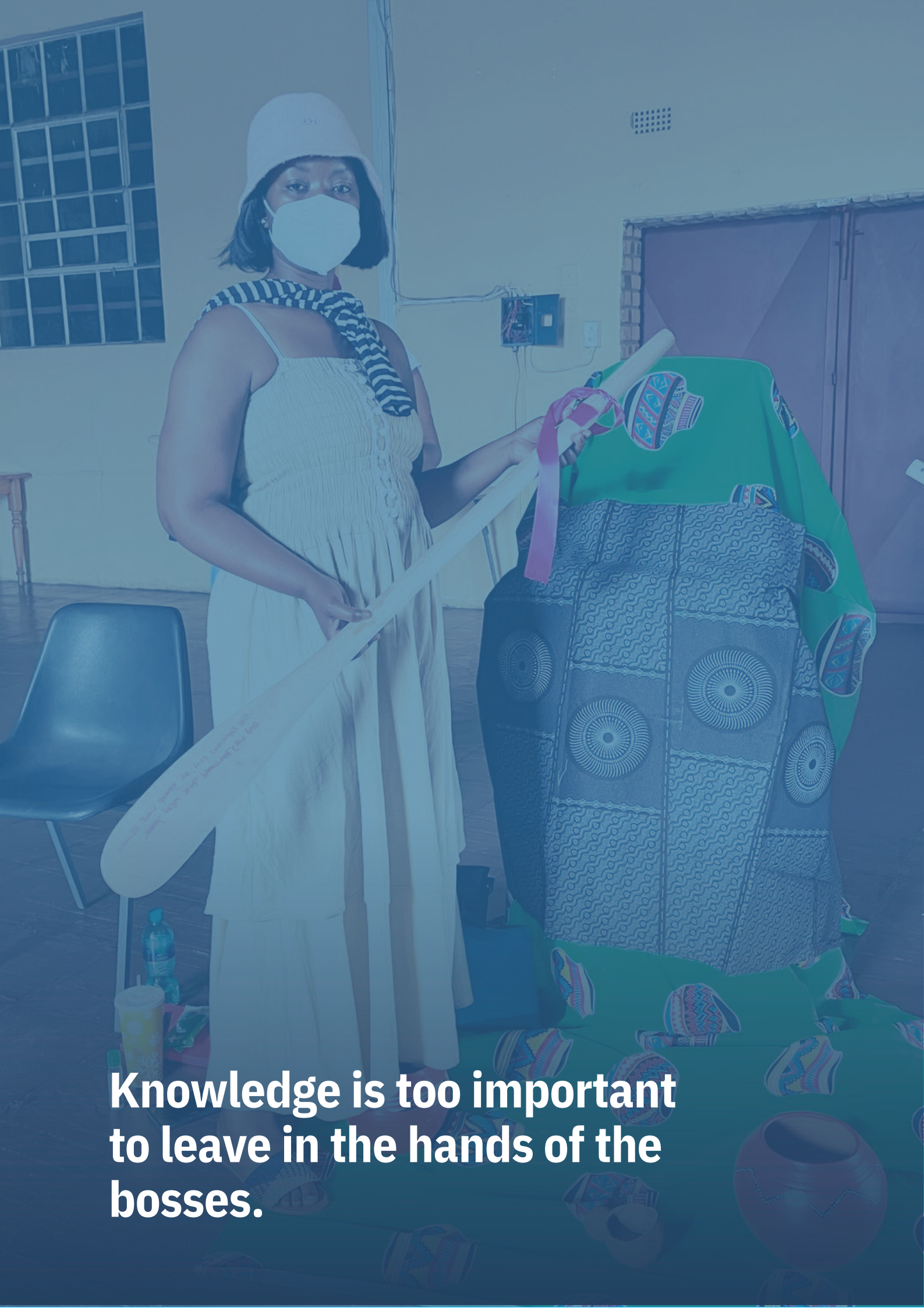


VOLUNTEER FOOD HANDLERS

**The hands and heart of the National
School Nutrition Programme**



**Knowledge is too important
to leave in the hands of the
bosses.**

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Introduction

The Labour Research Service (LRS) supports the struggles of women workers in all forms of employment. The LRS Power Up! initiative aims to advocate for the right of Volunteer Food Handlers to fair and decent work in a laudable community-centred National School Nutrition Programme.

In advocating for decent work, we have strived to know how the nature of work and the workplace is changing.

