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**BELEZWA’S FOOD FLOWS**

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**Belezwa Interview notes**

**INTERVIEW INFORMATION**

Date: 13 February 2021 – present

Location: Constitutional Hill

Interviewer: Makhanana Malungane

1. **PERSONAL INFORMATIONS**

Name/pseudonym: Belezwa

Age: 48

Sex: Female

Highest Level of Education: Matric

Role in agro-food system: Farmer (hydroponics)

Do you have other occupations? Cleaner

How long have you been involved in the business? Since 2016

1. **FARMER**

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| 8) | Where do you farm? | Constitutional Hill, 11 Kotze Street Braamfontein |
| 9) | What do you grow? Which of these are your main products? | * Lettuce * Herbs (basil, mint, thyme, parsley) * Peppers * Tomatoes * Spinach and baby spinach * Chinese cabbage * Garlic and ginger * Roses flowers |
| 10) | How many hectares do you farm on? | Less than a hector |
| 11) | How did you obtain this land and under what tenure arrangements? | This farm is on the rooftop of a government building. I farm here under an agro-processing women empowerment incubation programme, so I am currently not paying any rent |
| 12) | Have you always produced and sold the same thing? | No. I use to only grow lettuce. I got very good at it my lettuce was so good that I have been interviewed on a couple of platforms |
| 13) | How did you start farming? How did you learn the business? Where did you obtain the capital? | I was introduced to farming at a home for abused women and children in the Johannesburg city centre. Farming was used as a way to help with the healing process from my past. At this point, the agro-processing incubation programme funded by the city [the City of Johannesburg] came to visit the home looking for volunteers willing to train in hydroponic - that is how I started. |
| 14) | How many people are employed full-time and how many casual or seasonal workers? | My children are my full-time employees. They help during the planting and harvesting phase. I only hire some people to help when I need to harvest, especially for very big orders. This happens every 8 weeks or so. |
| 15) | What are your main inputs | My farm is organic, so I do not use any fertilizers. So, my inputs are seedlings, water, electricity, the greenhouse, hydroponic A-frames. |
| 16) | Where do you obtain your inputs? | It is a mix. Some things I get through the programme, others I pay for myself, and some a get through donations.  For example, the tomato, peppers, spinach and onions I got from a local feeding programme. They asked me to grow the produce for them.  The A-frames I received from a sponsor I met during the training programme.  My lettuce seedlings I buy myself from a black seedling producer in the Westrand  Rent is different at my previous greenhouse the contract included the structure and free rent for the first year, thereafter you had to start paying rent based on the produce you sold.  But two-year later the arrangement changed, and she was informed that she no longer owned the greenhouse. So, I had to find a new place. But now I am not paying any rent. |
| 17) | Where do you sell, which markets, to who? | A kota place in Braamfontein, Johannesburg  Friends and family  Colleagues [at the city]  Spar in the Vaal |
| 18) | What do you supply? | Mainly lettuce, different kind of lettuce my speciality is leaf lettuce. I package them nicely as they do at Woollies |
| 19) | How often? | Every 8 to 12 weeks |
| 20) | How did you get/find your market? | The programme helped me to find the Kota place in Braam [fontien]  While the church and family and friends helped to spread the word about my lettuce |
| 21) | Are produce sold collected or delivered? | For the big orders like the Kota place and Spar. They come and pick them up.  The Kota place is not far so it is not a hustle. But for the Spar delivery, a colleague comes and collects them. Because he found the market for me, we share the profits and duties |
| 22) | What quantity or value of each crop/produce sold? | From 18 A-frames I produce 1200 heads of lettuces. I sell them from between R12 and R22 ahead. But I have lower prices for family and friends |
| 23) | Which markets are working best for you? | The Kota place in Braam. They are always willing to take my stock |
| 24) | What could be improved to make markets work better for you? | The big markets are the problem like Joburg market. There are just too many restrictions. People want food but they are stopping us from selling the food they need. |
| 25) | Have you sold elsewhere before? | Yes, Joburg market |
| 26) | Are you part of any association or organisations | Not really. But I am part of a group of woman hydroponic farmers. |
| 27) | Do you have any collaborations? | Yes. I am collaborating with one of the managers at the place I work. He finds me markets and we spilt the costs |
| 28) | Since this time last year, has there been any changes in your farming, and if so what changes and when and if there was a change what caused the changes? | 1. **What do you grow?**   Yes. I have begun growing other things than lettuce. Because of theft, I decided to help a feeding programme and grow their seedlings for them.   1. **The availability and prices you buy inputs for?**   No. There has been no change.   1. **The sources and prices you pay?**   Yes. I have started buying from a black seedling producer now. This was the first time I was trying it out.   1. **What do you sell?**   Yes. I have started selling herbs like mint and basil and spinach since the lockdown began   1. **The prices you sell for**.   Prices for lettuce have gone up because of the bad weather. So, I have taken advantage of this, but I have had to drop prices for my friends and family. I started selling 1 head for R5 ahead.   1. **In the cost of doing business.**   No. There has been no change.   1. **The quantity sold.**   Yes. My greenhouse was based at a local school in Braamfontein. My greenhouse was broken into and a lot of equipment was stolen because during the lockdown the school was not open and there was less activity around the school. So, people had a chance to scope the place and steal expensive equipment like pumps and lighting equipment.   1. **Customers**   Yes. I gained Spar as a customer   1. **Suppliers?**   Yes. I started to buy from other black suppliers. But my experience was not so nice. So, I went back to my normal suppliers   1. **People you collaborate with.**   Yes. I am collaborating with one of the managers at the place I work. He finds me markets and we spilt the costs.  I also train others on how to do hydroponics. It is actually how I am making extra cash right now   1. **The number of workers?**   No   1. **The government regulations or taxes or other government interventions**?   No   1. **Space where you sell?**   No   1. How you travel to sell produce or to get inputs or to get inputs and the transport used?   No   1. **What has the biggest impact of Covid-19 on your farming? (Short & long term)**   Theft has been the biggest impact. Had my farm not been robbed at the school, I would have been far by now. Because of the theft, I could not farm for over 6 months. I had to find a new place to farm and money to buy new equipment   1. **What are the impacts of the lockdown on your farming, including the markets you supply?**   The Kota place in Braam has not changed their order but the owner says it is tough because they have been fewer students. [Wits University, Rosebank College, UNISA and several other colleges are is based in Braamfontein and surrounding areas]   1. **Have there been any other changes (outside the farming) impacts in your life from Covid?**   No. |
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H. COVID-19 and COVID measures

