

Reviewing the Effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Policy in Promoting Nutritional Equity Among School Children

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ABSTRACT

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is a new national policy aimed at improving nutritional equity among school children while reducing malnutrition and stunting rates. However, this program still faces various challenges, particularly the high number of mass poisoning cases due to the failure of the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG) to comply with food safety standards. This study reviews the effectiveness of the MBG program in improving nutritional equity among school children, analyzes its contribution to meeting the Nutritional Adequacy Rate (AKG) among students, and identifies factors that support and hinder the implementation of the MBG program. The research method used is a literature study with content analysis of official documents, academic literature, and credible reports related to the implementation of the MBG program. The results of the study show that although the MBG program has great potential in increasing student attendance, reducing the economic burden on families, and increasing long-term productivity, its effectiveness is hampered by the weak implementation of food safety SOPs, limited human resource capacity, inadequate kitchen infrastructure, and suboptimal inter-agency coordination. The phenomenon of mass poisoning indicates a systemic crisis in food supervision of the MBG program. Therefore, regulatory improvements, strengthening HACCP standards, increasing human resource training, and conducting periodic evaluations are strategic steps to ensure that nutritional equity can be achieved safely and sustainably. The government is also expected to strengthen evaluations and make internal improvements in the implementation of the MBG program so that it does not cause more cases of MBG program poisoning in Indonesia

Keywords : school children; Free Nutritious Meals (MBG); nutritional equity

INTRODUCTION

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is a government initiative officially launched in January 2025 based on Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024. It aims to improve the nutritional intake of school children and support their physical and cognitive development, particularly *stunting*, which still reached 19.8% in 2024 according to the Indonesian Nutrition Status Survey (SSGI) (Ministry of Health, 2025). With an initial budget of Rp71 trillion and a target of 82 million MBG program recipients, including students from early childhood education to vocational high school, Islamic boarding school students, pregnant women, and toddlers (Secretary of the Cabinet of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025). This program aims to increase access to balanced nutrition (± 700 calories per serving at a cost of IDR 10,000–15,000), reduce school dropout rates due to hunger, and empower local MSMEs through the food supply chain (SiMantap.MBG, 2024). The

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urgency of this policy is increasingly pressing given the long-term impact of malnutrition on children's cognitive development and national productivity, with the economic cost estimated at 3% of GDP (World Food Program, 2023).

Through this program, the government provides ready-to-eat meals aimed at addressing malnutrition and improving students' learning concentration. However, the implementation of this program does not always go as planned. One case that has come to light is mass poisoning due to the consumption of food from the MBG program. This case occurred because the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG) did not implement Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) correctly, starting from the storage of raw materials that were prone to spoilage, food processing without paying attention to the right temperature and time, to large-scale distribution without daily hygiene testing. These conditions led to the growth of harmful bacteria such as *E. coli* and *Salmonella* in the food consumed by children, causing mass poisoning cases in several schools. This incident is proof of the importance of strict supervision of the food supply system so that the noble goals of the MBG program do not end up harming public health.

The urgency of this research lies in the importance of ensuring that the Free Nutritious Food Program (MBG) truly provides nutritional and health benefits for children without posing new disease risks. The mass poisoning cases resulting from the SPPG's failure to comply with SOPs indicate that the food supply system still has significant weaknesses, from processing to distribution. If this problem is left unaddressed and not thoroughly investigated, the risk of similar incidents recurring will persist and potentially undermine public trust in the national program, which benefits over 82 million recipients (indef.or.id, 2025). With a very large budget and long-term impact on the quality of human resources, research on the implementation, supervision, and food safety quality in the MBG program is urgently needed to ensure the effectiveness of the policy and the safety of its recipients.

Previous research at Jakarta State University examined the phenomenon of poisoning cases that occurred in several regions by analyzing 16 news articles highlighting this phenomenon (Hartanto, 2025). However, this research did not discuss the effectiveness of the MBG program in improving nutritional equity among school children. Nasution et al. (2024) also showed that school meal programs improved students' nutritional status, attendance, and concentration in learning. However, it does not fully highlight the food safety risks in the implementation of the MBG program in the field. Research by Rahmawati et al (2024) found that food poisoning in schools is largely caused by a lack of compliance with hygiene SOPs, minimal cold chain supervision, and inadequate storage facilities. However, this study was conducted in school canteens, not in national-scale programs such as MBG.

Based on this background, the objectives of this study were to evaluate the effectiveness of the MBG program in improving nutritional equity among school children, assess the extent to which the MBG program can contribute to meeting students' daily nutritional needs, and analyze the factors that support and hinder the implementation of the program at the school and food provider levels. The results of this study are expected to provide relevant recommendations for the government in improving the implementation of the MBG so that the objectives of nutritional equity and improving the health of school children can be optimally achieved.

