

Bartering of agricultural produce becomes valuable in rural areas during a pandemic

Small-scale farmers, farm workers and dwellers and even micro-food producers in the township backyard gardens play an important role not only in terms of combatting household food insecurity, but also in terms of making fresh, nutritious and organic produce accessible in their respective communities. The value of producing own fresh produce in the time of a pandemic is highlighted in our story on food coping mechanisms of small-scale farmers and micro-food producers, in the time of Covid-19. Here the focus is on bartering as an alternative strategy to exchange and acquire food commodities.

As a result of the closure of marketing and trading, stemming from the Covid-19 restrictions, bartering became an important adjustment strategy among producers, in the process of exchanging and transacting. Bartering brings to light the cooperation that indigent rural people forge with each other in order to cope in times of crisis, or in hard times. Through the act of bartering, producers are building solidarity, keeping hunger at bay, and they highlight important values for creating caring and nurturing communities and societies.

ECARP has observed an increase in the number of its partners who bartered in 2020 when 66 partners bartered with others, compared to 22 in 2019. Bartered produce in 2020 include beans, beetroot, butternut, cabbage, carrot, green pepper, maize, onion, potatoes, pumpkin, spinach and sweet potatoes. Heirloom seed and seedling varieties such as maize, butternut, pumpkin, potatoes and onions, have also been bartered. Testimonies from farm workers, farm dwellers, small-scale farmers and township farmers point to the important role that bartering can play during difficult periods, like the lockdown and Covid19.

Buziwe Tsana is a small-scale farmer and lives in Committees Drift area and has used the bartering system for a while. However, since the lockdown, she has noticed that more and more small-scale farmers, farm workers and farm dwellers are willing to barter their produce. According to her the increase in bartering:

... is because of the lockdown. It is not easy to get to town or even to go and sell the produce elsewhere. So many people have resorted to bartering because it allows one to acquire what they don't have in their own plots and also to give away what they have in access.

Small-scale farmers have limited resources – land, infrastructure, seed etc. – so they may not produce as much as they would like. This also applies to varieties of crops and vegetables they can plant.

Through bartering vegetables and crops, these farmers are helping each other in multiple ways,

including clearing out surplus produce, without wasting, and acquiring what they lack. Many people may look at bartering as an outdated exchange system, as today money is used for exchange and has even gone digital. Digital transactions make it easy even for people in remote areas to exchange through money, given the necessary infrastructure and devices. However, the necessary infrastructure and resources are often absent in rural farming communities. This absence, combined with low income, from small-scale farming and low agrarian wages, make it difficult for poorly resourced producers to transact electronically. Bartering, therefore, becomes a handy option for producers.

The solidarity that the farmers have built makes it possible for them to look beyond the negativities associated with bartering. One criticism made against the bartering system is that one of the parties in the exchange gets short-changed. This is based on the fact that commodities are, in terms of market value, unequal and, therefore, finding a common ground may not be that easy. Furthermore, exchanging, for instance, grains for fresh produce may be unfair as the latter has a very short shelf life compared to the former. But, for Mbuyiseli Mtana, a small-scale farmer based in Alexandria in the Eastern Cape, this should not be an issue. He feels that:

One needs to look at bartering as two farmers helping each other out. The two parties exchange produce without using money. Otherwise, if you have more spinach than you need, it will wilt away and as a result you make a loss. Now if you barter then you not only get what you do not have but you also ensure that the other family has adequate food.

For Mbuyiseli Mtana, the issue is not about making profit, let alone exchanging with equal value, which is usually defined in monetary value/currency. Rather, it is about changing another person's position positively, through non-monetary exchange forms premised on support and economic considerations.

He relates his bartering in 2020, prior to the introduction of the lockdown in March 2020, when he gave a farm worker on a neighbouring farm heirloom maize seed in exchange for a hen. They met again at the end of February 2021, and the man told him he is expecting a big yield from the maize that he planted. This will also allow him to save seed that he will plant later. Mbuyiseli Mtana feels happy about this. He feels this is a win-win situation because the hen hatched 15 chicks so far. Not only has Mbuyiseli Mtana increased his chickens in number but his breed has also increased. This reflects an exchange where both parties derived benefits that are, significantly, assets for small-scale farmers and micro-food producers. For Mbuyiseli Mtana, the other important thing is that, this man now will have seed to plant every season and thereby enhance his own family's food security. Moreover, Mbuyiseli Mtana feels that:

It is important that we ensure that the heirloom seed is expanded and shared widely. Small scale farmers, farm workers and farm dwellers in places like Nanaga also need to have it and expand it. Sharing the seed widely will help if something happens that threatens maize seed quantities and quality in one location. It will be possible to get it and continue producing.



