



Smallholder farmers, school food gardens and South Africa's National School Nutrition Programme

– a focus on KwaZulu-Natal



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Smallholder farmers, school food gardens and South Africa's National School Nutrition Programme – a focus on KwaZulu-Natal

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Broccoli in flower. Photo: Mark Mattson

School garden at Entweni Primary School, northern KwaZulu-Natal. Photo: Mark Mattson

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SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNINGS

■ **Underfunding limits impact.**

Current per-learner meal budgets are too low to meet nutritional standards, leading to poor food quality and reduced variety.

■ **Centralised procurement excludes smallholders.**

The prevailing model favours large suppliers and struggles to integrate rural small-holder farmers, despite policy intentions.

■ **Hybrid procurement failures in KwaZulu-Natal.**

Attempts to combine centralised and decentralised systems were compromised due to poor planning, communication, and district-level capacity.

■ **Smallholder farmers face systemic barriers.**

Lack of business registration, transport, storage, collective organisation, and programme awareness prevent their participation.

■ **School food gardens are underutilised.**

Chronic underfunding, unclear objectives, and lack of dedicated support limit their potential as nutrition and learning tools.

■ **Late meal times undermine educational benefits.**

Many schools miss the 10:00 am target, reducing the programme's intended concentration boost.

■ **Weak infrastructure hampers delivery.**

Poor kitchens, erratic water supply, and unsafe storage compromise food quality and safety, especially in rural areas.

■ **Volunteer training gaps.**

Many food handlers lack adequate training in nutrition, hygiene and safe food handling practices, risking both quality and safety.

■ **International models show the way.**

Brazil, India and Ghana demonstrate that legislated local procurement quotas, community-based preparation, and strong oversight can boost inclusion, nutrition, and rural development.

■ **Political will and coordination are critical.**

Realising the NSNP's potential requires interdepartmental collaboration, legislative reform, and sustained investment in smallholder farmers and necessary infrastructure.

ACRONYMS

DBE	Department of Basic Education
DPME	Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal province
NGOs	non-governmental organisations
NPO	nonprofit organisation
NSNP	National School Nutrition Programme
PED	Provincial Education Department
SGB	School Governing Body
SHGs	self-help groups
VFH	volunteer food handlers

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa has a long history of school feeding targeting poor white, coloured and African children in schools and communities. It started in the 1940s when the apartheid government provided milk to poor white school children in response to high levels of malnutrition and infant mortality. The programme also had economic underpinnings; it helped stimulate demand for surplus milk production, supporting white commercial dairy farmers and stabilising milk prices. However, due to financial pressures and shifts in the state's priorities to focus more on segregation policies and industrialisation, the programme was halted in the 1950s. Some schools, supported by NGOs, continued with the programme, but the government no longer funded it. In 1994, the newly elected democratic government brought back the school feeding programme under the Department of Health. It aimed to improve education outcomes by providing an early morning snack and enhancing health through micronutrients. In 2004, the programme was transferred to the Department of Education (DoE) and its name was changed to the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). It targeted primary schools in quintiles¹ 1–3, and from 2008, 2010, and 2011, high schools in quintiles 1–3 were included. The government saw the DoE as best placed to manage and implement the school nutrition programme because it was targeted at school children.

The NSNP was conceptualised primarily as an educational intervention, aiming to enhance the educational experience of the neediest primary school learners by promoting punctual school attendance, alleviating short-term hunger, improving concentration, and contributing to overall health development (DBE and DPME, 2014). Alongside these aims are the inculcation of healthy eating habits and food gardening skills.

Studies on the programme have been conducted by various scholars, including some evaluations by the government itself. Common findings about the programme include challenges with centralised procurement, payment delays to service providers, a limited budget, poor infrastructure for food storage and preparation, poor food quality, poorly managed food gardens, and difficulty integrating smallholder farmers as fresh produce suppliers. When integrating smallholder farmers, research shows that most farmers do not have sufficient produce to meet the school's demands; they are often located in remote areas, making it difficult to reach them; and many are unaware of the programme and how to get involved. Lessons from countries such as Brazil, despite its limitations, show that if well-structured and adequately funded by the state, smallholder farmers can effectively supply schools with healthy, nutritious food. In return, they create local economies and contribute to broader livelihoods through secured markets for their produce.

This research report explores the design, implementation, and outcomes of South Africa's National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), with a focus on KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). Of particular interest is the role of smallholder farmers in the programme and the food production projects in schools. From the desktop study, combined with interviews with some of the key players in the NSNP in KZN, this report aligns with earlier studies that the programme is weak in terms of integrating smallholder farmers and school food gardens. It therefore argues that for the NSNP to integrate

1. South Africa's school quintiles are a system dividing public schools into five groups (Q1-Q5) based on their surrounding community's wealth, with quintile 1 representing the poorest (no-fee schools) and quintile 5 the wealthiest (fee-paying schools).

smallholder farmers and strengthen food production in schools effectively, the programme requires increased state funding and better and deliberate coordination between relevant state departments.

To effectively integrate smallholder farmers requires improving state support, including providing water infrastructure, access to secure productive land, extension services, climate change adaptation practices built on farmers' knowledge and experiences, indigenous seed banks in local communities, and good roads for easy transportation of produce. This will not only ensure productivity and supply of fresh produce to schools but will also contribute to broader household food security and create livelihood opportunities in rural areas. This requires a collaborative approach among the Departments of Education, Agriculture, Land Reform, and Rural Development, as well as provincial departments of infrastructure and transport.

