



# Think Piece: Food Gardening and Intergenerational Learning in Times of Uncertainty

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Uncertainty is a universal phenomenon, a lived experience, an unease about acting in view of an unpredictable future. Uncertainty is a rendering of realities, which can lead to innovations and creative solutions, but also can debilitate people through fear or unease, impairing their ability to act. Conceived broadly, uncertainty is logically an element of all action, because outcomes are always unknown and indeterminate. While uncertainty is inextricably present in all human enterprises, plans and aspirations, it is not evenly distributed across time and space. It is not a uniform property of action; rather, how it is perceived, experienced and dealt with varies. (Calkins, 2016:2)

To people who base their livelihoods on land and animals, climate changes generate experiences of increased livelihood uncertainty. With the point of departure in a case story from the Amanzi for Food project in the Eastern Cape and older case material on community gardens in Port Elizabeth, in this paper I reflect on ways of experiencing and coping with uncertain livelihood conditions. The focus of discussion is the intergenerational interactions and learning processes involved in food gardening and their role in shaping responses to uncertainty which point towards 'creative solutions' rather than 'debilitation' (cf. Calkins, 2016:2). In the two cases, I suggest, intergenerational interactions in gardening processes frame actions to manage uncertainty through mediations of knowledge, the formation of new social relations and dependencies, and openings of hope and potentiality. Each case features a central change agent whose agency is shaped by her/his ability to take up a generational position in a creative way.

Drawing on phenomenologically inspired approaches, I am interested in uncertainty as 'the lived experience of a pervasive sense of vulnerability, anxiety, hope, and possibility' (Cooper & Pratten, 2015:1). Calkins (2016) discusses experiences of uncertainty among pastoralists in Sudan. Inspired by John Dewey, she suggests that uncertainty and responses to uncertainty are closely entangled, and that actions to manage uncertainty should be conceived of as 'testing and experimenting' (Calkins, 2016:5). Along similar lines, I have elsewhere suggested that uncertainty provides agency with a provisional and experimental character enacted in different ways depending on the position of the actor and her understanding of the situation (Jørgensen, 2015).

My approach to livelihoods is inspired by anthropological debates on labour and livelihoods in Africa which highlight that livelihood practices are not just about earning one's daily bread, but also about becoming part of social relations through embodied material and moral interactions and exchanges (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Ferguson, 2013; Jørgensen, 2006, 2016). Livelihood uncertainty, in other words, is not only a question

of food insecurity but also of uncertain sociality. Generational relations are closely linked to livelihood practices, as livelihood practices and understandings are often passed over in intergenerational interactions. As Alber, van der Geest and Whyte (2008) point out, the notion of generation has two meanings. On the one hand, generation refers to '[t]hat which is generated' (Oxford English Dictionary in Alber *et al.*, 2008:2), in other words, to how 'people come into being' through historical forces and social relations and forms. On the other hand, generation also implies agency and creativity, referring to 'the act of generating' through which people take up generational positions and 'pursue their own interests' within these (Alber *et al.*, 2008:3). Drawing inspiration from this double understanding of generation, as structurally formed category as well as singular processual act, I now reflect on the ways in which generational relations are mobilised and negotiated in responses to livelihood uncertainty in South Africa.

### *Climate Change, Agriculture and Generation in the Eastern Cape*

Prior to colonisation, the Xhosa-speaking people of the Eastern Cape based their livelihoods on pastoralism and, to a lesser degree, cultivation (Mayer, 1971; Mostert, 1992). However, extensive labour migration to the mining industry, apartheid resettlement schemes and post-apartheid urbanisation mean that few people today have a long-term connection to the place where they live, and that the passing down of agricultural skills from generation to generation in many cases has been disrupted.

According to an officer in the Eastern Cape Department of Economic Development, Environmental Affairs and Tourism, 53% of young people in the country are unemployed.<sup>1</sup> The same officer characterised the economy of the province as an 'underdeveloped type of economy with vast levels of inequality' (personal communication, 02.08.2016). There are no statistics on the size of the informal economy in the province, but it clearly occupies a large number of people, including those involved in small-scale agriculture.

