

Beyond Food Provision: A Critical Policy Analysis of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program

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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;*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara kritis implementasi Program Makan Bergizi Gratis di Indonesia sebagai kebijakan pelayanan publik dalam meningkatkan hasil belajar siswa, dengan fokus pada aspek tata kelola, implikasi sosial-ekonomi, dan integrasi pendidikan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan analisis kebijakan melalui teknik analisis dokumen terhadap laporan pemerintah, literatur akademik, dan data sekunder yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun program memiliki potensi besar dalam mendukung pemenuhan gizi dan meningkatkan kesiapan belajar siswa, efektivitasnya masih dibatasi oleh sejumlah tantangan. Tantangan tersebut meliputi keterbatasan transparansi dan partisipasi pemangku kepentingan, belum optimalnya keterlibatan pelaku ekonomi lokal, serta ketidakkonsistenan kualitas layanan, khususnya terkait penerimaan dan keamanan makanan. Selain itu, program masih belum terintegrasi secara optimal dalam proses pembelajaran, berbeda dengan pendekatan seperti Shokuiku. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan desain kebijakan yang lebih inklusif, transparan, dan berorientasi pendidikan.

Kata Kunci: Kebijakan Pemberian Makanan Sekolah; Implementasi Kebijakan Publik; Analisis Kebijakan Pendidikan; Pengembangan Modal Manusia; Gizi dan Pembelajaran.

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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 linked to broader development agendas, including human capital formation, poverty reduction, and social equity, as well as improving school participation and access among disadvantaged groups (Gelli et al., 2007; OECD, 2020; WHO, 2021; Aurino et al., 2019). Nutritional interventions at the school level are widely acknowledged to enhance students' cognitive development, concentration, and learning capacity (Kristjansson et al., 2007; McEwan, 2015), thereby contributing to improved academic performance and long-term productivity (Sarwati et al., 2025; Agustini, 2025).

In Indonesia, the Free Nutritious Meal Program represents a major national initiative aimed at addressing persistent nutritional challenges and strengthening human resource development. The program builds upon the country's historical engagement with school feeding policies, which have evolved to respond to issues such as unequal access to nutritious food, high stunting rates, and disparities in students' learning readiness (Sekiyama et al., 2018). With a substantial budget allocation of approximately IDR 71 trillion and a nationwide rollout planned for 2025, the program reflects a strong governmental commitment to improving public welfare and educational outcomes across

multiple population groups, including students, toddlers, and mothers (Setiadi et al., 2025; Pora et al., 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, this initiative aligns with Human Capital Theory, which emphasizes that investments in health and nutrition are fundamental to enhancing individual productivity and long-term socio-economic outcomes. In the educational context, students are viewed as future human resources whose quality is shaped not only by formal instruction but also by physical and mental readiness, including adequate nutritional intake (McEwan, 2015; Kristjansson et al., 2007). Empirical evidence suggests that school-based nutrition programs can improve student motivation, attendance, and concentration, particularly when supported by conducive learning environments and effective management practices (McEwan, 2015; Kristjansson et al., 2007).

However, despite its strong policy rationale, the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program presents a range of complex challenges. Previous studies indicate that issues related to menu quality, food safety, and program management at the school level remain significant concerns, potentially affecting program effectiveness (McEwan, 2015; Kristjansson et al., 2007). In addition, large-scale implementation may create unintended socio-economic effects, including pressures on local food markets and limited involvement of small and medium enterprises. From a governance perspective, the effectiveness of the program is also influenced by factors such as transparency, stakeholder participation, and institutional accountability. Furthermore, the success of the program depends not only on food provision but also on supporting systems, including human resource capacity, training effectiveness, and strategic leadership, as well as the use of monitoring technologies to ensure efficiency and accountability (Maulana et al., 2025).

From an educational standpoint, a critical gap lies in the limited integration of the program into the learning process. Unlike more holistic approaches such as Japan's Shokuiku, where school meals are embedded within the curriculum as part of a broader pedagogical framework, Indonesia's approach remains predominantly distribution-oriented. This condition may limit the program's potential to foster long-term behavioral change, nutritional awareness, and meaningful learning experiences among students. Moreover, existing studies tend to focus on the benefits of school feeding programs without sufficiently addressing governance challenges, socio-economic implications, and the lack of educational integration in large-scale policy implementation.

In the Indonesian context, several recent studies have reported emerging challenges in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program, particularly related to governance, service quality, and program effectiveness. These studies highlight issues such as limited stakeholder participation, inconsistencies in food quality, and operational constraints at the local level (Agustini, 2025; Pora et al., 2025).

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

School feeding programs have been extensively studied across various contexts, particularly in relation to their impact on students' nutritional status, academic performance, and overall well-being. A substantial body of literature indicates that such programs contribute positively to students' attendance, concentration, and learning outcomes, especially in developing countries where nutritional deficiencies remain prevalent. School feeding programs have been shown to improve students' nutritional status, attendance, and learning outcomes (Bundy et al., 2018; Kristjansson et al., 2007).

