

**SPEECH BY DEPUTY MINISTER, DR JOE PHAAHLA, MP, AT THE NATIONAL
NUTRITION WEEK COMMEMORATION EVENT 2024**

University of the Western Cape (UWC)

10 October 2024

Prof Madiba, Vice-Rector of the University of the Western Cape,

Mr Irfan Akhtar, UNICEF South Africa Representative,

Deputy Director-General: Ms Jeanette Hunter,

Distinguished Guests,

Youth advocates and students

Members of the media present

Ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon, Molweni, Goeie dag

I wish to firstly thank the management, staff and students of UWC for agreeing to host and participate in this important event in our health calendar, the national nutrition week, we do not take your gesture lightly. I am also grateful for the collaboration between our NDOH, UNICEF and the youth advocates.

The theme for National Nutrition Week this year is, “Eat right for a better life!”. This resonates deeply with our collective mission to improve the health and wellbeing of all South Africans. Good nutrition is not just a matter of personal health; it is a cornerstone in the prevention of non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, hypertension and even mental disorders.

It is a matter of fact that in our country today and for many decades and centuries before we can speak about eating right, we must acknowledge that the first basic problem is that millions of South Africans struggle daily just to access basic food before we can even talk about quality. For many years this was due to policies of colonialism and apartheid which dispossessed millions of black people of their land to drive them as cheap labour in the mines and white owned commercial farms. Since the advent of democracy policies and programs were put in place to redress this atrocity but a lot still needs to be done.

Unfortunately, there are also many instances where land restitution and redistribution were not matched by adequate government support in terms of finance and farming expertise. As our country has become more industrialized and urbanized this has not been accompanied by sufficient job creation and therefore, we are faced with huge unemployment which leads to food deprivation. In recent times the situation has been exacerbated by international conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war which has led to shortages of various grain food and fuel leading to extreme rise in cost of food.

But today we are also here to share knowledge that it is not just access to food that matters but also the nutritional value of that food and that's where the concept of a balanced diet comes in.

A balanced diet throughout the life-course strengthens our immune system, reducing the risk of communicable diseases like respiratory diseases, and ultimately leads to fewer medical visits and lower healthcare costs. Good nutrition also enhances productivity and economic growth by ensuring that individuals have the energy and focus needed to perform at their best. This has huge implications for the future of our country.

This year, National Nutrition Week aims to increase knowledge about the types of foods that promote physical and mental health, encourage healthy eating habits, and raise awareness about the importance of the food environment. This week is the result of a collaborative effort between the National Department of Health and sister departments such as the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Land Reform, the Department of Social Development and the Department of Basic Education. It also brings together a range of collaborators in the nutrition space, of which UNICEF deserves special mention, as they have volunteered to take the lead to support NDoH in the preparations for NNW, including this event. Together, we strive to promote availability of nutritious foods to all South Africans.

Today, I want to emphasize the vital role of our youth in this endeavor. The Fix My Food youth advocacy movement is a shining example of how young people can lead the charge in our united efforts to improve our food environment. As we have heard and seen, this movement is dedicated to raising awareness about individual youth experiences with the food environment and solutions to improve it, by empowering youth to advocate for healthier food options to be more available and accessible.

The activities led by our youth advocates, such as Blood Sugar Bingo and the reading of youth statements, have been not just educational but also inspirational. They highlight the importance of youth voices in shaping policies and initiatives that promote healthy eating. I encourage all young people here today to continue advocating for nutritious food options and to actively participate in creating a healthier future for all.

As we move forward, I urge everyone to support initiatives that promote good nutrition and a healthy food environment. Collaboration between government and civil society is essential to ensure that nutritious foods are accessible to everyone. Continued education and awareness campaigns are crucial to sustaining the momentum of National Nutrition Week and the Fix My Food movement.

“Eat right for a better life!” is more than just a theme; it is a call to action for all of us. Let us work together to ensure that every South African has the opportunity to live a healthier, more fulfilling life. Unhealthy diet and physical inactivity are causal factors of obesity due to over consumption of unhealthy foods and physical inactivity. Being obese can increase the risk of developing a range of serious diseases, including hypertension, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, some cancers, obstructive sleep apnoea and musculoskeletal problems. Scientific evidence shows that even modest weight loss (5%) can lead to reduction in blood pressure and improved insulin sensitivity. Weight reduction may lower blood pressure by 5-20 mm Hg per 10 kg of weight loss in a person whose weight is more than 10% of ideal body weight.

Regular physical activity minimises excessive weight gain, helps maintain weight within a healthy range, improves bone health, and prevents obesity. It also improves cognitive function and reduce the risk of certain types of cancers. It also helps retard the progression of osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension. It is recommended that adults undertake at least 150 minutes per week of moderate physical activity, muscle strengthening activities on two days per week and minimise extended periods of sitting. You do not have to do all 150 minutes at once, you can just do 30 minutes of any physical activity you like, five days per week.

Even that 30 minutes, you do not have to do it at once, you can do 2 x 15 min or 3x 10min per day. What is important is to do this regularly, make it your lifestyle. As the Department of Health, together with our collaborators, we actively encourage all South Africans to be physically active. Being active doesn't necessarily mean

going to the gym or running marathons; activities like the dances and games you've just participated in are also excellent ways to stay physically active.

Now coming to healthy eating, it does not have to be expensive. Choose a variety of healthy foods that are affordable, fruits and vegetables that are in season. Consider meat-free days during the week and include dry beans, peas, lentils, fatty fish such as canned pilchards and sardines which are affordable options that are high in protein. The main challenges when coming to diet and NCDs is foods and drinks high in fat/oil, sugar and salt.

Please let us be mindful of the amount of fat/oil, sugar and/or salt that you add when preparing or buying food, but also please be aware that carbohydrates in starch foods such as samp or mqushu, pap, bread esp. white bread are converted to sugar after digestion so too much of starch is bad for our health. These items should be consumed as little as possible. Drink clean, safe water instead of sugary drinks. Earlier this week I saw the promotion on TV of something which we must completely discourage, sorry for those who make their livelihood from it, it is called Kota, in it you have a chunk of white bread, chips, russian, polony, cheese and all sorts of unhealthy additions. This is just one example of the kind of junk food we must vigorously educate people to keep away from.

In conclusion, I would like to encourage you to please take advantage of the screening and education services that are being provided here today. I want to thank the organizers, our partners, and especially our youth advocates for their dedication and contributions. I am optimistic about the future we can build together, driven by informed and empowered youth.

I look forward to you creating more opportunities for engagements with your peers. P Dir I would be failing in my responsibility if I leave without raising two lifestyles problems which are destroying our young people, excessive consumption of alcohol on campuses and in communities including where I was informed that some

students would rather buy cheap unhealthy food from their NSFAS allowances in order to save for weekend alcohol. Another monster is exposure to narcotic drugs of all sorts leading to addiction and committing of heinous crimes especially against women and children, the last one is tobacco smoking and the new fancy stuff, e-cigarettes and vaping, please keep away from all these. Let us take the lessons learned from this event and apply them in our daily lives and communities. Together, we can achieve a healthier South Africa.

Thank you.