In the sections that follow, the report provides a detailed discussion of the NSNP, research methods, and questions of this study, as well as its findings and experiences from other countries, concluding with a closing discussion.

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WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS

The importance of this research is twofold. Firstly, this research stems from Biowatch's intervention to challenge the dominant model of industrial farming by advocating for an agroecological transformation of the food system and by supporting smallholder farmers and schools in producing local varieties of vegetables and fruits, utilising ecologically friendly farming methods under the umbrella of agroecology and food sovereignty.

Agroecology in this context is both a scientific method of farming and a political movement that centres local knowledge, enhances the production of nutritious food and supports farmers' autonomy. Food sovereignty, on the other hand, is a broader political project, which is about the right of peoples to access healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems.

The NSNP has the potential to create opportunities for smallholder farmers to provide schools with nutritious and locally-produced fruits and vegetables. Biowatch is well-positioned to support such interventions, given its strong track record in agroecology training and support for smallholder farmers in the KZN region, and its recent expansion to include schools. The research, therefore, investigates the position of smallholder farmers and the status of school food gardens in the NSNP. Understanding the position and status of smallholder farmers and school food gardens within the NSNP will help Biowatch better position itself to make significant interventions.

Secondly, due to the unequal agrarian structure rooted in the history of land dispossession and systematic destruction of African agriculture by colonial and apartheid governments, many smallholder farmers remain poorly resourced and struggle with access to markets today. South Africa's food system is dominated by large-scale farmers who benefit from economies of scale and can effectively meet market demands. Given this context, the government has initiated programmes to assist smallholder farmers with access to markets. One such programme was Operation Vula, launched in KZN in 2017, with the aim of procuring produce from smallholder farmers to supply schools, hospitals and prisons. However, evidence on its impact remains thin, due to poor evaluation of such programmes.

This research is therefore essential, as it investigates procurement processes and the sources from which service providers obtain the food and fresh produce they provide to schools. This information helps us understand the challenges and opportunities that smallholder farmers face in accessing the NSNP market. Again, for Biowatch, such information is crucial for its interventions, including advocacy work targeted at the issue of access to markets for smallholder farmers and the transition to a more just food system.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The study's key questions guided the research approach, and these were:

- 1. What is the NSNP policy?**
- 2. How is the policy being implemented from the national to local levels, with an in-depth focus on KZN?**
- 3. What progress and challenges are experienced in implementing the NSNP nationally, provincially and locally in relation to the quality of nutrition children receive, the logistics of the programme, the implementation of school gardens, and sourcing produce from smallholder farmers?**
- 4. What are the procedures that smallholders must follow to supply produce to KZN schools?**
- 5. How does the South African programme compare to other similar programmes internationally (e.g. Brazil, India); and what can we learn from these?**

The data was primarily collected through secondary research and complemented by interviews with some key stakeholders. The study had a limited scope and timeframe, which constrained the number of interviews that were possible to undertake, especially with smallholder farmers in rural areas. Additionally, it was difficult to secure interviews with government officials involved in the NSNP. The researcher sent emails and WhatsApp messages to various contacts in the provincial government office, but none of the people invited agreed to participate in the interviews. Ultimately, only service providers were interviewed.

The other limitation of this research is the lack of recent evaluations of the programme. The last national evaluation report on the performance of the NSNP was published in 2016. There has not been a rigorous impact evaluation conducted, partly for methodological reasons as noted by Devereux et al. (2018), citing the challenge of identifying a control group. Because the NSNP is for school children who are at home in the evenings and weekends, it would be difficult to measure the contribution of the food they eat in school, since their eating patterns outside of school are unknown. This is the challenge with identifying a control group that can be studied over time and measured for impact.

Researchers have also noted that the objectives and priority outcomes of the NSNP are vague, and insufficient research has been conducted into its implications. What this means is that it is not clear what the NSNP is trying to achieve beyond delivering food to school children, and what difference it is making (Devereux et al., 2018). The same goes for information on food safety in schools, and the contribution of school food gardens; both these areas have not been thoroughly researched. Despite this limitation, this research report answers its key research questions.

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ABOUT THE NSNP: POLICY, ACTORS, PILLARS, LEGAL REQUIREMENTS AND FUNDING

In this section, the report provides information about the components of the NSNP, including the role players involved, its pillars, how it is funded and the legal requirements. The aim is to provide a broad overview of how the programme is structured, offering background information. Details about how the programme has been implemented and its outcomes are in the later sections.

NSNP policy

The NSNP is guided by the National Policy for the National School Nutrition Programme: Enhancing learning capacity through school feeding and nutrition education (DBE, 2016). The policy provides a framework to enhance learners' educational outcomes and health by ensuring access to nutritious meals, integrating nutrition education into the curriculum, and promoting sustainable food production. It affirms learners' rights to basic nutrition and aligns with the South African Constitution.

The key elements of the policy include the following:

- 1. Provision of one nutritious meal daily to learners in quintile 1–3 schools.**
- 2. Menus that align with national dietary guidelines (starch + protein + vegetables/fruit).**
- 3. Implementation through provincial education departments with conditional grant funding.**
- 4. Integration of nutrition into subjects like Life Orientation and Natural Sciences.**
- 5. Promotion of school gardens as part of the Sustainable Food Production pillar.**

The policy emphasises a rights-based approach, intersectoral collaboration, and the development of learners' physical and cognitive potential. It mandates monitoring, community participation, and accountability in the delivery process.

