

A Green(er) Roof over the Head: Reflecting on Strategies Targeting Homelessness with Urban Agriculture for Cape Town, South Africa

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1 ABSTRACT

The homeless face desperate socio-economic challenges, not in the least, food insecurity. Vulnerabilities are intensified by changing climatic conditions, macroeconomic constraints, limited sanitation and poor nutrition resulting from restricted access in urban food deserts. Social support programmes and shelters mitigate some risks, with several adopting urban agriculture (UA) in developmental strategies to yield longer-term benefits. Examples are especially prominent in the global North, where non-profit organisations (NGOs), research collaborations and cooperatives have engaged in partnerships to target UA-based interventions for the homeless. Such strategies emphasise the provisioning and cultural ecosystem services (ES) delivered by UA as green infrastructure (GI). Framing UA as multi-functional GI and acknowledging additional regulating and habitat ES empowers advocacy in urban planning to advance UA practices in urban centres where space is at a premium and market forces favour more competitive land uses. Although UA is increasingly applied in the global South, approaches remain largely productivist and economic, prioritising food security, poverty alleviation and entrepreneurship. Very few published case studies link UA and homelessness in developing contexts. This is evident in Cape Town, South Africa, regarded as a leader in UA in Africa and home to a substantial homeless population, where information on such strategies remains limited. In response, this paper explores international precedents from the global North and turns to a case study of Cape Town to investigate which organisations integrate UA into interventions for the homeless and how. A qualitative approach is applied following semi-systematic literature reviews. The first examines international cases in the academic literature as part of the literature screening section. The second, under the paper's empirical component, reviews grey literature on Capetonian examples identified from an official database of registered homeless shelters in the city (n = 29). The literature on international cases reveals the dominance of the USA and emphasises intergovernmental involvement, multidisciplinary collaboration, securing long-term tenure, linking UA sites with supportive uses, using liminal open spaces such as rooftops, remediating brownfields, subsidising infrastructure, embedding volunteerism and co-production, providing training and identifying access points to markets. Findings from Cape Town-based shelters indicate that 17.2% of organisations have implemented UA-related interventions, most primarily focused on production and subsistence, with an auxiliary recognition of therapeutic benefits. Many of the operational characteristics identified in Northern case studies are also pertinent in interventions in Cape Town, underscoring their significance and contextualising their application. By identifying evidence-based principles from global North and Capetonian precedents, the paper highlights critical opportunities to embed UA within strategies addressing homelessness through more developmental approaches, facilitated by urban planning, to encourage cultural and other multi-functional ES beyond (ir)regular sustenance or a temporary roof for the destitute.

Keywords: Homelessness, Urban agriculture, Urban farming, Ecosystem services, Non-profit organisations

2 INTRODUCTION

Homelessness constitutes an extreme manifestation of urban vulnerability, modelled by intersecting economic, spatial and social exclusions that are particularly pronounced in cities of the global South (Pitt, 2022; Hopkins et al., 2024). Within this condition, food insecurity emerges not merely in episodic hunger but as a persistent and multi-dimensional deprivation that constrains health, autonomy and dignity. For the homeless, food insecurity is embedded in everyday urban relations. As such, limited purchasing power, restricted access to food storage and preparation and a dependence on charitable donations collectively undermine both nutritional adequacy and agency over food choices (Greene, 2019; Campagnaro et al., 2023). In Cape Town, South Africa, where deep income inequality, spatial fragmentation and uneven food environments persist (Haysom, 2021; Kanosvambira et al., 2023), food insecurity among the homeless reflects broader failures in urban governance and social protection. Accordingly, food insecurity operates as

a critical lens through which the lived realities of homelessness and the limits of conventional relief-based responses, may be interrogated.

Urban agriculture (UA) has increasingly been positioned as a response to urban food insecurity, specifically within low-income and marginalised communities, where it is most often justified in terms of food provision. However, beyond this productivist framing, UA is also recognised internationally as an element of urban green infrastructure (GI) capable of generating a wider array of ecosystem services (ES), including social, cultural and health-related benefits (van Zyl et al., 2021). Research has shown that engagement with cultivation and green spaces can support psychological wellbeing, social connection and skill formation, outcomes that may be especially salient in contexts of profound vulnerability (Soga et al., 2017; Gibbens, 2019). Despite the increasing visibility of UA policy in Cape Town (Smit, 2016; Cilliers et al., 2020; Kroll, 2021), its relevance to homelessness and to food insecurity as a relational and structural urban condition, remains poorly conceptualised. This gap raises critical questions regarding the way food-based interventions are framed, valued and integrated within urban planning and social development. Against this background, this paper sets two research questions: Firstly, what good practice principles can be derived from international case studies of UA interventions in homelessness? Secondly, which organisations addressing homelessness in Cape Town include UA in their approach and what lessons are provided by these institutions for broader application?

