


# ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket

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October 2026 | Introduction to the ECD Nutrition Basket

Release date: 28 October 2026

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**Developed in collaboration with:**

zero2five Early Childhood Nutrition, Play & Support

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PIETERMARITZBURG ECONOMIC JUSTICE & DIGNITY
Economic justice through the lens of human dignity

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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.*

Zero2Five Trust, the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD) and public health nutrition consultant and registered dietitian Philippa Barnard introduce 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 **October 2026 costing** estimates the food cost at:

- **R7.39 per child per day** for children aged 9–23 months;
- **R13.16 per child per day** for children aged 2–6 years; and
- **R12.01per 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 **R4,802.02**, 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 **R962.02 per month**. At 70% subsidy coverage, the illustrative gap rises to approximately **R2,114.02 per month**.[1]

These figures are intended to make the financing question more visible — **not to suggest that R12.01 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.

[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.

**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, 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 October 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.**

# October 2026:  ECD Basket

## 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.**

## October 2026 headline costing

| R7.39 | R13.16 | R12.01 | R4,802.02 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **EG1: 9–23 months** | **EG2: 2–6 years** | **Illustrative 20-child ECD centre** | **Illustrative monthly food cost** |
| per child per day | per child per day | weighted average per child per day | 20 children × 20 days |

| Current food allocation | Illustrative financing gap |
|---|---|
| The 2026/27 DBE ECD subsidy includes a R9.60 per child per day food component. | R962.02 per month for a 20-child centre at 100% coverage; R2,114.02 at 70% coverage. |

### 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.

*See Annexure for the full October costing data.  This annex presents the detailed October 2026 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.*

# From Nutrition Guidelines to a Costed Basket

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

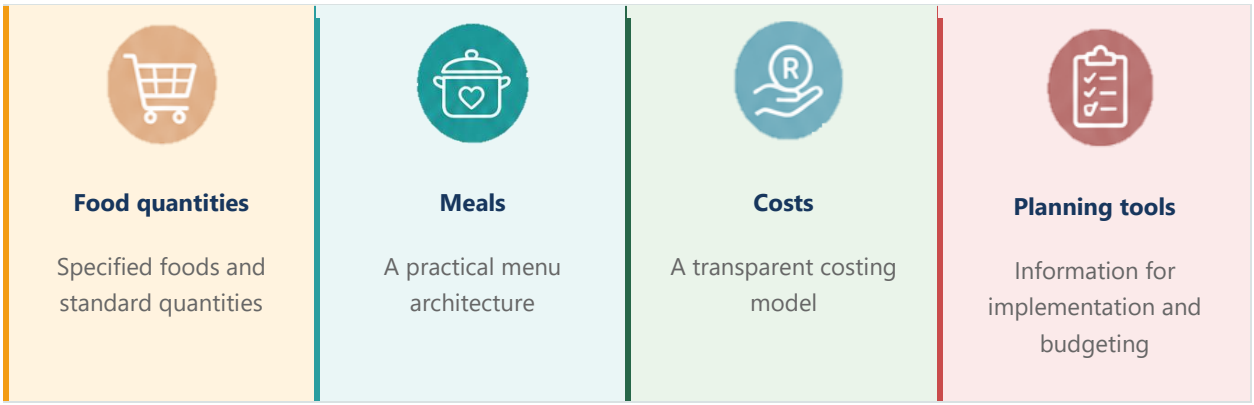
The ECD Nutrition Basket is one application of a broader nutrition-to-food methodology. The nutritional requirement comes first; the basket translates that requirement into practical food quantities; costing then shows what that food costs.

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




### Potential use

- ECD planning and budgeting
- Price monitoring
- Policy and financing discussions

### Potential future adaptations

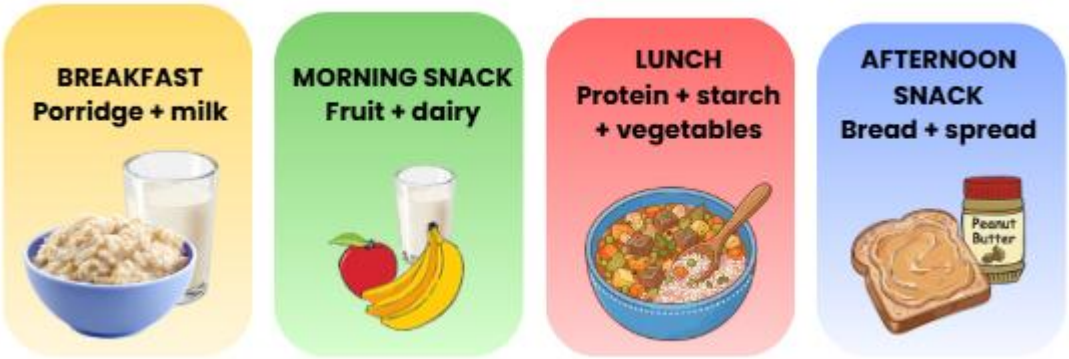
- Provincial / district contexts
- Garden-supported ECD settings
- Other context-specific baskets