Actors and pillars

The NSNP is a multi-stakeholder programme led by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Provincial Education Departments (PEDs). It is supported by a range of partners, including other government departments (e.g., Health and Agriculture), corporations, and NGOs.

The programme operates at four levels:

1. National

Department of Basic Education and partners.

2. Provincial

Provincial education departments and partners.

3. District

Provincial education department district officials and partners.

4. School

Principals, school management teams (SMTs), school governing bodies (SGBs), NSNP coordinators, NSNP committees, volunteer food handlers (VFHs), and school gardeners). They play various roles in implementing the NSNP.

The programme has three pillars:

1. School feeding

This pillar is concerned with providing nutritious meals to all learners in quintile 1–3 primary and secondary schools, as well as identified special schools, on all school days. The menu is prescribed by the Department of Education, which stipulates that meals should include proteins, starch, and vegetables and/or fruits. Menus follow a one-week cycle, which differs from one province to the next, primarily based on local taste. For instance, in KZN, samp with beans is a common local taste, whereas in Limpopo it is pap.

2. Nutrition education and deworming

This second pillar of the programme is concerned with educating learners and the community about good nutrition, and creating awareness about the Deworming Campaign. Its goal is to educate learners, school staff and the surrounding community on healthy eating habits and lifestyle choices. The deworming component addresses parasitic infections that can affect nutrient absorption, school attendance, and cognitive development. While it is an important pillar, it remains underfunded, with only 0.5% of the NSNP allocated to this pillar (DBE, 2016).

3. Sustainable food production (SFP)

This third and final pillar of the programme concerns facilitating food gardens and other food production projects in schools. Its objectives are to encourage schools to produce their fresh fruits and vegetables and to serve as outdoor classrooms for nutrition, science and agricultural education. Similarly, this pillar is underfunded, receiving 1–2% of the total NSNP budget.

Legal requirements

The implementation of the NSNP requires compliance with legal requirements set out in the following legislation:

1. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa

- states that when spheres of government contract for goods and services, they must do so in a manner that is “fair, equitable, transparent, competitive and cost-effective” (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Sec. 217[1]).

2. Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act (PPPFA)

- provides a framework for preferential procurement towards historically disadvantaged individuals in the provision of goods and services.

3. South African Schools Act (SASA)

- outlines Section 21 functions that may be allocated to schools so that they may control their finances.

4. Public Finance Management Act (PFMA)

- promotes sound financial management practices.

5. Division of Revenue Act (DoRA)

- published annually and defines responsibilities of national and provincial departments regarding conditional grants, notably, submission of business plans and monthly and quarterly reports and compliance with conditions in the Conditional Grant Framework.

6. Conditional Grant Framework (CGF)

- outlines the minimum requirements of NSNP implementation, and which includes dates on which funds will be disbursed, meal cost per learner per day, menu and feeding requirements, responsibilities of DBE and provinces, and reporting requirements.

Funding

The NSNP is funded through a conditional grant to provincial education departments and is allocated in accordance with the Division of Revenue Act. According to the NSNP Conditional Grant Framework issued by the Department of Basic Education, the daily allocation rates for the 2023/24 year include R3.05 per primary learner, R3.65 per secondary learner, and an additional breakfast supplement of R0.59. The breakfast supplement is only available in rural KZN and Eastern Cape schools, where they serve maize porridge for breakfast.

This budget represents a slight increase from the figures presented in the 2016 NSNP evaluation report, which indicates a budget allocation of R2.85 for primary schools and R3.60 for secondary learners. In the interview with service providers in KZN, they noted that the current budget is R4.02 for primary schools, a slight increase from 2023. For secondary schools, as of 2024, the budget is R4.84 per learner, as indicated in the parliamentary budget office performance of basic education conditional grants (2023).

The total budget for the 2025/2026 financial year, as announced by the Minister of Basic Education, is R9.798 billion. While there has been a slight increase over the past years, the budget remains significantly low, making it a challenge to meet the daily food requirements. This is discussed in detail in later sections on the challenges of the programme.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NSNP

How the NSNP operates nationally

At the Department of Basic Education, the NSNP is managed by a dedicated directorate composed of 21 officials responsible for the national implementation, monitoring, and coordination of the programme. In the 2013/2014 financial year, the team included one Director, seven Deputy Directors, five Assistant Directors, and seven administration and support staff. Key national partners include other DBE directorates such as the Education Management Information Systems (EMIS), the National Treasury, and the Departments of Health and Agriculture. Private partners such as the Tiger Brands Foundation (TBF) and Nestlé South Africa also contribute to the programme.

The structure and staffing of the NSNP, as well as the partnerships supporting it, vary significantly across provinces:

- **Eastern Cape**

In the Eastern Cape, the programme is overseen by 16 provincial-level and 58 district-level officials, including 54 monitors. Key partners in this province include TBF, Kellogg's, the Eastern Cape Department of Rural Development and Agrarian Reform, the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), Food and Trees for Africa, and Fort Cox Agriculture and Forestry Training Institute.

- **Free State**

In the Free State, 6 provincial and 40 district officials manage the NSNP, with support from the Free State Department of Agriculture and the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund. Gauteng's NSNP is staffed by 12 provincial and 30 district officials, with key partnerships including the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Health.

- **Gauteng**

The NSNP in Gauteng is managed by 12 provincial and 30 district officials, and key partners include the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Department of Health.