In the Eastern Cape, agricultural production is relatively low, and according to an officer in the local Economic Development Agency in Nkonkobe Municipality, most small-scale and subsistence farmers in the area are older people. 'No young people are coming up to become farmers – that is why we get failure. Everyone wants to go to university; everyone wants to move to Cape Town or Johannesburg [...]. Agriculture is not fashionable' (personal communication, 01.08.2016). Along similar lines, in the early 2000s, when I carried out research on community gardens in Port Elizabeth, non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives and government officials often complained about young people's lack of involvement in agricultural activities. However, while some young people expressed feeling discouraged about the hard physical work and rather limited economic output of cultivation, others did find their way to the community gardens, often guided by older people. Similarly, in the Amanzi for Food project, a middle-aged female participant, Mrs Peters, has involved a small group of younger people in her cultivation activities.

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1 For recent figures, see <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/youth-unemployment-rate>.

### *Gardeners and Change Agents*

After working as a nurse for 14 years and in private business in Port Elizabeth for a number of years, Mrs Peters and her husband decided 'to come back home' and start cultivating their land in Nkonkobe. Mrs Peters became a member of the NGO Zingisa and was trained in agro-ecology. Later, she heard about the Amanzi for Food project from a Forte FM community radio broadcast, and with the help of the local agricultural extension officer, she got in touch with the Imvotho Bubomi learning network connected to the Amanzi for Food project. This linked her up with other farmers interested in learning new methods for cultivation and dealing with water shortages. Another female farmer in the group had been trained in permaculture methods by an NGO in Cape Town, and Mrs Peters learned various methods from her, which she currently practises in her food garden. Recently, she involved a group of young women in her gardening activities. Thus, Mrs Peters, who has managed to connect with actors and knowledge from elsewhere, now passes on the knowledge to younger people in the area and involves them in testing and experimenting with various methods. She describes her approach as 'trial and error'.

Mrs Peters has at a relatively late stage of her life embarked on a new livelihood learning path. She actively seeks out and moves between different learning communities, accessing knowledge that she then passes on to younger collaborators who, it appears, willingly accept her authority. In Port Elizabeth in the early 2000s, I met an elderly man who took up a position quite similar to that of Mrs Peters. Lungile (pseudonym) was born on a farm near Grahamstown. After being involved in the anti-apartheid struggle in Port Elizabeth in the 1980s and spending a number of years in jail, he moved to Cape Town, where he was introduced to people growing vegetables in the townships. He decided to join the activities of an NGO that trained him in food gardening – in 'how to plant, how to, you know, grow vegetables, spacing, designing, compost bed, everything' (personal communication, 14.01.2001). Later, he returned to Port Elizabeth and joined a community garden in which he quickly came to take up a leading role, sharing his knowledge on cultivation with the younger members of the group, motivating them to work, and networking with NGOs and government agents supporting urban food gardening.

While Lungile and Mrs Peters might have been involved in garden work as children, neither had spent much time as cultivators in their adult life. Yet they managed to take up positions of authority as cultivators in relation to younger people. In the following, I suggest three perspectives which may offer insights into how these two persons became central agents in processes of collective learning and change.

#### **Anticipation and mediation of knowledge**

Mrs Peters and Lungile have both been successful in linking up with external agents to access knowledge (and resources) useful for their food gardening practices. Lave and Wenger (1991), in their writings on apprenticeship and learning, describe a certain type of generational learning in which younger people gradually learn from the skills and practices of older ones. However, the situation is slightly different in the case of Lungile and Mrs Peters, as neither can be considered an actual master of cultivation. Rather, they are successful mediators of knowledge who are willing to test and experiment with newly gained knowledge through 'trial and error', to use Mrs Peters' words.

In his work on climate change in Greenland, Nuttall (2010) draws attention to the role of *anticipation* in local strategies of adaptation to an increasingly uncertain environment. Anticipation is about drawing on experiences and skills in the process of finding one's way in the world and involves the connection of several temporal points. Inuits, Nuttall argues, have not just *adapted* to their environment; they anticipate 'the possibilities and conditions for successful engagement with it' (2010:25). 'Successful anticipation depends to a certain extent on the ability to act on previous experience and apply knowledge to new situations and forms of engagement' (2010:33). Mrs Peters and Lungile appear to have a talent for this kind of anticipation. By drawing on different kinds of knowledge and installing themselves as knowledge mediators, they are able to navigate in an environment which offers certain possibilities for cultivation, some related to access to soil and water and others related to support in terms of seeds and advice.

