

Implementation of Free Nutritious Meal Policy to Improve Student Nutrition in Sidoarjo Regency, Indonesia Schools

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Abstract: Nutritional adequacy is a crucial factor in supporting student health, cognitive development, and academic achievement. In Indonesia, nutritional problems among school-aged children continue to be a significant challenge that affects the quality of human resources. To address this issue, the Indonesian government launched the Free Nutritious Meal Program (Program Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) in 2025 as a national policy aimed at improving student nutritional intake. Although the program carries strategic objectives, its implementation across regions demonstrates varying dynamics and challenges. Previous studies have largely emphasized the impact of school feeding programs on nutritional status and learning outcomes, while research focusing on policy implementation processes at the local level in Indonesia remains limited.

Purpose: This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program as an effort to fulfill student nutritional needs in Sidoarjo Regency. The research adopts a qualitative approach, with data collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Research informants include program beneficiary

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students, school administrators, Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi (SPPG), and relevant local government agencies. Data analysis is conducted using the Mazmanian and Sabatier policy implementation model, which emphasizes problem characteristics, policy characteristics, and environmental variables.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This study employs a qualitative research approach using observations, interviews, and document analysis, guided by the Mazmanian and Sabatier policy implementation framework.

Findings: The findings indicate that the implementation of the MBG program in Sidoarjo Regency has generally been conducted fairly well and has received positive responses from students and schools. The program contributes to improving student nutritional intake and reducing their daily expenses. However, several challenges remain, including delays in food distribution, inaccuracies in target school selection, weak inter-institutional coordination, the absence of detailed standard operating procedures, and limited human resource capacity. These issues affect the consistency and effectiveness of program implementation.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the development of public policy studies in Indonesia, particularly in relation to the implementation of nutrition fulfillment policies in the education sector. The findings are expected to serve as a reference for evaluation and provide policy recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Indonesia.

Keywords: free nutritious meal program; policy implementation; student nutrition; public policy

Paper Type: Article-research

Introduction

Nutritional fulfillment is very important to support children's academic achievement, according to information from the WHO, which states that sufficient and balanced food intake greatly affects children's brain growth and thinking abilities,

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directly impacting their learning capacity and academic results. If a child experiences nutritional deficiencies or malnutrition, this can lead to impaired brain function, reduced concentration and memory, thus negatively affecting their learning outcomes. Meeting nutritional needs is a basic physiological aspect that directly affects students' cognitive abilities, concentration, and readiness to learn; therefore, the MBG program is seen as an intervention that not only improves nutritional status but also strengthens children's daily learning capacity (Wahyuningsih et al., 2025). Nutritional status in children aged 6-18 years was assessed by grouping them into three categories: 6-12 years, 13-15 years, and 16-18 years. Nationally, the prevalence of stunting in all three groups remains high, exceeding 30%. The highest rate is found in the 6 - 12 year old group (35.8%), while the lowest is in the 16 - 18 and 13- 15 year old groups, with nearly identical percentages of around 11%. In the 16 - 18-year-old group, the rate is 8.9%. The prevalence of overweight and obesity in school-aged children (6-12 years) is 9.2% (Cahyanto et al., 2021).

To address this issue, the government launched the Free Nutritious Meals Program in early 2025. However, public perception of this program varies. A survey conducted by GoodStats showed that only 21% of the public agreed with the program, while another 20% chose not to give an opinion or were unsure about the Free Nutritious Meals program. The challenge of fulfilling nutritional needs in Indonesia is not only related to the issue of malnutrition rates but also to the unequal distribution of healthcare services and access to nutritious food across regions. Some areas, particularly in the 3T regions (underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost), still face limited food supply, low family nutrition knowledge, and minimal supporting facilities in schools. This situation drives the emergence of the double burden of malnutrition (Yuliana et al., 2023). Children with good nutritional status tend to have better academic performance compared to

children who are undernourished or malnourished. Meeting nutritional needs thru nutritious food, as implemented in the Free Nutritious Meal Program, aligns with the WHO's approach to ensuring optimal child health and growth.