- **KwaZulu-Natal**

In KwaZulu-Natal, the NSNP is managed by 20 provincial and 90 district officials. Major programme partners include Enterprise iLembe, the KZN Department of Health, Kellogg's, Game, and the TBF. The province places special emphasis on supporting small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) and cooperatives, particularly those owned by women.

- **Limpopo**

Limpopo has the largest staff complement, comprising 125 full-time employees and 755 EPWP-funded school-based monitors. Its main partners include FUEL, TBF, the University of Venda, EPWP, the Department of Agriculture, and Food and Trees for Africa.

- **Mpumalanga**

In Mpumalanga, 6 provincial and 30 district-level officials are responsible for the NSNP. The province collaborates with the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Land Administration, the Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism, the Mpumalanga Regional Training Trust, and EPWP. Mpumalanga also supports the use of SMMEs and cooperatives as service providers.

- **Northern Cape**

The Northern Cape manages the programme with the assistance of 9 provincial and 15 district officials, backed by an additional 18 officials contracted for monitoring and administrative duties.

- **North West**

In the North West, the NSNP is administered by 5 provincial, 6 district, and 32 circuit-level officials.

- **Western Cape**

In the Western Cape, 3 provincial and 14 district officials are involved in managing the programme, and 9 officials are employed on a contract basis to monitor the programme. The main partners are the Western Cape Departments of Health and Agriculture.

Procurement models

The NSNP has two implementation models:

1. **Centralised**

2. **Decentralised**

Different provinces follow these two models to achieve the same goal. The model refers to the method of food procurement. In the centralised model, the PED appoints service providers for the whole province. It enters into service-level agreements with them to procure and deliver food to schools. In the decentralised model, schools appoint local service providers to procure and provide food, utensils, and fuel. Thus, in the two models, the disbursement of funds, contracting of service providers, and procurement of goods and services differ. Still, both models are designed to achieve the same goal: providing nutritious meals to learners in schools.

The last evaluation report of the NSNP was published in 2016, and no subsequent evaluation has been conducted. At the time of the evaluation, the centralised model was being followed in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and the Western Cape, reaching 6.1 million learners. The decentralised model was followed in the Eastern Cape, Free State, Northern Cape and North West provinces, reaching 3 million learners.

The advantages of the centralised model include control over procurement and financial management, as well as the potential for bulk purchasing and uniform quality standards. However, the disadvantages include contracts being awarded to large companies while excluding smallholder or local producers. Another disadvantage of this model is that it is prone to bureaucratic delays, particularly when processing payments. It also makes it difficult for schools to adapt to local needs because of uniformity. The decentralised model, on the other hand, allows for schools or districts to manage their procurement, which is often done through School Governing Bodies (SGBs). This model promotes local economic development by enabling smallholder farmers, local stores, and cooperatives to supply food to their communities. Additionally, it provides schools with greater autonomy to tailor their menus to local preferences.

The model, however, has its shortcomings. For instance, it requires significant capacity at the school-level procurement, which most schools do not have, thus leading to poor implementation. What is clear from centralised and decentralised models is that implementation is the challenge due to inadequate systems from the side of the state, a situation that is made worse by corruption. However, if implemented properly, a decentralised model has the potential to be an effective model.

The KwaZulu-Natal model

In KZN, the centralised model has historically been used to contract service providers, but it has faced criticism for late payments and the exclusion of smallholder farmers. Late payments have a negative impact on the ability of service providers to deliver food, resulting in some schools being unable to feed their children. The province has attempted to move toward a hybrid model, where decentralisation is used in some districts, such as eThekweni and uMkhanyakude or for specific food items (e.g., fresh produce). At the same time, centralised contracts continue for bulk staples or protein. However, media reports in 2023 indicated that the attempted hybrid model was a disaster as it led to a delivery crisis. In the interview with one of the suppliers, he mentioned that they experienced delays in payments, which affected their ability to supply food, and this lasted for about four months. Thousands of schools across KZN did not receive food deliveries during the transition to the hybrid procurement model, resulting in learners going without meals for several days. The disruption garnered national media attention, triggering public outrage and intense political scrutiny. Subsequent investigations revealed several underlying causes, including poor planning for the transition, inadequate communication with schools and service providers, limited procurement capacity at the district level, and weak contract enforcement and oversight mechanisms.

Still, in 2025, there were several reports in newspapers about challenges in the NSNP in the province including corruption allegations. For instance, the *Sunday World* reported in May that about 2.5 million learners were at risk of missing meals due to payment delays. *The Mercury* reported in July that some schools may go without food because service providers were not paid. The Department of Education cited technical systems errors tied to a financial systems upgrade. *The Witness* also reported in July that there were tender irregularities in the Ugu District where some appointed contractors did not meet tender requirements. The service providers' association called for an urgent probe into what seemed like a flawed tender awarding process, which negatively affected the feeding programme. Despite challenges, the hybrid model remains in place in principle, but its implementation is uneven.

Service providers in KwaZulu-Natal

In an interview with a service provider from uMkhanyakude, who supplies two schools, he explained that service providers are appointed following a tender process. The districts advertise the tender, and those with interest apply. If accepted, you are awarded a three-year contract. After three years, the agreement does not automatically renew; however, you can reapply, but there are no guarantees that you will be reappointed. This was confirmed by another interviewee, who is part of the service providers' association. The association has members from different provinces, including KZN. It was formed to bring together service providers to support one another and address the challenges they face in implementing the programme. The 2016 evaluation report of the NSNP also confirms this tender process, noting that contracts are awarded for three years.

