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Disabled Free State farmers are feeding their communities through aquaponic farming

FREE STATE, SOUTH AFRICA (15 April 2020): The lives of nearly 100 disabled farmers in the Free State province have been turned around thanks to INMED Aquaponics™ led by the knowledgeable and compassionate Mantombi Madona, an adaptive agriculture facilitator and trainer for INMED South Africa.

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.

“Subsistence farmers here were struggling to produce enough vegetables even for themselves,” says Madona. “Today, the three cooperatives that I work with are producing enough tomatoes and lettuce and a variety of vegetables, not only for themselves, but for their communities as well at an affordable price. They even turn a profit.”

The cooperatives, made up mostly of disabled women and youth, are located in Hennenman (Phomolong Disabled Cooperative), Wesselsbron (Monyakeng Disabled People of South Africa), and Kroonstad (Lentsweleng Cooperative), the third largest city in the Free State.

The water-conserving adaptive agricultural technologies and techniques introduced by INMED are a revolutionary approach to the interrelated issues of poverty, food security, nutrition and economic development in the Free State, one of the worst drought-stricken regions in South Africa—as well as the region with the largest number of people with disabilities in the nation.

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“Aquaponics plays a vital role in these farmers’ food security, and they are now on their way to becoming self sufficient, which is especially important during the coronavirus shutdown,” says Madona. “Fortunately, INMED was able to receive a special exception from the government for a few members to visit the projects to monitor the seedlings, which will be ready for harvest in June.” INMED South Africa’s resource teams are also still available to offer telephonic guidance and support in the case of emergency.

Madona, who has a B.Tech in agricultural management from Central University of Technology in Bloemfontein, was hired by INMED in 2013, but retrenched two years later due to lack of funding. In 2018, when critical new funding from USAID came in, she was immediately re-hired, and has since become a shining example of how INMED Aquaponics can change lives.

Rabrand Mogoloa, Phomolong disability cooperative beneficiary , says, “We are happy to have INMED, and especially Mantombi, in our lives. We get a lot of training, and the aquaponics system means we are also developing as farmers, and actually producing fresh produce. This is something new to us. We are achieving food security and are able to generate income as disabled people. Our eyes have been opened and we are also very thankful to USAID for their support.”

Madona is also thankful for the support of INMED South Africa intern, Menzy Khumalo, who has completed courses in fish care and breeding. “Menzy helps me with the technical aspects of the aquaponics systems, as well as organizing, planning and monitoring the sites,” she says.

INMED’s Free State co-ops are showing the world the many advantages of aquaponics compared to traditional farming, adds Madona. “You can produce throughout the year, there is 90% less water consumption, less labour, it saves energy, and you can provide your own fertilizer from fish waste. You can also produce higher-quality produce at a faster rate than traditional farming.”

Also critical to the success of these operations are the relationships Madona has built with the farmers and their communities. “More than practical training and skills, I have tried to show love, commitment and respect to all in the community,” she says.

Although there are a high number of disabled people in the Province—more than 230 000 people with disabilities live in the Free State – many of them still face the challenge of fighting the stigma in South Africa’s rural communities, where disabled farmers are not supported at fresh produce markets.

“Fortunately, the communities here actually give support to these disabled farmers, as well as volunteer to help out in some of their activities,” notes Madona. “They like to spend time with these special people because they learn from them and can see and appreciate the value they add to the community.”

In Phase II of INMED’s Adaptive Agriculture Program (AAP) in the Free State, which started at the end of last year, training is expanded to include agro-processing, which will enable co-op members to supply larger, more distant and commercial markets.

This will contribute to job creation in the aquaponics operations and production, food processing, marketing and building, which in turn will contribute greatly to ongoing economic relief in this under-resourced province.

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Editor's notes

About INMED Partnerships for Children

INMED Partnerships for Children is a non-profit international development organisation that has worked in more than 100 countries for over 30 years to build pathways for vulnerable children and families to achieve well-being and self-reliance. Through multisector partnerships and in-country affiliates, INMED builds effective systems that deliver innovative and sustainable approaches to break complex cycles of poverty for current and future generations.

INMED South Africa

Since 2006, in-country affiliate INMED South Africa has been working in collaboration with a wide range of corporate, foundation and government partners to transform the health, lives and futures of South Africa's most vulnerable children. INMED South Africa's programmes focus on food security, child and community health, and economic and social development via climate-smart agriculture and participatory education. Incorporated under Section 21, INMED South Africa is a registered non-profit organization (NPC/PBO) recognized by the Department of Social Development and the South African Revenue Service (SARS). For more information, visit: www.inmed.org.za.

About USAID

The Expanding Participation of the Disabled in Climate-Adaptive Agriculture Program is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

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