, P., Gangen, N., Adams, R. and Ngcwayi, N. (2017), *Food Choice and Body Mass Index (BMI) in Adults and Children. Evidence from the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) and Empirical Research from Khayelitsha and Mitchells Plain in South Africa*, Institute for Social Development, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town.

Glover, T.D. (2004), "Social capital in the lived experiences of community gardeners", *Leisure Sciences*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 143-162, doi: 10.1080/01490400490432064.

Glover, T.D., Parry, D.C. and Shinew, K.J. (2005), "Building relationships, accessing resources: mobilizing social capital in community garden contexts", *Journal of Leisure Research*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 450-474, doi: 10.1080/00222216.2005.11950062.

Hallett, S., Hoagland, L. and Toner, E. (2016), "Urban agriculture: environmental, economic, and social perspectives", *Horticultural Reviews*, Vol. 44 No. 44, pp. 65-120, doi: 10.1002/9781119281269.ch2.

Hilmers, A., Hilmers, D.C. and Dave, J. (2012), "Neighborhood disparities in access to healthy foods and their effects on environmental justice", *American journal of public health*, Vol. 102 No. 9, pp. 1644-1654, doi: 10.2105/ajph.2012.300865.

Jagganath, G. (2021), "The transforming city: exploring the potential for smart cities and urban agriculture in Africa", *The Oriental Anthropologist*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 24-40, doi: 10.1177/0972558x211057162.

Kanosvamhira, T. (2019), "The organisation of urban agriculture in Cape Town, South Africa: a social capital perspective", *Development Southern Africa*, Vol. 36 No. 3, pp. 283-294, doi: 10.1080/0376835x.2018.1456910.

Kanosvamhira, T.P. (2024), "Cultivating food justice: redefining harvest sales for sustainable urban agriculture in low-income Cape town post Covid-19", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 48 No. 2, pp. 280-292, doi: 10.1111/1468-2427.13224.

Lam, V., Romses, K. and Renwick, K. (2019), "Exploring the relationship between school gardens, food literacy and mental well-being in youth using photovoice", *Nutrients*, Vol. 11 No. 6, p. 1354, doi: 10.3390/nu11061354.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

Lukas-Sithole, M. (2020), "Greening Nyanga: developing a community park in a complex urban environment in Cape Town, South Africa", *Acta Horticulturae et Regiotecturae*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 96-100, doi: 10.2478/ahr-2020-0019.

Martin, A., Oudwater, N. and Meadows, K. (2000), "Urban agriculture and the livelihoods of the poor in Southern Africa case studies from Cape Town and Pretoria, South Africa and Harare, Zimbabwe", *Paper presented at the International Symposium - Urban Agriculture and Horticulture -the linkage with Urban Planning*, Berlin, 7-9 July 2000.

Olivier, D.W. and Heinecken, L. (2017), "Beyond food security: women's experiences of urban agriculture in Cape Town", *Agriculture and Human Values*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 743-755, doi: 10.1007/s10460-017-9773-0.

Othman, N., Latip, R.A. and Ariffin, M.H. (2019), "Motivations for sustaining urban farming participation", *International Journal of Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 45-56, doi: 10.1504/ijarge.2019.10021353.

Padgham, J., Jabbour, J. and Dietrich, K. (2015), "Managing change and building resilience: a multi-stressor analysis of urban and peri-urban agriculture in Africa and Asia", *Urban Climate*, Vol. 12, pp. 183-204, doi: 10.1016/j.uclim.2015.04.003.

Paganini, N. and Lemke, S. (2020), "'There is food we deserve, and there is food we do not deserve' food injustice, place and power in urban agriculture in Cape Town and Maputo", *Local Environment*, Vol. 0 No. 0, pp. 1-21, doi: 10.1080/13549839.2020.1853081.

Paganini, N., Raimundod, I. and Lemke, S. (2018), "The potential of urban agriculture towards a more sustainable urban food system in food-insecure neighbourhoods in Cape Town and Maputo", *Economia Agro-Alimentare*, Vol. XX No. 3, pp. 401-423, doi: 10.3280/ecag2018-003008.

Paganini, N., Hansmann, J., Mewes, A., Reich, V., Reigl, M. and Sander, L. (2021), "Covid-19 lockdown and the impact on local food systems: food security and nutrition in South Africa's marginalised communities–a food justice perspective from the Cape Flats and St. Helena Bay", Helena Bay. SLE: Berlin.

Putnam, R. (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York.

Reuther, S. and Dewar, N. (2006), "Competition for the use of public open space in low-income urban areas: the economic potential of urban gardening in Khayelitsha, Cape Town", *Development Southern Africa*, Vol. 23 No. 01, pp. 97-122, doi: 10.1080/03768350600556273.

Russ, A. and Gaus, M.B. (2021), "Urban agriculture education and youth civic engagement in the US: a scoping review", *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, Vol. 5, 707896, doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2021.707896.

Shepard, B. (2012), "Community gardens, creative community organizing, and environmental activism", in *Environmental Social Work*, Routledge, pp. 121-134.

Smit, W., de Lannoy, A., Dover, R.V., Lambert, E.V., Levitt, N. and Watson, V. (2016), "Making unhealthy places: the built environment and non-communicable diseases in Khayelitsha, Cape Town", *Health and Place*, Vol. 39, pp. 196-203, doi: 10.1016/j.healthplace.2016.04.006.

Suchá, L., Schlossarek, M., Dušková, L., Malan, N. and Šarapatka, B. (2020), "Land tenure security and its implications for investments to urban agriculture in Soweto, South Africa", *Land Use Policy*, Vol. 97, February, pp. 1-10, doi: 10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104739.

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2017), "Thematic analysis", *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, Vol. 2 Nos 17-37, p. 25.

Thornton, A. (2008 In this issue), "Beyond the metropolis: small town cases of urban agriculture and peri-urban agriculture in South Africa", *Urban Forum*, Vol. 19, pp. 243-262, doi: 10.1007/s12132-008-9036-7.

Tiraieyari, N. and Hamzah, A. (2015), "Predictors of youth voluntary participation in urban agriculture program in Malaysia: a review", *Modern Applied Science*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 1-11, doi: 10.5539/mas.v9n1p1.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026

Tiraieyari, N. and Krauss, S.E. (2018), "Predicting youth participation in urban agriculture in Malaysia: insights from the theory of planned behaviour and the functional approach to volunteer motivation", *Agric Hum Values*, Vol. 35 No. 3, pp. 637-650, doi: 10.1007/s10460-018-9854-8.

About the author

Tinashe P. Kanosvamhira is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow on the Africa Urban Futures project, which is a collaborative initiative between the Urban Futures Studio (Utrecht University) and the African Centre for Cities (University of Cape Town). The project's main objective is to inspire new imaginaries for sustainable African cities by drawing on existing innovations from across the continent. Tinashe P. Kanosvamhira holds a Ph.D. in Urban Geography. His research primarily focuses on Urban Geography with a specific emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa. His diverse research interests encompass various socio-spatial issues, including sustainable infrastructures, governance, livelihood strategies of the less privileged, as well and food systems. Tinashe P. Kanosvamhira can be contacted at: kanostk1@gmail.com

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: **permissions@emeraldinsight.com**

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/qrj/article-pdf/26/2/261/11431699/qrj-05-2024-0108en.pdf by University of Leeds user on 21 September 2026