Service providers are paid monthly. To get payment, they must complete forms and submit supporting documents to the school. The school must then verify that the food was delivered and indicate the number of children who were fed. If all the paperwork is in order, then the payment is made to the service provider. There have been challenges with payments, where service providers would not receive payment for approximately three or four months. However, the

interviewee indicated that there were some improvements. Delayed payments are not only a problem in KZN, but also occur in other provinces, and are one of the issues with implementing the NSNP. The primary outcome of the Department of Education's irregular payment system is that children are not getting food.

Service providers are not only individuals in business but also include nonprofit organisations (NPOs) and smallholder farmers. In an interview with a staff member from the uMhloosinga Development agency in uMkhanyakude, which was started in 2005 to facilitate economic growth, he explained that they once got a contract from the Department of Education to supply schools in the district. Their organisation supports smallholder farmers with access to markets, and they saw the school nutrition programme as a great opportunity for the farmers. This came after the government launched the Radical Agrarian Socio-Economic Transformation (RASET), which aimed to procure from smallholder farmers. During this period, uMhloosinga sub-contracted 500 farmers in the district to produce and supply their collection packhouse. They also hired drivers to transport the food. It was mainly vegetables and fruits, including bananas, from smallholder farmers in Mtubatuba. Their contract with the government ended in 2019, and it was never renewed, which was a massive loss for the 500 farmers.

Regarding smallholder farmers as service providers, the representative from the service providers' association in KZN explained in the interview that some of their members were smallholder farmers. These were mainly based in the Durban metro area, in townships such as uMlazi. However, these small farmers only operated as subcontractors; they did not have direct contracts with the government. The association connects them to service providers in the area. When asked how they find farmers to sub-contract, the interviewee explained that it is largely through word of mouth. He elaborated that because smallholder farmers often operate informally, it can be a challenge to find a group of them working collectively. It is also challenging for them to bid on government tenders to supply schools directly because they are not registered as businesses. Research also shows that, in most cases, smallholder farmers, particularly those in remote rural areas, are unaware of the NSNP due to limited access to information. This means their participation is further constrained.

Where do service providers purchase the food they supply to the schools?

The service providers interviewed explained that they buy from wholesalers. For example, they purchase from Mtubatuba Cash and Carry to supply the schools in Mtubatuba. They also buy from supermarkets such as Shoprite and Spar, depending on the price. They buy canned fish, samp, soya mince, instant porridge for the primary schools, vegetables, rice, and maize meal. Buying from supermarkets and wholesalers is common across all provinces, as indicated in the NSNP evaluation report. Service providers are sometimes able to bargain for discounted prices because they buy in bulk.

Buying from smallholder farmers

According to the interviewees, it is challenging to find smallholder farmers and source from them. Unless they hear about and join the WhatsApp group of the service providers' association and post that they have vegetables to sell at a certain price, they remain excluded. Those who sometimes benefit from the programme are the ones near the schools that service providers serve. In such cases, service providers approach them and offer to purchase the produce they have. Those who are far from the schools are difficult to work with due to transportation costs. As a service provider, you must collect and deliver to the schools yourself. If it costs more to collect from smallholder farmers, then you buy from the wholesaler, because it is easier. The department attempted to gather farmers at one location, allowing service providers to procure from them, but this approach was unsuccessful.

Often, smallholder farmers do not have large quantities of produce because of challenges such as weather and limited access to water and land, and other production resources. To overcome these challenges, it is better if a group of farmers works together and combines their produce to sell. However, many lack storage infrastructure and transport, which makes it challenging to coordinate.

Sourcing from smallholder farmers works better in a decentralised model of procurement, such as in the Eastern Cape. A research study by Mensah and Kariem (2021) found that participating schools in rural areas benefit from local sourcing by way of using fresh vegetables in preparing meals, thanks to the utilisation of a decentralised catering model in the Eastern Cape. Consequently, there is evidence of farmers participating in the NSNP food market earning additional income and growing more vegetables on more land in some cases. However, even though the Eastern Cape uses a decentralised procurement model, it has no clear-cut programme to optimise the benefits of local sourcing for the NSNP. In KZN, smallholder farmers struggle to be integrated, especially those in remote areas. While the intention to procure from smallholder farmers is there in theory, in programmes such as RASET, the implementation is poor.

Additional services

In addition to supplying food, service providers are also required to provide transportation and deliver food to the schools, as well as supply gas for the stoves. This requirement puts poorly resourced smallholder farmers at a disadvantage. It hinders them from providing to the schools directly, in a decentralised procurement model. According to the representative of the association for service providers, part of their work involves addressing these challenges collectively. They achieve this by linking service providers with farmers and drivers and facilitating price bargaining. However, he indicated that the challenges are more systemic and require state investments and a strong political will.

Challenges

One of the major challenges to implementing the NSNP is the low budget allocations, coupled with payment delays in some contexts. One of the interviewees explained that budget allocations are low, yet food prices continue to rise. There is no room to negotiate the budget once you have signed the contract for three years. So, when food prices go up, as a service provider, you must look around for cheaper shops; sometimes, you end up using your own money to make things happen. This means working at a loss. The contract specifies the type of food that service providers should provide, and they must stick to the menu that the Department of Education wants. They cannot change the menu, or else it will be a breach of contract. This challenge was also reported in the evaluation report and in several scholarly papers as a major one that results in service providers supplying low-quality food and skipping fruits and vegetables in the diet. The implication for this is that children are fed meals that do not meet their nutritional requirements, defeating the goal of the programme. In another interview, the representative of the service providers' association explained that they are fighting the centralised model through legal processes. They want the NSNP to align with the Sustainable Development Goals, aiming to end poverty and create opportunities for people, particularly in rural areas. He added, "We are giving kids foods we will never feed our kids, R4.02c per learner, which is even lower than what the government spends on prisoners". Others raised concerns that if the government does not increase the budget and change the procurement model, service providers may start buying counterfeit foods.

