

## SHARED INTEREST

### **“Opportunities have come up for us”**

“It is so pathetic to look at a young person, and see someone so brilliant not working,” declares Pildah Modjadji, mother of eight children and grandmother of 11. Mrs. Modjadji is a former school principal and one of the dynamic women organizers of a community initiative in the small rural village of Pankop, Mpumalanga, where two Shared Interest guarantees are beginning to create livelihoods and jobs for 300 of the community’s 2,400 families.

In this traditional Tswana-speaking community, formerly part of the Bophutatswana “bantustan,” jobs are few and far between. Men typically seek employment in the province’s mines, or to go Pretoria or Johannesburg in search of manufacturing work. They are likely to return once a month. This leaves the women in charge of much of the daily life of the community, under the traditional governance structure.

The project began in 2002, when a neighboring farmer advised the community that the area could be a good place to raise tropical fruits. Chief Moluka allocated tribal lands (from the former Bophutatswana homeland) and encouraged young people to cultivate them, but with little success. Next the community’s women took over the plots and began to raise fruits and vegetables. In 2003, they conferred with a consultant company (Stratviz), that suggested the community create a facility to purchase and dry its produce.

Recognizing that there are only two other large dehydration plants in the country, the project made economic sense. Individual families welcomed the initiative -- eager to be able to afford bread, electricity and school fees. The youth, who appreciated the potential for job creation, named the project “Diretsogetse” which, in Tswana, means “opportunities have come up for us.”

Stratviz worked with the newly formed Pankop Women Farmers’ Forum, traditional and municipal leaders to design the project and secure government support. With these funds, they began to renovate the abandoned boys’ and girls’ high school dormitories that had been replaced by a more modern government school after 1994, and prepared an initial dehydration facility. In 2005, the project trained 65 young people to do factory work, and prepared four on the site to train others to peel the produce and use the machines.

In 2006, the community applied to ABSA Bank for a loan to improve and expand the facility and purchase driers. ABSA brought the project to Thembani, which worked closely with the community to engineer the financing. With the help of a Shared Interest guarantee, the loan is currently providing the working capital for the expansion and operation of the facility. To date, 100 workers have been hired from the community – the majority of them under the age of 35. When the plant is fully operational it will employ 200 people – a projected 80 percent of them women.

Early in 2007, with a second Shared Interest guarantee, the project launched its next phase: organizing participating families to increase fruit and vegetable production. Since some families had no previous farming experience, Mrs. Modjadji and her sister

organizers began to work intensively with their neighbors. "We are teaching them that the richness comes from the soil," she says. So far 100 families have each received one-fifth of a hectare (with a well), and begun to grow fruit trees and vegetables in their own yards. The community is also preparing to farm collectively in natural greenhouses made from poles covered with special nets. When workers observed that poles might tear the cloth, they asked local auto repair shops to donate used tires, which they cut up and nail to the tops of the poles to protect the nets.

The women in the project have already secured the services of an accountant and auditor, and opened individual accounts at ABSA bank. As their production and incomes grow, the processing plant will increase its supply and economize by virtually eliminating fruit transportation costs. Eventually the business will expand further by purchasing from neighboring farmers. Mrs. Modjadji reports, "When I go home now there will be a message some has left under my avocado tree. Other communities want to know how we got started."

At the end of the production process, the community sells the dehydrated fruit and vegetables to other companies for a variety of purposes. These include inexpensive, nutritious and hardy fruits and vegetables that can be rehydrated by simply immersing them in water, or used as components for canned and powdered soups and spices.

The project plans to purchase equipment to make juice from their mangos, lemons, guavas and bananas, and marketing some of their products (such as hoodia and the African potato) to pharmaceutical purchasers. Diretsogetse has also begun to explore marketing linkages to a number of potential partners, including the union Solidarity, representatives of the Mpumalanga school nutrition scheme, and the University of Pretoria program akin to Meals on Wheels. They already have more demand than they can meet.

In the future, they also envision satellite enterprises, such as a sewing business that would train and hire local women to make the uniforms and protective clothing for the project's factory and field workers. Anticipating needs of their employees, the majority of whom will be young women, Diretsogetse plans to organize a day care center and pre-school. This will enable young working mothers to care for and educate their pre-schoolers on site, with the support of students from the University of Pretoria, who will gain practical experience under professional supervision. A local factory has already promised to make and donate the furniture.

Finally, to promote occupational health and safety (the nearest formal medical services are thirty kilometers away), Diretsogetse is planning to train workers in on-site first aid measures, and enlist volunteer doctors to staff a weekly clinic for its workers and their families.

"Now we are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel," concludes Mrs. Modjadji. "When God calls me, I will know that I have helped the young people of this community to eat and drink and dress and receive an education."