

BEYOND FOOD PROVISION: A CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF INDONESIA'S FREE NUTRITIOUS MEAL PROGRAM

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Diserahkan tanggal 15 Juni 2026 | Diterima tanggal 15 Juni 2026 | Diterbitkan tanggal 21 Juni 2026

Abstract:

This study aims to critically analyse the implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program as a public service policy in improving student outcomes, with a focus on governance, socio-economic implications, and educational integration. Employing a qualitative approach with policy analysis, the study utilizes document analysis of government reports, academic literature, and relevant secondary data. The findings reveal that while the program demonstrates strong potential in supporting nutritional intake and enhancing learning readiness, its effectiveness is constrained by several challenges. These include limitations in transparency and stakeholder participation, uneven involvement of local economic actors, and inconsistencies in service quality, particularly regarding food acceptability and safety. Moreover, the program remains largely disconnected from the educational process, unlike more integrated approaches such as Shokuiku. The study concludes that a more inclusive, transparent, and education-oriented policy design is necessary to maximize the program's impact on sustainable human capital development.

Keywords: School Feeding Policy, Public Policy Implementation, Educational Policy Analysis, Human Capital Development, Nutrition and Learning

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INTRODUCTION

School feeding programs have been widely recognized as strategic policy instruments to address nutritional deficiencies and improve educational outcomes, particularly in developing countries (Bundy et al., 2018; World Bank, 2020; Adelman et al., 2008). These programs are closely associated with broader development agendas, including human capital formation, poverty reduction, social equity, and improved educational access among disadvantaged groups (Gelli et al., 2007; OECD, 2020; WHO, 2021; Aurino et al., 2019). Nutritional interventions at the school

level contribute to students' cognitive development, concentration, and learning capacity, thereby supporting academic achievement and long-term productivity (Kristjansson et al., 2007; McEwan, 2015). In Indonesia, the Free Nutritious Meal Program represents a major national initiative intended to address nutritional challenges, reduce inequalities in learning readiness, and strengthen human resource development through a nationwide policy intervention.

Previous studies generally emphasize the positive contributions of school feeding programs to students' nutritional status, attendance, motivation, and learning outcomes. Recent studies in Indonesia similarly highlight the potential of the Free Nutritious Meal Program to improve educational quality and human capital development. Nevertheless, existing literature pays limited attention to the broader challenges associated with policy implementation, including governance issues, transparency, stakeholder participation, socio-economic implications, and the integration of nutrition programs into educational processes. In addition, the potential effects of large-scale implementation on local food markets and the involvement of small and medium enterprises remain underexplored. Consequently, a significant research gap exists in understanding the Free Nutritious Meal Program not merely as a nutritional intervention but as a multidimensional public policy.

Based on Human Capital Theory, Policy Implementation Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory, this study positions the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a multidimensional policy that intersects three key domains: human capital development, policy implementation, and educational practice. Human Capital Theory explains the importance of nutritional investment in strengthening students' long-term productivity and development. Policy Implementation Theory provides a framework for examining governance structures, institutional capacity, and implementation challenges. Meanwhile, Experiential Learning Theory highlights the importance of integrating nutrition programs into educational processes to foster sustainable behavioral change and meaningful learning experiences. By combining these perspectives, this study offers a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding both the opportunities and limitations of large-scale school feeding policies.

Therefore, this study aims to critically analyze Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program by focusing on three key dimensions, namely governance structures, socio-economic implications, and educational integration. Employing a qualitative policy analysis approach based on document analysis, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on public policy implementation and provide recommendations for improving the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of school-based nutrition programs in developing contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a policy analysis approach to critically examine the implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program. A qualitative

approach was considered appropriate because this study sought to explore complex policy dynamics, governance structures, and contextual challenges that could not be comprehensively captured through quantitative methods. The analysis was guided by an integrated framework consisting of Human Capital Theory, Policy Implementation Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory. These theoretical perspectives were used to examine three principal dimensions of the program, namely governance aspects related to transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation; socio-economic implications associated with market dynamics and the involvement of local economic actors; and educational integration concerning the relationship between nutrition programs and learning processes.

The study relied on qualitative data derived from various sources to enhance analytical depth and triangulation. These sources included official government regulations, program guidelines, policy briefs, academic journal articles, empirical studies, media reports, and other publicly accessible documents relevant to the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Data collection was conducted through document analysis by systematically reviewing, selecting, and interpreting written materials based on their relevance to the objectives of the study, particularly those addressing implementation processes, governance structures, and program outcomes.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis to identify patterns and critical issues emerging from the collected documents. The analytical process involved several stages, including data familiarization through repeated examination of the documents, coding to identify themes related to governance, socio-economic implications, and educational integration, categorization of codes into broader analytical themes, and interpretation of findings through the lens of the selected theoretical frameworks. This approach enabled the researcher to critically assess consistencies, discrepancies, and implementation challenges associated with the program.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied several validation strategies, including data triangulation through the use of multiple data sources, theoretical triangulation by employing different analytical perspectives, and transparency in documenting the analytical procedures undertaken throughout the research process. Nevertheless, this study was limited by its reliance on secondary and document-based data, which may not fully capture the realities of program implementation in the field. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to incorporate primary data collection methods, such as interviews, field observations, and quantitative impact assessments, to generate a more comprehensive understanding of stakeholder experiences and the effectiveness of the program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Governance and Institutional Challenges

The findings reveal that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program is characterized by several governance-related challenges. While the policy is supported by a substantial budget allocation and strong political commitment, issues related to transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation remain evident. The management structure appears to be highly centralized, with limited involvement of broader community actors.

