

# Government Social Policy: Implementation of The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG)

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## Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is a flagship policy promoted by President Prabowo Subianto. The MBG has a national strategic goal of reducing stunting and malnutrition rates, which will have an impact on improving Indonesia's human capital. This study aims to uncover dilemmas within the MBG program, examine stakeholder responses, and elucidates the program execution using the Theory of Change (ToC) framework. This research employed a qualitative method utilizing phenomenological approach. The research sites comprised three schools in City A and City B, located in East Kalimantan Province. The informants for this study were students as beneficiaries, school officials involved in MBG management, and the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG). Findings indicates that the MBG program has succeeded in providing nutritious food according to Recommended Dietary Allowances (AKG), which has had a positive impact on improving students' healthy behavior and concentration. However, obstacles still encountered include delays in distribution, limited menu variety, exclusion of small local suppliers and inadequate monitoring and assessment. This study elucidates systemic dilemmas in governance, the marginalization of small enterprises, and the economic repercussion for school cafeteria vendors.

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## 1. Introduction

Nutritional and child health challenges persist as significant concerns in efforts to enhance the quality of human resources in Indonesia [1,2,3,4]. To address these problems while simultaneously enhancing societal welfare, President Prabowo Subianto, through Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No. 83 of 2024, established the National Nutrition Agency (Badan Gizi Nasional, BGN). One of BGN's flagship policies is the Free Nutritious Meal program, now widely known as MBG [3]. Previously, in 2015, a program called PROGRAS (National Child Nutrition Program) was initiated as a pilot approach for school feeding, providing breakfast to schoolchildren [5].

School feeding programs aim to fulfill children's nutritional and health requirements, incentive school attendance in alignment with educational goals, and promote knowledge of sustainable healthy eating habits into adulthood [3,5,6,7]. Consistent with BGN's vision and mission, MBG focuses on comparable objectives, specifically promoting knowledge of healthy eating habits and lifestyles, establishing a national nutrition resilience framework, and achieving equitable and transparent nutrition governance [3]. MBG aims to reach 82.9 million beneficiaries, comprising children under five, students, pregnant women, and breastfeeding moms [8,9]. The crucial importance of this program is driven by issues concerning the quality of Indonesia's human capital [2,3,4,10]. Malnutrition and stunting, which manifest during the initial 1,000 days of life, persist as critical concerns [2,3,10]. These challenges persist in Indonesian society. The presence of MBG is anticipated to generate renewed impetus in addressing nutritional inadequacies [3], contingent upon its distribution to the appropriate recipients.

Theories of social and behavioral change indicate that systems and behaviors influencing modifications in stakeholder relationships and individual practices can affect the success of this program [11,12]. Although its commendable aims, the execution of this strategy encounters various obstacles. Frianti [13] identified challenges in MBG's implementation, including menu quality and diversity, distribution and logistics, food safety and hygiene, inadequate monitoring and evaluation, and restricted involvement of educators and institutions. Addressing public and stakeholder perceptions concerning the advantages of complimentary nutritious meals is essential [13,14].

Implementation issues get worse by social disagreements regarding target beneficiaries. This circumstance requires stringent supervision of the program [15]. Several factions suggest that MBG should be restricted to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, whereas others champion an equal allocation of benefits without of discrimination [13]. Therefore, thorough evaluations are necessary to determine students' distinct nutritional needs across various regions, local dietary preferences, and the capabilities for food production and distribution in each locale [16].

The functioning of MBG is intrinsically linked to governance factors, community engagement in oversight, and the nutritional quality of meals [7,11,17]. Consistent and measurable execution, coupled with regular assessments, is crucial for evaluating the program's impact and efficacy [18]. Despite encountering dilemmas and challenges, MBG continues to be a significant project in enhancing public health through a holistic and cooperative strategy [3,7,18]. The initiative enhances non-military defence components and promotes social stability [4]. Moreover, MBG is anticipated to ensure fair access for all students in Indonesia, irrespective of disparities [19].