The paper proceeds with the next section unpacking homelessness as a concept, its drivers and lived impacts, with a particular emphasis on food insecurity and dignity. This is followed by a discussion of UA as a multi-functional, nature-based developmental intervention and unpacking ES in UA in Section 4. International case studies of UA in homelessness interventions are then reviewed in Section 5 to distil key principles. Cape Town is subsequently introduced as the empirical case study, followed by a methodology section detailing the desktop review and dataset used. The results and discussion sections (8 and 9) examine the nature, scale and significance of UA initiatives linked to homelessness in Cape Town. The paper concludes with reflections and planning-oriented recommendations to integrate UA more systematically into homelessness responses in the city, also of value to other contexts in the global South and North.

3 COMING TO TERMS WITH HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is a worldwide phenomenon affecting countries in the global North and South (Pitt, 2022). It is estimated that 150 million people, or 2% of the world population suffer from homelessness (Lidzhade and Mphambukeli, 2025), with the figure expected to increase under globalised neoliberal urbanism ruled by market forces. Within this system, prolific homelessness jars with aspirations for progressive world-class cities principled on rational order, the rule of law and codified planning to protect private interests. As such, the homeless are othered and stereotyped as perpetrators who increase crime, litter and dump, practice poor hygiene and contaminate, beg and devalue property by their presence as agents of the ‘broken window syndrome’ (Michaels, 2022). Such narratives bound in aversion from powerful private investors and fear amongst the voting public politicise the issue as an emotive challenge for local authorities framed by deep difference, professional and personal conflict (Hopkins et al., 2024). Broad brush condemnation of the homeless as a class of ‘social failure, dysfunctionality and unproductivity’ (Gerrard and Farrugia, 2015; Pitt, 2022:2) easily rationalises blunt political intervention. Yet even a shallow exposition of personal narratives or a frank confrontation of systemic drivers, may uncover accounts opposing freeloading by choice or deliberate ill intent. Rather, testifying to precarity of circumstance and last resort, aggravated by external factors beyond individual control. These include structural unemployment, migration, domestic violence and dysfunctional home environments, adverse childhood experiences, substance abuse and health challenges (Makiwane et al., 2010; Pitt, 2022; Hopkins et al., 2024; Lidzhade and Mphambukeli, 2025). In realisation, acknowledging that the homeless are often exposed to property threat, isolation, misconception, stigmatisation, harassment and violence and may face substance dependence, physical disability and disease (Rankin, 2019; Hopkins et al., 2024). Health concerns may be far reaching, including injuries, mental health challenges, sexually transmitted infections, respiratory ails like tuberculosis and other co-morbidities (UN-Habitat, 2020). These issues are severely impacted by changing climatic conditions and seasonality, lacking sanitation and ablution facilities and food insecurity in urban food deserts (Greene, 2019; Hopkins et al. 2024).

Food deserts do not reference the type, size and number of food retailers established locally, but rather lacking access to affordable healthy food amongst the poor even when retailers are plentiful (Smith et al., 2010). For the homeless, who often dwell in well-served urban areas, challenges include limited financial means and restrictions in preparing or storing food. This is especially problematic for perishable fruits and vegetables (Greene, 2019). Food insecurity overshadows basic hunger to include spatial, social, cultural, political and emotional aspects of food access (ibid), including the act and place of consumption (Campagnaro et al., 2023). Eating is often an undignified experience for the homeless as many scavenge for sustenance in bins, beg or are handed leftovers to consume publicly. Such meals are often nutritionally deficient, even hazardous, consisting of calorie rich processed foods or expired products. Alternatively, more nourishing meals may be accessed through soup kitchens and homeless shelters that may also provide temporary accommodation, sanitation and ablution facilities, clothing, blankets and possibly rehabilitation and developmental services (Brothers et al., 2020). Shared accommodation and meals may foster social cohesion in conviviality and camaraderie, but the interim nature of shelter support does not necessarily advance food security, nor do charitable services instil pride, self-confidence, self-esteem or self-reliance (Mjema et al. 2023). In addressing issues of nutrition, advancing food security, training and dignity in parallel, several organisations incorporate UA in developmental strategies addressing homelessness.

