

# Builders Warehouse encourages sustainable food production

Recent United Nations FAO and World Food Programme reports suggest that over 39% of South Africans are vulnerable to food insecurity, meaning they do not have regular, dependable access to enough safe, nutritious food. Builders Warehouse is looking for ways to help encourage communities to become more self-sufficient in food production by making it easy for people to grow their own vegetables in low-cost “veggie tunnels”.

## Addressing food insecurity

Food insecurity can result from many different causes like droughts, wars and economic problems. In South Africa the main cause of food insecurity is poverty. Massmart believes that true national growth and development is possible only when all South Africans have enough to eat. In its corporate social investment strategy it has set a very high priority on feeding and encourages its operating divisions to do the same.

Builders Warehouse’s Vegetables Under Construction project can help facilitate a sustainable supply of affordable, nutritious food to communities. Massmart’s partner in the project, the Robin Good Initiative, designed a plastic tunnel roughly 4m x 9m, which can house as many as 340 plastic rubbish bags of mixed sand and sawdust. The fertilizer is mixed in water, then poured into the bags of sand to nourish one or two individual tomato, spinach, lettuce or other table quality plants for each bag.

The project has already established more than 3500 of these hydroponic units, usually near schools, so that children and parents can learn about growing food and participate in their own vegetable production. Since the main task in this hydroponic gardening is simply mixing the fertilizers in water and hand-watering the plastic sand bags containing the growing vegetables, the project is both environmentally friendly and water-wise.

Where the Vegetables Under Construction project has already established these “veggie tunnels”, the

participating school-community has not only harvested vegetables for the school meals, but in some cases has produced as much as R2 000 in profit from the surplus crops. Builders Warehouse is currently expanding the project into the Western Cape.

## What is food insecurity?

- Food insecurity refers to inadequate access to sufficient quantities of safe, nutritious food.
- FAO and WFP data suggests that over 39% of South Africans are vulnerable to food insecurity, mainly as the result of poverty. Almost half of South African households earn a monthly income of R1 000 or less and many South Africans are dependent on government grants for regular income.
- Children are particularly vulnerable and undernourishment hampers growth and development. It is estimated by SA Healthinfo that 22% of all South Africans under the age of nine are stunted by chronic malnutrition.
- Vegetable tunnels can also provide an opportunity for income as surplus crops can be sold to people living in the local communities in which they are located.

## South Africans from poor households at greatest risk

On a national level, poverty continues to be the main factor in household food insecurity. The General Household Survey (Statistics South Africa, 2006) shows that more than half of South African households earn a monthly income of R1 000 or less. Given that there are not many viable livelihood strategies available, most poor households are dependent on government grants for regular income. The effects of inadequate nutrition are staggering, especially for young people, who are still growing. Children who are chronically undernourished, especially those under nine, are likely to suffer from both physical and cognitive development problems.

Further complicating the future health and growth of many young South Africans is the fact that millions of children are orphaned every year due to HIV/AIDS or live in households where parents or family adults are either sick or unemployed. Loss of necessary family income drastically lowers the level of food available to the children and the whole family. Many of these children are themselves HIV-positive, making adequate nutrition vital to their survival.

### Builders Warehouse sponsors veggie tunnels for AIDS orphans

The Thusanang HIV/AIDS Centre is situated on the outskirts of Soweto on the old Durban Roodepoort Deep Gold Mines in a township known commonly as Slovoville. The centre is managed by Bongani Mithombeni with the help of two volunteers from the community. Together they provide two meals a day (breakfast and lunch) to more than 450 children who have either been orphaned by HIV/AIDS or are HIV-positive themselves.



The centre receives a monthly grant from the Department of Social Welfare to purchase food for the children. Builders Warehouse donated three veggie tunnels to the Thusanang HIV/AIDS Centre to help develop a healthy, balanced and nutritious diet for the children. The chain's primary goals are to help the children at the centre gain regular access to the required daily allowance of nutritious food they need as well as to educate them about the health benefits of eating a nutritionally balanced diet. For some of these children the food they receive at the centre is the only food they will get until the next day and that's why they are also given a share of the crop from the veggie tunnels to take home.

The presence of these Builders Warehouse vegetable tunnels promotes the local growth of vegetable crops, encourages learning about the

nutritional basics of healthy living, provides income-producing entrepreneurial opportunities whenever there's a surplus of crops and allows for a continuous and sustainable source of food supply within the community. ■

### How does this Builders Warehouse project address food insecurity?

- \* The Vegetables Under Construction project encourages communities to become self-sufficient in food production by making it easy to grow vegetables.
- \* Vegetable tunnels can help provide regular access to nutritious food. When located at or near schools, they can also help educate young people about growing their own food and about the health benefits of eating a nutritionally balanced diet.
- \* Builders Warehouse installed three vegetable tunnels at the Thusanang HIV/AIDS Centre situated on the outskirts of Soweto.
- \* To date, the Builders Warehouse has erected more than 3 500 "veggie tunnels" in South Africa.