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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**SA need to address main drivers of chronic malnutrition, says Stellenbosch businessman**

CAPE TOWN. – A former teacher and visionary businessman from Stellenbosch has emerged as an inspirational thought leader in seeking to address South Africa's second pandemic - chronic malnutrition that affects at least 27% of South Africa's under 5-years old children.

Chronical malnutrition or stunting has been associated with delayed cognitive development, impaired physical growth, lower productivity, and a greater risk of poor health including the development of cardio-metabolic disease that may be transmitted to the next generation.

Chronic malnutrition causing stunted growth under infants and small children has stubbornly been with South Africa for the past 40 years. This grim statistic means a quarter of South Africa's younger population can be considered to be physically and cognitively impaired. (Source: https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-015-1844-9)

In 2019, the Lancet (a weekly peer-reviewed general medical journal) estimated that chronic malnutrition can cost a middle-income country like South Africa about 12% of its GDP. With a R3 trillion GDP, this amounts to a staggering R360 billion annually.

Org van der Wath, executive director of the INANI Start Well Foundation, bid a successful corporate career farewell in 2017 and became involved full-time in developing nutritious meals and cost-effective ways to process nutrient-dense food offered to children in vulnerable communities.

"I started my career as a school teacher in 1992, but my entrepreneurial spirit soon led me to the private and later also the corporate sector," said Van der Wath.

"After completing an MBA thesis on land reform at the Stellenbosch Business School in 2016, I became acutely aware of the high levels of stunting and critical shortcomings in the nutritional value of sponsored meals supplied to the poor and underprivileged communities in the country.

"To address chronic malnutrition (stunting) we needed to understand the main driver of the pandemic. Which "growth nutrients" are children lacking in their first 5-years of life?" he asked.

As the answer is technical. A simple analogy could assist:

A house is a combination of foundations, floors, walls, windows, doors and a roof. Inside the house there can be beds, a fridge, a TV, a mirror among many other things.

Similarly, food is a combination of fat, proteins and carbohydrates. These are called the macro-nutrients. To build on the analogy, they are the “house”.

Inside the food there can be Calcium, Iron, Vitamin D many other micro-nutrients, which forms the “beds, fridge, TVs, baths and mirrors”.

As a bath is not very useful without a house, micro-nutrients cannot be eaten as food. They form important minuscule parts of the food we eat.

Large food processors’ marketing departments craft convincing messages about micro-nutrients being the be-all and end-all for childhood growth. This is simply misrepresenting facts.

They do this because micro-nutrients can cheaply and more importantly, profitably be added to recipes. Often the portion of the packaging on which the nutritional claims of the micro-nutrient contents are printed on, is more expensive than the actual added micro-nutrients.

“How do we achieve the improvement in the nutritional value of sponsored meals?

“Very specifically, bioavailable growth nutrients like fats, proteins and carbohydrates must be present in meals during every child’s critical growth phases.

“If the household cannot supply these, feeding scheme meals at school should be the safety net for them.

“In the current business model, large food processors win tenders when they offer the cheapest meals to feeding scheme projects. As a society, we cannot continue to serve sugar-rich, nutrient-poor cereals to growing children in poor communities. Through our not-for-profit processing business structure, we vastly improve the quality of ready-to-eat meals. It is interesting how a different focus can achieve totally different outcomes.

“We establish not-for-profit food processing plants with the purpose to sustainably manufacture and sell nutrient-dense morning meals at pioneering low costs to feeding scheme projects serving children from poverty-stricken communities.

“The first of these not-for-profit whole food plants – the first of its kind in the country - will be in production during early 2021. A plant can service the needs of 200 000 children. Our vision is to set up at least ten of these plants. It will certainly help to address the chronic malnutrition (stunting), which impacts 1.7 million South African under 5-year old children every year.

“The consequences if we do not act decisively now, would be too ghastly to contemplate,” warned Van der Wath.

“According to the World Bank, the Human Capital Index (HCI) measures the productivity of a future worker and the current HCI of South Africa paints a bleak picture. With an HCI that is below 0.42 South Africa ranks at 134 out of 175 countries (Kenia ranks at 92 with a HCI of 0.56).

"What it actually means is that a child born in South Africa today would be 41% as productive as they could be under complete health and education. South Africa presents a paradox because it is classified by the World Bank as an upper-middle income country which means it is quite a wealthy country compared to other countries on the continent,” Van der Wath says.

“To stop the silent hunger epidemic in the country, government, donors, corporate CSI offices and feeding scheme operators must demand that growing children receive growth nutrients daily during their first 5-years of live. There are no short cuts. This is basic biology,” said Van der Wath.

*Media release compiled by Fanie Heyns on behalf of Inani Start Well Foundation. For more information, contact Org van der Wath on 079-5140067 or Leonie Venter on 076-8356430.*