

Governance and Operational Challenges in Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Policy: Implications for School Nutrition

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Abstract

Purpose— This paper examines the implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) policy, focusing on distribution, food safety, menu delivery, and institutional coordination in relation to school nutrition and human-capital development.

Research Methodology— The underlying study describes a qualitative, descriptive approach involving purposively selected elementary schools, stakeholder interviews, observation of meal delivery, and a review of school height and weight records. Implementation concerns are organized thematically; an independently assessable nutritional-effect estimate is not available.

Results— The analysis identifies distribution reliability, food safety, menu acceptability, and interagency oversight as central implementation dimensions. The available analysis does not establish changes in students' BMI-for-age, attendance, concentration, or achievement.

Research limitations/Implications— Limited reporting of the study setting, qualitative evidence, and anthropometric comparisons restricts outcome inference. Program management requires traceable procurement, hygiene assurance, locally responsive menus, and transparent monitoring.

Originality— The paper integrates operational implementation and governance considerations into an evaluation framework while distinguishing program objectives from demonstrated student outcomes.

Keywords: Free Nutritious Meals; Public Policy Implementation; Food Supply Chains; Nutrition Governance; School Feeding; Human Capital

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1. Introduction

School meals occupy an important position at the intersection of health, education, social protection, and economic development. Nutritional support during schooling may contribute to learning participation and household welfare, but the direction and magnitude of any benefit depend on the design and implementation of the intervention. Reviews of international school-feeding evidence emphasize that program objectives increasingly encompass nutrition, educational participation, and food-system development rather than a single health indicator (Alderman *et al.*, 2024; Akiyama *et al.*, 2025). These objectives should be distinguished from effects demonstrated by a particular evaluation.



Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals program (Makan Bergizi Gratis, MBG) places these multiple objectives within a large-scale public implementation system. Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024 established the National Nutrition Agency (Badan Gizi Nasional, BGN), and Presidential Regulation No. 115 of 2025 provides a specific framework for MBG program governance (Republic of Indonesia, 2024, 2025). Delivering meals through schools requires coordination among public authorities, service units, food suppliers, educational institutions, and local communities. From an economics and management perspective, the program raises questions about administrative capacity, procurement, supply-chain reliability, and the efficient conversion of public resources into services.

Research on MBG has discussed education-related objectives and policy risks, including nutrition standards, budget sustainability, uneven distribution, and monitoring gaps (Agustini, 2025; Albaburrahim *et al.*, 2025). Aji (2025) draws attention to fiscal and implementation trade-offs, whereas Herdiana (2025) highlights the role of administrative coordination and inflexible distribution arrangements. Work focused on eastern Indonesia additionally points to geographic and institutional challenges (Fatimah *et al.*, 2024). These studies support examining implementation quality, but their conclusions do not establish causal nutritional effects in the schools considered in this paper.

An important analytical gap concerns the link between implementation processes and demonstrable outcomes. The existence of a meal service does not, by itself, reveal whether meals are safe, nutritionally appropriate, actually consumed, equitably delivered, or associated with measurable changes in children's growth. International studies show that school-meal outcomes vary by design, setting, exposure, and measurement approach (Cohen *et al.*, 2021; Spill *et al.*, 2024). A defensible program evaluation must therefore differentiate observed operating conditions, plausible mechanisms, and empirically verified health or educational changes.

This study examines how MBG implementation is organized and which operational concerns may constrain service delivery, with attention to distribution, food hygiene, menus, and governance. It also considers the limits of using descriptive observations and school anthropometric records to make claims about student nutritional outcomes. The contribution is a governance-centered reading of MBG implementation relevant to public-sector management and human-capital policy. The following sections synthesize related literature, describe the reported qualitative approach, organize the implementation analysis, and identify implications for evidence-based program management.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 School Feeding, Human Capital, and Outcome Evidence

School-meal interventions are often justified by their potential to reduce short-term hunger, increase participation in education, and support child development. A systematic review of studies in low- and middle-income countries found benefits for some educational and growth outcomes while calling for stronger evaluation of longer-term effects (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Evidence from India and South Africa illustrates that educational or health responses can be context dependent and are evaluated using designs that seek to address selection and confounding (Kaur, 2021; Mostert, 2021). These findings offer relevant comparative background, not direct estimates of MBG's impact in Indonesia.

