

## Medi-Plantas - One Year Old (Received March 11, 2009)

On March 5 to 7, I visited what has become known as the Medi-Plantas project, in the rural Mozambique area called Molumbo, in the interior highlands of Zambezia province within sight of the border with Malawi. I went with Orlando Fumane, CCM Zambezia's Project Monitor, the man in the yellow hat in some of the photos. Pastor Manteiga Pulaise, the project manager, showed us around; he's the one in blue in the photos, with the black ball-cap.



Medi-Plantas is almost a year old; it started up last April. At that time, one medicinal plant garden was set up in Molumbo, a nursery from which seedlings could then be transplanted to other gardens in other neighbourhoods. Now there are two nursery gardens, the second one in Muguliwa, grown with cuttings from the first. The Molumbo field has 10 different plants; the second Muguliwa field has 13. The land was granted by the local chiefs, who are solidly in favour of the project.

It didn't rain from March to December of last year. With digging a water-hole by hand and rigorous watering the Medi-Plantas team managed to save the plants, but they weren't in shape for transplanting. Then—in this era of erratic climate change—intense rains in January and February of 2009 battered and flattened the plants. With tender care, most have since recovered. Normally the rainy season tapers off after March. Now is the time for harvesting of leaves to make the medicines. Right after harvest, with the soil moist but no longer pummeled and saturated by rains, the plants will be transplanted to thirty (30) new gardens, in neighbourhoods where HIV+ Medi-Plantas clients are already trained in caring for the plants and making and using the medicines. Besides the plants, each receives a hoe, a watering can, and vegetable seeds for improving their diet with tomato, cabbage, carrot, onion, pepper and garlic.



Many of the people already are growing some of these medicinal plants in their yards or fields, such as aloe vera, periwinkle, and African potato. This last has been one of the most successful. Most of the clients use it, in the form of a tea made from the dried and pounded tuber; it helps stimulate immunity by promoting white blood-cell growth, and improves digestion so that the body benefits more from what it consumes.



Two photos are of Antonio (with the tubers) and Isabel (with the entire plant) showing off their own African potatoes.

Medi-Plantas has also identified and is promoting 7 other plants which grow wild locally and are used by local traditional healers for treating symptoms associated with HIV/AIDS. Through Medi-Plantas, CCM is working closely with the local registered members of AMETRAMO, the Association of Traditional Healers of Mozambique.

Medi-Plantas is closely meshed with the government health service, and combines medicinal plants with conventional pharmaceutical treatment. We visited the Molumbo Health Centre. There, people can be tested for HIV—but the Centre has no means to treat them. So the Centre refers HIV-positive patients to CCM, the only organization in the entire district treating patients with HIV/AIDS. When we met with the government administrator for Molumbo he called the project “excellent”, a “miracle”, and he thanked and congratulated CCM. Pastor Manteiga the Medi-Plants leader negotiated with the Ministry of Health to receive, store and administer anti-retro-viral treatment (in Portuguese, abbreviated as TARV) right in Molumbo. Otherwise, people would need to travel 100 km to Gurue, the nearest centre equipped to administer TARVs, paying a round-trip fare of \$10 US—absolutely impossible for anyone in Molumbo.



The testing of a patient’s white-blood-cell level, which determines when TARV should begin, also can only be done in Gurue. CCM pays the patients’ fare, and Medi-Plantas workers accompany them to help steer the way through the medical procedures and bureaucracy, which can be intimidating for unwell rural people unfamiliar with the city and its ways. For greater efficiency, CCM organizes these visits once or twice a month, each time taking a dozen or so patients. On one of the days we were there, 17 HIV-positive patients made the journey in the back of a truck to Gurue, including 4 children; the photo shows them. Before the trip, CCM treats patients, for weeks if necessary, with both traditional and conventional Health-Centre medicines to strengthen them for the strenuous journey.

