

**SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF HEALTH, DR JOE
PHAAHLA DURING WORLD ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH
DAY COMMEMORATION 2026**

**ZIMBALI LODGE, KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
29 SEPTEMBER 2026**

Programme Director, Cllr Dolly Shandu and Speaker of the host
iLembe District Municipality

Health MEC and Colleague, Ms Nomagugu Simelane

Ms Shenaaz Elhalabi, Representatives of the World Health
Organization in absentia

Cllr Thobani Shandu, Executive Mayor of iLembe District
Municipality

Prof Nicolas Crisp, Acting Director General

Dr David Musoke representing the International Federation of
Environmental Health,

Ms Mashudu Mukoma representing Health Professions Council
of South Africa

Cllr Thami Ngubane representing South African Local
Government Association

Senior government managers from all spheres of government,
Environmental Health Practitioners, otherwise known as Health
Inspectors in communities

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning, Sanibonani

Today, as we mark World Environmental Health Day under the theme “***Environmental Health: Standing with Science to Protect Communities***”, we are reminded of a fundamental truth: environmental health is not an optional extra in public health, it is one of its very foundations.

The water we drink, the air we breathe, the food we eat, the places where we live and work, how we manage waste and chemicals, the presence of disease vectors, and our capacity to withstand floods, droughts, heatwaves and other environmental shocks all of these determine whether people stay well or fall ill.

This year’s commemoration seeks to:

- Underscore the critical role of environmental health in preventing diseases linked to environmental risks.
- Bring together government, the private sector, academia and civil society to craft innovative strategies for stronger environmental health systems.
- Stimulate policy dialogue and recommend interventions that reduce the burden of environmentally related diseases.

- Equip Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs) and allied professionals with the knowledge and tools to improve monitoring, compliance and intervention.
- Celebrate the profession and honour the dedication of EHPs across the globe.

Environmental health goes beyond inspection and enforcement. It is about prevention, science and equity protecting the health, dignity and wellbeing of our communities. South Africa's health policy and legislative framework reflect this understanding. Environmental health services are an integral, community-based component of Primary Health Care, and EHPs play a vital role in identifying, assessing, monitoring and controlling environmental risks before they escalate into major public health crises.

The theme calls us to stand with science. For the health sector, this means decisions must be guided by the best available evidence. We must measure environmental risks rather than speculate about them. We must strengthen surveillance, environmental monitoring, risk assessment and data systems. Most importantly, we must translate scientific evidence into practical interventions that communities can understand and use. Science must serve people.

A scientific finding that remains confined to a report or journal article one that does not protect a child or any vulnerable member of our population does not protect communities. A water-quality result that does not trigger action fails to protect a community. An air-quality measurement that is not translated into a public health response does not prevent disease. Our task, therefore, is to build a stronger bridge between evidence, policy, implementation and community action. That bridge is environmental health.

South Africa has made significant progress in many areas of public health, yet we continue to face a complex combination of environmental risks and they are not evenly distributed. Communities grappling with inadequate infrastructure, informal settlements, overcrowding and limited access to basic services are often exposed to multiple environmental hazards simultaneously, raising urgent issues of environmental health equity.

A child growing up where water is unsafe, sanitation is inadequate, waste accumulates and air pollution is high does not begin life with the same opportunity for health as a child in a safer, healthier environment. The environmental determinants of health intersect directly with the social determinants of health. This is why our response must be integrated. We cannot

separate environmental health from primary health care, communicable disease control, maternal and child health, non-communicable diseases, occupational health, emergency preparedness and health-system resilience.

South Africa has experienced outbreaks and incidents that have demonstrated the consequences of weaknesses in water quality, sanitation, food safety and environmental health systems. Our responses must be tailored to move beyond reacting to outbreaks. We must strengthen prevention. Environmental Health Practitioners must be able to identify risks early, monitor water quality, investigate complaints, support outbreak investigations and work with communities to ensure corrective action is taken. These efforts must be underpinned by functional systems at local level, clear accountability and reliable information flowing from communities and municipalities through provincial structures to national decision-makers.

Food safety offers another powerful example: a working food system is a public health system. Our EHPs are a critical line of defence. You inspect food premises, investigate complaints, support outbreak investigations, collect samples and take enforcement action where necessary. But we must increasingly complement enforcement with prevention, education, risk-based

surveillance and stronger partnerships with the food industry and communities.

The primary objective is to prevent contaminated foodstuffs from reaching consumers in the first place. This is particularly important because foodborne disease outbreaks can spread rapidly and disproportionately affect children, older persons and people living with underlying vulnerabilities, as we have seen with the Naledi incidents and other outbreaks across the country.