The formulation of the research problem involves: (1) What dilemmas arise in the execution of MBG? How do stakeholders respond? How can the implementation of MBG be elucidated through the Theory of Change framework? This study aims to identify the dilemmas encountered in MBG implementation, examine the responses of stakeholders directly involved, specifically beneficiaries and MBG managers, and elucidate MBG implementation using the Theory of Change framework.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative method utilizing a phenomenological approach, as illustrated in Figure 1, to explain the subjective experiences of stakeholders in the MBG program. The phenomenological approach was selected for its focus on the depth exploration of the significance of individual experiences in program implementation, thereby facilitating diverse and comprehensive viewpoints [23]. Between April and June 2025, ten interviews and observations were conducted with stakeholders of the MBG program. The interviews and observations involved three schools that benefited from the MBG program and the MBG management entity, specifically the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi/SPPG). The study comprised a total of fourteen informants, with eight from City A and six from City B.

The data analysis in this study utilized a phenomenological approach as adopted from [23]. This approach has multiple phases, starting with horizontalization, then progressing to textural and structural descriptions, researcher reflection, and concluding with the development of an essence description, which is then associated with the ToC.

### 2.2. Data Validity & Reliability

This study applied source triangulation to enhance the validity and reliability of the data by comparing insights from several informants for a more comprehensive understanding.

## 3. Result and Discussions

The successful implementation of the MBG program at educational institutions illustrates that school function merely as beneficiaries and technical implementers, rather than as decision-makers. Interviews with educational institutions in City A and City B indicated that they possess insufficient autonomy in menu determination, vendor selection, or budget management. All strategic choices are centralized inside the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG) as the MBG kitchen. This disparity generates a divide between policy architects and frontline executors, constraining the responsiveness of policies to local requirements.

The limited scope for school involvement also impedes their capacity to offer feedback or do direct assessments of program execution. However, schools have a more profound understanding of student attributes, dietary habits, and possible allergy hazards. When issues occur—such as restricted menu diversity, postponed delivery, or allergic responses—schools lack a structured mechanism for prompt modifications. This opposes the essential tenet of program management centered on local responsiveness and ongoing feedback [24,25].

Within the ToC framework, there must be a synergistic progression from activities to outputs, with the active participation of all stakeholders, including educational institutions. In this case, the presumption that local players possess the capability and opportunity to engage is unfulfilled. The disparity in roles compromises program efficacy, since technical implementers are excluded from planning and evaluation procedures, despite their proximity to beneficiaries [12,21,22].

### 3.1. Coordination between Central and Local Authorities and Technical Limitations

Field studies reveal significant challenges in coordination among the federal government, local government, SPPG, and educational institutions. Numerous schools indicated that allergy forms were not revised with the increase in MBG beneficiaries. Moreover, throughout Ramadan, not all educational institutions had technical directives for menu modifications, leading to inconsistent practices in the provision of *takjil* (iftar snacks) and resulting in confusion. This underscores deficiencies in the vertical communication system intended to link policy formulation with grassroots execution.

The lack of a risk management system exacerbates the situation. Schools possess insufficient knowledge regarding the nutritional composition of the meals, as menus are entirely planned and regulated by SPPG. Despite SPPG's efforts to engage nutritionists and provide digital menu notifications, schools continue to feel marginalized in the menu design and certification process. The

absence of a systematic reporting mechanism from schools to central program administrators exacerbates the responsiveness to technical issues faced in the field.

From the ToC perspective, collaboration among various levels of government and implementing partners should establish a synergistic network to facilitate seamless processes from inputs to outputs and outcomes. Nonetheless, inadequate coordination limits logistical networks and program modifications. The program's objective of enhancing children's nutritional access through complimentary nutritious meals may be inconsistently realized, as local execution does not entirely conform to central design [12,21,22].

### **3.2. Transparency and Accessibility to Procurement Procedures**

A significant discovery from the interviews is that the food vendor procurement process is primarily closed and necessitates considerable financial resources. Data from educational institutions and SPPG suggests that establishing an MBG supplier requires substantial initial investment, standardized cooking infrastructure, and the capacity to distribute thousands of servings daily. This condition prohibits micro and small enterprises near schools from participating, despite their longstanding role as informal food suppliers for students.

