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Contact:

Nancy Baker, Communications Director, INMED HQ: +1 540-533-7490, nbaker@inmed.org

Janet Ogilvie, INMED South Africa Operations Manager: +27 011 486 1090 or jogilvie@inmed.org



A Message of Hope from the Desert

NORTHERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA, (September 15, 2017): In the drought-ravaged village of Pella in the Northern Cape of South Africa, a stalwart group of women are making hope bloom in the desert. With the help of INMED Partnerships for Children, a small nonprofit international humanitarian organization based in Sterling, Virginia, and monetary support from financial services firm Old Mutual, the Pella Food Garden Cooperative is learning how climate-smart agriculture and aquaponics can improve their lives today and bolster their entire community for the future.

Pella is located near the border of Namibia, where the land is primarily scrub desert with very low rain fall (approximately 16mm per year) with extreme heat in the summer and frigid cold nights in winter. The high salt content of the soil slows and stunts the growth of crops. Farmed traditionally, it is nearly impossible to eek a living out of this sun-baked terrain.

Life in Pella is both back-breaking and heart-breaking, with an unemployment rate hovering around 70% and a crime rate to match. It's often described as a desolate waste land. The Pella Food Garden Cooperative, consisting of five women (one of whom is disabled), has been struggling to farm this desolate waste land for eight years but has not generated enough income to utilize all their land or buy inputs for the land. The group earns an average of R200-R300 per month (\$14-21 US), requiring all of the members to rely on government assistance just to survive.

Esther, who has chaired the Pella Food Garden Cooperative since its inception, is a widow who is supporting three family members and a granddaughter. When she's not tilling the hard-packed soil of the co-op's land, she's volunteering at the village's primary school vegetable garden, coaxing the earth to produce vegetables for the school's meals program and teaching the children how to work in the garden. Esther understands the critical impact that access to fresh produce has on growing minds and bodies—which is why she has been instrumental in bringing a new farming technique called aquaponics to Northern Cape.

Aquaponics: A Solution for Drought Regions

Aquaponics is an innovative and highly intensive food production technique that combines aquaculture (fish farming) and hydroponics (soilless crop growing) in a closed system that is easily scalable to meet the needs of smallholder farmers, schools, government institutions, commercial enterprises and even home gardeners. It is climate-change resilient and is highly accommodating to individuals with disabilities.

INMED Partnerships for Children (INMED) is a pioneer in the field of aquaponics, which is at the heart of its climate-smart agriculture program. Aquaponics is helping hundreds of individuals achieve food security and sustainable income generation by strengthening local capacity to understand and address climate change, while resolving interrelated issues of environmental degradation, water scarcity and poverty in South Africa, Jamaica and Peru.

INMED has developed a simple and affordable aquaponics system that uses “off-the-shelf” local materials. Its modular design and limited mechanization make this system easy to operate and maintain and does not require fertilizers, chemicals or heavy labor. INMED and its in-country affiliates have teamed up with a variety of multi-sector partners to install dozens of aquaponics systems over the past decade as a climate-change-adaptation solution for drought regions.

INMED South Africa, for example, installed a commercial-sized aquaponics system for the Pella Food Garden Cooperative as well as a commercial-weight shade cloth for the group's adaptive agriculture vegetable garden. The INMED team also installed a drip irrigation system and enhanced the soil with manure/compost to neutralize the salt content and improve crop production. A full-time INMED staff member is facilitating daily training and will work with the group for a full year.

In addition to receiving technical training in adaptive agriculture, the Pella co-op members are receiving computer skills, accounting, business planning, marketing and sales training from

INMED South Africa NPC

Fancourt Office Park, Block 7, Loft Right, Northumberland Avenue, North Riding 2162
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INMED and Old Mutual. Less than six months into the project, the aquaponics system and drip-irrigation garden are yielding bountiful harvests, with vegetables significantly larger and healthier than in years past and markets eager to purchase their fresh, high-quality produce and fish.

At INMED's latest site visit, the women were eager to demonstrate their new skills and gigantic produce. Their project has been featured in a South African agricultural magazine and on a segment of SABC TV News. South Africa's national government and others are expressing keen interest in how aquaponics can help other struggling regions of the country.

The Personalities Behind the Pella Food Garden Cooperative

INMED South Africa Operations Manager Janet Ogilvie has spent a considerable amount of time training and coaching the entrepreneurial women of the Pella Food Garden Cooperative. Following are brief bios, based on her observations and discussions with four of the five determined ladies of the desert.



Esther: The leader and chairperson of the co-op, Ester is age 47 and the mother of three. She supports her son and oldest daughter, who are in their 20s, as well as a seven-year-old daughter. Esther lost her husband nine years ago. "When speaking of him, you can hear the love and respect she still has for him, and she still hurts from the loss," observes Ogilvie. Esther is a strong and determined woman, who believes INMED's climate-smart agriculture project will not only help her provide a better life for her family but improve the lives of the people in her village.



Silvana: Ester's 25-year-old daughter and the youngest member of the co-op, Silvana studied at a university for a time but has not been able to find a job. She has a daughter, who loves to go to the aquaponics project with her mom and grandma to help. Silvana's partner died from a drowning accident last year, so she is raising her daughter with the help of her mother.



Thelma: Physically disabled, Thelma is raising her grandson after her daughter died in child birth—an all-too-common occurrence in this part of the world. Still, Thelma finds joy in life, despite its hardships. With an infectious sense of humor, Thelma is often teased for cursing like a sailor. One day, her grandson asked her, "How can you be such a religious person and still swear so badly?" To which Thelma replied, "I don't mean to; the words just fall out my mouth," along with uproarious laughter.



Christelle: Esther's sister and the quiet one of the group, Christelle works hard to support her sister and family in all they do. She is an incredibly kind and gentle woman but with a very strong backbone.

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About INMED:

INMED Partnerships for Children is a nonprofit international development organization that has worked in more than 100 countries to pathways for disadvantaged children and families to achieve self-reliance and success. Through multi-sector partnerships, INMED builds effective systems that deliver innovative and sustainable approaches to break complex cycles of poverty and generate opportunities for success. INMED's programs in climate-smart agriculture/aquaponics, maternal and child health and economic development and have made a sustainable impact on the lives of millions of children and their families since 1986. Learn more at <https://inmed.org>.

About INMED South Africa:

Since 2006, INMED South Africa has implemented a variety of aquaponics and adaptive agriculture projects for schools, farming cooperatives and public/private initiatives. INMED's success has been its ability to work in collaboration with a wide range of corporate, foundation and government partners to improve the health, lives and opportunities of tens of thousands of South Africa's most vulnerable children. INMED South Africa is incorporated under Section 21 and is a registered non-profit organization (NPC/PBO) recognized by the Department of Social Development. Learn more at <https://inmed.org.za>.

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