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| 103) | What do you know about government responses to Covid? | Yes. I heard there is money set aside for farmers to help them with Covid |
| 104) | How did you hear about Covid and the government responses to it? | Since I work for a municipality, I am aware of some of the responses. But most of the responses I heard about on the news |
| 105) | How have these responses affected you? | Not much has changed |
| 106) | How have Covid and Covid measures affected your household and reproductive work? Any effects on economic activities | Covid made it easy for people to steal at my farm. Because of this, I could not make the money I use to make. Life is tough. My husband is a full-time pastor, so because we could not physically be at church it becomes hard for us to survive |
| 107) | How have you responded to the changes brought by Covid? | I live in Johannesburg CBD. So, I always wear a mask. I never make that mistake when I am outside. My children know that the number 1 rule especially because the place is so crowded the only way you can protect yourself is by wearing a mask. |
| 108) | Have you benefitted from any Covid related government or non-government support? If so, what support was received? | Yes. I had a visit from the Gauteng Department of Agriculture. They came to verify if my farm exists. Since then, I have had promises but little help from the government. There was a promise for seedlings which never received. But I am still hopeful something will come. |
| 109) | How have you responded to the changes imposed by the government? | 1. What did they do in response (probe any innovations, changes in equipment or technology)?   No   1. Participation in any associations? Has the role of that association changed?   No   1. Have you been part of or had any discussion with any government officials or leaders? If so with who/which level of government? Did you get any benefit or see any change from that discussion?   Yes. Not yet |
| 110) | Has there been any change since Covid in what you and your family eat? | Yes. We are not eating like we use to do. There is just less money |

**Additional notes**

* Community programme gave her seedlings to kick-start her business after the theft at the national school of Arts in Braamfontein
* She was part of a programme that helps woman and youth to start agriculture businesses. She was recruited by the City of Johannesburg as part of an entrepreneurship programme

**13 February 2021 | 12:00pm**

Constitutional Hill, Johannesburg

Due to Covid-19, Constitutional Hill was desolate. It was hard to find parking. But the guards were friendly and showed me where I should park.