On school food gardens

Apart from a lack of clarity over its objectives, this pillar faces severe funding constraints. As noted earlier, within the NSNP budget, the school feeding component is allocated 96% of the funding, leaving 4% for all other components,

including food gardens, nutrition education, deworming, and administration. The evaluation report indicates that productive school food gardens are largely due to dedicated personnel responsible for them. However, most schools lack the resources to hire someone to maintain the food garden. In a study by Mafugu (2021) in KZN, he found that some schools sent learners to work in the food gardens as a form of punishment, rather than as an educational tool.

As a result, learners were not interested in the food gardens. He also found that some schools lacked access to water, making it difficult to cultivate or maintain food gardens. While this component of the NSNP is underfunded and poorly implemented, research confirms that when well implemented, food gardens increase children's consumption of fruits and vegetables, which are essential components of a healthy diet. Increasing the intake of fruits and vegetables reduces micronutrient deficiencies (such as iron, zinc, and vitamin A) and decreases the likelihood of childhood obesity (Savoie-Roskos et al., 2017). School gardens can function as "outdoor classrooms" and encourage positive attitudes towards the implementation of gardens, both at school and at home. They have the potential to contribute to children's learning, household food security and local employment creation, but in the NSNP, their objectives are unclear, and they are severely underfunded, so their potential remains underexploited.

Overview of the NSNP nationally

This section provides a brief overview of the NSNP's performance nationally, examining the diet, feeding schedule, challenges, and additional information. The national evaluation was conducted by JET Services for the DoE and was published in 2016.

In half (50.2%) of the schools visited for fieldwork during the national evaluation of the NSNP, learners receive balanced meals comprising three food groups (starch, protein and vegetables); 42.4% of schools could only serve two food groups. The food group most often not served was vegetables. Schools tend to prepare higher quantities of starch and lower quantities of vegetables and protein than they should, for the number of learners approved for the NSNP, meaning that learners are receiving less than the recommended daily amount of certain food groups. There are provincial variations in this regard.

Regarding mealtimes, meals should be served by 10:00 am if the meals are to boost learners' concentration. However, the last learner was fed by 10:00 am in only 18.1% of schools, which serve one meal per day. Only in Limpopo did most schools complete serving meals by 10:00 am, as recommended. Late provision defeats the purpose of the school nutrition programme, which intends to enhance concentration and learning in the classroom. Of the 267 schools visited for fieldwork in the study, 255 schools (96.2%) were able to serve a main meal. School stakeholders confirmed that there were days when meal provision did not take place, mainly because of funds not being received on time, late delivery by suppliers, tender processes not being completed (in KZN) or a lack of fuel. In the worst cases, days or months were reported to have passed with no NSNP meal provision occurring. Other challenges reported nationally include poor food preparation facilities in schools. NSNP preparation facilities were rated as "very poor" or "poor" in 23.2% of schools; inadequate access to water, NSNP coordinators reported that water was "not available" or access was "erratic" in 49.7% of schools; poor cleanliness (linked to challenges with water); and the unsafe storage of gas (only 35.9% of the schools using gas kept the canisters outside, and 66.0% of those canisters that were outside were locked in a cage). These challenges were most significant in the rural areas of KZN and Limpopo provinces.

The majority of schools had received some training on the NSNP, but there was poor provision of training for the volunteer food handlers (VFHs); only 41.9% had been trained. VFHs received a monthly stipend of R1,500 per month and were recruited by advertising locally within the community. The SGB plays a key role in recommending candidates, with a priority given to women from poor households. Provincial differences were quite striking: Mpumalanga had

the highest proportion of VFHs trained (86.9%), whereas the Free State had trained only 5.2% of its VFHs. These findings are of concern: health and safety in the storage and preparation of food, preparing the right foods in the right quantities, preparing tasty meals and serving meals on time are primarily dependent on VFHs being knowledgeable and skilled. The evaluation report recommended that new VFHs receive training in all these areas before commencing work.

Food quality is another area of concern in the NSNP. A North West study confirmed that a *Salmonella* outbreak was linked to food eaten at the school. The main food product contaminated was samp, which had been poorly stored and prepared (53.4% of the sampled cases). A timely epidemiological, environmental and microbiological investigation led to the conclusion that the etiologic agent of this outbreak was *Salmonella* (*S. heidelberg* was the causative agent for the outbreak), and the most probable food vehicle of transmission was cooked samp served to learners within the NSNP (Motladile, 2019).

These challenges point to the underfunding of the NSNP, coupled with poor implementation of the programme.

How does KZN compare nationally?