Other reviews report that universal meals may improve school-meal uptake, while evidence for attendance, obesity, or related outcomes is more heterogeneous and can have limited certainty (Cohen *et al.*, 2021; Spill *et al.*, 2024). Holford and Rabe (2024) further demonstrate why age and duration of exposure matter when considering children's bodyweight. Consequently, biological indicators, attendance records, or perceptions of classroom focus should not be treated interchangeably. Each outcome requires a defined measure, an observation window, and a suitable comparison.

2.2 Implementation Capacity and Multi-Actor Governance

Successful school feeding depends on operational rather than merely formal compliance. Chambers *et al.*, (2020) show how communication, stakeholder engagement, and local implementation shape the delivery of universal school meals. Process-evaluation research likewise identifies feasibility, acceptability, and the experiences of parents, pupils, and staff as distinct dimensions that must be studied rather than assumed (Jessiman *et al.*, 2023). In Indonesia, administrative capacity, division of responsibilities, and monitoring have become central questions in the MBG literature (Herdiana, 2025; Masrich *et al.*, 2026).

Indonesia's policy framework creates a basis for coordination and supervision, yet the presence of formal rules cannot guarantee identical implementation across heterogeneous regions (Republic of Indonesia, 2025). Governance analysis should address clarity of roles, operational reporting, supplier accountability, and feedback from schools. Such issues directly concern organizational effectiveness and public-resource stewardship, linking MBG policy to interdisciplinary research in economics and public management.

2.3 Distribution, Food Safety, and Local Supply Chains

The implementation of school meals involves procurement, storage, preparation, transport, and consumption. These functions can be difficult to integrate when suppliers, kitchens, and schools are separated by geographic or infrastructural constraints. Fatimah *et al.*, (2024) discuss barriers in eastern Indonesia, while Makambombu (2026) identifies tensions between centralized program governance and local-food systems in Sumba. Evidence from Ghana illustrates how caterer practices and operating arrangements affect the nutritional diversity of school meals (Liguori *et al.*, 2024). Such studies support the relevance of examining local supply-chain design and menu feasibility.

Food safety must also be evaluated as an independent performance dimension. Hygiene failures, inadequate transport controls, and inconsistent supervision can undermine the intended benefits of meal provision. Recent Indonesian analyses emphasize operational certification and monitoring rather than relying on the nominal availability of meals as evidence of quality (Erlyn *et al.*, 2026; Reza, 2025). Implementation discussions should therefore distinguish food-service procedures and risks from verified instances of contamination or illness at particular schools.

2.4 Equity, Acceptability, and Public-Value Measurement

Program access alone does not ensure equitable use or consistent nutritional intake. Meals may be rejected because of taste, culture, age appropriateness, or uneven portion quality, while remote schools may face distinct logistical costs. Kiftiyah *et al.*, (2025) raise questions of social justice and geographic targeting; Tambunan *et al.*, (2025) frame learning productivity as an intended area of benefit. Wibowo and Yuliani (2026) argue for linking nutrition, food safety, procurement, and monitoring with locally responsive program governance.

The literature therefore suggests two related but separate questions: whether a program's service-delivery system is working as designed, and whether participation leads to changes in nutrition or learning. Assessing the first may rely on interviews, operational observations, and process records. Assessing the second normally requires well-defined outcomes and defensible comparisons. Treating potential benefits as proven effects would obscure an important distinction between policy aspirations and research findings.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Setting

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach to examine implementation arrangements at several elementary schools participating in the MBG program. Schools were selected purposively, and the unit of inquiry was the implementation process, including organizational arrangements and the delivery of school meals. Limitations in

reporting the schools, observation period, and participant numbers restrict an assessment of the transferability of the qualitative interpretation.

