

CAPE TOWN, South Africa – Five years ago, the Primrose Park Primary School in the downtrodden township of Manenberg planted a modest vegetable garden, tucked away in a corner of its sandy, red grounds. This vegetable plot produced spinach, carrots, lettuce and beans, all of which had transformed a once barren patch of the schoolyard into a vibrantly green tract. The district, engulfed by poverty and unemployment, relished the new garden. School administrators and local volunteers claimed it would not only provide children with fresh, nutritious food, but would also serve as an outdoor classroom, where students could receive lessons about the growing food and nutrition.

Primrose Park was part of a global trend. Around Cape Town, and across the developing world, nonprofit organizations were helping schools plant vegetables gardens. Proponents advocated that school gardens were a way to bring opportunity and hunger relief to the children of areas suffering extreme unemployment and food insecurity.

Today, a chain-link fence surrounds the small, empty plot, where the Primrose Park Primary School garden used to be. What remains is a few straggling plants which have been able to survive several years of disregard. The fence barricades students from playing in or around where the garden once grew, and the school no longer has gardening tools or any personnel devoted to maintaining it.

The fate of the Primrose Park’s garden, as it turns out, is not unique in Cape Town.

Described by UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as being a model community for school gardening, Cape Town is home to dozens of deserted and unused school gardens.

Often, as in the case of Primrose Park, the gardens are started with the financial and technical help of a non-governmental organization, or NGO, with the idea that schools will be able to maintain the gardens on their own after several years. But few of the gardens, if any, remain sustainable after the nonprofits withdraw their support.

International advocates of school gardens say that the situation in Cape Town may be an anomaly.

“We feel that school gardens are a great way to promote food security and access to better diets,” says Ellen Muehlhoff, the Senior Officer of the Nutrition Education and Consumer Awareness Group at the FAO. “They provide a really good platform for learning a whole variety of skills that can enable children to produce food later on in life, in addition to provisioning school meals.”

The UN’s World Food Programme (WFP), FAO, and The World Bank promote school gardens as long-term solutions to food security. Communities from southern Africa to India, El Salvador, and eastern Africa have seen a large jump in NGO support for these projects.

“In El Salvador, school gardens are being used as a teaching tool and are improving school feeding programs there now,” says Carmen Dardano, a Nutrition Officer at the FAO who has been overseeing the development of school gardens in Central America.

In fact, school gardening has received support from nearly every level. Local community members in Cape Town and government and international officials approve of such programs across the board.

But the case of Primrose Park, and dozens of other similar Cape Town schools, raise serious questions about the efficacy of school gardening as a means to address food insecurity.

Of the half dozen or so nonprofits that have worked in Cape Town to help address food security through school gardening, most have shifted their efforts elsewhere. Many NGO's have elected to either abandon their school gardening efforts entirely or refocus their programs more narrowly on environmental education.

“We completely underestimated the amount of time, energy, and money that goes into a vegetable garden,” says Janna Kretzmar, Director and Founder of Earthchild Project. A local Cape Town organization focused on bringing environmental and health education to underprivileged students, Earthchild Project has experimented with multiple different models to teach students. After several years of operating a full-size vegetable garden, the NGO shifted to using individual-sized crate gardens as a response to the excessive costs of upkeep. Janna Kretzmar explains, “Our Living Classroom Program, where we use containers for students to create individualized portable gardens, is a far more efficient, effective and sustainable way of teaching the same lessons.”

“With the Living Classroom Project, we’re getting out lessons to many more kids for a fraction of the price, and it seems to be going well,” says Kretzmar.

However, with no expressed intention of moving out of the schools they work in, Earthchild Project has no foreseeable future transferring their programs over to the school’s control.

Earthchild Project specifically focuses on education, unlike most other NGO’s in Cape Town, which tend to also emphasize the issue of food security. However during a 2012 two month visit to over ten Cape Town schools, not one school garden, with or without NGO support, supplied enough vegetables to regularly supplement their feeding schemes.

Among the school garden projects attempted by various like-minded NGO’s in Cape Town, a range of factors were reported to have challenged each garden's ultimate success. While hindrances were often school-specific, they most commonly were rooted in a lack of funding, which weakened many schools' ability to invest time and effort in their gardens. Some schools failed to designate an official caretaker while others assigned inexperienced employees, which resulted in inadequate caretaking of the gardens. Additionally, many of the projects suffered from low community support, with reported problems such as looting and destruction.

One major problem was the ambiguity about the purpose of the gardens. Dozens of teachers, principals and NGO leaders interviewed for this story cited a wide variety of objectives for the gardens. These objectives included providing food for students, beautifying the schools, and teaching students about nutrition and sustainable food production.

While teachers and school administrators unanimously supported the gardening programs, dozens of teachers interviewed say they have little time in the school day to incorporate the gardens into their lesson plans.

In the case of Primrose Park Primary School's gardening efforts, Schools Environmental Education and Development (SEED), a Cape Town-based NGO, withdrew from Primrose Park after three years of support. SEED's strategy was incrementally designed to leave the school with a self-sustainable garden and environmental education program. Yet, only a few years after SEED's withdrawal, no garden remained. Reportedly, all of SEED's Cape Town school gardening programs that were started at the same time as Primrose Park met a similar fate.

While SEED acknowledges that these early efforts were flawed, organizers claim to have changed the design of their previous school gardening programs. Since their Primrose Park-era programs, they have transitioned from a traditional garden design to permaculture, a design in which all of the materials used for the garden can be created onsite through methods of composting, rainwater storage, and crop rotation.

Despite this, none of the many principals interviewed at each school had a clear idea about how to maintain the garden once SEED leaves. However, SEED intends to offer additional support for schools after their most recent programs phase out.

Earthchild Project, SEED, and various international organizations say that even if the food security component fails, the education provided by the garden is still important.

Carmen Burbano, a Policy Officer and School Feeding Specialist at the World Food Programme (WFP), says, "The downside and misinterpretations that have been attached to school gardens is that they have been thought of as production sites for school feeding programs. We make a strong difference between using the school garden for educational purposes and expecting them to supply a great proportion of the nutrients to the school."

Yet, representatives from Cape Town NGO's, FAO, and WFP continue to cite food security as the most prominent issue in relation to school gardening. With 80% of households in Cape Town classified as moderately or severely food insecure, according to Household Food Insecurity Access Scale, food security is one of the most critical issues for the city.

However, the case of Cape Town showed extremely little school-grown vegetables being incorporated into school meals. Other NGOs' programs that were food-production oriented, like the Peninsula School Feeding Association's project, failed. Organizations that had mixed goals, like SEED, have increasingly transitioned their focus more exclusively on environmental education, as Earthchild Project has done.

Faldi Wagiet, a General Educational Coordinator in Cape Town's Department of Education, discussed the potential for school-produced vegetable production, "In theory, it's a beautiful idea, but in practice it cannot play out. It is thought that you want to develop vegetable gardens for the poorest of poor, but they do not have the money able to sustain a garden. As far as I know of, there are no school vegetable gardens that are functioning well on a sustained basis."