ES Category	Definition	Potential UA examples
Provisioning ES	Protection and restoration of natural resources and the capability of natural (e.g., rivers, biomes) or semi-natural (e.g., community gardens) green spaces to contribute physical products, materials or goods consumed directly by humans.	Community gardens, rooftop farms and alike produce fresh vegetables, fruits, eggs, honey, herbs and other food products often consumed by proximate residents, improving urban food security and reducing food miles. Urban gardens may cultivate medicinal and aromatic plant species used in traditional remedies or small-scale commercial products.
Regulating ES	The regulation of ecosystem processes that moderate natural and artificially induced environmental conditions. Benefits derive from capacities to control, reduce, or buffer ecological, climatic and biological processes alternatively requiring technical or engineered solutions.	UA vegetation contributes to local cooling through evapotranspiration and shading to reduce the urban heat island effect. Plants in UA systems capture particulate matter and contribute to pollutant removal from urban atmospheres. Soil enhancement is promoted via organic matter and reduced compaction, also preventing surface erosion. There are further contributions to nutrient cycling and soil quality stabilisation. UA systems can enhance pollinator habitat and activity and support populations of beneficial insects that regulate pests.
Cultural ES	The non-material benefits humans derive from ecosystems meeting cultural or spiritual needs when visiting, living in or enjoying views of green areas.	UA spaces provide green venues for recreation, passive enjoyment and aesthetic engagement with nature, especially valued in dense urban contexts. UA sites are often used for environmental education and gardening training, generally increasing ecological literacy and food system awareness, ultimately advancing skill development and employment opportunities. Shared involvement in UA projects fosters cultural expression, social interaction, networking, inclusion, community organisation and stronger sense of community identity. Exposure to green UA spaces, participation in gardening and contact with nature are linked with mental health improvements in decreased depression and anxiety, enhanced cognitive abilities, increases in attentional capacity, increases in life satisfaction and the benefits of physical activity like strength, fitness and flexibility.
Habitat services (or supporting services)	ES that conserve natural ecosystems and enhance urban biodiversity do not directly benefit humans but facilitate the fulfilment of all other ES by providing natural habitats.	UA sites, especially diversified gardens, increase urban biodiversity as habitats for flora, pollinators, insects and fauna often uncommon in built environments. Soils in urban horticulture systems regularly present enhanced biological diversity and nutrient cycling compared to non-vegetated landscapes. UA systems presenting diverse crops, including rare or heirloom cultivars, support the conservation of genetic resources in urban areas. Through green cover, flowers and sheltered microhabitats, UA supports the lifecycles of beneficial organisms, enhancing general ecological functions in urban areas.

Table 1: ES categories and potential examples in UA. Source: Constructed from Draper and Freedman (2010); Gonzalez et al. (2010); Soga et al. (2017); Gibbens (2019); Gónra and Górný (2021); Lategan et al. (2021); van Zyl et al. (2021)

4 URBAN AGRICULTURE AS A NATURE-BASED SOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENTAL TOOL

UA is defined as the production of food and non-food crops and/or animal husbandry at micro and meta scale within and on the peripheries of urban areas (Hardman et al., 2022). UA includes all activities from cultivation to the entrepreneurial components of agri-processing, marketing and distribution (Cilliers et al., 2020; Chari et al., 2022). UA is acknowledged as a nature-based solution and element of GI, defined as a strategically planned, designed and managed urban network, consisting of various natural, semi-natural and man-made green and blue spaces that conserves ecosystem functions, contributes to biodiversity conservation and provides social, economic and health benefits through multiple ES (van Zyl et al., 2021). ES are the direct and indirect benefits all living species derive from the capacity of ecosystems to provide goods and services that satisfy needs (De Groot et al., 2010). ES have been classified according to provisioning, regulating, cultural and supporting/ habitat services. These categories are not mutually

exclusive, with multiple benefits derived simultaneously by GI elements like UA (van Zyl et al., 2021). Table 1 captures ES categories and potential manifestation examples in UA.

Recognising numerous ES (Table 1), highlights multi-functionality as a critical GI characteristic, which has provided planners with significant motivation and leverage to advance implementation internationally (Tsegaye et al., 2018; Cilliers et al., 2021). Yet, an overly naïve perspective should be avoided. A balanced approach recognises latent ecosystem disservices (ESD), acknowledging that ecosystem functions may deliver contrasting negative impacts (Davoren and Shackleton, 2021; Lategan, et al., 2021). For UA, examples may include invasive species or clearing indigenous remnants, continuous maintenance, operating expenses, security concerns of theft, squatting and vandalism. The threat of cultivation on urban sites contaminated by proximate pollutants like lead, arsenic from pesticides and polyaromatic hydrocarbon from exhausts, as well as residue and littering from discarded items related to substance abuse are noted (Bryld, 2002; Lategan et al., 2021). Fresh produce is also associated with microbial foodborne disease deriving from cats and birds, composting materials and fertilizers from livestock (Kaiser et al., 2015). Additionally, limited funding, skills and knowledge, staff shortages and a reliance on volunteer labour, limited markets and lacking consensus regarding success metrics often limited to biased cost-benefit analyses in favour of economic sustainability, are concerning (Biewener, 2016). Such challenges are exacerbated by limited research focused on UA benefits for vulnerable stakeholders like the homeless (Gibbens, 2019), with reflections limited to reports on disparate case studies. Section 5 attempts to relay some of these cases from the global North to evidence their general approach and distil potential lessons of practice.

5 REVIEWING SELECT GLOBAL NORTH CASE STUDIES OF URBAN AGRICULTURE IN HOMELESSNESS INTERVENTIONS

The examples summarised in Table 2 were derived from the academic literature on UA interventions targeting the homeless.

