



HEALA
Equitable access to healthy food

Who is HEALA?

HEALA is a coalition of civil society organisations advocating for equitable access to affordable, nutritious food in South Africa by building a more just food system.

Access to nutritious, affordable food is a fundamental human right. Section 27(1)(b) of the South African Constitution guarantees all the right to sufficient food and commits the state to the progressive realisation of this right. Additionally, Section 28(1)(c) states that every child has the right to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services.

Still, South Africa suffers from high levels of hunger, food insecurity, and obesity — all of which are consequences of the country's broken food system. A healthy and sufficient diet is essential for all people to achieve their full potential.

HEALA believes that only by fixing South Africa's broken food system will the country be able to guarantee everyone equitable access to affordable, nutritious food.

What is a food system, and why does it matter?

We often think of our food as going from the farm to our plates, and many people often believe the food we consume is a choice.

In reality, many different and often unseen mechanisms shape what we eat, including agricultural, processing, distribution and economic systems as well as government policies. Collectively, all these processes are often referred to as the food system.

When food systems don't work, people's health pays the price. Because government policy forms a crucial part of South Africa's food system, HEALA believes hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition are policy choices.

The South African government must urgently address entrenched inequities within the food system by enacting legislation to enable a healthy food environment, including strengthening poverty reduction measures and regulating the food and beverage industry to ensure transparency.

What is food justice?

Better food systems are crucial for achieving everyone's right to food.

Thus, HEALA believes that food justice – or establishing more just food systems – addresses the underlying root causes of inequitable access to nutritious foods, particularly for poor black South Africans.

HEALA supports local and global efforts to transform global and local food systems' production and distribution to improve sustainability and equity. This work is complex and interconnected, bringing together some of the most critical global struggles of our time, including climate change, land use and inequality.

To us, food justice ultimately means a South Africa where no one goes hungry and where access to nutritious foods isn't determined by where you live or how much money you have.

How does HEALA advance the right to food through food justice?

HEALA advances the right to food by advocating for more just food systems in South Africa.

We do this by working with communities to organise and also acting as a national platform to amplify the voices of organisations and ordinary South Africans at a local, provincial and national level.

HEALA does this by:

1. Conducting advocacy campaigns to educate officials, civil society, communities, and the public about actions government can take to build a more equitable food system;
2. Convening civil society and social justice organisations to share information, strengthen networks and organise around food justice campaigns; and
3. Carrying out mass media campaigns to build greater public awareness of how South Africa's food system determines access to affordable, nutritious food and the actions government can take to build a healthier food environment for all.

What can government do NOW to fix South Africa's food system and achieve affordable, nutritious food?

Based on research and inputs from communities and coalition members, HEALA has identified three main areas in which policy change can fix the food system and increase equitable access to nutritious food.

1. Better regulation of the food environment

- Government must more strongly regulate the food environment in favour of consumers to curb the consumption of unhealthy food, which is often heavily marketed to South Africa's poor. To do this, the government must first urgently increase the health promotion levy on select sugary beverages to the World Health Organisation-recommended rate of 20%. Currently, the levy – meant to curb rises in deadly diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure – remains a paltry 11% and has not been increased since it was introduced in 2018.
- Secondly, the government must introduce effective front-of-package warning labels on foods to help consumers make better choices and live healthier lives. Several studies have shown that people globally and in South Africa have trouble reading traditional nutritional labels — even if they might not know it.
- Lastly, the government must use taxes, subsidies and price controls to limit food price inflation and ensure that a healthy food basket is affordable. For an average South African household, the price of staple monthly groceries was a whopping R4,137 in July 2021 — more than the monthly minimum wage.

2. Better industry accountability

- For decades, the food and beverage industry has fed the public the myth that what we eat is our choice alone. These marketing campaigns have shaped stigmatising and shaming narratives that lay the blame for noncommunicable diseases such as obesity and diabetes squarely at consumers' feet — ignoring the larger food system.
- Today, South Africa's food industry continues to wield great power in shaping how the nation eats and, consequently, the future health of our country. HEALA and its members work to ensure that the food industry is transparent and accountable for its role in influencing access to nutritious food in today's unequal society.

3. Improve poverty alleviations measures to address hunger

- Half of South Africans remain unemployed, and sufficient nutritious food remains out of reach for many.
- In South Africa, the government-determined food poverty line is a policy measure used to estimate the average monthly cost of meeting a typical person's average caloric needs. Many believe that even the recently set food poverty line of R624 per month remains woefully inadequate.
- Even though the COVID-19 outbreak has led to new hunger levels in the country, the "emergency" COVID-19 relief grant is a paltry R350 per month.
- The National Child Support Grant remains just R460 — making it the only permanent social grant below the food poverty line. The government should urgently increase the Child Support Grant (CSG) to at least the upper bound of the Statistics South Africa-recommended food poverty line – R1,335 – and extend it to pregnant women. Increases to this vital grant would allow women to afford the additional nutritional requirements for a healthy pregnancy and give children a solid foundation for lifelong health and economic development — ultimately benefiting all South Africans.
- Given widespread increased unemployment and poverty, a Basic Income Grant of R1,335 for those 18-59 should also be introduced. Basic income grants will stimulate economic growth and help safeguard people's health, food security and education.
- Lastly, the National School Nutrition Programme has been a lifeline for hungry learners since 1994. Yet, today many pupils do not get the regular nutritious meals they are entitled to under the programme. Government officials must ensure all eligible learners – whether in-school or not because of COVID-19 – receive healthy daily lunches through the National School Nutrition Programme.