### Relations of dependence

A second perspective on Lungile's and Mrs Peters' appeal to younger people may have to do with the way they offer relations of dependency. Ferguson (2013), in the article 'Declarations of Dependence: Labour, Personhood, and Welfare in Southern Africa', proposes that historically, relations of dependency have been of high importance for survival and welfare in South Africa. Using the Ngoni state as an example, he suggests that in the precolonial states when land was in abundance and chiefs became powerful because of their followers, freedom 'came not from independence, but from a plurality of opportunities for dependence' (Ferguson, 2013:226). While colonial conquest and capitalist industrialisation broke up the existing social systems, the industrial economy continued to be built on relations of dependency, argues Ferguson. Thus, while dependency may be seen as an important aspect of personhood in Southern Africa, relations of dependency are under threat in the labour-surplus economy experienced in the country (Ferguson, 2013).

Lungile and Mrs Peters, *qua* their relations to NGO and government actors, their successful gardening activities and their willingness to collaborate with others, appear to offer young people a potentially beneficial relation of dependency, increasingly attractive in the context of profound livelihood uncertainty. Building up new social and intergenerational relations seems to be an important part of managing livelihood uncertainties. People use such relations to access new knowledge, but also to establish new ways of becoming dependent on others. As suggested by Hastrup and Fog Olwig (2012:4, emphasis added), managing new kinds of uncertainties is not just a matter of developing new *technical* ways of living in an environment but also about developing new kinds of *sociality*.

### Hope and potentiality

To the young people who 'follow' Lungile and Mrs Peters, the activity in the gardens appears to offer openings of hope and potentiality. Although, as mentioned, agriculture is commonly looked upon as 'backwards', several young people interviewed in 2016 talked about the potentiality of agriculture, perhaps encouraged by an increasing policy and NGO interest in the area. At Fort Cox Agricultural College, two young women told me: 'Many young people want to work in offices, in big cities. They like fancy places. But we saw an opportunity. Agriculture

is in demand, but not many people have the knowledge, so there are more opportunities' (personal communication, 01.08.2016).

Expectations of modernity (cf. Ferguson, 1999) as described by these two young women are widespread globally, nurtured by Western-inspired mass education (Valentin, 2014). However, many young people experience coming of age in an era where the educational hopes of modernity and development are, in most cases, disappointed (cf. Ferguson, 2006; Johnson-Hanks, 2014; Mains, 2013; Prince, 2013). Lungile and Mrs Peters appear to offer the embodiment of a different kind of hope; a future orientation which, like the *anticipation* of Nuttall, involves the connection of several temporal points or eras. The young women at Fort Cox told me that their interest in agriculture was nurtured by their grandparents' stories and gardening practices. In a community garden in Port Elizabeth, young people said that 'as Xhosas we used to depend on gardening. Our forefathers were planting' (personal communication, 24.10.2001). Food gardening appears to be a practice which connects to the past and to an ethnic or African identity, while at the same time directing itself towards the future – a future that does not float on dreams of 'fancy places' but is embedded in hard work, in 'doing something' in a material and embodied way. Lungile told me: 'Our gold in the Eastern Cape is agriculture, that's why we are doing this [cultivation]. In the Transvaal [now Gauteng] and in KwaZulu-Natal, they have mines, but here there is no coal, no mines. And we don't want to be beggars, we want to do something' (personal communication, 01.10.2000). The link between hard work and a successful future is mirrored in the comments, 15 years later, of a young woman involved in Mrs Peters' garden: 'I don't like to sit down and wait for things to happen, I like to make things happen myself. There are no jobs here, so I have to break the soil' (personal communication, 01.08.2016). Lungile's and Mrs Peters' ages, combined with their hard work and their knowledge of new cultivation methods and techniques, place them in a position to mediate the hope of successful agricultural production.

### *Final Thoughts*

This paper had its starting point in reflections on the roles and relations of two Eastern Cape agents who, in different time periods and different geographies (one urban, one rural), in somewhat similar ways took up a generational position and initiated new technical practices and social interactions in the context of gardening and small-scale food production. I suggest that the generational difference between the two change agents and their younger collaborators is an important frame for collective actions to manage the livelihood uncertainties they face. The generational positions of Lungile and Mrs Peters provide them with a space for creatively mediating knowledge, social relations and hopeful visions of the future.

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