Project / Initiative	Organisation Type	Key Partners & Stakeholders	Approach & Model	Produce, Cultivation Methods & Facilities	Engagement with Homeless	Outcomes & Impacts
The Food Project/ Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative, Boston, MA & suburbs (1991)	Community-based nonprofit network	Foundations; municipalities; schools; hunger relief orgs	Youth employment, food donation, farmers markets. Food justice-oriented, educational UA integrating production, donation and market sales	Mixed vegetables; open-field cultivation; greenhouses; suburban farms (16 ha total); internships organic soil-based production; community gardens, farm, aquaculture facility, greenhouses and bioshelters, processing facilities and marketing outlets	Direct: produce and meals for homeless shelters and soup kitchens.	Food access, youth leadership, social cohesion
San Francisco County Jail – Garden Project, San Francisco, CA (1992 -2018)	Nonprofit re-entry programme	County jail; municipalities	Rehabilitative UA linking incarceration, skills and community service	Vegetables; tree planting; soil-based cultivation on institutional land	Indirect: food for homeless and elderly	25% lower recidivism
Sea Change, Inc. Philadelphia, PA (1993)	Nonprofit economic development corp.	Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority	Entrepreneurial and ecological UA as neighbourhood regeneration	Organic vegetables, herbs, flowers; 0.2 ha site; eco-village systems; organic farming, traditional and innovative technologies	Direct: employment and training	Skills, food production
Cook County Sheriff's Garden, Chicago, IL (1993)	Correctional UA programme	Univ. of Illinois Extension Urban Gardening Programme	Prison-based farming. Institutional rehabilitative UA	Vegetables; 557 m ² prison garden; soil-based	Indirect: food for homeless; inmate rehabilitation	Reduced recidivism; food donations
Growing Home, Chicago, IL (1998)	Nonprofit social enterprise	City of Chicago; Community Development Block Grant; Coalition for the Homeless	Greenhouse farming; phytoremediation. Employment-focused UA with environmental remediation	Greenhouse, vegetables; raised beds; 0.4–1.2 ha brownfield site; phytoremediation	Direct: homeless employment	Skills development; food production
Gino Organic Gardens, Chicago, IL (1998)	Volunteer-based and entrepreneurial	Local food nonprofits	Raised beds, donation model. Subsistence and donation-oriented UA	Mixed vegetables; raised beds; 670 m ² vacant lot	Direct: homeless employment; Indirect: produce to homeless-serving orgs	454 kg produce donated in 1998

Seattle Youth Garden Works. Seattle, WA (1998)	University-affiliated programme	Universities; community partners	Market gardening; skills training. Workforce development UA	Market garden vegetables; soil-based plots	Direct: training homeless	Workforce readiness
Urban Oasis / Community Harvest. Washington, D.C. (Late 1990s)	Community-based project	Public housing authorities; schools	Urban farm. Employment-oriented UA in underserved areas	Vegetables, herbs, flowers; 0.2 ha farm	Direct: homeless employment	Food access in underserved area
Justiceville. Chicago, IL (Late 1990s)	Transitional housing initiative	Restaurants; housing providers	Herb cultivation for restaurants. Micro-enterprise UA	Herbs; 93 m ² plot; soil-based	Direct: homeless residents farm	Income, skills
City Growers. Boston, MA (2010)	For-profit social enterprise / cooperative	City of Boston; institutions; volunteers	Sales-based; co-operative governance. Commercial UA with a social objective	Intensive vegetable production; 0.4 ha over four vacant lots; soil-based	Indirect: jobs, food to nonprofits	Employment, food access
Higher Ground Farm. Boston, MA (2013)	For-profit commercial UA	Private founders; volunteers	Rooftop commercial farming. Commercial, market-driven UA	Leafy greens, vegetables, flowers; 1,300 m ² rooftop; open-air beds	Indirect: unpaid/volunteer labour	Proof of rooftop UA viability
St. Vincent de Paul Urban Farm. Dayton, OH (2013)	Shelter-based participatory research	Univ. of Dayton; Ohio State Univ.; shelters	On-site shelter farms. Therapeutic and participatory UA	Vegetables; 2,500–3,000 m ² on-site shelter gardens; soil-based	Direct: shelter residents participate	Improved nutrition, mental health, lower recidivism
Growing Hope Gardens. Los Angeles, CA (2010s)	Nonprofit	Shelters; housing providers	Gardens in shelters and housing. Regenerative, empowerment-based UA	Organic regenerative gardens; shelter and housing sites; soil-based	Direct: stewardship and participation	Belonging, empowerment

Table 2: Synthesis of international examples of AU interventions in homelessness. Source: Constructed from Kaufman and Bailkey (2000); Biewener (2016); Gibbens (2019); Brothers et al. (2020); Mjema et al. (2023)

Findings captured in Table 2 are further detailed in Section 9 but is pertinent to acknowledge that all instances encountered are North American, calling the nature of similar approaches in the rest of the world, but especially in the global South, into question. If and how such approaches manifest in one of the global South's most developed and unequal countries, South Africa, and one of its most developed and unequal Cities, Cape Town, is particularly intriguing.

6 HOMELESSNESS AND URBAN AGRICULTURE IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is wracked by severe housing shortages resulting from colonial and apartheid rule, structural unemployment and a contemporary neoliberal approach that has reduced output in the state's low-income housing projects. Some 3.4 million prospective beneficiaries were captured on the national needs register by 2024 (RSA, 2024), most of whom are accommodated in informal settlements and informal backyard rental accommodation. Access to the informal sector, especially the backyard component, reflects resilience and agency amongst the otherwise destitute (Lategan and Cilliers, 2017) and the capacity for resource mobilisation and/or supportive kinship networks that assist in accommodation access (Lategan and Cilliers, 2019). These informal settlers are not considered homeless, but survive in precarity close to the verge of destitution should their circumstances change.