Compared to other countries, Australia found that the School Breakfast Clubs Program was able to improve students' concentration (95%), engagement (90%), and academic outcomes (85%) (Macdonald, 2019). The Philippines also showed that the average academic performance of students significantly improved after the implementation of the school-based feeding program, although demographic factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status did not always correlate with learning outcomes (Alcantara & Marisa A. Frontreras, 2024). Meanwhile, in Africa, in the region of Kenya, the availability of resources for school feeding programs has been proven to increase student participation, attendance, and academic achievement (Njumwa & Solomon, 2024). In Tanzania, the implementation of this program contributes to improved exam results, reduced absenteeism, and increased student concentration (Maijo, 2018). Meanwhile, the DepEd-based school feeding program in Pangasinan, Philippines, has been proven not only to improve academic performance but also to improve students' nutritional status by increasing their body mass index (BMI) (Joseph Lu & Dacal, 2020).

Free nutritious meals were proposed by presidential candidate Prabowo during the 2024 Presidential Election campaign. This idea can be considered a new concept, given that no Indonesian president has had a similar idea, thus positioning President Prabowo as a leader capable of generating ideas to carry out his leadership. The ability to realize ideas. The fulfillment of campaign promises, which is then manifested in the form of the MBG Policy, reflects President Prabowo's ability to turn ideas into policies, thereby serving as evidence that President Prabowo has been able to translate ideas into policies that have an impact on the

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wider community (Herdiana, 2025). The Free Nutritious Meal Program proposed during the administration of Indonesia's 8th President by Prabowo Subianto is a program intended, among other things, for school students across Indonesia. In implementing this program, various related sectors are needed to ensure its success. To ensure the program's success, President Prabowo, thru Presidential Regulation Number 83 of 2024, established the National Nutrition Agency to carry out the task of fulfilling national nutrition needs. Quoting from the official website of the National Nutrition Agency, the implementation of this free nutritious meal program is carried out in two forms. First, BGN will establish Nutrition Fulfillment Service Units that will be distributed throughout Indonesia. Second, BGN will collaborate with State Institutions/Third Parties.

However, in its implementation, a number of regions in Indonesia are experiencing different problems in implementing this free nutritious meal program.

Table 1.1. Data on program issues in various region

No.	Problem	Source
1.	- Delayed food distribution - Late payments to kitchen partners - Food poisoning among students - Rejection in Papua	Tempo.co (Pradipta, 2025)
2.	- Problematic statement letter (parents asked to sign a waiver if the child is sick/poisoned) - Low nutritional and food safety standards	DetikEdu (Aisyah, 2025)

- Weak supervision (risk of poisoning)
 - Central government is not transparent and hands-off
 - 3. - The menu is not balanced. Times Indonesia
- It is not suitable for the local (Shobirin, 2025)
culture.
- It does not sufficiently involve the local community.
- The evaluation is weak.
 - 4. - Food quality is declining Herald.id
- Limited catering capacity (Saminja, 2025)
 - 5. - Non-transparent budget CNBC Indonesia
management can open the door to (Alfisyahri, 2025)
corruption.
- Increasing economic pressure when launching programs with a large budget burden.
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Based on Table 1.1, the Free Nutritious Meal Program launched by the government in 2025 aims to meet the nutritional needs of school children at various educational levels. However, in practice, it faced many challenges and problems in several areas, such as distribution delays, insufficient portions, and cases of food poisoning due to spoiled food caused by limited catering capacity. Some regions, such as Papua, even rejected this program because they believed that education programs were more important than free meal programs. Criticism also came from institutions like JPPI, which highlighted the weak coordination between the central and regional governments, the lack of training for implementers, and policies that did not align with field conditions. Additionally, the non-transparent budget management is seen as opening the door to corruption and

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increasing economic pressure, burdening the country without any tangible short-term results. In areas like Sidoarjo, some schools have already adopted this program, but many others have not, indicating that the distribution is not yet optimal. Overall, although the Free Meal Program has good intentions, it still requires thorough improvements to be effective and targeted.

