Food Sovereignty Event:
Working with Rural Community towards Food Security

11-12 March 2014

The Farmer Support Group (FSG) and local community woman hosted yet another successful event, “Sustainable Agriculture for Food Sovereignty”, on the 11th and 12th of March 2014, at Fabeni, Msinga. The FSG and members from the community have been engaged in various projects in the Msinga district since 2004. The FSG provides smallholder farmers with training, advice and project support, which ranges from organic and indigenous gardening to manufacturing building blocks. Msinga’s land is covered with aloes and rock, no green grass or pastures. One can’t help but wonder how these people manage to farm, let alone crop. Goats and cattle roam the area in search of a little green grass or leaves that they might find. Thus, FSG aims to assist these smallholder farmers and other land-users to actively manage their natural and related cultural resources in a sustainable manner in order to improve their livelihoods and quality of life.

In this regard, FSG hosted a Food sovereignty indaba in Bergville, Okhahlamba Local Municipality (OLM) on 14-15 October 2013. As a sequel to the event, FSG hosted another event titled: Sustainable Agriculture for Food Sovereignty. The event allowed farmers to share what they learnt during the previous event and discuss issues related to sustainable agriculture.

In addition, to enhance farmer-farmer engagement; farmers / rural people from OLM attended the two-day event.
Day 1
12 March 2014

Programme Director: Miss Lindelwa Mazubane
Opening: with prayer: Mrs Ngwenya
Welcome: Induna Mr Shelembe

Present visitors from Bergville

Communities in representation were from the areas of Bergville (New stand, Obonjaneni, Okhombe, Busingatha, Reserve B, Mlimeleni, Potshini and Nokopela) and Msinga (Nocomboshe, Nkandla, Fabeni, Machunwini, Gudwini, and Mkhuphula).

Purpose of the meeting

Nonhlanhla explained the main aim for the gathering was to share ideas on farming innovation in order to secure food independently. Further Lindelwa explained the logistics of the event; she split of participants into two groups. Each group will visit a respective site i.e Gudwini and Machunwini.

Site visits

Site 2 visit: Gudwini and Mkhuphula

First part of the site visit was in Gudwini a group called Lethimpilo Women Group which consists of 29 members. They have a garden whereby it is split into individual plots. They explained their gardening methods and application, they grow vegetables all year for consumption and market; their target market is local community. The group also explained that they save various vegetable seeds, such as spinach and potatoes. In addition they explained their saving scheme and benefits. They spoke about savings benefits. They use their money to buy farming equipment such as water pump of which each member contributed R120.00 per person.

Upon group discussion a visitor asked about the challenges and solutions, one that popped up was group laziness but this is solved by the group reminding one another about the constitution and group agreements.

Second part of the site visit was in Mkhuphula a group named Sukuma with 38 members’ three men and 35 women. They work as a team in agricultural aspects and bee-keeping. They recently planted and marketed garlic. They explained the water conservation method of using farrow irrigation system. The engine pumps water from the river to the main farrow and channel water along the farrows throughout plots in the garden. They demonstrated to
how to plant garlic for us. In addition some of the visitors were taken to the bee hives in the forest, whereby only three boxes were seen and only one had bees.

**Site 2 visit – Machunwini**

Group of farmers visited the Machunwini area and were hosted by the Sizathina farming group. The Sizathina group consists of 21 women, each having an equal share of work on the same piece of land. The initiation of the group was motivated by the harsh living conditions, garden members were finding it hard to make ends meet. Upon arrival in the garden the Machunwini farmers explained how they operate in their garden. They mentioned that they have two pieces of land, one which is a communal garden and the other is divided into individual plots. The farmers have strict regulations in the communal garden. This is to make sure that all group members fully participate in all garden activities. The Bergville farmers appreciated their model as it was effective in making sure that group members cooperate. Discussions in the site were centred on contour ploughing, seed planting and saving, composting, crop protection and harvesting.