INDICATOR	KZN	NATIONAL	INTERPRETATION
NSNP staffing	20 provincial officials and 90 district officials manage NSNP in KZN (DBE & DPME, 2014).	Example: Eastern Cape – 16 provincial and 58 district officials; Limpopo – 125 provincial employees (DBE & DPME, 2014).	KZN has more district-level staff than some provinces, suggesting a more substantial local presence if resources and oversight are adequate.
Smallholder farmers inclusion	The 2023 hybrid procurement model intended to integrate SMMEs and cooperatives was compromised due to poor planning and communication, causing delivery crises (Sunday World, 2024).	Many provinces struggle with smallholder inclusion; Eastern Cape's decentralised approach shows better local sourcing (Mensah & Karriem, 2021).	KZN's failure was more severe than the national norm and undermined trust in local procurement reforms.
Infrastructure – kitchens, storage, water	Rural KZN schools report poor kitchen structures, erratic water supply, and unsafe storage for gas canisters (Mafugu, 2021).	National averages: 23.2% of schools have "poor/very poor" kitchens; 49.7% have erratic/no water; only 35.9% store gas canisters outside (66% locked) (DBE & DPME, 2014).	KZN's rural infrastructure issues are in line with or worse than national averages.
School food gardens	Many KZN schools lack dedicated staff, face water shortages, and in some cases use gardens as punishment (Mafugu, 2021).	Nationally, school gardens receive 1–2% of the NSNP budget and succeed mainly where there is dedicated personnel and water access (Savoie-Roskos et al., 2017).	KZN mirrors national challenges, with added learner engagement concerns.
Feeding disruptions	The 2023 procurement change in KZN caused widespread school meal interruptions for days or weeks (Sunday World, 2024).	Nationally, disruptions are typically shorter and due to payment delays, late deliveries, or fuel shortages (DBE & DPME, 2014).	KZN's 2023 crisis was larger in scale and duration than typical national patterns.
Training of Volunteer Food Handlers (VFHs)	KZN-specific percentage not reported.	National: 41.9% trained; provincial range from 5.2% (Free State) to 86.9% (Mpumalanga) (Sibanyoni et al., Tshabalala, & Tabit, 2017).	Provincial data gap; requires follow-up to assess KZN training coverage.

6

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES IN SCHOOL FEEDING: LESSONS FOR SOUTH AFRICA FROM BRAZIL, INDIA, AND GHANA

School feeding programmes are powerful policy tools that promote education, public health, and rural economic development. Countries around the world have adopted varying models, each shaped by context-specific goals, governance arrangements, and levels of public investment. South Africa's NSNP, while reaching millions of learners, continues to face challenges around delivery reliability, nutritional quality, and inclusive procurement. This section compares school feeding models in Brazil, India, and Ghana; three countries whose programmes provide important insights into how the NSNP might evolve better to meet its educational, nutritional, and socio-economic aims.

Brazil: The National School Feeding Programme

Overview and governance

Brazil's *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE)* is widely regarded as a global benchmark for school feeding programmes. Originating in 1955 and significantly reformed in 2009, PNAE serves more than 42 million learners daily in public and community schools nationwide. What sets PNAE apart is its explicit legal recognition of food as a human right, codified in Brazil's constitution and governed by a robust legislative and institutional framework, supported by the political will to implement it.

The programme is coordinated nationally by the National Fund for the Development of Education (FNDE) under the Ministry of Education and is implemented at the municipal level. Federal transfers fund the programme, but municipalities have flexibility in choosing suppliers, menus, and additional resources.

Key features

- Legal frameworks: The 2009 law mandates that 30% of PNAE's food budget be spent on family farming, ensuring that local economies benefit directly.
- Menus designed by nutritionists: Every school menu must be planned by a certified nutritionist, reflecting local food cultures, seasonal availability, and nutritional standards.
- Decentralised procurement: Municipalities contract food suppliers directly, allowing greater responsiveness to community preferences.
- Participation mechanisms: Civil society oversight is guaranteed through School Feeding Councils, which monitor procurement and quality at the local level.
- Focus on healthy, minimally processed food: The programme avoids ultra-processed products and promotes fruit, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains.

Impact

Studies show Brazil's National School Feeding Programme contributes to:

- Improved school attendance and retention, particularly among vulnerable learners.
- Reduction in malnutrition and dietary deficiencies.
- Expanded income opportunities for smallholder farmers, particularly women.
- Greater community involvement in school governance.

Lessons for South Africa

- Legislating the right to food and embedding clear local procurement mandates enhances programme accountability.
- The use of qualified nutritionists can improve menu quality and child health outcomes.
- Decentralised procurement with local oversight fosters inclusivity and responsiveness.

India: The Mid-Day Meal Scheme

Overview and governance

India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) is the most extensive school feeding programme in the world, feeding more than 120 million children daily in more than 1.2 million schools. Initiated in the 1990s, it was made compulsory in 2001 following a Supreme Court ruling that recognised the right to food under India's constitution.

The programme is centrally sponsored and implemented by state governments, with funding from both central and state levels. The Ministry of Education provides guidelines, while states adapt menus, procurement, and infrastructure to local contexts.

Key features

- Daily cooked meals typically include staples such as rice, wheat, pulses, vegetables, and oil, with some states also adding milk or eggs.
- Food is prepared on-site in most schools by women's self-help groups (SHGs) or local cooks, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The scheme integrates school health services, including deworming, iron-folic acid supplementation, and handwashing education.
- The Automated Monitoring System tracks daily meal status, and independent audits ensure accountability. The AMS collects daily data from schools via automated phone calls, where headmasters report the number of children fed. This information is sent to a central Management Information System for real-time tracking. While it works to a certain extent, there is room for improvement. As it stands, it faces hurdles like poor mobile connectivity, inconsistent or inaccurate reporting, limited digital skills among school staff, and gaps in infrastructure, such as internet access and electricity.