Some other studies have shown that although nutritious food programs have a positive impact on children's health, the results still vary when viewed from the aspect of academic achievement (Kristanti & Sebtalezy, 2019). Some studies have shown the success of the program in improving nutritional status, but not many have specifically examined the relationship with students' concentration, memory, and academic achievement. Additionally, hindering factors such as food distribution, low acceptance of vegetable menus, and portion sizes not being appropriate for local nutritional needs remain important considerations in program implementation (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025).

Therefore, this research is important to conduct to assess program implementation from the perspective of program recipients and to formulate strategies to make the resulting benefits more optimal and sustainable. It also examines the comparison of the program across different countries. This research is not only theoretically relevant for enriching the study of the relationship between nutrition and education, but can also practically provide more targeted and sustainable policy recommendations for both the government and schools.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach to the implementation of the free nutritious meal program policy as an effort to meet nutritional needs, with case studies at SMAN 1 Waru, SMAN 2 Sidoarjo, and SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo. In this qualitative research, it is more

based on the level of information openness that will be obtained from the situation in the field. Using this qualitative research, the aim is to determine the effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in supporting the improvement of students' learning quality in Sidoarjo Regency.

In qualitative research, one must have a broad theoretical and insightful understanding in order to ask questions, analyze, and construct the research object more clearly. This research places more emphasis on meaning and is value-bound. Qualitative research is used when the problem is unclear, to uncover hidden meanings, to understand social interactions, to develop theories, to ensure data accuracy, and to investigate the history of development. Qualitative research has advantages including: first, the data obtained is not fabricated by the researcher, but based on facts, events, and reality; second, the discussion is in-depth and focused; and third, qualitative research is more open to viewing things from several different perspectives (Raco, 2010).

The data analysis technique used in this study is qualitative analysis, based on data obtained from interview results and documentation. The data obtained from the interviews was compiled into a report, which was then reduced, summarized, and focused on the important points. The themes and patterns are sought and arranged systematically. The activities carried out in the data reduction stage are selecting and summarizing data from interview and documentation results that are relevant to the focus of this research. To get an overview or specific parts of the research, various matrices, graphs, networks, and sections should be created, or it can also be in narrative form. The activity carried out during the data display stage is presenting the data narratively, which means telling the results of the interviews in the form of sentences and presenting them in the analysis results. Researchers strive to find meaning, patterns, themes, causal

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explanations, and so on. The conclusion must always be tested throughout the research, in this case by adding new data. The activity the author conducted during the data verification stage was drawing conclusions based on the data obtained from the research results.

Discussion and Findings

The analysis of the implementation of the Free Nutritional Meals Program (MBG) in this study uses the Mazmanian and Sabatier policy implementation framework, which emphasizes three main groups of variables: (1) problem characteristics, (2) policy characteristics, and (3) policy environment. The use of this framework aims to ensure that field findings are not only descriptive but are analyzed systematically to explain the factors that influence the success and obstacles to implementing the MBG policy at the local level.

Characteristics of The Problem

The Free Nutritious Meal Program is a strategic policy aimed at massive nutritional intervention to improve students' cognitive readiness and physical health. Legally, this program has strong legitimacy thru Presidential Regulation Number 83 of 2024, which mandates the establishment of the National Nutrition Agency as a central authority. The National Nutrition Agency not only serves as a regulator but also as a cross-sectoral coordination hub that oversees the operationalization of programs at the local level thru implementing units called Nutrition Fulfillment Service Units.