Climate change is another area that connects science to action. It is no longer a distant environmental issue; it is a health issue. We must ensure that health sector policy work translates into implementation.

As temperatures rise and floods occur, we need systems that can identify communities at greatest risk of heat stress, conduct rapid environmental assessments and enhance disease surveillance to strengthen prevention and ensure the continual functioning of infrastructure. Climate-resilient health systems must therefore include climate-resilient environmental health services. Here too, EHPs are essential.

I wish to use this occasion to recognise your contribution. You often see the environmental determinants of disease before

those determinants become visible in hospital statistics. We must therefore ensure that you have the tools, skills, technology, resources and institutional support required to perform your role effectively.

The recently updated national environmental health norms and standards provide an important foundation for standardising service delivery and establishing quality benchmarks across provinces and municipalities. But standards only have value when they are implemented. The task, therefore, is to close the gap between policy and practice.

As South Africa continues to strengthen its health system and advance the implementation of National Health Insurance, we must ensure that prevention remains at the centre of our health-system transformation. Universal health coverage cannot mean simply expanding access to treatment after people become sick. It must also mean creating conditions that enable people to remain healthy—and environmental health has an important contribution to make to that broader objective.

A health system that treats diarrhoeal disease but does not address unsafe water is incomplete. A health system that treats respiratory illness but ignores harmful environmental exposures is incomplete. A health system that responds to food poisoning

outbreaks but does not strengthen food safety systems is incomplete. And a health system that treats the consequences of climate-related health risks without investing in prevention and resilience is incomplete. We must therefore continue moving towards a health system that is preventive, proactive, data-driven, integrated and community-centred.

Environmental health should be anchored at ward level, with outreach teams closely focused on identifying and addressing environmental factors that may negatively affect the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Ward-based outreach teams should conduct household and community assessments, promote safe water and sanitation practices, support proper waste management, identify environmental hazards, and educate community members about hygiene, food safety and disease prevention.

In collaboration with local authorities, schools, community organisations and other stakeholders, these teams can identify environmental risks early and facilitate appropriate interventions, strengthening prevention measures and keeping communities safer.

Undertaking this work requires a multi-disciplinary approach and partnership across departments and spheres of government. We

must agree that water is not solely a water-sector issue; the same applies to waste, air pollution, food safety and climate change. These are whole-of-government and whole-of-society issues.

As we look to the future, we must also strengthen environmental health information systems. We need timely, accurate and usable information. Our goal must be better information for better action.

On this World Environmental Health Day, let us move beyond recognising the importance of environmental health and commit to investing in the people, systems and resources that make environmental health effective and possible. For the 2026 commemoration, I propose the following commitments:

First, let us invest in EHPs because environmental health cannot be delivered without a capable, adequately resourced and supported environmental health workforce. Let us invest in recruiting, retaining, developing and equipping EHPs, ensuring they have the skills, tools, authority and working conditions required to protect communities. We must recognise EHPs not simply as inspectors, but as essential public health professionals working at the frontline of disease prevention, health protection and healthier communities.

Second, let us invest in the systems and infrastructure that enable environmental health services to function.

We need functioning environmental health management systems with reliable data, surveillance and monitoring platforms, information technology, vehicles, equipment and appropriate facilities. Let us allocate resources where environmental health work happens in communities, municipalities and the places where environmental health risks emerge.

Third, let us build systems that make collaboration possible—not merely call for collaboration.

The determinants of health require strong collaboration across departments, municipalities and the non-governmental sector. Our systems must therefore be designed to connect them. Let us establish clear mechanisms for collaboration and integrated planning, share data, coordinate resources, define responsibilities and hold one another accountable for outcomes.

Lastly, let us invest in communities and measure what matters. Our success should not be measured only by the number of inspections conducted, certificates issued, samples collected or reports completed. We must measure whether our investments

are reducing environmental risks and whether people are actually living in safer, healthier and more resilient environments. This requires listening to communities, strengthening public participation and ensuring that environmental health services reach those who need them most.

These commitments require more than good intentions. They require political will, sustainable financing and a deliberate decision to invest in environmental health. Environmental health is not a cost to be managed; it is an investment in prevention, in public health and in the future of our communities.

In conclusion, as we commemorate World Environmental Health Day 2026, let us remember that environmental health is ultimately about prevention. It is about stopping disease before it reaches the clinic. It is about identifying risks before they become a crisis. It is about using science to protect those who are most vulnerable. And it is about creating communities where health is supported not only by hospitals and clinics, but by safer and healthier environments.

Let us hold ourselves accountable for the environmental health outcomes we deliver.

I thank you.

Happy World Environmental Health Day 2026