

NOVEMBER 2022

# DIALOGUE WITH TRADE UNION ACTIVISTS

## Volunteer Food Handlers

---

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

# 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.

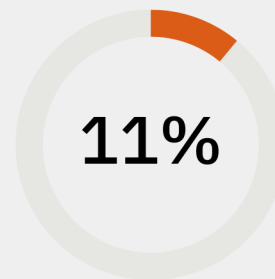
Millions of school children from impoverished communities benefit from the NSNP. Volunteer food handlers assist with food preparation for a small stipend and not a salary.

## The basics of NSNP

### NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMME



**Section 28(1)(c) of the Constitution of South Africa gives children the right to basic nutrition.**



About 2.1 million children lived in households that reported child hunger in 2018.

Child hunger rates in 2002 were 19 percentage points higher. The (NSNP) helps to reduce hunger and advance children’s rights to health and education.

### NSNP

Improved learning capacity

Promotes food production

Boosts nutrition education

**9.6m**

Over nine million children benefit from the NSNP

**60k+**

Volunteer food handlers get a stipend to prepare the food in schools

Data sources: Statistics SA; Child Gauge (2020)



The work of feeding millions of learners must be seen as work deserving of recognition and value.

## 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 in the NSNP 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.”

**Nina Benjamin,**  
Project Leader  
LRS Gender Equality Programme





# Supporting Volunteer Food Handlers: The "heart" and "hands" of the National School Nutrition Programme



Why is the NSNP and the work of Volunteer Food Handlers important for union activists who are also educators, parents and community members?

**As educators:** The NSNP contributes to improving education and meeting the nutrition and health needs of school-age children. It is difficult to concentrate and learn when you are hungry or malnourished. Nutritious food supports learners' ability to learn. As the economic crisis in our country intensifies, more and more families are going to bed hungry. For many children, the meal they receive at school through the NSNP is

their only nutritious meal for the day.

The NSNP aims to enhance learning, increase school attendance and punctuality and generally contribute to the health and well-being of our learners. A child who receives a nutritious meal is more likely to be alert, responsive, and eager to participate in the classroom. For educators, an active learner is key in the teaching

and learning processes. So, educators have a role to play in positively influencing the eating habits of learners through promoting nutritious menus and meal preparation by Volunteer Food Handlers in the NSNP at our schools.

**As parents:** Many parents are unemployed or working in low-paid jobs and have to go to great lengths to find ways of putting food on the table for their families. Mothers often feel very anxious when they cannot provide regular meals to their children. Knowing that your child can have a regular, balanced and nutritious meal through the NSNP is very reassuring for parents.

The NSNP also provides some parents of learners the opportunity to be cooks or what is referred to as Volunteer Food Handlers. Receiving a stipend, these parents ensure daily that learners in primary and high school receive nutritious and balanced meals.

**As community members:** Everyone wants to see children in their community thrive both physically and intellectually. A balanced and nutritious meal is key to a healthy mind and body.



As community members, it is important that we are actively involved in supporting a Government initiative that focuses on the well-being of our children. While the NSNP is important for what the Government refers to as poverty alleviation, it also has the potential to generate income for small groups of parents at schools through the

the recruitment of Volunteer Food Handlers. While the NSNP is important for what the Government refers to as poverty alleviation, it also has the potential to generate income for small groups of parents at schools through the recruitment of Volunteer Food Handlers.

**I am an ex-teacher, and I was responsible for food handlers at my school. We must return to basics and appreciate the skills of our grandmothers in teaching us how to eat well.**



# As trade union activists, why should we pay attention to the “heart and hands” of the NSNP – the Volunteer Food Handlers?

Union activists are concerned with the rights and well-being of all workers and across all workplaces. For Government, the NSNP is lauded as a flagship program fighting poverty. Yet the workers who cook and prepare the meals feeding thousands of children in schools across the country are categorised as volunteers and paid a stipend of R1270.85 per month or R58.70 daily - 63.5% of what Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP) workers receive. EPWP workers earn R1998.51 monthly and R92.31 daily.

Volunteer Food Handlers, the majority of whom are women, have been drawn into a “volunteer” program. The International Labour Organisation defines volunteer work as **“activities performed willingly and without pay to produce goods or services for others outside the volunteer’s household or family”**.

Key to the notion of volunteerism is that whoever volunteers does it out of choice, meaning they can join or leave at will. However, we need to question the idea that the Volunteer Food Handler “chooses” to volunteer. For many people working as Volunteer Food Handlers, it is an imposed survival mechanism. This means receiving even a stipend can assist with putting food on the table.

There is also the notion that the women who cook the food in the NSNP should not be concerned with a monetary return for their labour, as the cooking they

do as Volunteer Food Handlers should be a “labour of love” and love should be freely given. Yet it is usually only women who are expected to perform this “labour of love” or what we can aptly describe as unpaid or underpaid labour. We need to acknowledge that women receive very little in return for this “labour of love”. In the case of the Volunteer Food Handlers, their difficult working conditions, small stipend and lack of recognition as workers only further entrenches the notion that care work or the “labour of love” can easily be used to devalue women’s contribution to society.

“

**We need to question the idea that the Volunteer Food Handler “chooses” to volunteer. For many people working as Volunteer Food Handlers, it is an imposed survival mechanism.**

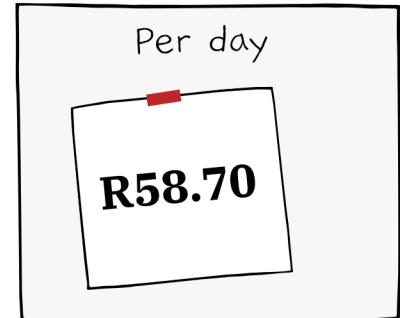
”



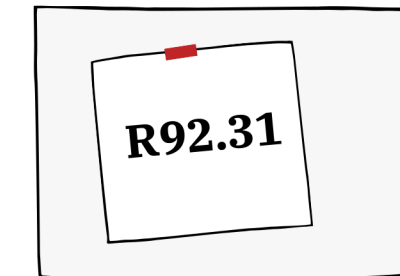
# Wage indicators



Volunteer Food handlers



Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP)



**KNOWLEDGE**  
IS TOO IMPORTANT TO  
LEAVE IN THE  
HANDS OF THE  
**BOSSSES**

## Key project contacts

Nina Benjamin | [nina@lrs.org.za](mailto:nina@lrs.org.za)  
Nosipho Twala | [nosipho@lrs.org.za](mailto:nosipho@lrs.org.za)  
Nancy Castrol-Leal | [nancy@lrs.org.za](mailto:nancy@lrs.org.za)

**Vision:** a labour movement that is part of a vibrant civil society that promotes egalitarianism.

**Mission:** To conduct research, provide information and facilitate participatory education for trade union development.

**Know more:** [www.lrs.org.za](http://www.lrs.org.za)

**LRS** Labour Research Service

Together we can  
**POWER UP!**