The implementation structure of Free Nutritious Meals follows an integrated top-down pattern. Based on the institutional flow, there was a significant delegation of authority from the national to the local level. National Nutrition Agency: Responsible for formulating nutrition standards, budget allocation, and macro-level supervision. Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit: Acts as the technical implementing unit (street-level bureaucracy) with full

control over supply chain management, food production processes, and distribution logistics. Education Department: Taking on the role of facilitator and administrative supervisor in their respective areas of work. Educational Unit (School): Serves as both beneficiaries and the implementing unit for daily impact monitoring.

Implementation in Sidoarjo Regency revealed a discrepancy between policy idealism and field reality regarding the characteristics of the problem. Field findings indicate that the selection of beneficiary schools is more dominated by considerations of logical feasibility than by socio-economic priorities. The selection of schools based on proximity to the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Units location indicates that geographical barriers and the cost-effectiveness of distribution are key determinants in decision-making.

Policy Characteristics

The policy characteristics of the Free Nutritious Meals (FNM) Program in this study were analyzed using the Mazmanian and Sabatier policy implementation framework, specifically to assess the extent to which the policy design was able to guide the implementation process at the implementer level. This analysis focused on the clarity of policy objectives, the causal assumptions underlying the policy, the allocation of implementer authority, resource capacity, and the coordination mechanisms between agencies involved in program implementation.

The Free Nutritious Meals policy has a relatively clear objective, which is to improve the nutritional fulfillment of students while also supporting efforts to prevent stunting by providing nutritious food in schools. That goal is understood by the implementing actors at the local level. However, research findings indicate that this clarity of purpose has not been fully followed by policy arrangements capable of ensuring the program's targeted implementation. The selection of schools for

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the program is still more influenced by technical considerations, such as proximity to the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit, rather than by indicators of the school's socio-economic needs. This condition indicates a gap between policy goals and the implementation instruments provided.

The policy for this program is also based on the assumption that providing nutritious meals regularly will have a positive impact on students' health, concentration, and readiness to learn. This assumption is conceptually strong and relevant. However, the policy has not yet detailed the operational mechanisms that can ensure this causal relationship consistently works in the field. The lack of clear technical regulations regarding distribution time, food quality standards, and alignment with learning schedules means that implementation results do not always align with the expected policy objectives. Additionally, the policy grants significant authority to the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG) in data collection and food distribution, aiming to enhance program implementation flexibility. However, this broad authority is not balanced by clear and binding coordination mechanisms with the Department of Education. As a result, data inconsistencies occurred, oversight was weak, and the role of local governments in the strategic decision-making process was limited. This condition indicates that the various implementation problems that arise more accurately reflect the limitations of policy design in regulating inter-agency relations rather than simply technical failures of the implementers.

From a resource perspective, although the MBG program is supported by relatively adequate central government funding, the policy does not clearly define the competency standards for implementers or the quality control mechanisms for implementation. This caused the quality of program implementation to vary across schools and regions, both in terms of the accuracy of distribution and the quality of the food

provided. Overall, the characteristics of the MBG policy indicate that it is a progressive policy with clear national objectives, but it is not yet fully supported by an institutionally mature policy design. Tension between policy goals at the central level and policy design capacity in guiding implementation at the local level is a structural factor influencing the effectiveness of program execution.

Policy Environment

Social, economic, and technological conditions, public support, the attitudes of voter groups, authority support, and the commitment and capabilities of public officials are all highly influential in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program, according to the Mazmanian and Sabatier implementation theory. According to the results of interviews with sources regarding the implementation of this program, the majority of the community, especially the parents of students who are one of the targets of this Free Nutritious Meals Program, are very open to it. This demonstrates the full support of the recipients for the Free Nutritious Meals program.

On the other hand, there are also those who show a different attitude, such as the school canteen staff who feel slightly disadvantaged by this program, which in the theory of Mazmanian and Sabatier is categorized as support from the target group. The canteen staff feel that since the program was implemented in the school, their sales revenue has decreased. This phenomenon shows that the implementation of this program not only faces technical nutritional issues but also has an impact on the local socio-economy, requiring compensation policies to maintain environmental stability. And if not managed well, it will lead to a lack of local support for program stability.

