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**SPEAKING NOTES FOR MEC THEMBA MTHEMBU ON THE LAUNCH OF  
SENIOR CITIZENS DIALOGUE ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE  
SYSTEMS THROUGH AGRICULTURE**

**VENUE: KWAMAYE SPORTSFIELD, OKHAHLAMBA**

**14 MARCH 2019**

Let me start by asking all of you to stand up and give a moment of silence for Banele and Sphelele Mdletshe who fell into a Dip Tank and died in a tragic accident, our thoughts and prayers are with their family.

Programme Director, it is an honour and privilege to be amongst you to talk about a project which is close to my heart.

Every day, plant species across the globe are disappearing. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that approximately 75 percent of the Earth's plant genetic resources are now extinct and another third of plant biodiversity is expected to disappear by 2050. Up to 100,000 plant varieties are currently endangered worldwide.

Unfortunately, most investments in agriculture are for crops such as wheat, rice, and maize rather than for more nutritious foods or indigenous crops—and this focus has had devastating consequences. Global obesity rates have doubled over the last 30 years, increasing the risk of diet-related illnesses including diabetes, hypertension and heart disease in industrialized and developing countries alike. Many indigenous crops are environmentally sustainable, improve food security, help prevent malnutrition and increase farmer incomes.

The nutritious value of indigenous food is something we need to work hard on to ensure that we preserve them. In South Africa, we are lucky to have an abundance of these indigenous foods and we need to ensure that we as the Department of

Agriculture and Rural development, preserve our indigenous foods and help educate our communities on how to cook them like the way our elders used to.

Conservation of the indigenous knowledge in farming is very important, especially if you look at climate changes we are experiencing at the moment. Indigenous foods are not only resistant to weather and climate change but they are also readily available, inexpensive to produce, highly nutritious and most importantly, organic.

In the past, people harvested indigenous leafy vegetables from the natural encroachment. Amaranthus (imbuya) and pumpkin leaves (imifino yezintanga) are now grown in intercrops. This farming system was the strategy of preserving indigenous vegetables in the field ensuring food security; as a result, less people had malnutrition, chronic diseases such as cancer, BP, heart and eye diseases. Later many turned away from consuming indigenous leafy vegetables because it was associated with poverty and self-esteem but now there is better awareness about the nutritional content and richness of indigenous vegetables so these vegetables can now be seen on urban markets and consumed by a wide range of people.

Advantages of Growing Indigenous Crops include:

- Low input requirements - use less water than 'Western' crops.
- Highly nutritious - can add more vitamins and minerals to a mainly starch-based diet.
- Resistant to drought, pests and diseases.

Cowpea (Imbumba): Originating in central Africa, this legume is one of the region's oldest crops. It is also drought resistant and can thrive in poor soil conditions. The leaves of the plant are also consumed as a vegetable.

As the Department, we want to acknowledge the role played by our citizens when it comes to indigenous foods, who have vast knowledge in indigenous food which is not recognized. Which is why I want to acknowledge the outstanding work done Ms Mdluli from uThando lweNhlambane Cooperative who is tilling the land using a manual planter and has planted maize and beans as well as fruit trees.

We are aware that Ms Mdluli is not alone, there are many more like her in oKhahlamba but we want farmers in KwaZulu-Natal as a whole, to continue with this practice and pass on the knowledge to others.

What concerns us the most about indigenous knowledge food is that:

- Indigenous knowledge is eroding because of limited transfer between generations due to changing social systems, despite the significance of these plants to food security and livelihoods.
- Changes in population pressure on natural resources and a breakdown in the in-situ conservation strategies is starting to result in the deterioration of natural resources, including African vegetables and consequently the indigenous knowledge associated with them. This is despite the significant contribution to food security made by these plants and their associated knowledge.
- More attention needs to be paid to these plants and other indigenous food crops in order to increase their contribution to food security and the variety of ways in which this can be done from household consumption to commercialisation and value-adding.

Okhahlamba is one of the areas that experienced a severe drought and planting was delayed and the district will be embarking on a drive to experiment with drought tolerant crops such as the indigenous foods.

KZNDARD (Research) is working to catalogue indigenous species of fruits and vegetables such as Boab, (indigenous tree found at Mkhuze) Moringa, Amarula, Imbuya, Amadumbe, izindlubu, imbumba and nokunye.

This engagement today is one of many where the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will have information sharing sessions in order to promote the use of indigenous knowledge systems in KZN. Our research department has already started to study indigenous foods and create seed banks where senior citizens will be allowed to share indigenous knowledge with young farmers.

Programme Director as I conclude, **"The death of a traditional food system is the death of a nation...physically and culturally. We can and must protect and restore practices that can make us healthy and well as indigenous people."**

So all of us gathered here today have a responsibility to ensure that we preserve this practice in order to improve our food and nutrition security in our Province.

I thank you.