

MEDIA STATEMENT

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Putting a real price on nutritious food for young children: Introducing a Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket for Early Childhood Development Centres.

New collaborative initiative translates nutrition guidance into actual foods, quantities and costs — making more visible the resources needed to feed young children properly.

Durban / Pietermaritzburg, South Africa – 14 October 2026 – As South Africa marks National Nutrition Week under the theme “**Creating Healthy Food Environments for Better Nutrition**”, Zero2Five Trust, the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD) and public health nutrition consultant and registered dietitian Philippa Barnard are introducing the **Early Childhood Development Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket (ECD Nutrition Basket)** — a practical tool designed to answer a question that has been difficult to quantify:

What does it actually cost to provide nutritious food to young children while they are in ECD care?

The ECD Nutrition Basket translates existing national nutrition guidance into a defined food requirement that can be **planned, purchased, prepared, quantified, costed and monitored over time**. It is designed to bridge the gap between what nutrition policy says children need and what ECD centres need to put nutritious food on the table every day – in practical and financial terms.

The work began through Zero2Five's practical experience of providing nutrition support and training to ECD centres. An initial two-week menu, based on National Department of Health nutrition guidance, was refined through implementation experience into a practical one-week menu. This was then developed into a Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework and, ultimately, a defined and costed food basket.

Nutrition first. Affordability informed.

Rather than allowing the price of food to determine what children should eat, the nutritional requirement is established first. The required foods and quantities are then translated into a practical menu and priced in supermarkets across the country where ECD practitioners purchase food for children, creating a basis for ongoing national price monitoring.

The ECD Nutrition Basket includes a diverse range of foods across the major food groups, including fortified staple foods, vegetables, fruit, legumes, eggs, tinned fish, milk and maas, healthy fats and spreads. It also allows for appropriate substitutions, promoting locally available food where the nutritional purpose of the meal can be maintained.

What is the cost of feeding children attending ECD centres?

The latest **September 2026 pilot costing** estimates the food cost at:

- **R7.35 per child per day** for children aged 9–23 months;
- **R13.06 per child per day** for children aged 2–6 years; and
- **R11.92 per child per day** as the weighted average for an illustrative 20-child ECD centre comprising 20% younger and 80% older children.

For this illustrative centre, the monthly food cost is **R4,768.47**, based on 20 children attending for 20 days.

The 2026/27 DBE ECD subsidy includes a food component of **R9.60 per child per day**. If 100% of children in the illustrative centre were covered by the subsidy, the centre would have a food ingredient shortfall of approximately **R928 per month**. At 70% subsidy coverage, the illustrative gap rises to approximately **R2,080 per month**.¹

These figures are intended to make the financing question more visible — **not to suggest that R11.92 represents the full cost of providing a nutrition service.**

The current costing covers food ingredients only. Labour, cooking fuel, water, cleaning materials, storage and equipment are excluded.

See Annexure for the full September costing data.

From a menu to a national monitoring tool

The ECD Nutrition Basket is now moving into a more structured pilot and refinement phase, with monthly price monitoring beginning in October 2026.

PMBEJD brings its experience in tracking food prices through the Household Affordability Index, while Zero2Five brings extensive practical experience of nutrition provision in ECD settings. Philippa Barnard, registered dietitian and public health nutrition consultant, led the menu development, nutritional analysis and costing.

The intention is to monitor the cost of the defined food requirement over time, providing a transparent evidence base for ECD planning, budgeting, procurement and future discussions about financing.

Why the ECD Basket matters

ECD centres are an important part of child nutrition. For many young children, the food provided while they are in care makes a meaningful contribution to their nutritional intake during the day.

The ECD Nutrition Basket does not replace the National Department of Health's nutrition guidelines, nor is it intended to be a stand-alone stunting-prevention intervention. However,

¹ Not all ECD centres receive funding from the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Among funded ECD centres, not all children attending those centres necessarily qualify for the subsidy.

when implemented appropriately as part of a broader, evidence-informed approach to child nutrition, it can contribute to efforts to prevent stunting and support healthy growth. By translating nutritional guidance into a defined food requirement and making the resources needed to provide that food visible, the Basket can help turn national nutrition commitments into practical, costed implementation at the point where young children are fed.

A defined nutritional basket, with a changing price

The ECD Nutrition Basket is a defined food basket designed to represent a nutritionally appropriate and diverse menu for children attending ECD centres. The menu and nutritional requirements have been established; the current phase of the work is focused on finalising the costing and establishing ongoing price monitoring.

The September 2026 costing represents the current cost of the defined basket based on prices observed at that time. As food prices change, the cost of the ECD Nutrition Basket will change too. Regular price monitoring will therefore allow the cost of providing the same defined nutritional food requirement to be tracked over time.

The ECD Basket makes the nutritional food requirement visible. Price monitoring makes its cost visible. Together, they provide an evidence base to support better nutrition, better planning and budgeting, and better-informed conversations about what it takes to ensure young children are fed properly and can grow and thrive.

ENDS

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About the partners

Zero2Five Trust works to ensure that children thrive by the age of five through integrated early childhood nutrition, health, WASH and development programmes.

Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD) produces independent research and food-price monitoring, including the Household Affordability Index.

Philippa Barnard RD(SA) provides public health nutrition, food affordability, nutrition analysis and technical support.

Annexure– September 2026 ECD Nutrition Basket Pilot Costing

This annex presents the detailed September 2026 pilot costing of the ECD Nutrition Basket, including product-level prices, quantities and calculations for the two age groups and the illustrative mixed-age centre. The costing represents food ingredients only and should be interpreted alongside the assumptions, exclusions and limitations described in the main report.

ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket (ECD Nutrition Basket) September 2026 Data				Energy Group 1		Energy Group 2		ECD Centre Example	
Draft version currently undergoing pilot testing				Children 9-23 months		Children 2-6 years		20 children (4:16 ratio)*	
Food Group	Foods Tracked	Unit (kg, L, Loaves)	Prices per unit	AP weight	Cost	AP weight	Cost	AP weight	Cost
Starchy Foods	Maize meal	Kilogram	R 9.79	0.18	R 1.77	0.36	R 3.55	6.52	R 63.83
	Enriched porridge, Morvite	Kilogram	R 29.41	0.3	R 8.82	0.6	R 17.65	10.8	R 317.61
	Brown Bread	Loaves (700g)	R 16.28	0.6	R 9.77	1.2	R 19.54	21.6	R 351.71
	Rice	Kilogram	R 13.15	0.10	R 1.30	0.20	R 2.60	3.56	R 46.77
	Potatoes	Kilogram	R 10.02	0.18	R 1.85	0.37	R 3.70	6.64	R 66.53
Vegetables	Onions	Kilogram	R 17.23	0.27	R 4.65	0.54	R 9.31	9.72	R 167.52
	Tomatoes	Kilogram	R 22.31	0.155	R 3.46	0.31	R 6.92	5.58	R 124.48
	Carrots	Kilogram	R 9.96	0.27	R 2.69	0.54	R 5.38	9.72	R 96.82
	Spinach	Kilogram	R 14.32	0.14	R 2.04	0.29	R 4.08	5.13	R 73.48
	Cabbage	Kilogram	R 20.81	0.234	R 4.87	0.468	R 9.74	8.424	R 175.34
	Butternut	Kilogram	R 11.33	0.234	R 2.65	0.468	R 5.30	8.424	R 95.46
Fruit	Apple	Kilogram	R 15.82	0.6	R 9.49	1.2	R 18.98	21.6	R 341.68
	Banana	Kilogram	R 19.98	0.9	R 17.98	1.8	R 35.96	32.4	R 647.26
Dry beans, peas, lentils, legumes	Dried beans, red speckled (sugar beans)	Kilogram	R 37.76	0.05	R 1.89	0.1	R 3.78	1.8	R 67.97
	Dried lentils	Kilogram	R 52.76	0.05	R 2.64	0.1	R 5.28	1.8	R 94.97
	Dehydrated soya mince	Kilogram	R 80.63	0.032	R 2.58	0.064	R 5.16	1.152	R 92.89

Fish, chicken, lean meat, eggs	Eggs	each (50g each)	R 2.31	2	R 4.62	4	R 9.25	72	R 166.46
	Pilchards, tinned in tomato sauce	Kilogram	R 71.16	0.12	R 8.54	0.24	R 17.08	4.32	R 307.42
Milk, maas	Full Cream Milk (Fresh or UHT)	Litres	R 16.40	1.86	R 30.50	2.62	R 42.96	49.36	R 809.42
	Maas	Litres	R 16.11	1.2	R 19.33	1.5	R 24.16	28.8	R 463.96
Fats, oil	Margarine (soft tub/spreading)	Kilogram	R 41.61	0.03	R 1.25	0.06	R 2.50	1.08	R 44.94
	Oil, sunflower	Litres	R 32.29	0.055	R 1.78	0.11	R 3.55	1.98	R 63.93
	Peanut butter	Kilogram	R 105.56	0.02	R 2.11	0.04	R 4.22	0.72	R 76.01
Seasoning	Salt	Kilogram	R 17.39	0.02	R 0.33	0.04	R 0.67	0.69	R 12.02
	Stock/ soup powder	Kilogram	R 66.89	0	R -	0	R -	0	R -
Total cost per month (20 days)**					R 146.92		R 261.30		R 4,768.47
Total average cost per person per day					R 7.35		R 13.06		R 11.92
Current subsidy***					R 9.60		R 9.60		R 3,840.00
Difference in subsidy					+R 2.25		-R 3.46		-R 928.47
Difference in subsidy when only 70% coverage is achieved****									-R 2,080.47

Notes:

- * The ECD age composition (20% younger age group and 80% older age group) is based on implementation experience of Zero2Five Trust, where centres typically have more older than younger children enrolled
- ** Please note that the total cost per month does not include other essential items for keeping clean (hands and equipment) and for cooking (fuel such as gas or electricity)
- *** The food component of the ECD subsidy used is R9.60 (40% of R24) as per DBE 2026/2027 financial year
- **** In practice, 100% ECD subsidy coverage is not seen across all ECD centres. This illustrative example uses 70% coverage.

Important note about the calculated cost of the ECD Nutrition Basket:

The cost of the ECD Nutrition Basket should not automatically be equated with the full cost of providing a nutrition service to children attending ECD centres. Food ingredients are only one component of meal provision. Labour, cooking fuel, water, cleaning materials, storage and equipment all carry costs which are not included in this costing model.

Important note on EG1 costing and milk feeding:

The EG1 (9-23 months) costing represents the food component provided through the ECD Nutrition Basket and does not include a monetary value for breastmilk or infant formula. Milk feeding remains an important component of nutrition for children in this age group, but breastmilk is not assigned a monetary value within the Basket and infant formula is not included as a standard Basket cost. The lower EG1 food cost should therefore not be interpreted as indicating that meeting the nutritional needs of younger children is inherently less costly than for older children. It reflects the defined scope of the Basket costing and the contribution of ECD-provided complementary foods.