The housing backlog is concentrated in the country's metropolitan areas, particularly in eThekweni (Durban), the City of Johannesburg and City of Cape Town, mirroring instances of absolute homelessness. Cape Town is highlighted for a lack of literature on the phenomenon and a large comparative homeless population (Viljoen, 2025). Hopkins et al. (2024) report that only five dedicated studies have emerged on homelessness in Cape Town since 2013 and that the exact extent of the homeless population is unknown. A 2020 estimate projected a population of 14357 homeless (ibid). Studies show that up to 71% are classified as chronically homeless, having experienced constant homelessness for a minimum of one year, or repeatedly over certain periods (Viljoen, 2025).

Life on Cape Town's streets is particularly inhospitable in gentrified business nodes managed under low tolerance private improvement cooperatives and crackdowns on vagrancy and squatting in the central business district (CBD) (Michaels (2022). Punitive responses call on law enforcement and private security to fine or remove the homeless based on bylaws of 'antisocial behaviour' (Pitt, 2022; Viljoen, 2025). Cape

Town’s homeless further face harsh summers, wet winters and gale force winds in what is known as the Cape of Storms. Some respite from authorities, the weather and hunger may be found in shelters provided by the state and non-governmental (NGOs) and non-profit organisations (NPOs). However, offerings generally deliver maintenance services and temporary accommodation, mostly failing to facilitate more permanent transitions from homelessness supported by long-term developmental assistance in social services, substance abuse treatment, skills development and economic empowerment toward permanent independence (Hopkins et al., 2024). The basic accommodation offered is also scarce and institutions under capacitated, with only 3246 shelter beds available (Table 3). Many homeless further actively avoid shelters due to strict operating hours and rules, including curfews, a ban on drug and alcohol use or non-admission of couples (Viljoen, 2025). Even when such detriments are inconsequential and more developmental interventions offered, Cape Town’s homeless are reticent to commit to longer-term stays given loss of income from begging or casual employment (Hopkins et al., 2024). The need for proven intervention strategies providing multiple longer-term developmental benefits, like UA (Table 2), is thus imperative.

There is significant potential to draw on existing support for and implementation of UA in the city. Cape Town is regarded as a front runner in UA (Jagganath, 2022) as the first South African city to deliver an UA Policy in 2007. This policy, along with the City of Cape Town Food Gardens Policy in Support of Poverty Alleviation and Reduction, support UA and food aid for indigent households and schools (Smit, 2016; Kroll, 2021). Food systems were also included in the city 2019 Resilience Strategy through targeted action plans. However, integration into broader urban governance and management has remained limited (Haysom, 2021). Furthermore, The OneCape 2040 Strategy proposes transitioning to an eco-friendly, inclusive, resilient and sustainable economy that supports UA and sources 80% of food locally. Yet, few political aspirations have been articulated (Kroll, 2021). Planning documents like the Municipal Spatial Development Framework (MSDF) (COCT, 2023) provides for protection and recognition of significant agricultural land like the Philippi Horticultural Area in the Cape Flats region that produces a large proportion of the city’s vegetables. The Cape Flats accommodates approximately 6000 small-scale and micro-farmers who operate some 100 urban gardens. Most are located on school and municipal properties, whilst others occupy liminal spaces like road verges to constitute more informal practices (Kanosvamhira et al. 2023). UA practices closer to the CBD are also documented, including the Oranjezicht City Farm located in a prestigious suburb in the Cape Town City Bowl which has itself supported the establishment of at least twenty other local UA initiatives (Steenkamp et al., 2021). Despite a significant homeless population and advancements in the establishment of UA policies and practices along the informal to formal continuum, the literature is sparse and whether, and how, approaches to homelessness in Cape Town have incorporated UA, unknown.

Nr	Organisation	Capacity	Nr	Organisation	Capacity
1.	The Haven Night Shelter, Bellville	83	16.	Elim Night Shelter, Elsies River	70
2.	The Haven Night Shelter, Claremont	15	17.	Loaves and Fishes, Observatory	35
3.	The Haven Night Shelter, District Six	80	18.	Oasis Reach for Your Dream, Phillippi	80
4.	The Haven Night Shelter, Kalk Bay	18	19.	Ubuntu Circle of Courage, Blackheath	0
5.	The Haven Night Shelter, Kensington	60	20.	The Ark City of Refuge, Faure	1000
6.	The Haven Night Shelter, Kraaifontein	92	21.	Youth Solutions, Zonnenbloem	60
7.	The Haven Night Shelter Moira Henderson House, Woodstock	81	22.	Beth Rogelim, Cape Town	100
8.	The Haven Night Shelter Napier Street, Greenpoint	155	23.	Culemborg Safe Space, Cape Town	23
9.	The Haven Night Shelter, Retreat	115	24.	Culemborg Parking Lot Safe Space, Cape Town	230
10.	The Haven Night Shelter, Wynberg	57	25.	Paint City Safe Space, Bellville	250
11.	The Haven Welfare Organisation, Cape Town	0	26.	U-Turn Ministries, Claremont	30
12.	Owl Shelter, Lansdown	80	27.	U-Turn Ministries, Bellville	21
13.	Happy Valley, Simonstown	65	28.	TASP, Bellville	25
14.	Somerset West Night Shelter, Somerset West	54	29.	Hope Revolution, Faure	70
15.	The Carpenter Shop, Cape Town	40	Total:		3246