Maize crop in Mbuyiseli Mtana's garden

Therefore, the exchange has expanded the availability of heirloom seed for others, thereby strengthening local producers' access to local seed sources, which is a very important part of food sovereignty. He remembers how his own seed varieties increased over the years due to seed exchange festivals that ECARP organised with other organisations within and outside the Eastern Cape province. These seed exchanges have helped him and other farmers in his seed bank network collect and save more seed varieties.

Bartering seeds and seedlings gives farmers an opportunity to grow their seed varieties and an ability to multi-crop in future to get crop varieties that they otherwise would not access without cash. This helps farmers reduce their reliance on global seed

companies and it reduces their input costs as they do not spend money buying seeds. Moreover, seeds that are exchanged are heirloom and may not be found in established seed markets.

Farm workers and dwellers who are supported by ECARP in micro-food production are also involved in bartering and have increasingly used of this form of exchanged since the beginning of the pandemic. Farms are remote and transportation is a big problem for many farm workers and dwellers. During the hard lockdown between March 2020 to June 2020, accessing towns became even more difficult for farm workers and dwellers. Many rely on farmers for their transportation to town. In complying with lockdown regulations, farmers could only offer lifts to a maximum of four people at a time. Meaning many farm workers and dwellers could not get to town and organising own transport is very costly. Bartering came in handy for Thembeke Mdoko as she was able to acquire green peppers by giving away carrots. Thembeke Mdoko feels that, although she has only started bartering, this could be a way to go:

We are not sure how long Covid19 will be with us. Therefore, we may be on lockdown for some time but also in order to try and stay safe we need to stay at home. Even without a lockdown, getting to town just to get fresh vegetables is too costly. Also, the reality is one can never have everything in their own garden. Therefore, bartering will remain important.

Those involved in bartering have also indicated that, the fact that bartering involves exchanging produce without using any cash, makes it possible to save money. This is what Buziwe Tsana said in this regard:

Bartering has helped me to save money that I would otherwise have spent on buying vegetables that are not available on my plot. The money will be used to cover other expenses like schooling.

This was corroborated by Nongenile Myali, a pensioner who lives in Kirkwood in the Sundays River Valley:

There is no money for most of us to acquire different varieties of seed in order to be able to plant as much crop varieties as we would like. Seed is expensive. So, bartering helps in this regard. This is especially the case as many people have not been able to get jobs because of the lockdown.

Moreover, many farm workers also have full-time jobs that they have to attend to at their work-places. This can make it harder for people to devote sufficient

time to work in their fields and gardens, to produce several varieties of vegetables, herbs and crops. Senior partners in the ECARP programme, also find bartering useful. For example, Nongenile Myali finds bartering helpful because, as an older person she is unable to work on a larger plot. In her words:

I am now much older and I am not able to plant as much as I used to or I would like. I would be happy to have more vegetable varieties than I have now. Through bartering, I am able to get vegetables that I need but do not have in my garden.

Therefore, in a way, through bartering the micro-producers and small-scale farmers are able to share their labour. Nongenile Myali planted maize, potatoes, butternut and carrots. She has been able to acquire other vegetables like cabbage, beetroot and spinach through bartering. Therefore, bartering has helped her due to the shortcoming she has faced in terms of accessing seed and the amount of labour she is able to put in.

Solomon Mtana, a game guard on one of the biggest game farms around Grahamstown, also used bartering. Although he only started planting his own food recently, he has quickly adopted the philosophy and ethos of the solidarity networks and bartering, which he does in addition to marketing his produce.

sector, get temporarily laid off, or their working hours and thereby wages reduced. With bartering, Solomon Mtana has been able to ensure that his family has enough food. He has exchanged his beetroot for carrots and green peppers. For Solomon Mtana:

Bartering is all about sharing, helping each other and ultimately encouraging one another to plant own food. I barter with other people around the farm. For me bartering also may not mean exchanging things on the spot. I can give the other person something to eat now while his crops are still growing and not yet ready for harvesting. Once they are ripe, he would be in a position to help me.



Solomon Mtana with sweet potato from his garden



Part of Solomon Mtana's garden with chillies, spring onion and spinach

The Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions that followed are major disruptions to the world of work and livelihood strategies, and means adapting and developing new ways to work and earn a living. Small-scale farmers and micro-food producer adapted to the situation by not only continuing to produce their own food, but they also bartered their produce for other goods. Bartering became an important form of transacting goods where monetary exchanges are interrupted and/or when cash is not available. Through bartering, farm workers, farm dwellers and small-scale farmers have been able to access food, help each other and in so doing are displaying crucial clues for creating caring and nurturing communities and societies, in times of crisis and economic hardship resulting from Covid-19.

Planting has come in handy for him at a time when many farm workers, particularly in the game sub-