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Freedom Day

Freedom Day, which is observed annually on the 27th of April, commemorates the anniversary of South Africa's first non-racial election held in 1994 and celebrates the country's liberation from Apartheid, a system in which a minority held political control over the majority. This day is significant because it symbolises the foundation of a new democratic government and the end of more than three centuries of colonialism, segregation, and white minority rule.

On the 10th of May 1994, Nelson Mandela, then leader of the African National Congress (ANC), became the country's first black president when the party received 62.65% of the vote. All racial groups in the country were given the opportunity to choose their own government for the first time. The 1994 elections led to a new democratic regime and constitution for the country.

While Freedom Day is significant for black Africans, it is also celebrated by all South Africans who embrace the concept of freedom.

The research presented below by Dr. Bhoola and Dr. Leal, CoE—HUMAN grantees, highlights both the country's post-apartheid accomplishments and its ongoing challenges.



Freedom Month 2026

Freedom and The Rule of Law—Thirty
Years of Democratic Citizenship

#FreedomMonth2026 | #RuleOfLaw | #30yrsDemocraticCitizenship

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Voiceless Beneficiaries: A Child-Rights Perspective on the National School Nutrition Programme in Rural KwaZulu-Natal.

This qualitative study investigated the lived experiences, implementation, and effectiveness of the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) in the King Cetshwayo District, a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal. This paper draws attention to the clear gap between the national curriculum's objectives for nutrition education and the reality of food insecurity, which poses serious pedagogical challenges for educators, and causes emotional anguish for learners.

The research was carried out in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in two rural areas: KwaDlangweza and eSikhelani. A purposive sample strategy was utilised to identify and select participants who were learners and employed teachers at three primary schools in these two rural areas. Learners who received the meals and teachers involved in the programme's administration were invited to take part. The age range of 10 to 12 years old (Grades 5 to 7) was established in the sampling criteria for learners, guaranteeing that they were old enough to communicate their experiences and viewpoints coherently and could be further probed for their thoughts and feelings related to their experiences.

The final study sample included 40 learners and 10 teachers. Semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions were used to gather data throughout 2024. Six focus groups, each with six to eight members, were conducted. Two of these groups included both teachers and learners, while the other four were exclusively made up of learners. With the participants' permission, all focus groups and interviews were audio recorded. Parents and caregivers of child and adult participants were needed to sign a child participant consent form allowing their minors to participate in focus group discussions and interviews, provided that the children were over the age of seven.

Four key themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the focus groups and interviews with learners and teachers. These themes capture both the programme's success and the obstacles encountered throughout its implementation in the King Cetshwayo District. The school meal dichotomy, navigating programme disruptions and safety issues, and the gap between theoretical nutrition education and practical reality, were the four main themes that emerged from the data. These themes draw attention to a program that is both essential and has serious shortcomings that decrease its effectiveness. The majority of child participants confirmed the NSNP

meal's essential role in their everyday life. A considerable portion of learners reported that the school meal was their most substantial and reliable source of nourishment.

Despite considerable appreciation of the programme, there were numerous concerns regarding the quality, content, and safety of the food provided. The meals' perceived low nutritional value and lack of variety were key causes of discontent. Teachers and learners discussed a monotonous diet and clarified that the meals are typically made using cheap ingredients and easy to prepare. Participants stated that fresh produce was frequently of low quality and often unsafe for consumption when it was delivered to the schools. The learners' direct connection between school meals and disease was the most concerning discovery. Inadequate storage and refrigeration, particularly in hot weather, was identified as a direct cause of food spoiling, resulting in unfavourable health outcomes.

A notable lack of standardisation in the meals served at the three participating schools was also found in the study, which may indicate inconsistent service delivery and negligence in quality control. The study discovered that learners' understanding of nutrition was partial, erroneous, and inaccurate. Most learners said they understood what "good nutrition" meant, but their definitions were frequently ambiguous, with many defining it more by the frequency of meals ("we have to eat often in the day") than by the nutritional value of the food.

The findings demonstrate the urgent need for systemic changes centered on enhancing accountability and governance, funding school facilities, guaranteeing quality control, and creating context-sensitive nutrition education plans. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3649/2026/v16n5a11>



Antibiotic overuse as a modifiable early-life risk factor for non-communicable diseases in sub-Saharan

This paper examines early-life antibiotic exposure as a potentially modifiable determinant of lifelong health by synthesising biological, epidemiological, and implementation evidence. It also outlines a practical research and policy agenda to incorporate antibiotic-aware prevention into routine child health platforms and non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention efforts in resource-limited sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) settings.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that non-communicable diseases, such as cancer, diabetes, chronic respiratory conditions, and cardiovascular disease, cause over 74% of deaths globally each year. Between 2000 and 2018, the use of antibiotics increased by 76% in low- and middle-income countries (Browne et al., 2021).