a. **Contour ploughing**

The hosts also explained about contour ploughing. The contours are erected after several rows. Farmers observed that they were a major difference between the field where there were contours and the field without contours. Farmers observed that maize plants in the field with contours were greener compared to the maize field without contours. The difference in the two fields was attributed to runoff water being prevented from flowing to the river. Moreover, some other farmers suggested that it was not easy to ascertain if contours have played a significant role in the greener field as the control field was full of weeds.

b. **Seed planting and seed saving**

Msinga farmers also shared their knowledge on seed planting and seed saving. The farmers mentioned that they put two-three seeds per seed station and thin later after germination. The main reason given for this agronomic practice was that if one seed fails the other seed/s is/are likely to germinate. The host farmers also explained about seed saving. This is a practice where seeds for the current crop are preserved for use in the next farming season. Farmers elaborated that seed saving helps in saving money which can be spent in other garden needs. Amongst other seeds these farmers save indigenous maize and one of its shortfalls is that it is not on high demand in the market; it produces fewer yields compared to hybrid maize seeds. However, although beneficial, seed saving can pose challenges in that diseases from the previous harvest can easily be transferred to the next farming season.
c. Composting

Msinga farmers do not only rely in inorganic fertilizers, farmers also use organic sources. They mentioned that they buy compost for their fields and sometimes make their own compost. They load manure in bags, fill it with water and then wait for the manure to decompose and then use it in their gardens.

d. Crop protection

Farmers also use organic methods to control pests. They crush aloe leaves and sprinkle them in vegetable leaves. Some farmers explained that to control beetles, they hunt them, crush and sprinkle their remains in vegetable leaves. Farmers were also encouraged to use the agronomic practice of crop rotation as a means of controlling pests and diseases. Farmers were encouraged to divide their gardens into plots and plant one family of crops (i.e. legumes, bulbs etc.) in each plot and plant another family of crops/vegetables in the same plot the following season. Farmers elaborated that crop/vegetables tend to be susceptible to the same pest/disease hence crop rotation helps in discouraging the multiplication of the pest or disease since it doesn’t get it host. Miss Mthembu highlighted intercropping as another means of controlling pests/diseases. She encouraged farmers to intercrop with plants/crops that help repel pests. Intercropping was also hailed as an effective agronomic practice that farmers can employ to preserve soil moisture.

e. Harvesting

There is joint harvesting in the communal garden. During harvesting the chairlady of the group summons the group members to come and harvest in the field. The harvest is shared equally among group members and each member has the choice to sell or to use her share of the harvest for consumption. After the harvesting each member is expected to contribute a certain amount into the groups’ joint bank account.

Day 2 – 12 March 2014

Programme Director: Miss Nonhlalnla Mthembu
Opening: with prayer: Mrs Ngwenya
Welcome: Induna Mr Zulu

Introduction and Purpose

Nonhlalnla briefly explained the previous year’s event in Bergville (October 2013), of which the current event was a follow-up. As a result the current event focused on sustainable agriculture in food sovereignty. The purpose of the event is to create a space for smallholder farmers from Bergville and Msinga to share lessons, challenges and solutions of issues
related to food production, marketing, and climate change. Nonhlanhla also gave community members (visitors and host) an opportunity to report on their observations and discussions done the previous day.

Discussion

Visitors’ presentation:

a) Potshini – Mr Zondo

Spoke on behalf of the group that visited the Gudwini and Mkhuphula garden. He explained how motivating it was to observe the unity of Msinga women and their farming methods. He expressed interest in the planted livestock fodder (Kikuyu grass) of which he will plant this at home and harvest during winter for his livestock. He was also impressed by different planting methods, group management and the demarcation of the garden, as well as the production of their own seedlings.