3.2 Data Sources and Collection

Data sources were described as in-depth interviews with school principals, school-level nutrition implementation teams, and catering providers, together with direct observation of meal distribution and consumption. Secondary sources comprised monthly school records of student height and weight. The lack of a transparent account of interview protocols, observation schedules, permissions, and document coverage limits independent assessment of how the reported evidence was gathered.

3.3 Analysis and Interpretation Boundaries

The qualitative procedure involved data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. Implementation concerns were organized under distribution logistics, nutritional standards and food safety, and oversight. Interviews, observation, and documentary information were intended to support triangulation, although incomplete procedural reporting prevents independent reconstruction of the coding decisions and analytical trail.

The study design also envisaged a before-and-after comparison of student anthropometric records using body mass index for age. However, no analysable baseline or follow-up results, sampling characteristics, measurement dates, or classification criteria are reported. Consequently, this analysis makes no estimate of a nutritional effect. Such an estimate would require a documented measurement protocol and age- and sex-appropriate interpretation of anthropometric indicators.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Research Result

The descriptive analysis is organized into four operational dimensions: (a) logistics and distribution; (b) food safety and portion quality; (c) acceptability and consumption; and (d) budget, coordination, and monitoring. These are analytical categories rather than quantified frequencies or comparative effect estimates. The evidence reported is not sufficient to rank their relative importance across sites or to estimate school-level outcomes.

4.1.1 Logistics and distribution

The implementation account identifies transport conditions and the distance between food production and schools as potential constraints on the timeliness of meal delivery. Difficult terrain and island connections can increase exposure to delays, particularly where distribution depends on weather or limited transport infrastructure. This concern is consistent with Indonesian studies of geographic disparities and food-system localization (Fatimah *et al.*, 2024; Makambombu, 2026). It is an implementation risk rather than an established finding that meals were late at a specified proportion of schools.

Greater reliance on local procurement and geographically accessible preparation units could potentially reduce transport complexity. Such arrangements would nonetheless require clear supplier specifications, inventory records, procurement accountability, and food-safety controls. Their effectiveness cannot be assumed without comparisons of service reliability, costs, and the nutritional characteristics of meals delivered.

4.1.2 Food safety and portion quality

The analysis identifies kitchen hygiene, ingredient handling, food transport, and age-appropriate meal composition as interdependent quality concerns. Potential weaknesses include inadequate sanitation facilities, inconsistent temperature management, and unclear portioning procedures. Current governance analyses recommend explicit hygiene assurance, structured supervision, and operational compliance documentation (Erlyn *et*

al., 2026; Reza, 2025). The evidence assembled here does not establish the prevalence of a particular safety failure or quantify nutrient intake at the study sites.

Menu planning must consider the nutritional requirements of the served age groups and the practicality of obtaining ingredients with predictable quality. Liguori *et al.*, (2024) show why preparation arrangements and caterer conditions matter when judging actual menu diversity. A menu's stated composition is not equivalent to measured consumption; plate waste, acceptance, and individual dietary needs can alter the nutritional contribution of a school meal.

4.1.3 Student acceptability and consumption

Student preferences and local food habits are potential determinants of meal uptake and consumption. Menu acceptability is analytically distinct from food-safety compliance: a hygienically prepared meal may provide limited benefit if it is not eaten. Acceptability should be evaluated through documented student feedback, observed consumption, or waste indicators rather than inferred from the number of meals served (Jessiman *et al.*, 2023).

4.1.4 Coordination, finance, and oversight

The analysis discusses the administrative complexity of a multi-actor national service. Procurement, budgeting, school participation, implementation oversight, and accountability require functioning links between national bodies and local providers. Debate about fiscal opportunity costs is part of the broader policy context (Aji, 2025), while scholarship on MBG identifies gaps in organizational readiness and evidence-informed coordination (Herdiana, 2025; Masrich *et al.*, 2026). Because school-level budget records and audited cost data are absent, this paper does not offer a fiscal impact estimate.