When antibiotics are administered during infancy, gut-microbiota assembly may be disrupted at a crucial stage for immunological and metabolic development. Early colonisers, such as *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii* and *Bifidobacterium*, preserve barrier integrity and regulate the production of short-chain fatty acid, which promote epithelial health and alter host metabolism [(Donohoe et al., 2012), (Hamer et al., 2007)]. β -lactam antibiotics caused a 70% decrease in *Bifidobacterium* abundance in a Finnish birth cohort (Korpela 2018). Additionally, the cord-blood interleukin-6 - a marker of systemic inflammation, was around 45% higher in those newborns. Animal models reflect these disruptions. Low-dose penicillin treatment in neonatal mice led to a 70% reduction in *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii*, a significant butyrate producer (Cox 2014).

Antibiotic-induced disruptions during infancy set the stage for metabolic and immunological dysregulation, according to evidence from animal models and high-income birth cohorts. However, the contribution of these pathways to long-term NCD risk in SSA populations is still hypothetical and will need to be tested in region-specific longitudinal cohorts.

High-income cohorts show long-term links between newborn antibiotics and subsequent outcomes. Any course taken prior to six months was associated with a 1.21-fold increased risk of being overweight at age seven (95% CI 1.13–1.30) in the United States ($n = 11,000$) (Trasande et al., 2013). Antibiotic exposure during the first year was associated with an increase in BMI z-score at age two (+0.20 SD for boys and +0.13 SD for girls) in Finland ($n = 12,000$). Although antibiotic-mediated microbiome disruptions may follow conserved pathways across populations, it is uncertain and needs empirical assessment if effect magnitude in SSA are comparable to those observed in high-income cohorts.

Three strands of evidence support the notion that early-life antibiotic exposure is a potentially modifiable determinant of lifelong health: (i) the biological pathway is plausible, as animal and in vitro models consistently demonstrate that antibiotics disrupt microbial processes essential for normal metabolic and immune development [(Wahlström 2016), (Cox 2014)]. (ii) Additional evidence is provided by epidemiological data from large birth cohorts in high-income countries, which link infant antibiotic usage to an increased risk of childhood obesity and allergic conditions

[(Trasande et al., 2013), (Ahmadizar et al., 2018)]. (iii) Lastly, case studies from various contexts demonstrate that well-designed stewardship levers can reduce paediatric prescribing by roughly 25% to over 80% [(Strategic Programme Against Antibiotic Resistance 2016), (Shao et. al., 2015)].

In conclusion, an integrated preventive approach is necessary to address the dual burden of infectious and non-communicable diseases in SSA. By aligning practical policy changes with a rigorous, context-specific research strategy, early-life antibiotic stewardship can be elevated from an undervalued risk factor to a cornerstone of NCD prevention.

This publication did not require ethics approval because it did not report on primary data gathering with human participants. The work is solely based on secondary research using published literature and publicly available data. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2026.2646042>



“Freedom Day, for me, is a celebration of how far we’ve come as a country and a reminder of who we’re still becoming. It represents South Africa’s democratic birth, rooted in hope, resilience, and the belief that our diversity is our strength. Inspired by the spirit of Ubuntu, I see Freedom Day as a reflection of our shared humanity: “I am because we are, since we are, therefore I am.” Despite our differences, cultures, and history, we continue to demonstrate that unity is possible. For me, it is a moment to honour our past, embrace our present, and be optimistic about the future we are shaping together. One love.”

Matamela Munyadziwa, Masters, University of the Witwatersrand.

Facts about Freedom Day

- In South Africa, Freedom Day signifies the end of apartheid and the start of a new democratic era.
- The day honours South Africa’s first democratic elections, which took place in 1994.
- After being imprisoned for 27 years for his anti-apartheid activism, Nelson Mandela was elected as South Africa’s first black president.
- 19.7 million of South Africa’s 22.7 million eligible voters participated in the 1994 national election.
- Freedom Day also honours the adoption of South Africa’s new constitution, which protects the rights and freedom of its citizens.



Freedom Day 2026

Freedom and The Rule of Law—Thirty Years of Democratic Citizenship

HAPPY FREEDOM DAY MZANSI!

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Quote of the month

“For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” –**Nelson Mandela**



Freedom Day 2026



Publications

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2. Leal, M., Beukes, J., Alcock, S., Thompson, U., & Norris, S. A. (2026). Antibiotic overuse as a modifiable early-life risk factor for non-communicable diseases in sub-Saharan Africa. *Global Health Action*, 19(1), 2646042. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2026.2646042>
3. Malope, M. F., Scott, M., Wessels, T., & Cowley, L. (2026). Expanding the methodological repertoire: Integrating multimodal approaches in genetic counseling research. *Journal of Genetic Counseling*, 35(2), e70193. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jgc4.70193>
4. Matshidiso, S., Million, P., Nosoyiso, F., Emmanuel, M., & Leila, P. (2026). Trends and Factors Associated with Stunting and Underweight among Early Grade Learners in Low-Quintile Schools in Johannesburg, South Africa (2020–2022). *The Open Public Health Journal* 19(1), e18749445423711. <https://doi.org/10.2174/0118749445423711260408200418>