



Groep 91 Uitvoer & Kaross Foundation

Letsitele citrus grower comes closer to its community



Groep 91 Uitvoer, a family-owned citrus producer from Letsitele has been successfully growing and exporting lemons, grapefruit and Valencia oranges across the globe for more than three decades, but it's their work through the Kaross Foundation that really excites Jan-Louis Pretorius, Groep 91 Uitvoer CEO and chairperson of the Kaross Foundation.

The Kaross Foundation is a non-profit joint venture between Groep 91 and Kaross, a well-known South African embroidery studio.

Together, they have been investing in the holistic health of no-fee government schools in the rural villages of Xihoko and Nkambako (the towns where most of their employees live) since 2015. The foundation follows a partnership approach, with projects focusing on teacher training, principal mentorship and pedagogical

programmes aimed at sustainably improving learners' academic experience.

The foundation's activities are in part funded by the Albert Heijn Foundation and Waitrose Foundation (South Africa), as well as by other strategic suppliers and service providers of Groep 91.

Positive contribution to the lives of rural children

According to a 2021 survey of their permanent staff, there is a collective group of 438 children, mostly of primary school age, whose parents work at Groep 91 Uitvoer. The families of the 400 embroiderers employed by Kaross Studio equally gain benefit from the foundation's work at the schools in the area.

An exhibition of art at the Kaross Studio by high school learners participating in the Sondela Open Dialogues programme (presented by the Valued Citizens Initiative (<https://www.valuedcitizens.co.za/>)) offers a firsthand opportunity to witness the impact that the Kaross Foundation's work has made on learners, remarks Jan-Louis.



The launch of the art exhibition, open until the end of the month at Kaross Studio in Letsitele

“At the opening of the exhibition, some of the learners spoke about their art as it represented their view of the world and their dreams. To witness their self-confidence was incredible to me. If I think back to five or ten years ago and what we found in the schools back then, it's clear that something positive has happened. Can it only be ascribed to our involvement? Of course not, but I would like to believe that we've made a positive contribution to the lives of these wonderful children and that gives us the inspiration to continue,” he says.

The theme of the exhibition, whose opening was also attended by Mopani District education officials, was Come Closer, chosen in recognition of the importance of alignment with a wider group of institutional and like-minded partners towards addressing the needs of their community.

Limited agriculture school programmes despite its economic importance

Although some high schools have Agriculture Management Practices as a subject, learners are at best exposed to experiential learning within vegetable gardens at their schools.



Groep 91's packhouse has an intake capacity of around 500 tonnes per day, using a 10-lane Greefa SmartSort optical grader.

Access to and insight into the world of large-scale commercial farming and its related careers is still limited, which is ironic, Jan-Louis says, given that these businesses form the economic backbone of most rural communities.

Letsitele is South Africa's foremost production region for both grapefruit and Valencia oranges, with more than 12,000 hectares in production.

"We're looking into introducing a structured agricultural programme at some of the high schools, which is part of the reason we're looking for alignment with other role-players such as the department of education," says Judy Müller, general manager of the Kaross Foundation.

Practical outings to Groep 91 and other farms and packhouses in the area have been arranged for high school learners from grades ten to twelve. Last year, learners also visited the Duroi Nursery in Letsitele where citrus and other subtropical fruit trees are propagated.

"This year we want to expose learners to more of the agricultural industry," Judy says.



High school students seeing how the million Valencia oranges grown by Groep 91 Uitvoer are packed and prepared for the market

The work of the Kaross Foundation spans from early childhood development right through to school leadership development. Although academic development is important, the foundation's first focus area is improving the integrity of the school system by focusing on the educators and leadership of the schools.

English second language programmes, both aimed at improving teaching skills and learner proficiency, have been introduced because English literacy sets a footing for the rest of learning to take place. Computer-aided maths instruction is offered at the primary schools through Cami labs set up at two of the partnering primary schools.

In all that they do, they strive to improve parental involvement, which traditionally has been very low. Every month the Kaross Foundation discusses its work with the wider public on Vision FM, a local Xitsonga language radio station in the Mopani District.

Sustainable improvement in education is a marathon, not a sprint

Jan-Louis points out that their investment into education is long-term in nature, realizing that the operational requirements expected from employees have become increasingly complex "and," he adds, "that talent has to come from this community. A school is the epicentre of community health. We believe that when schools produce academically and socially well-adapted learners, it has a ripple effect into the broader community."



There are 438 children whose parents work at Groep 91 and who benefit from the Kaross Foundation's work in their schools (photos supplied by Groep 91 Uitvoer & Kaross Foundation)

Groep 91 Uitvoer is clearly focused as a commercial farming and exporting enterprise, but as a family-owned business, he notes, they have an undeniable interest in the welfare and development of their employees and community.

“We do not want to stand on the sidelines and criticize,” Jan-Louis says. “Our goal is to be part of the solution - an integrated member of the rural economy. That’s who we are.”

“We are in it for the long run, and this marathon has just started,” Judy observes.



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