METHOD

This research method uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to understand the phenomenon of policy implementation in depth through the examination of relevant documents

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and literature. The research design used is a literature- , collecting various written sources, such as journals and scientific articles on food policy, school children's nutrition, food safety, food supply chain management, and school meal programs from other countries. In addition, this study also utilizes official documents such as Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024, reports from the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), reports from international agencies such as the WFP and UNICEF, as well as credible news reports discussing cases of mass poisoning due to the implementation of the MBG program. Data collection was carried out by searching for academic literature and online documents related to Free Nutritious Meals (MBG), food safety, school children's nutrition, and public policy evaluation.

All collected data were analyzed using *content analysis* techniques by identifying patterns of program success and weaknesses, causes of poisoning cases, effectiveness of monitoring mechanisms, and the roles of stakeholders such as BGN, SPPG, Health Office, BPOM, schools, and food MSMEs. This analysis was also reinforced by comparing the research findings with public policy evaluation models and international practices to assess the adequacy of standards, implementation structures, and opportunities for program improvement in Indonesia. Data validity is maintained through source triangulation by comparing information from various scientific documents, official reports, and credible news reports, as well as ensuring that all sources are highly credible and originate from authorized institutions. Research ethics are upheld by respecting copyright, avoiding data fabrication, maintaining objectivity in analysis, and ensuring that all interpretations are compiled honestly based on information found in the literature.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) in Improving Nutritional Equity Among School Children

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) initiated by President Prabowo Subianto is one of the strategic policies to strengthen the quality of human resources by improving the nutritional status of school children and vulnerable groups. However, what has happened recently is that there have been many cases of poisoning among students in Indonesia due to the MBG program. A report from the Head of the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) states that the highest number of poisoning cases were reported on the island of Java, with 112 Extraordinary Cases () or 7,925 people affected. When totaled cumulatively, there were 11,640 MBG recipients who experienced food poisoning from a total of 441 KLB. Of those affected, 636 people were reported to have been hospitalized and 11,004 cases underwent outpatient treatment (DW Indonesia, 2025). Meanwhile, according to a report from the Ministry of Health, the total number of beneficiaries who experienced food poisoning reached 13,371 people (Yanwardhana, 2025).

The high rate of mass poisoning in the MBG Program is a serious indication of a food security crisis and systemic negligence in the implementation of this strategic program policy. Data reported by the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) and the Ministry of Health show the massive and alarming scale of the problem. The massive epidemiological scale, with thousands of MBG program victims, mostly occurring on the island of Java, is no longer considered an isolated incident, but rather a reflection of a total failure in the management of large-scale food supply chains. This is supported by previous research on *School Feeding Programs* (SFP), where reports from organizations such as the WHO and studies in the *Journal of Food Protection* link mass poisoning to systemic failures in the supply chain, particularly violations of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and *Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points* (HACCP)

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principles, such as bacterial contamination due to unsafe food storage temperatures and times (Wahyuningtyas, 2025).

In addition, the Center for Tropical Medicine (PKT) at Gadjah Mada University stated that the main causes of MBG poisoning cases were production scales that exceeded the capacity of kitchens producing food equivalent to industrial catering, but the facilities were only of household standard and did not implement the HACCP system required for mass production; minimal supervision, such as the time from cooking to consumption often exceeding 4 hours (the safe limit), resulting in a broken cold chain, poor hygiene due to equipment being washed with dirty water and expired ingredients still being used, lack of training for cooks and field supervisors; and inadequate infrastructure due to cramped kitchen space, limited refrigeration equipment, and unguaranteed sanitation (Nathania, 2025). Thus, this is clear evidence of acute failure in implementing basic *food safety* practices at thousands of serving points. This is further exacerbated by a massive program approach, where research by the World Bank (2020) shows that launching programs simultaneously without building adequate local monitoring capacity will cause an exponential decline in quality control. This means that when programs are rolled out simultaneously without adequate training, infrastructure, and quality control authorities at the local level, the monitoring system becomes paralyzed. Failure to build adequate local oversight capacity will cause *food safety* issues such as HACCP violations, poor sanitation, and broken cold chains to occur not only at one or two points, but to spread rapidly and uncontrollably across thousands of locations, turning isolated incidents into massive epidemiological crises.