Impact

India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme has led to:

- Increased enrolment, retention, and attendance, especially among girls and children from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.
- A significant reduction in classroom hunger leads to improved concentration and academic outcomes.
- Employment and empowerment opportunities for more than 2.5 million women cooks. These are formally employed cooks, unlike in South Africa, where they are referred to as volunteers and given a monthly stipend and not a salary.

Challenges

- Infrastructure gaps: Some schools lack access to proper kitchens or clean water.
- Food safety incidents occasionally arise from poor hygiene or supply chain issues.
- Delayed payments to cooks and suppliers.

Lessons for South Africa

- Leveraging community-based cooking groups empowers women and strengthens food security.
- The integration of nutrition, hygiene, and health education enhances its impact beyond feeding. National mandates with state-level flexibility allow both uniform standards and local adaptation.

Ghana: The Ghana School Feeding Programme

Overview and Governance

The Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) was launched in 2005 under the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) with dual objectives: to enhance education and promote local agriculture. As of 2023, the GSFP provides meals to more than 3.4 million primary school children in public schools, prioritising poor and food-insecure districts.

The programme is coordinated by the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, with involvement from the Ministries of Agriculture, Education, and Health. It is supported by international partners such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), and the World Bank.

Key features

- One hot, locally prepared meal per day, tailored to local food cultures.
- Contracts are awarded to community-based caterers, often women.
- Target to source at least 80% of food from local smallholder farmers.
- Nutritional training and menu guidance provided to caterers.

Impact

- Improved enrolment and attendance, especially for girls.
- Enhanced household food security through reduced expenditure and increased local demand.
- Direct employment opportunities for caterers and informal workers.

Challenges

- Irregular payments to caterers impact food quality and delivery.
- Monitoring and evaluation capacity is weak at the district level.
- The nutritional content of meals is not always balanced due to cost constraints.

Lessons for South Africa

- Community-based food preparation stimulates local economies and fosters a sense of ownership.
- Setting clear local procurement targets ensures programme benefits are widely shared.
- Investment in monitoring and accountability systems is vital to improve meal quality and consistency.

What South Africa can learn

South Africa's National School Nutrition Programme already delivers meals to more than 9 million learners and is among the continent's most extensive school feeding programmes. However, the comparative analysis of Brazil, India, and Ghana reveals opportunities to elevate its impact:

- **Brazil**
 - emphasises the importance of integrating food sovereignty, nutrition, and farmer inclusion into the legal and institutional framework of the programme.
- **India**
 - highlights the transformative power of community-based food preparation, health integration, and digital monitoring to ensure equity and efficiency.
- **Ghana**
 - shows how localised catering and agricultural linkages can strengthen both school outcomes and rural economies.

By aligning the NSNP more closely with global best practices and the needs of its rural producers, learners, and communities, South Africa can transform the programme from a feeding scheme into a vehicle for economic justice, educational equity, and food sovereignty.

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CONCLUSION

The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) remains one of South Africa's most ambitious and impactful social protection interventions, reaching more than 9 million learners daily. At its core, the programme aims to alleviate child hunger, support educational performance, and promote healthy development. Yet, this research has shown that the full transformative potential of the NSNP, particularly its ability to catalyse local agricultural economies and promote food sovereignty, remains unrealised. The study's focus on KwaZulu-Natal reveals how persistent challenges in procurement models, inadequate infrastructure, delayed payments, and underfunding undermine both the nutritional and developmental goals of the programme.

While the centralised procurement model ensures a level of control and efficiency, it continues to exclude many smallholder farmers, especially those in rural areas who face structural barriers such as a lack of transport, storage facilities, and market access. The attempted transition to a hybrid model in KZN, although promising in theory, was compromised by poor planning, weak communication, and a lack of readiness among implementing stakeholders. The experience reinforces the need for in-depth capacity building at the district and school levels, improved interdepartmental coordination, and a strategic shift toward more locally driven procurement systems.

School food gardens, despite being one of the pillars of the NSNP, suffer from chronic underfunding and weak institutional support. As a result, they fail to meet their dual goals of nutritional supplementation and environmental education. Yet, evidence from other contexts demonstrates that when properly supported, school gardens can serve as hubs of agroecological learning and play a vital role in enhancing learners' dietary diversity.

Comparative lessons from Brazil, India, and Ghana further illuminate a path forward. These countries demonstrate that a well-resourced, community-rooted, and legally protected school feeding programme can support local economies, empower women, embed healthy eating habits, and transform the broader food system. Brazil's strong legal framework and emphasis on procurement from family farmers, India's community-led food preparation system tied to women's empowerment and nutrition education, and Ghana's integration of smallholder farmers into the programme all provide valuable models for South Africa.

To realise the developmental potential of the NSNP, South Africa must adopt a bold and comprehensive approach. This includes legislating local procurement quotas from smallholders; significantly increasing the programme's budget; decentralising procurement with safeguards for accountability; and actively facilitating the inclusion of smallholder farmers through access to land, water, infrastructure to facilitate local market access, and extension services. Without these systemic interventions, the programme risks becoming a narrow feeding scheme rather than a foundation for food sovereignty and rural revitalisation.

Ultimately, the NSNP can become a cornerstone of South Africa's journey toward a more just, inclusive, and sustainable food system; one that not only feeds children but also nourishes communities, restores dignity to smallholder farming, and builds resilience in the face of socio-economic and ecological crises. For this to happen, political will, interdepartmental collaboration, and grassroots participation are essential.

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