



# DECOLONISING NUTRITION AND VALUING VOLUNTEER FOOD HANDLERS (VFH) TO STRENGTHEN THE NSNP

**LRS** Labour  
Research  
Service



**The Labour Research Service (LRS)** is a South African labour support organisation focused on supporting trade unions, worker rights, and social justice through research, education, and advocacy. Established in 1986, LRS works to improve labour conditions and empower workers in South Africa and the broader Southern African region.

We work across the continuum of work, supporting workers and worker leaders in both the formal and informal work sectors.

Part of the LRS's objectives is to support women who are employed in precarious forms of work, including Domestic Workers, Waste-Pickers, Early Childhood Educators and Volunteer Food Handlers in South Africa's National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) to promote fair working conditions and recognition of their essential role.

*Power Up! is a collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Power of Women strategic partnership.*



Economic control is a form of gender-based violence.  
It's another way patriarchy reinforces gender inequality.  
Economic independence is a right for women.

**POWER UP!**



We need to address economic inequality and strengthen women's economic resilience and stability for a better, climate resilient future.

**POWER UP!**



They say if you want to go far, go together and that is exactly what we are doing with this programme.

**Together we can POWER UP!**



**POWER UP!** believes in fostering community initiatives related to food security and supporting women in local advocacy initiatives.



The right to **vote**,  
to **own land**,

to get an **inheritance**,  
& the ability to **get a loan**

Together we can  
**POWER UP!**

Together - building, organising, mobilising and transforming the power of women for social change.



**POWER UP!**



**POWER UP!**

# Promoting Health and Nutrition in Schools

## A Shared Vision:

- As the LRS, we share a similar vision with HEALA and its partners in promoting health and nutrition in schools.
- The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) is a powerful platform for improving school food environments and enhancing the health of learners.
- We want to highlight the opportunities and challenges in scaling up the NSNP.
- The Food Handlers play a critical role in supporting healthy living in their communities and schools. They need to be recognised and given better working conditions.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCALING AND EXPANDING THE NSNP

We believe that the reach and effectiveness of NSNP can be expanded through:

**Decolonising Nutrition**

**Valuing and Empowering Food Handlers**

**Reviving School Food Gardens**

# DECOLONISING NUTRITION

- **Food handlers in Gauteng are drawing on ancestral knowledge to rethink nutrition and promote healthy, traditional diets.**
- **Reviving Traditional Food Practices:** Food handlers in Gauteng are using ancestral knowledge to rethink nutrition. Drawing from the way mothers and grandmothers used to grow and prepare healthy food, they are finding sustainable methods that do not require large financial resources.
  - **The Three Sisters:** The traditional combination of maize, pumpkin, and beans serves as an example of sustainable and nutritious farming practices that enriched communities. This reflects a holistic approach to farming that modern schools can adopt.
  - **Challenges in School Kitchens:** Drawing on traditional cooking spaces offers valuable lessons in sustainability, contrasting sharply with the inadequate infrastructure in school kitchens today. Lack of refrigeration and storage facilities leads to spoiled food, while poor procurement systems provide schools with low-quality, unfresh food.
  - **Demystifying the Menus:** The misconception that traditional foods are “for the poor” must be challenged. These foods are essential for good health and are critical for supporting the development and learning of schoolchildren.

# VALUING FOOD HANDLERS

## Recognising the Essential Role of Volunteer Food Handlers

**Who Are They?:** Volunteer Food Handlers are the unsung heroes of the NSNP. They ensure that meals are prepared and served, playing a critical role in the health and nutrition of learners. However, they face significant challenges:

**Job Insecurity:** Without clear contracts or employers, food handlers lack formal recognition as workers.

**Rights Violations:** There is no social protection, and they lack adequate tools and health and safety protections.

### **Why We Must Recognise Them:**

**Childhood Nutrition:** Food Handlers are essential to the nutritional health of children. Instead of seeing their roles as extensions of their identity as women or mothers, they must be seen as skilled workers who deserve proper training and fair remuneration.

**Legal Rights:** Food handlers should be employed full-time, paid fairly in line with the **National Minimum Wage Act (NMWA)**, **Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA)**, and **Labour Relations Act (LRA)**.

**Their Broader Role:** They don't just serve food; they intervene when children are unwell or in distress and act as nutrition activists. Many food handlers, even after their contracts end, continue to share their knowledge with communities, promoting healthy living through organic food growing.

# WHO ARE VOLUNTEER FOOD HANDLERS?

## 60 000 + (mostly women) workers in SA's National School Nutrition Programme

### Role:

- Provide meals to over **9 million plus** children daily under the NSNP.

### Challenges they face:

- **Undervalued:** Their work is seen as an extension of care work expected of women, often unappreciated.
- **Unrecognised:** They lack formal recognition as employees despite their crucial role.
- **Under-remunerated:** Classified as volunteers, they receive only a small stipend, not a living wage.

### Advocacy:

- **VFH are nutrition activists** and are campaigning for visibility, recognition, valuing, and fair remuneration for their contributions.



# REVIVING SCHOOL FOOD GARDENS

## Mobilising School and Community Gardens for Healthy Living

- **Growing Food in Schools and Communities:** Food Handlers and community members have the potential to lead efforts in cultivating school gardens. These gardens can become a hub for growing nutritious, organic food that is integrated into school meals.
- **Agents of Change:** Volunteer Food Handlers, through their own gardening initiatives at home and in communities, are setting examples for healthier eating. By scaling this, schools can become centers of nutrition education and local food production.
- **A Holistic Approach to Nutrition:** The connection between growing, preparing, and consuming healthy food promotes a sustainable food system that benefits both learners and communities. This approach aligns with HEALA's goals to improve school food environments and health outcomes for learners.

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