Then, in the production process of the Free Nutritious Meals menu, various tools are used that can shorten production time because the portions are made in large quantities and must be

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distributed at a specific time. In this case, the availability of technology becomes a technical prerequisite that determines the success of large-scale implementation, such as this Free Nutritious Meals program.

However, besides having to produce quickly, the process must also ensure that the quality of the ingredients used to create a menu meets the established standards. Therefore, the employee recruitment system for the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit, based on interviews with the local coordinator, was found to be managed through a foundation partnered with the National Nutrition Agency for the establishment of the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit. This collaboration was established after the foundation met various requirements for the establishment of the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit. And the foundation recruited residents living near the unit to become employees through a rigorous selection process.

However, despite having adequate technology in the production process and strict employee recruitment, schools sometimes complain about delays in the delivery process. Based on the results of interviews with one of the staff members from the nutrition service unit, it was found that during the portioning process, there was a shortage of portions, so the staff needed to reproduce the food to meet the needs and ensure the portions matched the amount the schools would receive. Therefore, a thorough evaluation is needed regarding the causes of delays in the process of distributing free nutritious meals.

The local government also monitored the implementation of this Free Nutritious Meals program when it first started, particularly from the Sidoarjo Regency Education Office, which directly visited each school and local nutrition service kitchen to ensure service standards were met. However, the functions of the Education Office itself are data mapping and validation of targets, preparation of school facilities and infrastructure, advocacy and

socialization, and monitoring and evaluation. In this case, after interviewing one of the employees from the Sidoarjo Regional Education Office, it was found that the Education Office had fulfilled its duties and authority in implementing this program.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals program in Sidoarjo Regency, when viewed thru the Mazmanian and Sabatier framework, reveals a policy reality that lies between grand national ambitions and technical challenges at the local level. Overall, this program has a very strong legal foundation thru Presidential Regulation Number 83 of 2024, which successfully created a command structure from the center to the regions thru the National Nutrition Agency and the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit. However, in the dimension of problem characteristics, a dichotomy was found between the ideal goals of nutritional intervention and the reality on the ground, where the selection of beneficiary schools is currently dominated more by considerations of logistical feasibility and cost-efficiency of distribution than by the priority scale of students' socio-economic needs. This indicates that geographical barriers are still a determining variable limiting the reach of the program's distribution justice.

From a policy characteristics perspective, although the program has very clear goals in improving the quality of human resources, its institutional design still shows gaps in inter-agency coordination aspects. The significant authority granted to the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit in supply chain and distribution management often operates without strong synchronization with the Education Department, which is the regional school authority. This gap led to technical constraints such as inaccurate target data, weak collective quality control, and uncertainty in distribution time, which sometimes conflicted with learning schedules. The absence of binding technical regulations

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regarding the causal relationship between food quality standards and daily operational mechanisms indicates that this policy still requires maturation at the implementation instrument level so as not to rely solely on the flexibility of actors in the field.

Meanwhile, within the policy environment context, the Free Nutritious Meals Program faces contradictory social dynamics. On the one hand, this program receives massive public legitimacy from parents due to its tangible nutritional and economic benefits, but on the other hand, it creates negative externalities for the school's economic ecosystem, particularly in the canteen sector, which experiences a decline in revenue. Additionally, the reliance on mass production technology to pursue time efficiency has often not been matched by precise quality control management, leading to sporadic complaints about delivery delays. In conclusion, the future sustainability of the Free Nutritious Meals Program's success hinges heavily on the government's efforts to foster closer institutional integration, refine standard operating procedures, and establish compensation policies for affected local ecosystems, ensuring that the policy's environmental stability consistently supports the achievement of national nutrition targets.

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