WOMEN IN RURAL KZN BEAT FOOD INSECURITY

From seeds to wholesome meals

Colleen Dardagan

Goats in the valley of the Mpofoana River, near Tugela Ferry, deep in rural KwaZulu-Natal, eat cardboard and dig for roots to fill their bellies. The land is dry, just stones and red dust. Here and there the skulls and bones of dead cattle lie in sad heaps. They didn’t die of thirst, the women say. They starved to death.

Along the gravel road, blue drums are grouped at intervals to hold the water supplied by tankers once a week to the scattered villages. The drought that has gripped the province for more than two years is starkly evident in the Msinga mountains.

Two white tents shimmer in the winter sunlight. Inside the first, the brightly dressed women thank God and a team whose help and support they say has meant their families are fed and clothed, and their children are going to school.

In the second, in sharp contrast to the dry landscape outside, tables groan under the weight of plump purple cabbages, firm tomatoes, onions, and white-veined bunches of spinach that ooze moisture from their stalks. From under the lids of pots, the warm smell of cooked chicken wafts over the assembly.

The women admire each other’s produce, comment on the prices of the bags of tomatoes, and impress on the organisers that the chickens are not for sale, but rather an umnikelo (offering) to be shared at the conclusion of the morning’s programme.

Avarshka Sahadeva from the Farmer Support Group proudly tells network that this is the 6th annual Msinga Food and Nutrition Fair in Nhlesi, high in the mountains above Keates Drift.

The support group operates out of the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s School of Agricultural, Earth and Environmental Sciences in Pietermaritzburg. The theme for this year’s fair was “From seed to Plate”.

“We are highlighting the importance of each household growing their own food – the journey of planting a seed and then caring for it until it is ready for harvesting.”

Combining the indigenous knowledge of saving seeds and the technical know-how of seedling production was all about promoting self-reliance among these deep rural villages, Sahadeva said.

“How we have trained hundreds of farmers – mainly women – on food security and how to be business-savvy through the sale of the excess vegetables and crops they grow.”

As the group of women, like sunbirds among the flowering aloes, meander to view the lush vegetable garden, three men leaning on their sticks in the shade of a sparse tree pass the time of day. “It’s very hot,” they say. “But the rain is coming.”

“Whew,” we ask. “Argazi (we don’t know),” they counter with a sad, collective shake of their heads.

Dressed in traditional finery, the women from the village of Nhlesi in the Msinga mountains show off the organic tomatoes grown on a communal plot on the banks of the Mpofoana River. In front are Mukeliwe Mchunu, left, and Sizakele Ncala, and behind are Buyanani Ngubane, left, and Qhsbangani Ngubane.

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Ntoni Mzila carries a load of freshly picked cabbage and beetroot, which she says she has grown in her allotment of the communal vegetable plot. Mzila says the regular supply of vegetables not only kept her family fed, but the excess she sold gave her money to buy staples such as flour, mealie meal and cooking oil. During the school holidays, the children help to till the soil and dig the furrows to allow the water to flow between the raised beds, she adds.

In the deep rural areas outside Keates Drift, the drought and overgrazing has meant little food for both animals and the people who live in the area.