

Draft Manifesto For Healthy Living Alliance

INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of South Africa pledges to “improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person”. According to Section 27 of the Constitution, everyone has the right to “access to sufficient food and water”, and the state is compelled to “take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of each of these rights”.

However, over the past two decades, the diets of South Africans have shifted rapidly from a traditional diet based on grains, legumes, vegetables and fruit to a ‘western diet’ based on energy-dense, nutrient-poor processed foods and beverages with high added sugar and salt. These junk foods and sugary drinks are backed by massive advertising that permeates every aspect of South African life.

South Africa has the highest overweight and obesity rate in sub-Saharan Africa, with up to 70% of women and a third of men being classified as overweight or obese. Some 40% of women in our country are obese (body mass index greater than 30 kg/m²). One in four girls and one in five boys between the ages of 2 and 14 years are overweight or obese.

Poor diet now generates more disease than physical inactivity, alcohol and smoking combined. Obesity is associated with a number of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, hypertension, joint pain and certain cancers.

Currently, NCDs are the leading causes of death worldwide, resulting in 16 million premature deaths each year. The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that NCDs will account for 73% of deaths and 60% of the disease burden by the year 2020, mainly in low- and middle-income countries.

NCDs currently accounts for a staggering 43% of recorded deaths in South Africa. The chronic nature of NCDs demands long-term care and imposes a significant burden on an overstretched health system.

Improving diets to reduce NCDs in South Africa requires a sustained public health effort that addresses environmental factors and the conditions in which people live and make choices.

Sugary drinks is associated with weight gain in both children and adults and generally have little nutritional value. Furthermore, consumption of sugary foods and drinks is the primary cause of tooth decay, and 55% of 6-year-olds in South Africa suffer untreated tooth decay.

IN ORDER TO ENSURE THE HEALTH OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN PEOPLE, WE DEMAND THAT:

1. Access to healthy food and clean water should be recognized as basic human rights. We call on government to ensure that all South Africans have access to clean water and affordable healthy food.

2. Foods available at schools must be fresh, healthy and nutritious. Where possible foods should be acquired from the farming communities nearest the schools. Such practices would have a positive impact on the health of all students and would economically benefit farmers.

3. Children are protected from marketing that promotes poor dietary habits, as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 17, paragraph e): "State Parties shall...Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being'.

In this context, government should prevent the marketing and the promotion of foods and beverages targeted at children unless it is healthy and nutritious.

4. Labeling on all processed foods and beverages explains in simple and clear terms whether the product has high, medium, or low levels of sugar, salt, total fat, trans fats and saturated fats and if it contains genetically modified organisms. The labels should carry warnings of the risks associated with the regular consumption of high levels of such ingredients.

5. Government launches a massive and permanent national food education campaign to educate people about what constitutes a healthy diet, and inform the public what types of foods and beverages should be avoided.

6. Government implements the proposed tax on sugar-sweetened beverages as well as a tax on junk foods, and uses the revenue to promote healthy food and clean water.

The tax on sugary drinks, announced by the South African National Treasury in February 2016 to increase the retail price and reduce consumption, has the potential to be one of several powerful policy interventions to improve diets and reduce the burden of chronic disease in South Africa.

7. Government prioritises the promotion of small and medium rural production units as a means of assuring the sustainable and diversified production of sufficient amounts of quality foods, as a means of ensuring food security and sovereignty.

8. Government promotes “exclusive breastfeeding for babies during the first six months of life, and the introduction of complementary foods on demand while continuing to breastfeed”, as recommended by the WHO/ UNICEF.