In the Indonesian context, recent studies on the Free Nutritious Meal Program highlight its potential as a strategic policy instrument for improving human resource quality. Empirical findings suggest that the program has a positive and significant effect on students' motivation, learning productivity, and overall educational quality when combined with supportive learning environments and effective talent management practices (McEwan, 2015; Kristjansson et al., 2007). These findings

reinforce the argument that nutritional support plays a critical role in shaping students' academic engagement and long-term human capital development.

At the national level, emerging empirical studies provide important insights into the practical challenges of implementing the program. For instance, Agustini (2025) identifies gaps in policy effectiveness, particularly in relation to service delivery and student outcomes. Similarly, Pora et al. (2025) emphasize governance-related issues, including coordination challenges and policy implementation constraints at the local government level. These findings suggest that while the program is conceptually promising, its practical implementation remains uneven and requires further critical examination.

Beyond its direct educational impact, several studies have examined the role of governance and institutional capacity in determining the effectiveness of public nutrition programs. The success of such programs is often influenced by factors such as leadership support, human resource readiness, and the effectiveness of training and monitoring systems. For instance, research on the implementation of MBG monitoring applications demonstrates that system quality, training effectiveness, and strategic leadership significantly affect program performance, user satisfaction, and accountability (Maulana et al., 2025). These findings highlight the importance of integrating technological and managerial dimensions in large-scale policy implementation.

Despite these contributions, existing studies tend to focus primarily on the positive outcomes of school feeding programs, often emphasizing improvements in nutrition, attendance, and learning motivation. Limited attention has been given to the broader challenges of policy implementation, particularly in relation to governance issues, transparency, and stakeholder participation. In addition, the potential socio-economic implications of large-scale programs—such as their impact on local food markets and the involvement of small and medium enterprises—remain underexplored.

Furthermore, from an educational perspective, there is still a lack of research examining the integration of school feeding programs into the learning process. While countries such as Japan have successfully implemented holistic approaches through concepts like *Shokuiku*, which embed nutrition education within the curriculum, studies in the Indonesian context rarely address this dimension. Most existing research treats school feeding programs as standalone interventions rather than as integral components of the educational system.

Therefore, a significant research gap exists in understanding how the Free Nutritious Meal Program operates not only as a nutritional intervention but also as a complex public policy that intersects with governance structures, socio-economic dynamics, and educational practices. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the program's effectiveness and for identifying pathways to improve its implementation and sustainability.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a policy analysis approach to critically examine the implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate as the study seeks to explore complex policy dynamics, governance structures, and contextual challenges that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods. The research focuses on understanding how the policy is designed, interpreted, and implemented across different institutional levels.

The analysis is guided by an integrated theoretical framework combining Human Capital Theory, Policy Implementation Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory. These frameworks are used to examine three main dimensions:

1. Governance → transparency, accountability, stakeholder participation
2. Socio-economic impact → market dynamics, inclusion of local actors (e.g., SMEs)
3. Educational integration → linkage between nutrition programs and learning processes

This multi-dimensional framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of the policy beyond its formal objectives.

This study relies on qualitative data derived from multiple sources to ensure analytical depth and triangulation:

1. Policy documents: official government regulations, program guidelines, and policy briefs related to the Free Nutritious Meal Program
2. Secondary data: academic articles, reports, and prior empirical studies discussing school feeding programs and MBG implementation
3. Supporting documents: media reports and publicly available information relevant to program implementation

The use of multiple data sources enables cross-verification and enhances the credibility of the findings.

Data were collected through document analysis, which involves systematically reviewing and interpreting written materials relevant to the policy. Documents were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, particularly those addressing implementation processes, governance structures, and program outcomes.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following these steps:

1. Data familiarization → reviewing and understanding the collected documents
2. Coding → identifying key themes related to governance, socio-economic impact, and educational integration
3. Theme categorization → grouping codes into broader analytical categories
4. Interpretation → linking findings to theoretical frameworks

This approach allows the researcher to identify patterns, inconsistencies, and critical issues in policy implementation.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed:

- Data triangulation; using multiple sources to validate findings
- Theoretical triangulation; applying multiple theoretical perspectives
- Transparency in analysis; clearly documenting analytical steps

These measures enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and document-based analysis, which may not fully capture on-the-ground implementation dynamics. Future research is recommended to incorporate primary data, such as interviews or field observations, to provide deeper insights into stakeholder experiences and program effectiveness.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several policy recommendations are proposed:

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

Implications for Future Research

This study is limited to a qualitative policy analysis based on secondary data. Future research is recommended to incorporate primary data, such as interviews with stakeholders, field observations, or quantitative impact assessments, to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of program effectiveness.

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