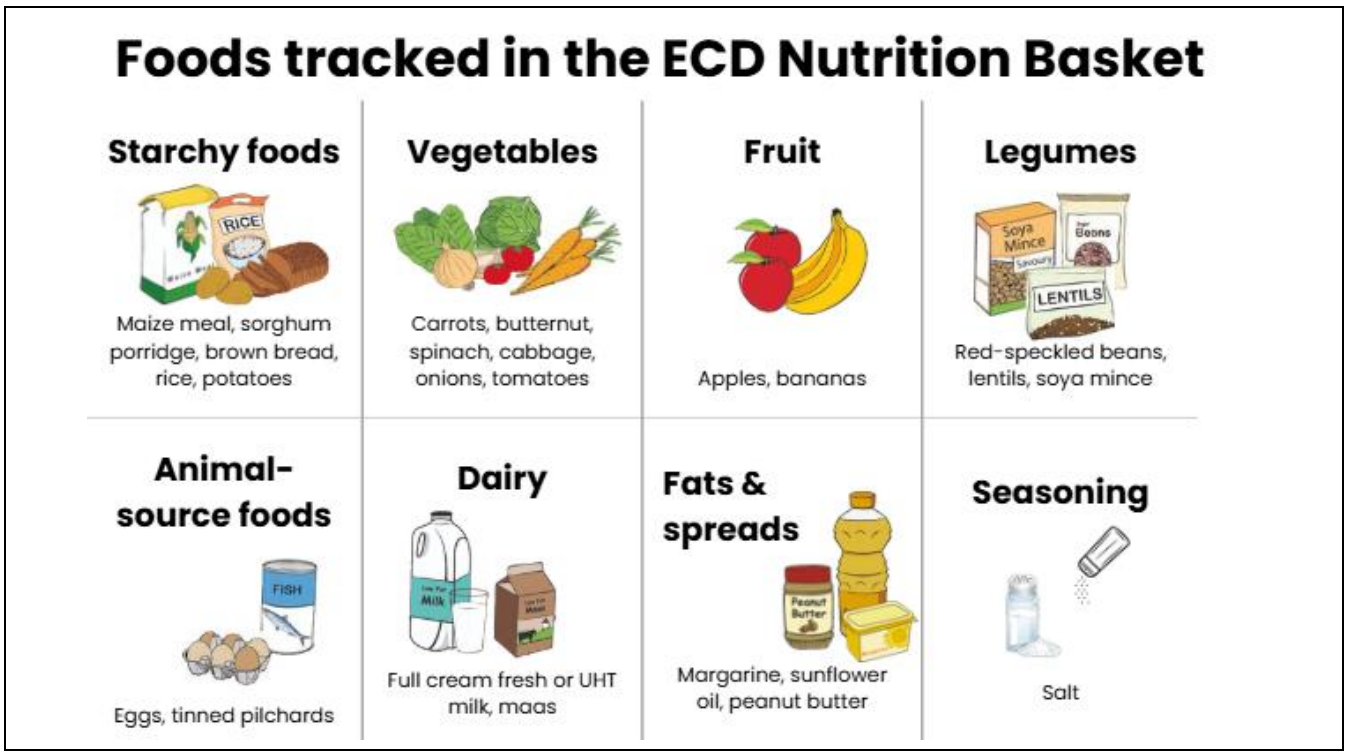
# What is in the ECD Nutrition Basket?

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




### 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

**NUTRITION FIRST. AFFORDABILITY INFORMED.**

## 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. |

## October 2026 illustrative 20-child ECD centre

| R12.01 | R4,802.02 | R9.60 | R962.02 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Weighted average cost** per child per day | **Monthly food cost** per 20-child centre / 20 days | **Current food allocation** per child per day | **Gap at 100% coverage** per month |

| At 100% coverage | At 70% coverage |
|---|---|
| **R4,802.02 allocated for food**<br>Illustrative allocation: 100% of children receive the food subsidy | **R2,688.00 allocated for food**<br>Illustrative allocation: 70% of children receive the food subsidy |
| **Shortfall: R962.02 per month** | **Shortfall: R2,114.02 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/**

**ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket (ECD Nutrition Basket) Updated October 2026 Data**

| | | | | Energy Group 1 | | Energy Group 2 | | ECD Centre Example | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 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 9,64 | 0,18 | R 1,75 | 0,36 | R 3,49 | 6,52 | R 62,83 |
| | Enriched porridge, Morvite | Kilogram | R 29,64 | 0,3 | R 8,89 | 0,6 | R 17,78 | 10,8 | R 320,10 |
| | Brown Bread | Loaves (700g) | R 16,21 | 0,6 | R 9,73 | 1,2 | R 19,45 | 21,6 | R 350,10 |
| | Rice | Kilogram | R 13,08 | 0,10 | R 1,29 | 0,20 | R 2,58 | 3,56 | R 46,52 |
| | Potatoes | Kilogram | R 10,45 | 0,18 | R 1,93 | 0,37 | R 3,86 | 6,64 | R 69,41 |
| **Vegetables** | Onions | Kilogram | R 19,15 | 0,27 | R 5,17 | 0,54 | R 10,34 | 9,72 | R 186,13 |
| | Tomatoes | Kilogram | R 24,50 | 0,155 | R 3,80 | 0,31 | R 7,59 | 5,58 | R 136,69 |
| | Carrots | Kilogram | R 9,71 | 0,27 | R 2,62 | 0,54 | R 5,24 | 9,72 | R 94,38 |
| | Spinach | Kilogram | R 12,92 | 0,14 | R 1,84 | 0,29 | R 3,68 | 5,13 | R 66,31 |
| | Cabbage | Kilogram | R 19,72 | 0,234 | R 4,61 | 0,468 | R 9,23 | 8,424 | R 166,14 |
| | Butternut | Kilogram | R 14,22 | 0,234 | R 3,33 | 0,468 | R 6,66 | 8,424 | R 119,81 |
| **Fruit** | Apple | Kilogram | R 15,80 | 0,6 | R 9,48 | 1,2 | R 18,95 | 21,6 | R 341,19 |
| | Banana | Kilogram | R 19,94 | 0,9 | R 17,94 | 1,8 | R 35,89 | 32,4 | R 645,97 |
| **Dry beans, peas, lentils, legumes** | Dried beans, red speckled (sugar beans) | Kilogram | R 38,62 | 0,05 | R 1,93 | 0,1 | R 3,86 | 1,8 | R 69,52 |
| | Dried lentils | Kilogram | R 54,45 | 0,05 | R 2,72 | 0,1 | R 5,45 | 1,8 | R 98,01 |
| | Dehydrated soya mince | Kilogram | R 75,66 | 0,032 | R 2,42 | 0,064 | R 4,84 | 1,152 | R 87,16 |
| **Fish, chicken, lean meat, eggs** | Eggs | each (50g each) | R 2,31 | 2 | R 4,62 | 4 | R 9,23 | 72 | R 166,16 |
| | Pilchards, tinned in tomato sauce | Kilogram | R 71,13 | 0,12 | R 8,54 | 0,24 | R 17,07 | 4,32 | R 307,28 |
| **Milk, maas** | Full Cream Milk (Fresh or UHT) | Litres | R 16,45 | 1,86 | R 30,60 | 2,62 | R 43,11 | 49,36 | R 812,11 |
| | Maas | Litres | R 15,96 | 1,2 | R 19,15 | 1,5 | R 23,94 | 28,8 | R 459,61 |
| **Fats, oil** | Margarine (soft tub/spreading) | Kilogram | R 44,28 | 0,03 | R 1,33 | 0,06 | R 2,66 | 1,08 | R 47,82 |
| | Oil, sunflower | Litres | R 32,41 | 0,055 | R 1,78 | 0,11 | R 3,57 | 1,98 | R 64,17 |
| | Peanut butter | Kilogram | R 101,15 | 0,02 | R 2,02 | 0,04 | R 4,05 | 0,72 | R 72,83 |
| **Seasoning** | Salt | Kilogram | R 17,03 | 0,02 | R 0,33 | 0,04 | R 0,65 | 0,69 | R 11,77 |
| | Stock/ soup powder | Kilogram | R 63,44 | 0 | R - | 0 | R - | 0 | R - |
| | | | **Total cost per month (20 days)**** | | R 147,82 | | R 263,17 | | R 4 802,02 |
| | | | **Total average cost per person per day** | | R 7,39 | | R 13,16 | | R 12,01 |
| | | | **Current subsidy***** | | R 9,60 | | R 9,60 | | R 3 840,00 |
| | | | **Difference in subsidy** | | R 2,21 | | -R 3,56 | | -R 962,02 |
| | | | **Difference in subsidy when only 70% coverage is achieved******** | | | | | | -R 2 114,02 |

**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.