Further to Mr Zondo’s feedback, other visitors listed what else they learnt: such as eradicating certain weeds by sprinkling burnt aloe on the soil. Other women also expressed the gratitude to the hosts for accommodating them.

b) Reserve B - Mrs Ngwenya

Spoke on behalf of the group that visited the Machunwini garden. In addition to what was explained above, she expressed interest in the group management model used, as it reduces conflict amongst members and each person has their own plot to work on over and above the communal plot. The furrow irrigation sparked interest amongst certain members; Mrs Ngwena said that they will try it in the garden in addition to the mulching. In addition, she advised the farmers to do soil testing as she noticed their maize was yellow, she further explained that extension officers can assist the testing; she explained how to take soil samples in the field.

Msinga/ host presentations
All Msinga community groups gave a brief description of their groups and the challenges they face and how they overcome it.

a) Mkhuphula

The Sukuma group representative gave a brief description of the group. It was formed in 1996; whereby they have two gardens and are involved in bee-keeping. She explained the challenges faced this year due to changes in rainfall patterns (climate change). However, they harvested and sold garlic and currently preparing garden for winter crops. In terms of bee-keeping she explained the operation of bee-keeping. As well as, stated the rules that are followed: Firstly one must not come into contact with bee or beehive if they have been intimate with their partner, secondly strong perfume/ scent is not allowed. Many questions were asked by visitors about the bee-keeping project. One striking question was the impact of bee-keeping: the group mentioned that the bees are beneficial for pollination to make seeds, as well as, bees deter other harmful pests away from their vegetables and crops.

b) Machunwini

It was explained that the group started in 1998 with 49 members. However, over time their numbers decreased to 21 members they plant maize and vegetables. Their main challenge is shortage of water but through the assistance of FSG, they built a dam and received a water pump to access the water into their garden. In addition to agricultural activities they conduct non-agricultural activities, which is making of clay pots (pottery).

c) Gudwini

Mrs Ngubane explained that the group consist of 29 women, whereby they farm vegetables and maize and use agro-ecological techniques. The challenge is water access, FSG assisted in buying a water pump. However, the pump gave trouble which led them to saving for a new pump. Since water is an issue, they use trench irrigation method in their garden. Mrs Ngubane also thanked the counsellor for providing seeds.

d) Fabeni

MaMhize explained that apart from agricultural activities, the group also makes building blocks of which they sell to the communities. She thanked FSG for their training and providing the group with block making equipment and material.

e) Nocomboshe

Group member explained that there are three groups in this community. All groups are involved in agricultural activities, they are strong in savings activities of which member use proceeds for agricultural purposes, one member explained that she was able to purchase goats from savings proceed. The major challenge all groups face is drought.

Guest speakers
a) Mrs Ngobe – Ward councillor

Firstly she expressed her gratitude for everyone being present and for her invite to the event. She said unity is a successful weapon, but division is the killing factor. She was pleased to see the unity and mutual sharing of knowledge among farmers from different areas. Her ultimate wish is for all skills and items presented will be passed onto the youth.

b) Mr Shelembe

He explained that apart from the work presented, FSG is also involved in another project of which he is active in, that is afforestation of indigenous trees. He explained the importance of keeping indigenous trees alive as it is the heritage of the communities. He further explained how to plant seeds, when to plant, how to transplant and basic care of trees.

Closing

Dr Maxwell Mudhara – Director of FSG

He started off by expressing his concern at first for the event. However, with his observation of farmers actively and mutually sharing ideas, his initial concern is banished. The next concern for him is how FSG will continue with gatherings like this as funds are minimal. He further explained the meaning of Food Sovereignty; he said it implies that farmers have the final decision of food, i.e. whether they should buy or not from stores/shops, or simply make your own food. He explained that everyone conducts their own practises in terms of food production, of which each practise has its own consequences. He closed by thanking the organizers for making the event a success and to stakeholders especially communities for being present and contributing to the success.

or make things for yourselves. Some are using fertilizer and some are using manure. What are impacts of inputs you use? Be closing I would like to thanks farmers by encouraging us to continue with this work. And thanks our donor Tshintsha Amakhaya, FHSR