The informalisation of work is a big concern when looking at the definition of what counts as work and who counts as a worker in South Africa. Women workers are directly affected by the informalisation of work. Informalisation can manifest through, for example, non-standard work arrangements and self-employment as a survival mechanism.

The LRS recognises that many women workers are struggling to maintain their receding formal jobs. Others have been drawn into formal work cloaked as “voluntary”, as is the case of the Volunteer Food Handlers in the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). The concept of ‘volunteering’ implies that the worker should not receive payment because the job is a social responsibility.

Millions of school children from impoverished communities benefit from the NSNP. Volunteer food handlers assist with food preparation for a small stipend and not a salary.

LRS Power Up! Initiative

OBJECTIVE: Increased collective influence and impact women have on laws and policy, the public discourse and social attitudes and narratives that cause discrimination, violence and exclusion, contributing to the full realisation of women’s rights and gender equality.

The LRS Power Up! Initiative seeks to connect and support volunteer food handlers to have their jobs made visible, recognised, valued and remunerated. We are part of a broader international initiative that involves women's rights organisations and networks in 17 countries. Together, we will build, organise, mobilise and transform power on three strategic agendas: bodies, voices and resources.

"The concept of ‘volunteering’ implies that the worker should not receive payment because the job is a social responsibility."



Volunteer Food Handlers:

The hands and heart of the National School Nutrition Programme

The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) is a government programme for poverty alleviation, aimed at ensuring that children have the right to nutritious food that supports their ability to learn.

How the NSNP works

The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) was launched in 1994 as one of Mandela's lead projects. The idea of the project is to provide healthy nutrition that supports children's ability to learn. More than 9.6 million children in South Africa depend on the NSNP. In 2020, learners at 21 000 schools had nutritious meals prepared through the NSNP.

The NSNP targets children in no-fee paying primary and high schools i.e. quintiles 1-3. If resources are available targeted learners in quintiles 4 and 5 are also catered for. There are three components to the program:

1. School feeding schemes aimed at providing daily nutritious meals to learners
2. Nutrition education for promoting healthy lifestyles
3. School Food Gardens where learners, educators and parents are provided with skills to grow their own food as a way of contributing toward long-term household food security. The gardens are used as a teaching and learning resource.

The Department of Basic Education is responsible for co-ordinating the NSNP in cooperation with the Provincial Education Departments. Provincial Education Departments provide the Department of Basic Education with a proposed budget which includes food, stipends for the Volunteer Food handlers, equipment and cooking fuel. Provinces are also responsible for promoting local economic empowerment through the procurement of fresh produce from smallholder farmers. The farmers should be registered with the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development and adhere to good agricultural practices. Between 2018 and 2019, 3 477 small and medium enterprises and local cooperatives were contracted to supply food to learners.

The NSNP is funded through a Conditional Grant that is transferred to provinces. The budget for 2022/23 stands at R8.5 billion.

All levels of Government have the responsibility of ensuring the smooth running of the NSNP. The National Department of Education is responsible for ensuring that funds are secured from National Treasury.

The Provincial Departments of Education are responsible for developing and submitting business plans to the Department of Education and the Districts are responsible for supporting and monitoring the NSNP at the school level. Schools that form part of the NSNP are required to set up School Nutrition Committees responsible for proper menus, health and safety and monitoring and evaluation. The committee comprises nutrition advisers, School Governing Body members, a school coordinator and a volunteer food handler.

The Volunteer Food Handler – Keeping the NSNP alive in the School

Views from volunteer food handlers:

"Working with food is one of my favourite things to do. I used to work in the kitchen at Spur before getting this position. COVID forced our restaurant to close, so I applied. I was thankful for the opportunity to earn some money."

"I needed the money as well as the opportunity to contribute to the school."

"I needed a job because I have been unemployed for a long time."

"I wanted to help feed the students at my child's school."

"I am a widow, and after my husband died, I was in a lot of pain. This job helped me get back on my feet."

The NSNP is operational in over 21 000 schools and at the heart of the programme is a huge workforce of more than 61 000 volunteer food handlers who start early in the morning with preparing food, serving the children breakfast and lunch and then cleaning the kitchen and utensils.

Unemployed parents of learners in local communities, mostly women, are recruited and appointed by the School Governing Body (SGB) as volunteer food handlers. Volunteer Food Handlers are unemployed parents of learners in local communities, usually women who are recruited on a contract basis and receive a monthly stipend of anything between R1360 and R1566 depending on provincial budgets.