The farm is located above the basement parking, which is situated on the second short left when driving from Empire Road. To get to the farm, you have to walk upstairs secured by a scaffolding. The stairs are likely 100m above the ground from the basement parking. The stairway has no lighting, and it is supported by what looks like manure bricks that can be as big a maxi brick. At the top there are three greenhouses - one belongs to Belezwa. Belezwa’s greenhouse is the closest to Kotze street.

Belezwa started her business after completing a 2-year training programme sponsor by an incubation programme at Wits University in December 2016. At that time, she was already working as a cleaner for the local municipality. When she started, she said her colleagues were not supportive and kept reporting her to management, but management was impressed with her business idea and offered some assists in the form of working hours. The manager even suggests that all the cleaners should start a hydroponics cooperative, but the other cleaners were not interested. She had a 2-year contract with various markets like the food-lovers market which she supplied for 4-months at the beginning of the business. After that, she serviced the Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market (JFPM).

Belezwa had not arrived. So, I decided to look around. I met Rhudzani, he works in one of the other greenhouses which belong to Kenneth. Kenneth grows hope for SAB. He has a farm in George in the Western cape and has another greenhouse in Pretoria.

Rhudzani was friendly and allowed me to see inside the greenhouse. He says that there are over 500 hops plants in the greenhouse currently and they are likely to be harvested in the first week of March 2021. These hops are bound for SAB - one of South Africa’s largest brewer.

He says the work is hard but rewarding. In the beginning, the seedlings require a lot of attention but over time they can stand on their own. He is the only full-time employee there but once the harvest time comes a couple of people come and help him harvest the hyssops. This happens at 3 to 4 times a year.

He says that heavy rains (Eloise) were tough on the current crop. Rhudzani says the greenhouse flooded due to the heavy rains. When I asked him about how Covid affect him he said there was no change in how the farm was operating. Kenneth was able to get a permit to come to the farm within a few days, so he was able to travel to Johannesburg CBD and Diepsloot quite easily with the permit. Also, there was no change in the farm demand even during the alcohol bans during the lockdown.

Belezwa arrived 30 mins later with her middle child, holding an ice lolly (cool-time). She looked exhausted. They had walked from the home on Plein street, about 3kms from the greenhouse based on the rooftop of one Constitutional Hill’s basement parking. The first thing she did was open up her greenhouse and see how her produce was doing. She was not impressed by the water level in the big plastic containers to run through the A-frames had run out. She explains to me that had been operational here for only a few months. Before she was based at the National School of Arts in Netown Johannesburg, where she grew lettuce for a couple of years. According to Belezwa her greenhouse at the school was much better, there she had automatic pumps, filtration systems and lights equipment to help her plants grow but those were stolen during a burglary during the day before alert 5 of the nationwide lockdown.

Now Belezwa’s farm was more rudimentary using basic equipment like the “Big Jim” storage box and plastic pipes to run her hydroponic farm. She found this place after bumping into a former mentor last year. The mentor helped her get the space for free and helped to get her all 18 A-frames she has in this greenhouse. Belezwa credits her former mentor for her entry back into farming because she did how she would get back on her feet. As she speaks, Belezwa is emotional her eyes become glassy, and she looks away from me. She says the 6 months when she could not farm were hard for her, especially because her family was solely depending on her cleaner income. But she happy because the current greenhouse is bigger than the previous one. In the old greenhouse could plant 3500 seedlings but now she can plant 4630 seedlings.

Inside the greenhouse, Belezwa was growing a few trays of tomatoes, spinach, peppers and onions for the community-based feeding scheme. Some of the peppers had rotted due to the heat. She explains that she could not come and check out the greenhouse during the week because of her work as a cleaner. Today Belezwa and her son came to check on the plants and prepare the greenhouse for the planting of 600 lettuce seedlings in the coming week.

A day before my visit, Belezwa was contacted by the Gauteng Department of Agriculture to arrange a truancy visit due to “fake” covid-19 claims made by farmers in the area. The visit happened 2 weeks later but Belezwa is yet to receive any covid-related support from the state.

Belezwa feels that Covid-19 has little effect on the future growth of her business. “All people need to eat,” says Belezwa. She believes her type of farming is immune to the impact of Covid because of the way her produce is grown - inside hydroponic greenhouses.