This crisis deeply touches upon the fundamental values of Pancasila, especially the Second Principle, Just and Civilized Humanity. The principle of *Just Humanity* requires the state to guarantee the basic rights of its people, including the right to safe and healthy food. When the MBG program run by the state has caused thousands of children to be poisoned, this constitutes a violation of justice and civility because the state has failed to protect its citizens from the dangers it has created. Ultimately, the high rate of poisoning not only burdens health facilities, but also undermines the legitimacy of the program and raises ethical dilemmas. As long as this massive food security crisis continues to recur, the MBG cannot be considered an effective instrument for achieving nutritional equity, but rather a source of public health threats that requires a comprehensive evaluation before it can be considered successful. This turns the noble intention of improving nutrition into a massive health threat and undermines public trust in the government's policy management.

2. Contribution of the MBG Program to Meeting the Daily Nutritional Adequacy Rate (AKG) for Students

The MBG program is a national public policy that seeks to improve access to healthy and nutritious food for students at the primary and secondary education levels. The MBG program has had a number of tangible impacts on students' health and learning activities. Adequate nutrition plays an important role in improving concentration and academic performance by around 10-15% (Nasution et al., 2024). In addition, nutritional interventions in schools have reduced cases of malnutrition by 12% and anemia by 8% in school-age children after the implementation of the MBG program (Darmawan et al., 2021). This shows that consistent increases in nutritional intake have a positive impact on children's overall health. In addition to impacting children's learning activities and health, the MBG program also eases the economic burden on families. Nutritious meal programs also reduce daily expenses and can save up to IDR 300,000 per month per child (Nefan, 2025). Thus, this has a significant impact,

especially for low-income families.

In addition, the MBG program also contributes to reducing the risk of stunting and obesity by providing children with direct access to foods containing essential nutrients, such as protein, carbohydrates, healthy fats, and vitamins and minerals needed for growth and development. Children who receive nutritious foods containing protein, energy, vitamins, and minerals are better able to achieve optimal growth. The WHO (2024) explains that malnutrition reduces energy, endurance, and cognitive abilities by up to 10%, so nutritional interventions through school programs have a significant impact on supporting child development. The implementation of the MBG program also shows that increased nutritional intake can improve overall health. Thus, the MBG program also contributes to addressing issues such as stunting, a condition where children experience stunted physical growth due to chronic malnutrition.

The MBG program has the potential to bring significant changes to the quality of life of future generations. Good nutrition is closely related to increased individual productivity. Individuals who are well-nourished tend to be healthier, have stronger immune systems, and are able to reach their optimal work potential. Conversely, malnutrition can reduce human productivity. In addition, Rahmawati et al. (2024) reveals that the MBG program is also an effort to modernize the education system through improving social welfare. This is considered an adoption of government policies inspired by several developed countries with the aim of improving social welfare. Therefore, the MBG program not only serves to meet the daily nutritional needs of students, but also contributes to improving the quality of education and health of the younger generation.

However, its implementation in the field still shows symptoms of bounded *rationality*. Limited information, the capacity of implementing agencies, and weak data integration between agencies are the main obstacles to the optimal realization of the program. The symptoms of bounded rationality that appear in the form of weak data integration between agencies and limited capacity of implementing agencies are manifestations of the failure to actualize unity in the context of bureaucracy. The failure of relevant agencies to work in an integrated manner, share accurate information, and align their vision in the implementation of the MBG program indicates the existence of sectoral barriers that are contrary to the spirit of unity. This poor coordination reduces the effectiveness of vital national programs and weakens Indonesian unity in the context of concrete development actions. Therefore, the implementation of the MBG requires good coordination between institutions so that the program can be targeted and implemented optimally.

3. Supporting and Hindering Factors of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG)

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is driven by strong supporting factors, particularly political commitment from the President and fiscal support in the form of a budget allocation of Rp71 trillion to fund the MBG program, which targets 19.47 million beneficiaries (Purwowidhu, 2025a) . Conceptually, the MBG program addresses Indonesia's urgent need to reduce *stunting* and malnutrition rates, as well as providing strong justification in the eyes of the public and health institutions (Ministry of Health, 2025) . The MBG program also collaborates with the World Food Program (WFP), UNICEF, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which play an important role in providing technical support and developing MBG program guidelines. WFP is exploring with the government the use of AI-based menu optimization that considers nutrition, sources, food availability, and prices. Meanwhile, UNICEF supports the development of a set of national guidelines and standards for effective

MBG implementation (UN, 2025) . In addition, MBG has economic potential to adopt a *farm-to-table* model, as successfully implemented in Japan's *Kyushoku* program, by integrating and creating a stable market for local agricultural products (Auliawan & Harsiwi, 2025) .