The food handlers are entitled to a small Unemployment Insurance Fund benefit. One volunteer food handler is appointed for every 200 learners. Large schools have up to eight food handlers. In small schools, the ratio of food handlers to learners can be 1:125.

The conditions of the volunteer food handlers are often very challenging where they are obliged to work on average six hours of hard labour, and in some cases in very difficult conditions, with no running water or even a proper kitchen. Sometimes before starting the process of cleaning utensils, volunteer food handlers have to move all around the school, collecting dishes learners have left after eating.

Earning much less than other Extended Public Workers, where the average earnings of a general worker in Gauteng is R3 795, volunteer food handlers should be applauded for their commitment and dedication to the nutritional and educational wellbeing of children from schools across many impoverished communities.

Why it is necessary to support the NSNP and the work of the Volunteer Food Handlers

All over the world school nutrition programmes like the NSNP are acknowledged as having a positive impact on the nutritional status of children.

For many children, the meal they receive at school is the only full nutritious meal they will receive for the day and this is very important for the child who might come to school hungry. It is very hard to concentrate or actively participate in learning if you are hungry. Receiving a nutritious meal is essential for enhancing learning and the overall development of the child.

The NSNP's promotion of school food gardens is an important way learners are able to gain knowledge about healthy food production. The World Health Organization emphasizes the benefits of school gardens as a means to improve childhood health and nutrition and as an important means of creating food security where children can have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. Making the gardens fun and exciting to work in, learners can be encouraged to eat what they produce and in this way extend their diets to a bigger variety of fresh vegetables and fruit.

"It is important that the work in school food gardens become part of the school curriculum."

The school food gardens offer educators, learners and community members the opportunity to grow local vegetables and to include these in the meals at school. In some schools, the produce of the school food garden is shared with the broader community where for example on Fridays some learners are given food parcels to assist both the learner and their family members with food over the weekend.

While we have no evidence as yet of the work of school gardens becoming part of the core curriculum or extracurricular activities at school, the gardens do offer learners the opportunity to increase their more formal knowledge about agricultural production. It is important that the work in school food gardens become part of the school curriculum.

The benefits of the NSNP go beyond feeding learners at school, and can also boost the local economy by offering opportunities for generating job opportunities or market opportunities for small-scale farmers. The mostly unemployed women recruited as volunteer food handlers have the chance to learn new skills and earn a very small stipend. The success of the NSNP rests at the moment on the shoulders of the more than 61 000 volunteer food handlers, and it is important that the work of feeding millions of children is seen as work deserving of recognition and value by the community, and appropriate working conditions and salary.

" We need decent jobs for volunteer food handlers."

So while the position of volunteer food handler offers some possibility of a form of employment, for it to be a real job, the importance of the work of the food handler needs to be recognized and rewarded accordingly. We need decent jobs for volunteer food handlers.

At present, it is very difficult to know how the NSNP has opened up possibilities for procurement from small-scale local farmers. To ensure that the NSNP does become a vehicle for promoting the local economy, it is important that relevant stakeholders are aware and involved in decisions around procurement.

So while the position of volunteer food handler offers some possibility of a form of employment, for it to be a real job, the importance of the work of the food handler needs to be recognized and rewarded accordingly. We need decent jobs for volunteer food handlers.



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About us

The Labour Research Service (LRS) is a non-profit, membership-based, labour support organisation with fifteen member trade unions in South Africa. The Labour Research Service works with trade unions across federations and industries.

The Labour Research Service partners with global union federations, solidarity support organisations, federations, trade unions, the International Labour Organisation, government departments, academic institutions, community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations.



The **vision** of the Labour Research Service is of a labour movement that is part of a vibrant civil society that promotes egalitarianism.



The **mission** of the Labour Research Service is to conduct research, provide information and facilitate participatory education for trade union development.



The **objectives** of the Labour Research Service are

1. To increase knowledge for trade union development.
2. To increase the capacity to mobilise for trade union development
3. To increase the influence of the trade union movement in the contexts in which it operates.

The LRS stands for:

The development of its member unions and the trade union movement in South Africa and in Africa.

Working class leaders that seek to organise and represent workers in a world of work that continues to change.

Worker leaders who are open to renewing their strategy and approaches to bargaining and organising.

Inspiring workers to believe in and exercise their individual and collective power in the struggle for social and economic justice.

The Labour Research Service has existed for over three decades because trade unions recognise the need for support in their ongoing efforts to organise and represent the interests of their constituency at the shop floor, at industry level and in social dialogue.

Know more: www.lrs.org.za/about-us/the-lrs-story/

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