SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE AND LAND AFFAIRS, HON. LULU XINGWANA (MP)

ON THE OCCASION OF THE WORLD FOOD DAY

EMBUTSINI TRIBAL AUTHORITY, MPUMALANGA PROVINCE

16 October 2007
Ladies and Gentlemen:

The year 2007 marks the 27th anniversary of the World Food Day Commemorations and the 62nd anniversary of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) founded in 1945.

This calendar day was proclaimed in 1979 by the Conference of FAO aimed at reflecting and heightening public awareness of the world food problem and strengthening solidarity in the struggle against hunger, malnutrition and poverty.
During the World Food Summit in 1996, Heads of State and Governments reaffirmed “the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.” These laudable efforts were further given impetus by the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000.

“The choice of The Right to Food” as the theme for 2007 World Food Day demonstrates increasing recognition by the international community of the important role of human rights in eradicating hunger and poverty, and hastening and deepening sustainable development.

In terms of Chapter 2, section 27.1b of the Constitution of South Africa (1996), Government guarantees progressive social rights, that every citizen has the right to have access to sufficient food and water and that the State must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve realization of this right.

Furthermore, the Constitution mandates government departments to develop appropriate legislation and programs to achieve the right to adequate and nutritious food.

The role of government regarding the right to food is two folds: Firstly, the creation of an environment where society is able to produce their own food or empowered socio-economically to have a purchasing
power and secondly, provide direct assistance to the poor and vulnerable through social safety nets.

In a progressive response to this constitutional requirement, Government has established an Integrated Food Security Strategy with the purpose of streamlining, harmonizing and integrating the different food security programs being implemented by different government departments so as to “attain universal physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food by all South Africans at all times to meet their dietary and food preferences for an active and healthy life”.

South Africa generally shows a healthy exportable surplus in its production of basic foodstuffs. In cases where drought or other factors have caused a shortfall in supply, we have always been able to import sufficient food timeously. We have never featured on the UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO’s) Global Information and Early Warning System as a country in a food crisis. Food production in South Africa is also diversified, ensuring the availability of a wide range of foodstuffs.

The difficult challenge is that the food security situation in South Africa has been and is still characterized by an apparent state of sufficiency for the nation. Despite our national food security and relative wealth, the experience of most South African households especially in rural areas is that of continued poverty which is manifested in food insecurity, ill-health and arduous work for low returns.
Like many developing countries, South Africa’s inability to satisfy essential needs is caused by a number of factors. However, poverty and hunger in particular were shaped by apartheid and are a consequence thereof. One of the harshest and most brutal aspects of this system was a process of active disposition of assets such as land and livestock from the black majority, while the opportunity to develop, access to markets, infrastructure and human development were denied the majority of our people.

Over two thirds of ultra poor households are located in rural areas and more than half have members who are pensioners and whose main supporters are women. Underlying the lack of purchasing power by this segment of the population is the limited scope of income opportunities, especially in the rural areas. Lack of economic activities in close proximity to the rural communities’ aggravates access to employment.

Projections estimate that the wheat demand would have grown by more than 50% by 2010 and by almost 90% by 2020. This can be compared to modest growth for maize demands which is about 20%, 40% and 70% in years 2000, 2010 and 2020 respectively compared.

The pattern in the increasing food demand provides particular challenges for capacity to supply sufficient food in future. It appears the current production levels will not match the projected future demand unless production is increased especially in context with the
effects of climate variation and the bio-fuel initiatives. The new entrance farmers have a critical role to play in expanding capacity to produce to meet projected future demand for food. The ILima/Letsema Campaign which was launched last year has set a target of increasing food production by 10-15%.

There is a need for collective and coordinated action (Block Farming) that assures greater responsiveness of the process to specific needs of the farming communities. Strengthening of associations such as Women in Agriculture and Rural Development (WARD) would go a long way in aggregating smaller farm units into a larger unit to break the constraints attributed to problems related to lack of access to markets namely, transport, market infrastructure, collection and storage of produce, bargaining power and finally lack of institutional responsibility focused at ensuring marketing access for small farmers.

The same will hold with regards to Youth involvement in agriculture. I am talking here about our own YARD – the Youth in Agriculture and Rural Development structure. These young adults will have to realize that as attempts are made towards accessing land, the key issue is the ability to use the land. These will further talk to the ability of individuals being able to make desired livelihoods from it. Apart from the needs of entrepreneurship involved to succeed in farming, one would further hope that young adults will fill the gaps in primary and secondary micro enterprises. The latter refers to issues of inputs supply in packages relevant to existing or envisaged agricultural enterprises, issues around collation and marketing of produce, issues
around contract management and processing of produce hence our continued support in training and capacity building.

Like the other eight provinces, Mpumalanga provincial administration has introduced Masibuyele Emasimini in 2004/05 targeting the poor communities in rural areas. This intervention provides mechanization, production inputs and training and capacity building for rural communities thus enhancing the local food security. To date R 66 million has been spent in 26 communities. Albert Luthuli community benefited this year where two farming communities are in the process of establishing Masibuyele Emasimini.

According to the Department of Health, 33% of children 0-6 years have been shown to be suffering from vitamin “A” deficiency which not only causes blindness but also results in a weakened immune system. One in four children of age 1-9 years have been found to be stunted which is a reflection of poor diets associated with poverty.

These statistics show that improving food security is not only about ensuring availability of food but also the quality of the food that is consumed is important. The Department of Health is thus a key partner in efforts to improve food security and to that effect, the Department of Health is involved in the providing vitamin A supplements to children aged 0-5.

Additional to this, the Department of Health is spearheading the mandatory fortification of staple foods. Our (South Africa) bread and
maize meal is fortified with six vitamins and two minerals to improve the quality of diets consumed by South Africans.

Similarly the Department of Education is involved in the promotion of school gardens and provision of meals through its National Feeding Programme. These partnerships should thus be strengthened to provide accelerated implementation aimed at addressing the development of most of the facets of human development.

If I were to provide detail of what government is doing to ensure progressive realization of the right to food, I would not be able to finish my speech today. Although a lot of efforts have been paid by the Social Cluster during the last decade to support a number of development projects, we also acknowledge that their impact in terms of improving the food security amongst the most food insecure and vulnerable communities is still very limited.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Food Security is a complex issue characterized by inter-disciplines, multi-sectors and multi-levels. It involves stakeholders from various fields, from household to national level. Government alone cannot hope to win the fight against food insecurity. It is therefore a challenge that requires strong partnerships to ensure that the right to food becomes a constitutional right indeed.

Have a happy World Food Day.

I thank you!