Table 3: Homeless shelters registered on the City of Cape Town Open Data Portal. Source: CoCT (2025)

7 METHODOLOGY

This paper employs data sourced from the City of Cape Town’s Open Data Portal (CoCT, 2025) that provides publicly accessible municipal datasets across a range of thematic categories, including social development. Within this category, a 2025 dataset titled ‘Homeless Shelters’ was identified that indicates places of accommodation for the homeless within the City of Cape Town. It is acknowledged that the list

may not capture informal, faith-based, or unregistered initiatives operating outside of the City's officially recognised programmes. The twenty-nine organisations captured in the database are presented in Table 3.

Each organisation was subjected to a semi-systematic desktop review (Lategan et al., 2025) of grey literature (websites, media articles and reports) using key words and Boolean Operators to configure the following search strings: Organisation AND Cape Town AND Urban Agriculture; Organisation AND Cape Town AND Urban Farming; Organisation AND Cape Town AND Garden; Organisation AND Cape Town AND Food Security. Corresponding folders were created for each organisation and subfolders for each search query created on Endnote as reference management platform. Both deductive and inductive coding were completed using Atlas.ti. Results are discussed in Section 8.

8 RESULTS

Results demonstrate that 48.3% (n=14) of organisations referenced general gardening practices, whilst 17.2% (n=5) referenced larger scale UA activities more specifically, though not always directly by name. The relatively high number of instances recorded for gardening activities is largely due to the Haven Night Shelter collective with eleven branches, but one general website. Thus, making it impossible to gauge where and how much gardening takes place. The Haven Night Shelter and the Salvation Army's Beth Rogelim men's home mention resident involvement in garden-related activities (Haven Night Shelter, 2025; Salvation Army, 2025), with the available information suggesting that these activities are restricted to general maintenance and domestic gardening duties rather than a structured developmental strategy based on UA. The Somerset West Garden Project transformed a derelict park into a thriving urban farm that utilises volunteers from the homeless community, sells produce locally through a market and to restaurants and supplies the Somerset West Night Shelter and Thomas House of Hope (Atlantic Fertilisers, 2023). A Community gardening approach was also identified in the Ubuntu Circle of Courage organisation, which demonstrates how UA can support the homeless in personal development. The organisation is supported by the Western Cape Department of Agriculture (WCDoA) and the Cape Agency for Sustainable Integrated Development in Rural Areas (Casidra), with a five-year lease from a local company ensuring medium-term stability (Casidra, 2025a). The Happy Valley Shelter reports the existence of a vegetable garden damaged by a local baboon troop, calling for support to reestablish the space in recognition of its role in providing fresh produce for residents and in fostering a connection with nature (Happy Valley, 2025). However, no data were available on the garden's size, production capacity, governance, or operational model in contrast with other cases identified.

At the Oasis Reach for Your Dreams organisation, the Garden of Grace project trains residents, with the help of the Local Cape Roots company (Maledo, 2021), in the cultivation of a subsistence garden. The project has received support from the WCDoA and Casidra to upgrade infrastructure and increase production capacity (Casidra, 2025). The Garden of Grace supports nutritional needs but also advances personal growth, dignity and vocational opportunities whilst produce is sold locally in aid of broader food security concerns (Oasis, 2025). A wider focus at Garden of Grace sprouted the Gardens for Growth initiative that supports local families to initiate and maintain domestic food gardens, ultimately envisioning community-run enterprises that generate fresh produce and local employment whilst promoting climate resilience and ecological restoration (Casidra, 2025b). A focus on ecological functions is also evident in U-Turn Homeless Ministries' Living Roots Nursery in Claremont. Living Roots offers a distinct form of UA focused on horticulture, environmental restoration and sheltered employment and not food production. The indigenous nursery is operated by the formerly homeless in the final stages of U-Turn's rehabilitation programme (Shoba, 2023), with therapeutic benefits noted (Lemonaid and ChariTea Foundation, 2025). Living Roots is a social enterprise that generates income through plant sales, landscaping services and workshops, with profits reinvested into U-Turn's programmes (Volkwyn, 2023; Living Roots, 2026). Participants receive accredited training in gardening, landscaping, composting, first aid and environmental management, contributing to both personal rehabilitation and urban ecological outcomes (Lemonaid and ChariTea Foundation, 2025). Structured horticultural training is combined with practical food production in the Bellville CBD Food Garden, a purpose-built urban food production system integrated into a Safe Space for the homeless and vulnerable in collaboration between the Greater Tygerberg Partnership and social development NGO, MES and related to the Tygerberg Association for Street People (TASP). Founded on a 300 m² site, the garden was conceived during the COVID-19 lockdown to improve food security, health and