Currently Medi-Plantas treats 59 patients. More are appearing every week—19 new cases in January and February of this year. Early in the project, its workers gave 122 presentations in the communities to a total of 3294 people, telling them what the project does, and urging them to take part and to spread the word to others. These talks were set up in collaboration with local chiefs, political parties, pastors, the ministry of health, and other community leaders.



Immediately after, people started showing up daily at the CCM office, and still are showing up; the veranda has become the waiting room, and Manteiga wants to have a local carpenter make some wooden benches. One photo shows patients waiting, and another some others leaving for home. Some come on their own, others are referred by the Health Centre when they test positive for HIV.

Often too, pastors or others come to the project office worrying about a neighbour, relative, or fellow member of their church congregation and asking for the project's help. In these cases Manteiga or one of his colleagues Rosa and Domingos visit the person at home, and in every case so far the sick one has accepted to join the program.



A key to the success of Medi-Plantas is family visits. When Medi-Plantas began, Pastor Manteiga met 2 HIV-positive people rejected by their families, forced to live apart from the house and behind a thatch screen; both died shortly after. This no longer happens, once Manteiga or Rosa or Domingos explain HIV-AIDS to the families and make sure that the HIV-positive person



is accepted and loved. One photo shows a home visit with Maria, the woman with her baby, who is also HIV-positive.

The two project centres are each 22 km from Molumbo village the site of the project office. The roads in the rainy season are nearly impassable. Manteiga, Rose and Domingos have a small motorcycle and two bicycles to make their rounds of their patients' homes, and journeys back and forth from the Health Centre and the Medi-Plantas office.

We visited several of these, and heard their stories.

Harrison is 9 years old—itsself a miracle, since few children born HIV-positive live past age five. Medi-Plantas ministered to his mother till she died last September; her AIDS was too advanced by the time the project reached her. At that time Harrison was too weak to walk, and his legs were covered with sores. The miracle continues: This time when we met him, after 4 months of Medi-Plantas treatment, he was running through the CCM yard chasing chickens for supper. We couldn't slow him down to get his picture taken.

Isabel is 33. She and her husband and her 18-month-old son are HIV-positive. "I'm very grateful to the project," she told us. "We have learned how to care for ourselves, how we can live life with the HIV."

Antonio is 40. He has 10 children, 7 still living at home. With Medi-Plantas treatment including African potato, in alliance with conventional antibiotics which CCM has helped with, "I feel robust and very satisfied." He has tuberculosis, which often accompanies HIV/AIDS as an opportunistic infection. "If it weren't for this project, I would have lost my life by now." He showed us the wide pepper fields he and his family grow. We saw huge numbers of the small red harvested peppers drying on straw mats in his yard.

Raimundo is 40. His wife died late last year of AIDS, and he himself was so sick he believed he was about to follow her. He lives with his mother and the orphaned children. His wife was a cousin of Rosa, the Medi-Plantas worker, who



brought him to the project. After 5 months with Medi-Plantas "I feel strong enough that the TARVs I take are no problem." He showed us his huge grass-roofed tobacco drying-shed, full of hanging leaves. "I am happy," said Raimundo.



Lorodina is 23. When she found out she was HIV-positive her husband left her, with 3 small children, the youngest also HIV-positive. We talked to her at the CCM office where she had spent the night sleeping on a straw mat on the floor with her baby, having gotten in late the night before from her first trip to Gurue for testing. This happens often; the project office is also by default a hostel.

Maria is 30 and has 5 children, the oldest twelve, the youngest just over a year old, and HIV-positive; her husband too has abandoned her. We talked to Maria at her home.

Both women said that before Medi-Plantas they had had no hope, felt themselves weakening, didn't know how they would keep on working their fields and feeding their children, or how their children would live once their mother had died. Lorodina and Maria today are living fairly normal lives, thanks to Medi-Plantas.

Pastor Manteiga says he always wanted to be a medical missionary. Now, with Medi-Plantas, that's exactly what he is.

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