

Food security from urban farms

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By Shaun Benton

A Washington-based NGO has singled out the “innovative practices” of urban farmers in Philippi as a key element of future food security for Cape Town.



The Worldwatch Institute, which recently brought out its 2011 State of the World report, Innovations that Nourish the Planet, sent some of its staffers to explore the viability of small-scale farming in the Philippi horticultural area.

It is a 3300ha section of farmland surrounded by informal and formal settlements, and suburbs.

Farmer Nazeer Ahmed Sunday said he wanted to expand his one-hectare plot and make it more

commercially viable. He already grows enough vegetables, with some chickens and sheep, to feed his family.

Yet, he said other local residents, as well as the city government, still needed to be convinced of the viability of commercial farming opportunities within the city boundaries.

While the area produced 50% of the fresh produce consumed by Cape Town, it used to be as high as 70%, Sunday told The New Age, citing a study commissioned by the City of Cape Town.

He hoped that with collective efforts, the percentage would go up again and help to keep food prices down.

There are 16 small-scale farmers in the area, with about 28 large commercial farmers surrounding them. In order to be more effective, the small farmers realised they had to work together, he said, and were prepared to share among themselves some expensive infrastructure, such as tractors.

In June they intend launching the Schaapkraal Developing Farmers Association, said Sondag, so they could work collectively, and address issues “in a collective way”.

One of the association’s key objectives, he said, was to preserve the area for agriculture.

While they had already received some help from the provincial department of agriculture, the small scale farmers in the area say they needed more land and skills in order to expand beyond subsistence farming.

Sondag complained that there was as much as 1000ha “owned by speculators” that lay idle and suggested it would be a good place to introduce land reforms.

Danielle Nierenberg, an agricultural researcher from the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute, said urban agriculture projects, such as the Philippi project, were increasingly important sources of food and income to urban dwellers. She said that 14 million people moved to cities each year in sub-Saharan Africa and that 30 million to 40 million Africans would depend on urban agriculture to meet all of their food requirements by 2020.