income opportunities. The project supplies fresh produce to a soup kitchen and sells surpluses to generate modest income for participants. Stakeholders emphasise dignity, mentorship, skills development and employability as central outcomes. Expansion plans to approximately 600 m² indicate a transition from pilot-scale production towards an expanded UA model (Alexander, 2021). The largest scale, and most mature, UA intervention was identified in the Ark City of Refuge's farm where a small vegetable garden evolved into an organic urban farm supporting a kitchen that provides approximately 3000 meals daily (Masiwa, 2024). The farm includes open-field production, tunnels, fruit trees and designated plots for school learners to gain agricultural experience. The project benefits from long-term partnerships with food retailer Shoprite, the WCDoA and other donors, who have provided infrastructure, training, seedlings, irrigation equipment and surplus food (Shoprite, 2021; Shoprite, 2024). Thirty to forty residents are empowered by direct participation in food production and receive permaculture training, enhancing their capacity for self-sufficiency. The farm further supports external organisations, including soup kitchens, crèches and old-age homes to position the initiative as a critical node in local food relief networks (The Ark, 2026).

9 DISCUSSION

This paper highlights homelessness as a heterogeneous condition affected by structural, spatial and personal impacts. Interventions that consider the homeless as a singular group risk strengthening stigma and advancing a disconnect between need and response. Sensitive UA initiatives are required that acknowledge homelessness as a condition of exclusion from urban citizenship and the right to the city. As alluded to previously, one of the principal considerations in claiming this right resides in meeting the basic human right to access adequate food. In keeping, studies on UA in the global South generally highlight issues of food security and poverty alleviation, adopting a reciprocal advocacy approach (Kanosvamhira et al., 2023). Studies in the Global North initially focused on a productivist approach but later acknowledged multi-level social and cultural factors (Kanosvamhira et al., 2023; Saguin, 2024). Thereby also recognising that food insecurity exceeds mere hunger to include indignity of access, preparation and consumption. Appropriately targeted UA practices thus reposition food access from charitable dependence to a communal participatory practice of agency, citizenship and community. The Food Project emphasises social cohesion and civic engagement alongside food production, positioning UA as a developmental and relational practice (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000). Growing Hope Gardens and St. Vincent de Paul Urban Farm demonstrate how cultivation and shared meals can restore stewardship and belonging (Gibbens, 2019; Mjema et al., 2023). These cases also illustrate the value of embedding UA within supportive institutional settings, like shelters, transitional housing and correctional or rehabilitative environments, to connect UA sites directly with complementary social services. Thus, also suggesting that some of UA's most significant contributions for homelessness may not be caloric or economic, but rather social, cultural and psychological, espoused via routine, purpose, contact with nature and social interaction, as cultural ES. All Capetonian cases, bar U-Turn Homeless Ministries' Living Roots Nursery, focus primarily on sustenance and nutrition, reconfirming tendencies in the global South. However, most also recognise AU's therapeutic contributions and the advancement of personal development as significant drivers, often informed by structured training, skills acquisition and pathways to employability (Oasis Reach for Your Dreams, the Bellville CBD Food Garden, U-Turn Homeless Ministries and the Ark City of Refuge). This mirrors international precedents (Seattle Youth Garden Works, Justiceville, Growing Home) where workforce readiness, accredited training and transitional employment are central objectives rather than ancillary benefits (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000). Activities pursued for income generation often benefit the broader community through fresh produce delivered to restaurants and sold at dedicated markets (Seattle Youth Garden Works, the Food Project, Somerset West Garden Project, Bellville CBD Food Garden, Ark City Refuge), or donated surpluses (Gino Organic Gardens, City Growers, the Food Project, Bellville CBD Food Garden), furthering general food security. The deliberate identification of access points to market, whether through farmers' markets, restaurant supply chains, or institutional procurement is important. Thereby enhancing financial viability and reinforcing dignity through productive participation to support a sense of achievement, contribution and belonging in aid of community assimilation.

External ties are significant in support of UA interventions for the homeless. International case studies like Seattle Youth Garden Works, Growing Home and City Growers and Capetonian examples like Ubuntu Circle of Courage, Oasis, Bellville CBD Food Garden and Ark City of Refuge illustrate that successful

initiatives are habitually rooted in intergovernmental involvement, multidisciplinary collaboration and public private partnerships. International and local cases further demonstrate that embedding volunteerism and co-production through resident participation, community volunteers and institutional partners, enhances ownership, social capital and programme resilience. Partnerships, sponsorships, goodwill and sound management are paramount in operating sustainably with security of tenure to allow UA interventions to mature and expand.

However, land access and tenure insecurity are often detrimental constraints to UA, specifically in high-value urban centres like the Cape Town City Bowl where market led competition is significant and risk of displacement imminent without explicit policy recognition, institutional land access and use rights. International examples demonstrate adaptive spatial strategies in response to such constraints, including the use of liminal and non-traditional spaces like rooftops (Higher Ground Farm) and the remediation of contaminated or underutilised brownfields (Growing Home), to expand the spatial repertoire available for UA in dense urban environments (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000; Biewener, 2016). Comparable opportunities exist in Cape Town, and are already practiced in areas like the Philippi Horticultural Area (Kanosvamhira et al. 2023), but remain underexplored within homelessness responses.