However, this potential is hampered by structural obstacles that cause food security crises. The main obstacles to the MBG program are:

- a) The regulations and technical guidelines for the MBG program are not comprehensive, including a lack of detailed SOPs on hygiene by the Regional Nutrition Service Units (SPPG) in the regions, food security, and geographical adaptations such as distribution to 3T areas. This has led to widespread MBG food poisoning and the uneven distribution of the MBG program in Indonesia (Purrowidhu, 2025b) .
- b) Limited human resources, namely non-standardized SPPG training, with only 5,000 ICA cooks deployed in October 2025, while kitchen infrastructure is *overloaded* (up to 4,000 servings/day without full HACCP) (Zulaika et al., 2025) .
- c) Low budget absorption, with only 22% recorded as of September 2025, and a lack of transparency in reporting, including comprehensive evaluative data from BPS, which hinders *monitoring* of nutritional and economic impacts (Semarang Regency Central Statistics Agency, 2025) .
- d) The universal approach has the potential to be wasteful, ignoring the priorities of vulnerable groups and burdening the national budget. Given budget constraints, the MBG program should focus on children from low-income families (Salma, 2025) .

The failure of the MBG program indicates problems in its implementation process. Despite transformative political commitment and fiscal support, the program's great potential was thwarted by systemic failures in the regulatory framework, food safety standards (HACCP), and operational capacity in the field, which collectively triggered a food safety crisis and budget inefficiency. The allocation of Rp71 trillion and high political support became wasted capital because it was not balanced by a mature technical foundation, which also failed to create social justice through equitable access to nutrition. Structural weaknesses, such as incomplete regulations and hygiene SOPs by the SPPG in the regions, became major loopholes exploited by limited human resources and *overloaded* kitchen infrastructure. This explains why the prevalence of food poisoning and low budget absorption occurred simultaneously (), and indicates a serious disconnect between available funds and the program's ability to execute them safely and efficiently.

The simultaneous and massive launch of the program exceeded regional monitoring capacity, posing a significant risk. This is in line with the research Bundy et al. (2016) which emphasizes that school feeding programs must be strictly monitored in terms of efficient procurement of raw materials, safe storage, and distribution, especially in remote areas (3T); the importance of implementing and complying with international standards, such as *Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points* (HACCP) in all stages from the kitchen to the point of consumption by children in schools; and the importance of standardizing training for cooks, supervisors, and local Nutrition Fulfillment Service Units (SPPG) to maintain food hygiene and quality. Therefore, the MBG program can achieve the goal of Social Justice if structural obstacles are overcome through consistent implementation and a shared commitment to upholding the values of Fair and Civilized Humanity. By prioritizing child safety and fiscal accountability, and strictly and consistently enforcing regulations in the implementation of the MBG program, this

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program can become an important instrument in creating a healthier and smarter generation towards Indonesia Emas 2045.

CONCLUSION

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is designed to support the cognitive development of school children and improve nutritional equity. Research findings indicate that in its implementation, the MBG program still faces a number of problems and challenges. Despite its relatively strategic objectives, based on the implementation of the MBG program, there are still many shortcomings in the field. Various cases such as food poisoning incidents indicate that food safety has not been fully guaranteed. This indicates a discrepancy between the normative objectives of the MBG program and the actual conditions in the field, particularly in terms of inter-agency coordination and technical readiness. In addition to the lack of supporting infrastructure in several locations, the problem is further compounded by the fact that food providers often do not meet sanitation and food safety requirements, which can increase the possibility of contamination. The limited number of human resources with experience in food safety and hygiene () means that the monitoring process is often not sustainable. The lack of coordination between regions is also caused by the dependence of local governments on central guidelines that are not yet fully standardized. These conditions indicate that a more organized restructuring is needed by the MBG program management to ensure that the food provided to students is safe and of high quality by reorganizing the management of the MBG in a more systematic manner.

There are several recommendations that need to be followed up to address these challenges, namely improving food safety by regularly applying the *Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points* (HACCP) principle, increasing the number of sanitation audits, and creating more comprehensive and uniform Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) across all regions. Furthermore, careful preparation is needed to improve human resource capabilities through training standards for food inspectors and suppliers. In addition, the government must ensure that food production facilities meet health requirements and implement a transparent and systematic evaluation system to ensure that all parties are accountable. Thus, this step is expected to support the implementation of the MBG program to achieve consistent health benefits and nutritional status for students. Further research is recommended to examine the effectiveness of implementing food safety standards such as HACCP in greater depth at various levels of food providers, while mapping infrastructure disparities and human resource capacities in each region to identify the factors that most influence the quality of MBG implementation. In addition, further research could also explore the role of the school community, namely teachers and students in the Food Safety Patrol, and their contribution to a culture of food awareness in schools by conducting in-depth interviews regarding the effectiveness of the MBG program in nutritional equity among school children. Thus, it is hoped that future researchers can provide a more comprehensive and effective food safety strengthening model in line with the goal of nutritional equity in this study.

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