The exclusion of small enterprises from the food supply chain restricts the local economic advantages of MBG. The approach may foster dependency on large, centralized providers rather than fortifying localized economies surrounding schools [26]. This undermines the program's foundational intent of boosting local businesses. Numerous school canteen vendors indicated a decline in clientele and a lack of information regarding opportunities to engage as MBG partner vendors.

In the ToC framework, inclusion in implementation procedures is essential for sustainability and equity. When access to the program's value chain is limited to large organizations, a core ToC assumption is undermined: that social transformation transpires through extensive community engagement, encompassing small-scale businesses [27]. In the absence of enhanced transparency and equitable access, MBG risks yielding limited economic impacts and may provoke opposition from local groups that perceive themselves as excluded.

### **3.3. Socio-Economic Impacts on Local Enterprises and the School Environment**

#### **3.3.1. Immediate Impacts on Canteen Vendors**

The most apparent effect of the MBG program implementation is evident in the circumstances of school canteen vendors. In Cities A and B, vendors formerly involved in the daily school economic activities have encountered a significant reduction in income. Students who previously acquired snacks or supplementary side dishes have now diminished such expenditures due to the provision of staple meals at no cost. Several vendors reported having to discontinue operations due to a daily revenue decline of up to 70 percent, especially in schools that prohibit canteens from offering other food options.

This situation illustrates the displacement effect, in which a new program supplants an existing sector that formerly contributed to the local economic ecology. Vendors at school canteens have historically constituted an informal network that facilitates student nourishment, characterized by organically established social interactions. The implementation of a centralized food distribution system undermined these relationships, resulting in local vendors losing their livelihoods without compensation or transitional support [28].

This exemplifies unforeseen outcomes frequently overlooked in program development within the ToC framework. The presumption that dietary interventions will produce beneficial effects universally is invalid if current microeconomic systems are disregarded. Consequently, ToC design must integrate socio-economic risk assessments and mitigation measures to mitigate unexpected consequences for disadvantaged groups, including canteen vendors [12,21,22].

#### **3.3.2. Disparities in Local Vendor Capability**

SPPG's criteria in the MBG vendor procurement process necessitate substantial manufacturing capacities and effective distribution systems. Vendors must provide thousands of servings daily

while adhering to stringent nutritional and sanitation standards. This situation hinders micro-enterprises – such as domestic food stalls or school cooperatives – from competing effectively. They are deficient in industrial-scale culinary tools, skilled workers, and sufficient financial resources. Consequently, only a select few major providers thrive and dominate the MBG supply industry.

This disparity engenders structural exclusion inside the program's value chain. Although large vendors can exploit economies of scale and resources to attain profitability, local firms are relegated to a marginal position. This exacerbates the disparity among economic participants within the educational ecosystem [26]. In many areas, local firms are not directly engaged as partner providers, contrary to the program's initial intent of "empowering the local economy."

From the ToC perspective, this discrepancy signifies a failure to engage a crucial assumption concerning local actor involvement. If the program seeks to promote local economic growth, it must establish a framework for change that enhances the capacity and access of small firms. Small vendors cannot progress without incubation programs, training, or local consortia. This disparity not only undermines local stakeholders but also compromises the overall viability of the program, as reliance on a restricted number of major providers is particularly vulnerable to supply disruptions [29].

### 3.3.3. Stakeholder Responses in the MBG Program

#### 1) Student Perspectives: Effectiveness and Aspirations

From the students' viewpoint, the MBG program offers obvious benefits. A significant number of elementary and junior high school students conveyed satisfaction, indicating that the program eliminates the necessity of carrying pocket money or acquiring supplementary meals at the cafeteria. For families from lower-middle economic backgrounds, this savings is substantial and relieves the financial strain on parents. Furthermore, the practice of communal dining in the classroom fosters a congenial atmosphere and reinforces social connections among students.

Observations indicated that the menu is constructed in a repetitive format: a serving of white rice; animal protein (options include chicken, fish, or a boiled egg), typically prepared as fried in batter, cooked with soy sauce, or seasoned with sweet-and-sour; fruit (options include sliced papaya, watermelon, one banana, or one orange); stir-fried vegetables (such as mustard greens, carrots, long beans, green beans, or baby corn); plant-based protein (one piece of tofu or tempeh); while UHT milk was only supplied at the beginning of the MBG program.

