



ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket

October 2026 | Introduction to the ECD Nutrition Basket

Release date: 14 October 2026

A practical translation of nutrition requirements into food that can be specified, costed and monitored.

The ECD Nutrition Basket is designed to make the food requirement for young children attending ECD centres visible — and therefore make its cost and financing implications visible.

NUTRITION FIRST. AFFORDABILITY INFORMED.

September 2026 headline costing

R7.35 EG1: 9–23 months per child per day	R13.06 EG2: 2–6 years per child per day	R11.92 Illustrative 20-child ECD centre weighted average per child per day	R4,768.47 Illustrative monthly food cost 20 children × 20 days
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Current food allocation

The 2026/27 DBE ECD subsidy includes a R9.60 per child per day food component.

Illustrative financing gap

R928.47 per month for a 20-child centre at 100% coverage; R2,080.47 at 70% coverage.

Important:

Costing:

- The current costing covers food ingredients only. Labour, cooking fuel, water, cleaning materials, storage and equipment are excluded.
- For children aged 9–23 months (EG1), the lower food cost should not be interpreted as a lower total nutritional or feeding cost, as breastmilk and infant formula are not included in the standard Basket costing. Milk feeding remains an important nutritional contribution for children in this age group and should be considered when interpreting the EG1 costing.

Financing:

- The 2026/27 DBE ECD subsidy includes a R9.60 per child per day food component. The illustrative financing gap is modelled according to the proportion of children in an ECD centre who are covered by this subsidy. Not all ECD centres receive DBE funding, and among funded centres, not all children necessarily qualify for the subsidy. The illustrative gap therefore shows the potential food-cost shortfall under different levels of subsidy coverage; it does not imply that every ECD centre or child currently experiences the same gap.

Developed in collaboration with:



From Nutrition Guidelines to a Costed Basket

How the ECD Nutrition Basket is built — and what it provides

The ECD Nutrition Basket is one application of a broader nutrition-to-food methodology. The nutritional requirement comes first; the basket translates that requirement into practical food quantities; costing then shows what that food costs.

The Basket provides a practical snapshot of the food required to provide a diverse and nutritionally appropriate diet for children attending ECD centres during the ECD day. It is a defined food requirement that can be costed and monitored as food prices change.

The ECD Nutrition Basket is a national costing application of the framework. The methodology can potentially be adapted to different ECD contexts while maintaining nutritional integrity.

01	02	03	04	05
NUTRITION GUIDANCE	MINIMUM ADEQUATE ECD NUTRITION FRAMEWORK	BASKET MENU	ECD NUTRITION BASKET	PRICE MONITORING
National nutrition guidance provides the evidence-based foundation.	Defines age, meal structure, portions and substitution principles.	Operationalises the nutrition logic in a practical five-day ECD menu.	Quantifies the required foods using standard quantities and specifications.	Tracks what the basket costs as food prices change.

The Basket provides

 Food quantities Specified foods and standard quantities	 Meals A practical menu architecture	 Costs A transparent costing model	 Planning tools Information for implementation and budgeting
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Potential use • ECD planning and budgeting • Price monitoring • Policy and financing discussions	Potential future adaptations • Provincial / district contexts • Garden-supported ECD settings • Other context-specific baskets
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What is in the ECD Nutrition Basket?

A practical five-day meal architecture, with substitution options

The ECD Nutrition Basket translates nutrition requirements into a practical pattern of meals — while allowing flexibility without compromising nutritional quality.

Meal architecture

BREAKFAST	MORNING SNACK	LUNCH	AFTERNOON SNACK
Porridge + milk	Fruit + dairy	Cooked meal: protein + starch + vegetables	Bread + spread

Foods tracked in the September costing

Starchy foods • Maize meal • Instant sorghum porridge • Brown bread • Rice • Potatoes	Vegetables • Carrots • Butternut • Spinach • Cabbage • Onions • Tomatoes
Fruit • Apples • Bananas	Legumes • Dried red-speckled beans • Lentils • Dehydrated soya mince
Animal-source foods • Eggs • Pilchards in tomato sauce	Milk / dairy • Full-cream fresh or UHT milk • Maas
Fats / spreads • Margarine • Sunflower oil • Peanut butter	Seasoning • Salt

Substitution principle

Substitutions should maintain the nutritional intent of the meal and be practical in the ECD setting.
Example: Butternut ↔ Orange fleshed sweet potato

Note on EG1: The 9–23 month costing reflects the food component supplied through the ECD Nutrition Basket. Breastmilk is not assigned a monetary value, and infant formula is not included as a standard Basket cost. Milk feeding remains an important contribution to the nutritional intake of children in this age group and is therefore important context when interpreting the EG1 costing.

What does the ECD Nutrition Basket cost — and what does this mean for financing?

October 2026 | Food ingredients only

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The financing logic

1	2	3	4	5
CHILD NEEDS	FOOD REQUIREMENT	BASKET COST	FINANCING	MONITORING
Nutrition requirements determine what children need.	The framework translates needs into meals and food quantities.	The required foods are specified and priced.	Funding is considered against the cost of the required food.	Monthly prices can be tracked over time.

September 2026 illustrative 20-child ECD centre

R11.92	R4,768.47	R9.60	R928.47
Weighted average cost	Monthly food cost	Current food allocation	Gap at 100% coverage
per child per day	per 20-child centre / 20 days	per child per day	per month

At 100% coverage	At 70% coverage
R3,840.00 allocated for food	R2,688.00 allocated for food
Illustrative allocation: 100% of children receiving the food subsidy	Illustrative allocation: 70% of children receiving the food subsidy
Shortfall: R928.47 per month	Shortfall: R2,080.47 per month

Why this matters

- The ECD Nutrition Basket provides a transparent reference for the food component of ECD nutrition provision.
- Monthly monitoring can show how changes in food prices affect the cost of meeting the defined nutritional requirement.
- The costing should not be interpreted as the full cost of providing a nutrition service: labour, fuel, water, cleaning, storage and equipment are outside the current food-ingredient costing.
- The figures can support future discussions about ECD financing, budgeting and the resources required to deliver nutritious meals.

For the technical background and further information on the ECD Nutrition Basket:
Zero2Five Trust: <https://zero2five.org.za/>