In several reported cases, there are indications of concentrated control in program management, which may reduce inclusivity and limit equal access to participation. Such conditions can be associated with what policy scholars describe as elite capture, where access to resources and decision-making is dominated by a limited group of actors. This situation potentially undermines public trust and affects the overall effectiveness of the program.

These findings are consistent with recent studies in the Indonesian context, which report similar governance challenges, including limited transparency and coordination issues in program implementation (Pora et al., 2025; Agustini, 2025). From a Policy Implementation perspective, these challenges reflect the complexity of translating large-scale policy design into effective local practices. Weak coordination mechanisms and limited monitoring capacity may further exacerbate inefficiencies in program delivery.

B. Socio-Economic Implications and Market Dynamics

The large-scale nature of the program has generated notable socio-economic implications, particularly in relation to local food markets. The increased demand for food supplies may create pressure on local production systems, potentially leading to price fluctuations and supply imbalances.

This condition indicates that while the program aims to improve nutritional access, it may simultaneously produce unintended economic consequences if not carefully managed. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the participation of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the supply chain remains limited. This represents a missed opportunity to integrate the program with local economic development strategies.

An inclusive policy design that actively involves local producers and SMEs could enhance both economic resilience and program sustainability. Without such integration, the program risks becoming a top-down intervention with limited multiplier effects on the local economy.

C. Service Quality and Student Acceptability

Another critical issue identified in this study relates to service quality, particularly in terms of food quality, safety, and student acceptance. Findings suggest that the meals provided are not always aligned with students' preferences, which may lead to low consumption rates and reduced program effectiveness.

In addition, inconsistencies in food quality and concerns regarding freshness indicate potential weaknesses in distribution and quality control systems. From a Human Capital

perspective, these issues are significant, as the intended benefits of nutritional intervention cannot be fully realized if food is not consumed or fails to meet acceptable standards.

Issues related to food acceptability and service quality have also been documented in recent local studies, indicating that program effectiveness is closely linked to user satisfaction and implementation consistency (Agustini, 2025).

This highlights the importance of incorporating feedback mechanisms from students and schools to ensure that the program is responsive to user needs and preferences.

D. Educational Disconnection and Missed Learning Opportunities

One of the most significant findings of this study is the limited integration of the program into the educational process. The Free Nutritious Meal Program is predominantly implemented as a logistical and administrative intervention, with minimal linkage to classroom learning.

In contrast, countries such as Japan implement integrated approaches through *Shokuiku*, where school meals are used as educational tools to teach nutrition, culture, and healthy lifestyles. This approach aligns with Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through direct experience.

The absence of such integration in Indonesia reduces the program's potential to influence students' knowledge, attitudes, and long-term behaviors. As a result, the program functions primarily as a short-term nutritional intervention rather than a transformative educational strategy.

E. Policy Priorities and Perceived Inequality

The scale of public investment in the program has also generated broader discussions regarding policy priorities within the education sector. The allocation of substantial financial resources to the program may create perceptions of imbalance, particularly when compared to investment in educational personnel and infrastructure.

From a policy perspective, such perceptions can influence stakeholder acceptance and program legitimacy. While the program is designed to support human capital development, its effectiveness may be affected if it is not aligned with broader educational needs and priorities.

Overall, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meal Program is shaped not only by its nutritional objectives but also by governance quality, economic integration, and its alignment with educational processes. Without addressing these interconnected dimensions, the program risks underutilizing its full potential as a comprehensive human capital development strategy.

CONCLUSION

A. Conclusion

This study critically examined the implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program through a qualitative policy analysis approach, focusing on governance, socio-economic implications, and educational integration. The findings indicate that while the program demonstrates strong potential as a strategic instrument for improving nutritional status and supporting human capital development, its effectiveness is constrained by several structural and implementation challenges.

From a governance perspective, the study identifies limitations in transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation, which may affect program inclusivity and public trust. The presence of centralized management patterns and indications of concentrated control suggest the need for stronger oversight and more equitable distribution mechanisms.

In terms of socio-economic impact, the program has the potential to influence local market dynamics, particularly through increased demand for food supplies. However, the limited involvement of local economic actors, such as small and medium enterprises, indicates that the program has not yet fully realized its potential as a driver of inclusive economic development.

From an educational standpoint, the findings reveal a significant gap in the integration of the program into the learning process. Unlike more holistic approaches such as Japan's Shokuiku, the Indonesian program remains largely focused on food distribution, thereby limiting its capacity to foster long-term behavioral change and nutritional awareness among students.

Overall, the study concludes that the Free Nutritious Meal Program should not be viewed solely as a nutritional intervention, but rather as a multidimensional policy that requires alignment between governance structures, economic systems, and educational practices to achieve its full potential.

B. Recommendations

Strengthening Governance and Transparency

The government should enhance accountability mechanisms by ensuring transparent procurement processes, clear monitoring systems, and broader stakeholder participation. Decentralized and inclusive governance models may help reduce concentration of control and improve program effectiveness.

Promoting Inclusive Economic Participation

The program should actively involve local producers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in its supply chain. This approach can help stabilize local markets, reduce supply pressures, and generate positive multiplier effects for local economies.

Improving Service Quality and Responsiveness

Efforts should be made to ensure food quality, safety, and alignment with students' preferences. Establishing feedback mechanisms involving students, teachers, and schools can improve program responsiveness and increase consumption rates.

Integrating Nutrition into the Educational Process

To maximize long-term impact, the program should be integrated into the school curriculum. Adopting elements from models such as Shokuiku may help transform the program into a comprehensive educational tool that promotes nutritional literacy and healthy behavior.

Aligning Policy Priorities within the Education Sector

The implementation of the program should be aligned with broader educational priorities, including investment in teachers, infrastructure, and learning quality. A balanced approach is essential to ensure that nutritional interventions complement, rather than compete with, other critical components of the education system.

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