Students are not only passive recipients. They expressed other expectations, including the provision of milk for all grade levels, rather than solely for lower primary students. They articulated goals for an expanded menu diversity, specifically the incorporation of seafood and a broader selection of fruits. These goals indicate that students possess preferences and the ability to think on their consumption choices. The engaged and critical beneficiaries are significant as they form social capital that can enhance program accountability. In the ToC framework, student voices provide an essential feedback mechanism. If the ToC's assumptions on change encompass the encouragement of healthy eating habits, then student participation in assessing and contributing to menu options signifies a progression towards enhanced ownership. ToC must consequently facilitate user-centered evaluation to ensure that program enhancements are not just top-down but also adaptively responsive to field needs [12,25].

#### 2) Response from Beneficiary Representatives and Parents: Gratitude and Concerns

Teachers and principals, as advocates of beneficiaries, view MBG favorably as an integral component of student welfare services. They noted immediate effects, including enhanced student concentration on learning following breakfast, especially in the morning. The provision of meals at school mitigates social inequality by ensuring that students receive equitable treatment, irrespective of their economic status. This corresponds with the ethos of educational inclusivity advocated by the program. Moreover, students are taught proper dining habits, including handwashing, offering prayers before meals, and abstaining from conversation during eating. MBG coordinators in City B underscored the principles of independence, responsibility, and leadership by designating class representatives to oversee food distribution and the retrieval of containers post-meal, with roles alternating day-to-day.

Nonetheless, educators articulated concerns, especially over their restricted participation in menu formulation and delivery procedures. As individuals most intimately involved with kids on a daily basis, they believe they have a more profound comprehension of students' needs and behaviors. Regrettably, the program's design does not systematically incorporate teacher input. This signifies a vulnerability that could impede program performance at the operational level, as implementation without comprehensive teacher support complicates educational and supervisory operations.

From the parents' perspective—though not yet thoroughly examined—concerns have arisen regarding processed or ultra-processed food ingredients, particularly during the month of Ramadan. However, favorable feedback was conveyed concerning meal provision beyond Ramadan. Parents experienced help from MBG, as it enabled their children to get breakfast or lunch. This highlights the necessity for enhanced stakeholder communication between program organizers and the community [30]. In the context of ToC, opposition from essential supporting entities like parents may hinder the attainment of child nutrition objectives if adverse attitudes arise and are not swiftly mitigated by informative and transparent communication.

### **3.4. Implementation of MBG using the Theory of Change (ToC)**

The MBG program is formulated as a strategic initiative to cultivate a healthy and productive generation using a cross-sectoral approach. A thorough examination of the underlying ToC is crucial for assessing its success. The following outline delineates the implementation of each phase of the ToC according to empirical observations.

#### **3.4.1. Input: Funding and National Policy**

The MBG program is underpinned by state budget allocations and a national policy framework from the central government, which provide the basis for local execution. This exemplifies robust political will as the foundational impetus for transformation. Nonetheless, centralized policy inputs present difficulties in adapting policies to the regional context, especially when local capacities and needs are inadequately addressed.

Findings reveals that numerous schools and municipal authorities faced challenges in adapting implementation to local circumstances, such as during Ramadan or due to the scarcity of local vendors. This indicates that robust central directives must be harmonized with structural adaptability to be effectively implemented by local actors. In the absence of such equilibrium, inputs cannot effectively facilitate the anticipated modifications within the ToC chain [12,21,22,31].

#### **3.4.2. Activities: Procurement and Distribution of MBG**

The fundamental operations of MBG—food procurement and distribution to educational institutions—represent the principal operational hubs. These processes are significantly dependent on vendors via SPPG. The predominance of major vendors and the restricted engagement of schools in oversight expose deficiencies in the participation of local stakeholders, particularly micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and the schools themselves.

Disparities in capacity among participants constitute a significant obstacle in this phase of activity. Minor actors, such canteen vendors and local MSMEs, exhibit a deficiency in competitiveness within a highly standardized framework. Within the ToC framework, operations must incorporate local partners as integral components of initiatives aimed at economic empowerment and equitable distribution of benefits [12,21,22,31].

