

**Opening remarks/ speaking notes, DDG: HIV AND AIDS, TB AND MCWH
Commemoration of World Breastfeeding week webinar,**

06 August 2026

Theme: “Breastfeeding for a Sustainable Start in Life: Strengthen What Works”

- Distinguished representatives from the World Health Organization and UNICEF;
- Esteemed panellists;
- Colleagues from national, provincial and district health services;
- Representatives from academia,
- Civil society,
- Labour,
- Members of the national Breastfeeding Technical Working group,
- Professional associations and development partners; and
- All participants joining us online from across South Africa.

Good morning and welcome to the National Department of Health's World Breastfeeding Week 2026 Commemoration Webinar.

It is a great honour and privilege to join you today as we commemorate World Breastfeeding Week, observed globally from 1 to 7 August under the Theme: **“Breastfeeding for a Sustainable Start in Life: Strengthen What Works.”** This theme reminds us that breastfeeding is not only a matter of child nutrition; it is a matter of health, equity, food security, human development and sustainable futures for generations to come.

We kicked off this year's joint commemoration with a community outreach event held on Tuesday the 4th August to observe a mass breastfeeding hour nationwide in Nkondlo Village, Chris Hani district in the Eastern Cape province. It is my great pleasure to announce that this event was a huge success and more than 400 community members including over 200 mothers and pregnant women convened to breastfeed together while this activity was observed in other parts of South Africa at the same time. It is my pleasure to also announce that 243 postpartum mothers between 3 and 5 months and Ten pregnant women were registered on MomConnect on this day and are due to benefit from MomConnect messages until their babies reach the age of 2 years.

The National Department of Health would like to consolidate a report on a number of mothers reached nationwide through the mass breastfeeding session towards end of September. The next province and location for this challenge and outreach will be announce early next year to beat the set record. We strongly believe that, with time this activity will contribute to normalising breastfeeding within communities and in a longer run improve breastfeeding rates.

On behalf of the National Department of Health, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to our partners, including WHO, UNICEF, SABR, GrowGreat, Hold my hand, PATA, other civil society organisations, traditional leaders, community structures and other government sectors, for their continued commitment to protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding in South Africa and for making this event a success. Your collective efforts continue to strengthen the warm chain of support that mothers and children need to thrive.

Colleagues,

This year's World Breastfeeding Week commemoration is particularly significant for South Africa because it comes at an important moment in our national nutrition agenda. In September 2026, the National Department of Health will convene a national stakeholder consultative workshop as part of the process to review and revise the **2013 Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) Policy**. The upcoming consultation will provide an opportunity to reflect on progress made over more than a decade, examine emerging challenges and opportunities, and identify priorities for strengthening breastfeeding and infant feeding support in the years ahead. The workshop forms part of the national activities planned for World Breastfeeding Week 2026 and beyond.

The discussions we have today are therefore about far more than celebrating World Breastfeeding Week. They represent the beginning of an important national conversation about the future of infant and young child feeding in South Africa. Today's insights, evidence, experiences and recommendations will help shape our thinking as we embark on the policy revision process. As we listen and engage, we should be asking ourselves: What is working well? Where are the gaps? What must be strengthened? And what additional actions are required to create an enabling environment where every mother can successfully breastfeed and every child can receive optimal nutrition?

This aligns perfectly with the theme “**Strengthen What Works.**” The policy revision process presents an opportunity to ensure that our policies remain responsive to new evidence while continuing to support interventions that have proven effective across the continuum of care, from pregnancy and childbirth through infancy and the first two years of life and beyond.

Breastfeeding remains one of the most effective and cost-effective interventions available to improve child survival, growth and development. Breastmilk is a living food, uniquely designed to meet the nutritional needs of infants while providing protection against infections and disease. It requires no preparation, is always available, and offers lifelong benefits for both mother and child. The department in line with global WHO and UNICEF guidance recommend initiation of breastfeeding within one hour of birth, exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, and continued breastfeeding up to two years and beyond with appropriate complementary feeding.

Yet despite the strong evidence and policy commitment, South Africa continues to face significant challenges. The National Food and Nutrition Security Survey 2024 reported

that the exclusive breastfeeding rate remains at approximately 22%, far below the global target of 60% by 2030. At the same time, the country continues to face a substantial burden of child malnutrition, including stunting, wasting, underweight and overweight. These indicators remind us that breastfeeding is not only a maternal and child health issue; it is a critical component of our broader strategy to address malnutrition and improve child wellbeing.

The encouraging news is that we know what works. We know that initiation of breastfeeding within one hour of birth works. We know that exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months works. We know that skilled counselling, keeping mothers and babies together, supportive families, breastfeeding-friendly workplaces and strong community support systems improve breastfeeding outcomes. We also know that mothers living with HIV who are receiving and adhering to antiretroviral treatment can safely breastfeed, and that donor human milk from accredited milk banks provides a lifesaving alternative when a mother's own milk is not available. We also know that strong policies, programmes and community support systems can significantly improve breastfeeding practices. The challenge before us is not discovering new solutions, but strengthening and scaling up those interventions that have already proven effective.

Throughout the programme, we will hear from experts discussing barriers to exclusive breastfeeding, the role of breastfeeding in addressing malnutrition, the importance of supportive health systems and communities, innovations in communication and digital support platforms, and the lived experiences of mothers themselves. These discussions will provide valuable lessons as we work to strengthen breastfeeding support nationally and as we prepare for the IYCF policy review process. Importantly, breastfeeding is not solely the responsibility of mothers..

The success of breastfeeding depends on families, communities, healthcare workers, employers, policymakers, and society as a whole.. Every one of us has a role to play in ensuring that mothers feel supported, informed and empowered to breastfeed. As this year's campaign reminds us, strengthening breastfeeding means strengthening the entire warm chain of support that enables every child to have the best possible start in life.

I would therefore like to acknowledge and thank all mothers across South Africa who continue to breastfeed despite many personal, social and economic challenges. We recognize your commitment, your resilience and the vital contribution you make to the health and future of our nation.

I also wish to acknowledge the dedicated health workers, community health workers, counsellors, programme managers, researchers and advocates whose tireless efforts continue to advance breastfeeding protection, promotion and support throughout the country.

Colleagues,

The success of World Breastfeeding Week will not be measured by the number of events we host or discussions we hold. It will be measured by the actions we take afterwards, actions that strengthen support for mothers, improve breastfeeding rates, reduce malnutrition and give every child the best possible start in life.

Let us therefore use this webinar to learn from one another, to challenge ourselves, to share solutions and to commit to strengthening what works.

I wish you a productive and engaging discussion and look forward to the outcomes that will help advance both our World Breastfeeding Week objectives and the forthcoming revision of South Africa's Infant and Young Child Feeding Policy.

It is now my pleasure to officially declare the World Breastfeeding Week 2026 National Commemoration Webinar open.

Thank you.