The establishment of BGN and the later specific governance regulation provide an institutional framework against which responsibilities and reporting arrangements may be assessed (Republic of Indonesia, 2024, 2025). To evaluate actual performance, that framework should be linked to traceable indicators such as meals delivered on time, safety-check compliance, recorded menu substitutions, complaints resolved, and documented expenditure. These are proposed monitoring measures, not outcomes observed and counted in the present study.

4.1.5 Nutritional and educational outcomes

Nutritional status, school attendance, concentration, and academic performance are important potential outcomes of school feeding. However, interpretable anthropometric comparisons, attendance series, validated concentration measures, and school assessment data are not established by this analysis. No measured change in these outcomes can therefore be inferred. International studies suggest possible benefits, but effect estimates from other settings cannot be transferred directly to MBG students without local evidence (Holford & Rabe, 2024; Mostert, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021).

4.2 Discussion

The principal contribution of this analysis is an organizing framework for operational risks rather than an estimate of effects on student health. From a governance perspective, the four implementation dimensions form an interdependent system. A geographically efficient supply chain may still fail if quality assurance is weak; hygienic preparation may still deliver limited benefits when meals are poorly accepted; and adequate budgets do not ensure service quality when monitoring and accountability are incomplete. Multi-stakeholder implementation research points to the importance of making responsibilities visible and connecting frontline feedback to policy decisions (Chambers *et al.*, 2020; Jessiman *et al.*, 2023).

This governance interpretation is compatible with literature that treats school feeding simultaneously as social protection, an educational support mechanism, and a potentially

important food-system intervention (Alderman *et al.*, 2024). Indonesia-specific policy work similarly highlights adaptive local sourcing and integrated oversight (Makambombu, 2026; Wibowo & Yuliani, 2026). These connections emphasize an economic and organizational question: public value depends on operational efficiency, supplier accountability, service reliability, and independently measurable human-capital outcomes.

A major inferential boundary concerns the difference between implementation processes and child outcomes. Qualitative interviews and observation can document how food is prepared, distributed, and received. They cannot by themselves verify the magnitude of changes in nutritional status or learning. Even a simple before-and-after comparison needs transparent observation dates, a defined population, age- and sex-appropriate anthropometric classification, and attention to alternative explanations. Comparative research from other systems illustrates the importance of these design features (Cohen *et al.*, 2021; Kaur, 2021; Spill *et al.*, 2024).

A feasible administrative response would integrate procurement records, transport logs, food-safety checks, age-appropriate menu planning, complaints, and indicators of consumption into routine monitoring. Longer-term outcomes such as growth or educational participation should be evaluated with clearly identified samples and repeated measurements rather than presupposed from program participation. Community feedback can also provide information about menu acceptability and equity, consistent with the concerns raised by Kiftiyah *et al.*, (2025) and Tambunan *et al.*, (2025).

The scope of inference is constrained by incomplete information about the reported schools, participants, period of study, analytical procedures, and underlying empirical material. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized to all Indonesian MBG service units, and no causal nutritional, attendance, or achievement effect is claimed. These limitations also identify priorities for further work: verified qualitative process evaluation at defined sites, transparent service-performance records, and appropriately designed longitudinal assessment of child outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The analysis places Indonesia's MBG policy within an interconnected set of organizational and operational challenges: distribution reliability, food safety and meal quality, acceptability, and cross-agency coordination. These dimensions matter because public resources become meaningful nutritional and educational services only through dependable procurement, preparation, delivery, consumption, and oversight. The central contribution is a governance-centered framework for identifying implementation priorities, rather than proof that MBG has already improved student health or learning at the schools described.

For policymakers and program managers, the immediate implications are to clarify interagency responsibilities, strengthen supplier and kitchen accountability, build locally responsive food supply arrangements, and publish traceable performance indicators. An independent assessment of student nutritional status requires documented baseline and follow-up data, valid classification procedures, and a design adequate for the claim being made. Incomplete empirical documentation limits the strength and generalizability of the present interpretation. Future research should use transparently documented field evidence and longitudinal outcomes to test whether improved implementation translates into measurable benefits for children and local food systems.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI STATEMENT

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used [NAME TOOL / SERVICE] in order to [REASON]. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.