#### **3.4.3. Output: Accessibility of Nutritious Meals in Educational Institutions**

The MBG initiative has successfully met its output objective: delivering nutritious meals in educational institutions. Meals are allocated daily to students in accordance with menus created based on Recommended Dietary Allowances (AKG). This output signifies a concrete and observable accomplishment, establishing the foundational criterion for assessing program efficacy.

However, output quality is not continuously uniform across different regions. Distribution disparities, delivery delays, and restricted menu variety have arisen as concerns in multiple

locations. This suggests that outputs remain unstable, with their efficacy depending on robust logistics and quality control systems—factors not uniformly developed throughout all implementation regions [12,21,22,31].

#### **3.4.4. Outcome: Improvements in Dietary Habits and Nutritional Condition**

The primary objective of MBG is to promote healthy dietary habits and enhance students' nutritional well-being. Interviews indicated that children are becoming accustomed to consuming breakfast and demonstrating appreciation for the nutritious meals offered. MBG coordinators saw that students exhibited increased focus and vitality in class following breakfast.

Nonetheless, measurable information to empirically assess improvements in nutritional status are not yet accessible. Furthermore, results may be hindered by factors such as food acceptability, menu fatigue, or inadequate supplementary instruction. In the ToC framework, outcomes rely not simply on the presence of outputs but also on the degree to which recipients internalize and ascribe meaning to these outputs [12,21,22,31].

#### **3.5. Impact: A Resilient and Resourceful Generation**

The enduring effect of MBG is the cultivation of a healthy, intelligent, and productive generation. This reflects the expansive scope of ToC, necessitating time and continuous interventions. If nutritional outcomes and healthy eating behaviors are regularly upheld and promoted, this influence is highly attainable in the next years.

Achieving such impact necessitates policy consistency, enhanced monitoring and evaluation procedures, and increased involvement of local stakeholders. A robust and inclusive system is essential for achieving transformative benefits, such as improved human resource quality. According to the ToC, impact is transformative and can only be realized if the entire chain—from input to outcome—operates in harmony and responsiveness [12,21,22,31].

### **4. Conclusion**

The Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program is a strategic initiative designed to enhance health and the quality of human capital in Indonesia. The program, with its extensive beneficiary coverage, aims to tackle nutritional issues, such as stunting and malnutrition, from an early age. This study analyzes the execution of MBG utilizing the Theory of Change (ToC) framework from the viewpoints of beneficiaries and program managers. Findings demonstrate that the implementation of MBG depends on national policy support and financing as essential inputs. Nevertheless, its implementation in the field encounters dilemmas in local adaptation, mostly due to insufficient stakeholder involvement in procurement and distribution processes. Although the output—specifically the provision of nutritious meals—has been accomplished, the outcome of alterations in eating behavior and enhancements in nutritional status has yet to be quantitatively assessed. In order to achieve the enduring effect of cultivating a healthy and productive generation, enhanced local engagement and a more responsive and adaptive monitoring system are essential.

Our research yields significant insights for enhanced development and implementation in East Kalimantan Province. Simply offering complimentary healthful meals is inadequate. Additional assessment is required to evaluate the dilemmas faced and the responses of stakeholders. The program aims to enhance the nutritional status of the population, especially among youngsters, with anticipated benefits for health and productivity. Nonetheless, various obstacles and limitations persist, including difficulties in acquiring information from SPPG in a particular city, similar menu variations, restricted school power in suggesting or regulating menus, and the cautious attitudes exhibited by stakeholders in reaction to the research.

#### **Limitations**

This study's limitations consist of two primary components. First, the research was limited to City A and City B in East Kalimantan, so restricting the geographical scope and diminishing the generalizability of the findings to other places that have various socio-economic situations. Second, the study was conducted three months post-initiation of the MBG program, indicating it did not

capture long-term dynamics such as policy adaptation, modifications in beneficiary behavior, and distribution efficacy. Without ongoing monitoring, it is challenging to thoroughly detect both obstacles and enduring accomplishments.

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