

**INANI StartWell Foundation-plant to serve 200 000 meals daily**  
***First of its kind in combatting childhood stunting in SA***

In a ground-breaking initiative, the first of its kind in the world, INANI StartWell Foundation launched a not-for-profit food processing plant in Springs, East Rand. At pioneering low costs, the plant will sustainably manufacture and sell nutrient-dense morning meals to feeding scheme projects and institutions. At full capacity, the plant can serve 200 000 toddlers and pre-schoolers from poverty-stricken communities a daily meal portion. This initiative established the INANI StartWell Foundation as a leading role player in the fight against chronic malnutrition and childhood stunting amongst South African children.

Org van der Wath, executive director of INANI StartWell Foundation, is passionate about the innovative business model in which the food processing plant will produce the food. "Our business is not focussed on creating wealth for shareholders," explains van der Wath. He continued to say that for the first time the focus of the ready-to-eat meal recipes is on the growing child's needs, rather than looking at shareholder interests. "We have profound and scientifically-based reasons why specific ingredients and nutrients are included in the StartWell meals. Yes, the product is sold to the market and feeding scheme initiatives. We are not a charity organization in itself as the company needs to generate revenue to pay our monthly bills running a world-class food factory. One of the real beauties of using this business model is the fact that our cost allocations are transparent to all parties including NGO's, donors and Corporate Social Investment Programs procuring from us".

Few South Africans are aware that almost one in every three children in South Africa suffers stunting due to lack of nutrition. Childhood stunting is the impaired physical growth and delayed cognitive development that occurs when growing babies and children fail to reach their height-for-age growth markers. The most significant driver for stunting occurrence is a poor nutritional diet during the first 2 000 days, or the first 5-years of a child's life. Van der Wath explains that individuals exposed to stunted growth during their early growth phases cannot be distinguished from healthy, well-nourished ones with the naked eye. Therefore child growth needs to be closely monitored – sometimes not so accurately done within poverty-stricken communities. The sad reality is that their physical and cognitive impairments will cause them to live their lives with this backlog.

"Although only about 100 000 of our under 5-year old children are considered hungry or wasted (under-weight-for-age), UNICEF indicates that 1.7 million of the 6.5 million South African children in this age group suffer from chronic malnutrition (under-height-for-age) also referred to as silent hunger. These 1.7 million children have access to food but not to nutrients," van der Wath explains. "Their diets are energy-rich but nutrient-poor. Their tummies are filled, but the food does not carry the nutrients required to build their immune systems and develop them physically and cognitively to fulfil their full potential."

It took about three years to design and pilot the StartWell™ nutrient-rich cereal to find the right balance between nutrient integrity, texture, taste, flavour and costs. As a result, the meals are delicious and desirable for the children. Various private food scientists and dietitians worked on refining the recipe over this period. Academics at the University of Stellenbosch, the University of Cape Town and the North-West University also assisted with ensuring the nutrient profile of the meal supports child growth.

Bio-available proteins with the correct amino-acid profile are the building blocks for growing healthy bodies. If we are serious about addressing stunted growth in poor communities, it is vital to address protein deficiencies in growing children's diets. There are just no shortcuts for this important biological fact. At a cost of R2-00 for a 35g portion, the StartWell™ nutrient-dense cereal will deliver around

85% of a toddler's daily protein needs. The meal also carries the precise vitamin and minerals required to support child growth. Fortifying with specific vitamins and minerals is relatively easy and inexpensive to do.

Government and many private feeding schemes provide food to more than nine million children daily. They address hunger and try to provide nutrients to children in poor communities. However, their limited budgets don't always allow them to address the high demand for nutrient-rich food. They often just duplicate the same cheap and regularly available staple foods used by households in vulnerable communities.

"Often feeding schemes provide meals fortified with soya to increase the protein content. However, many food scientists question whether soya as a primary protein source can contribute to a poor child's chronic shortage of essential growth nutrients. In addition, soya is a double-edged sword as it has a bitter taste and requires sugar as a mask. The reality in South Africa is that as long as sugar addition to morning meal recipes aimed at growing children is not regulated, these cheap energy-rich and nutrient-poor meals will remain the go-to option," explains Van der Wath.

"We aim to play a crucial role in the food manufacturing value chain by serving underprivileged communities in South Africa. We are excited to partner with institutions focussing on early child development and feeding schemes supporting our countries toddlers through their early development stages," continues Van der Wath.

These partnerships are imperative because we face a social and humanitarian disaster if we don't act now. A total of 34.4 % of the country's workforce is unemployed, food insecurity impacts 11.8 million South Africans daily, and 300 000 more SA children become stunted every year.

It is also crucial from an economic point of view. Chronic malnutrition (or stunting) can cost a middle-income country like South Africa 8% of its GDP according to an article published by The Lancet in 2019 (a weekly peer-reviewed general medical journal).

"With a R3 trillion GDP, this amounts to a staggering R240 billion annually," says Van der Wath. If the trend continues and 25% ( $\pm$  15m persons) of our population were exposed to chronic malnutrition during their early growth phases, this number is not too far-fetched. It amounts to R16 000 per person per annum, which could well be the reality. Especially if you consider The Lancet's explanation: *"The economic effects of stunting include cognitive and other developmental deficits that affect lifetime productivity, greater incidence of infectious and parasitic disease that cause physical impairments, and greater risk of chronic diseases in adults, with their attendant high medical and indirect costs"*.

According to the World Bank, nutritional investments are one of the best value-for-money development actions, generating average returns of 16 dollars for every dollar invested.

The World Bank's 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 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, according to Van der Wath.

“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 five years of life. There are no shortcuts. This is basic biology,” advocates Van der Wath.

We need to improve the nutritional safety nets available in crèches, pre-schools and Early Child Development Centres (ECD’s). Van der Wath calls on Corporate South Africa’s CSI initiatives and feeding scheme programs to support this unique not-for-profit food processing project.

“The cost of the construction of the plant of 2 500 square metres in Springs was R11 million. It will manufacture 200 tons of nutrient-dense cereals every month and will employ thirty workers,” explains Van der Wath.

As a not-for-profit organization, we are committed to expand our footprint and establish more plants in order to eradicate stunting in South Africa over the next decade. We hope to achieve this through substantial collaboration with local and international businesses, investors, private feeding schemes and other partners.

To celebrate this exciting accomplishment, the Inani StartWell Foundation is having the **Factory Grand Opening and Project Launch** on the **19<sup>th</sup> of October 2021**. This will include a short presentation, a factory tour and the Village project launch. For more information, or to attend the proceedings please contact Yolandi van der Wath: [yolandi@inanicfs.org.za](mailto:yolandi@inanicfs.org.za) or 082 325 3053