Urban planning is thus identified as a champion for UA for its role in land use regulation, strategic development oversight and as multi-disciplinary entity with potential intergovernmental and private sector linkages (Górna and Górny, 2021; Skinner and Haysom, 2021; Ngie and Sithole, 2023). In many cases the strategic instruments informing planning policy and practice already support food-based uses like UA and more sustainable and environmentally sensitive development options like GI. However, as with other GI elements (van Zyl et al., 2021), urban planning professionals generally remain ill-equipped to integrate UA which may be illegal in many urban areas in contravention of traditional bylaws based on permittances and restrictions rooted in colonial conventions or benefitting neoliberalism and capital interests (Lee-Smith, 2013; Kroll, 2021; Matamanda et al., 2022). The absence of a definitive, proactive, integrated and pro-poor strategy focusing explicitly on the informal UA sector in Cape Town serves in substantiation (Skinner and Haysom, 2016).

Emphasising multi-functional ES, both informally and formally, beyond food for the homeless may be required to motivate UA in Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs) aligned to South Africa's 2013 Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) (Haysom, 2021). SPLUMA's emphasis on principles of justice, resilience and sustainability are prudent, especially when planners proactively consider ESD commensurate with a normative professional responsibility to separate incompatible land uses and guard against detrimental activities (Górna and Górny, 2021). In emphasising ESD, the paper cautions against the idealisation of UA. Risks related to soil contamination, food safety, labour exploitation and exposure to unsafe environments may disproportionately affect homeless participants. This is particularly evident in cases such as Growing Home, which addresses soil contamination through phytoremediation, highlighting that environmental risk is not incidental but structural. The ethical implementation of UA strategies for the homeless demands that environmental or institutional risks are not externalised for an already vulnerable group. The following section concludes the paper with six recommendations based on the discussion presented.

10 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings confirm that while Cape Town has a comparatively strong policy environment supportive of UA, the integration of UA into homelessness responses remains fragmented and opportunistic rather than systematic. Drawing on the literature, empirical findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed emphasising the role of urban planning in enabling homelessness-responsive UA strategies in Cape Town:

1. Integrate UA explicitly into homelessness and urban planning frameworks: UA should be recognised formally as an effective instrument in homelessness interventions within municipal planning instruments, including IDPs and SDFs. Aligning UA initiatives with SPLUMA principles would further legitimise their inclusion as instruments of spatial redress and inclusive urban citizenship. Explicit articulation would reduce legal ambiguity, protect UA from displacement and enable proactive land allocation.

2. Identify and secure land for UA via proactive spatial planning: Urban planners should lead targeted spatial analyses to identify suitable land for UA linked to homelessness services. This may include municipal land, school properties, rooftops, underutilised public land, servitudes, buffer zones and other liminal spaces. Secure tenure arrangements, even if time-bound, are critical to enable UA initiatives to advance, attract investment and deliver long-term benefits.

3. Promote multi-functional UA models beyond food production: Planning frameworks should explicitly recognise and incentivise the multi-functionality of UA, particularly enhancing and integrating cultural ES. In support, shifting evaluation metrics beyond yield, income, or traditional cost-benefit analyses to include dignity, wellbeing, agency and community integration to better reflect the objectives and outcomes demonstrated in both international and local case studies. This includes recognising UA sites co-located with shelters, safe spaces, rehabilitation centres and training facilities as critical social infrastructure and not ancillary land uses.

4. Support long-term, cross-sectoral partnerships: Evidence from both international and Capetonian cases highlights that successful UA initiatives in service of the homeless are secured by long-term partnerships involving multiple tiers of government, NGOs, academic institutions and the private sector. Urban planners may act as conveners to facilitate interdepartmental coordination between social development, environmental management, economic development and health departments, whilst also facilitating partnerships with civil society and donors. Such partnerships are essential to subsidise infrastructure, promote volunteerism and co-production in addition to ensuring sustained skills transfer and programme continuity.

5. Address environmental and ethical risks: UA initiatives involving homeless participants must guard the vulnerable against environmental and institutional risks. Urban planners should operationalise measures to guarantee that sites are assessed for soil contamination, water quality, food safety and exposure to hazards and that mitigation measures, including raised beds, phytoremediation, or controlled inputs, are implemented as required. Ethical practice will require that participation is voluntary, safe and empowering and not conditional or exploitative.

6. Expand empirical research on local UA initiatives: There is a clear need for further research on UA and homelessness in Cape Town and the global South. In-depth qualitative studies of existing initiatives that investigate governance arrangements, funding mechanisms, participant experiences and long-term outcomes would address existing shortcomings and strengthen the evidence base to inform more contextually appropriate policy design. Improved documentation of local successes is essential to move UA from isolated practice to strategic intervention. This research serves as a first step in this regard.

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