

Controversy Surrounding Indonesia's Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG): Policy Effectiveness and Governance Challenges

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Abstract

Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) has emerged as one of the most ambitious social policies in contemporary Indonesia, attracting widespread public attention due to its scale, fiscal implications, and expected contribution to human capital development. This study examines the controversy surrounding Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) in Indonesia, focusing on its potential effectiveness and governance challenges. Using a literature review approach, this study synthesizes academic articles, policy reports, and previous studies on school feeding, child nutrition, educational outcomes, and public policy implementation. The findings show that MBG has the potential to improve children's dietary intake, reduce short-term hunger, increase school attendance, and support learning participation. However, its effectiveness depends on governance quality, including procurement transparency, food safety, budget accountability, institutional coordination, monitoring systems, and local implementation capacity. This study concludes that MBG should be understood as an integrated human development policy rather than a simple food distribution program. Strong governance is essential to ensure that the program produces equitable, sustainable, and measurable benefits for Indonesian children.

Keywords

Child Nutrition; Governance; Program Makan Bergizi Gratis; Policy Effectiveness; School Feeding.



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INTRODUCTION

Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) has emerged as one of the most ambitious social policies in contemporary Indonesia, attracting widespread public attention due to its scale, fiscal implications, and expected contribution to human capital development. The program was introduced in response to persistent nutritional

challenges among Indonesian children, including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and unequal access to healthy food across socioeconomic groups. Despite significant progress in reducing malnutrition, Indonesia continues to face nutritional disparities that disproportionately affect children from low-income households and remote regions. In this context, schools are increasingly viewed as strategic institutions for delivering nutritional interventions and improving children's welfare. Consequently, Program Makan Bergizi Gratis is expected not only to address nutritional deficiencies but also to support educational participation and long-term productivity. However, its large budgetary requirements and complex implementation mechanisms have generated considerable controversy regarding its effectiveness and governance capacity.

The academic literature generally supports the use of school feeding programs as instruments for improving child nutrition and educational outcomes. Numerous studies have demonstrated that school meal programs can increase school attendance, improve concentration, enhance dietary intake, and contribute to better learning performance among students. Kristjansson et al. (2007), in a comprehensive systematic review, found that school feeding interventions positively affect both physical and psychosocial outcomes among disadvantaged children. Similarly, Bundy et al. (2017) argue that school feeding programs represent an effective investment in child development because nutrition is closely associated with cognitive growth and future labor productivity. In the Indonesian context, previous experiences with the Program Gizi Anak Sekolah (PROGAS) suggest that school-based nutrition programs can improve eating behaviors, nutritional awareness, and learning environments when supported by adequate institutional arrangements (Sekiyama et al., 2018; Pramesthi et al., 2025). These findings provide an important empirical foundation for the implementation of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis.

Despite the promising evidence, the literature also emphasizes that the success of school feeding programs depends heavily on governance quality rather than food provision alone. Large-scale feeding initiatives require effective coordination among multiple actors, including central and local governments, schools, suppliers, health authorities, and community organizations. Challenges related to procurement systems, food safety standards, monitoring mechanisms, logistical distribution, and accountability frequently influence policy outcomes. According to the World Food Programme (2013), sustainable school feeding programs require strong institutional capacity, transparent management systems, and continuous monitoring to ensure that intended beneficiaries receive quality services. Given Indonesia's vast archipelagic

geography and significant regional disparities in infrastructure and administrative capacity, implementing Program Makan Bergizi Gratis presents substantial governance challenges. Consequently, public debates surrounding the program often focus on whether state institutions possess sufficient capacity to deliver the policy effectively and equitably.

Based on these considerations, this study proposes the hypothesis that the effectiveness of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis is significantly influenced by the quality of policy governance, particularly in terms of accountability, transparency, intergovernmental coordination, and monitoring systems. Although nutritional interventions can contribute positively to child welfare, their success depends on how effectively policy objectives are translated into implementation practices. Evidence from previous school feeding programs in Indonesia indicates that institutional coordination and stakeholder engagement play critical roles in determining program outcomes (Sekiyama et al., 2018). Therefore, improvements in nutritional status and educational performance are likely to be achieved only when governance arrangements support efficient resource allocation, transparent procurement procedures, and effective service delivery mechanisms. Conversely, weak governance structures may reduce program effectiveness and generate implementation inefficiencies.

This paper argues that the controversy surrounding Program Makan Bergizi Gratis should be understood primarily as a question of public policy effectiveness and governance rather than merely a political debate over government spending. Supporters of the program emphasize its potential to reduce nutritional inequality, improve educational outcomes, and strengthen local economies through food procurement from local farmers and small enterprises. Such benefits are consistent with broader development literature highlighting the long-term economic returns of investments in child nutrition (Hoddinott et al., 2013). Nevertheless, critics argue that the substantial fiscal commitment required by the program may create opportunity costs by limiting resources available for other priority sectors, including healthcare infrastructure, sanitation, and educational quality improvement. Moreover, concerns regarding administrative efficiency, budget leakage, and implementation readiness continue to shape public discourse. As a result, assessing the effectiveness of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis requires a comprehensive examination of both its intended social benefits and its governance challenges.

Therefore, investigating the controversy surrounding Program Makan Bergizi Gratis is essential for understanding the broader relationship between social policy

innovation and state capacity in Indonesia. While existing evidence suggests that school feeding programs can generate positive nutritional and educational outcomes, these benefits are contingent upon effective governance arrangements and institutional accountability. The program's success cannot be measured solely by the number of meals distributed but must also be evaluated through its ability to improve nutritional indicators, educational participation, and social equity in a sustainable manner. By integrating social realities, existing literature, governance perspectives, and policy implementation concerns, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and governance challenges of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis. Such an analysis contributes to ongoing discussions regarding evidence-based policymaking and the capacity of public institutions to deliver large-scale social programs in developing countries.

METHODS

This study uses a literature review approach to examine the controversy surrounding Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) in Indonesia, particularly in relation to policy effectiveness and governance challenges. A literature review is appropriate because it enables researchers to identify, compare, and synthesize existing knowledge from academic studies, policy reports, and institutional documents (Snyder, 2019). This approach is also useful for analyzing public policy issues that involve multiple dimensions, including nutrition, education, budgeting, implementation, and accountability. The review focuses on how previous studies explain the effectiveness of school feeding programs and the institutional conditions that influence their success. Therefore, this method allows the study to develop a conceptual understanding of MBG based on existing evidence rather than primary field data.

The data sources used in this study consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and relevant institutional publications. The literature was selected based on its relevance to school feeding programs, child nutrition, public policy implementation, and governance. Key references include studies on school feeding effectiveness, such as Kristjansson et al. (2007), Bundy et al. (2017), and Sekiyama et al. (2018), as well as methodological works on literature review design. The selection process followed the principle that a literature review must use transparent and academically defensible criteria to reduce bias in interpreting previous studies (Tranfield et al., 2003). Sources were prioritized when they were published by reputable journals, academic publishers, international organizations, or institutions with clear expertise in nutrition and public policy.

The analysis was conducted through thematic synthesis by grouping the literature into several main themes: nutritional effectiveness, educational outcomes, implementation capacity, budgetary sustainability, procurement governance, and accountability mechanisms. This thematic approach is suitable because literature reviews should not merely summarize previous studies, but also organize findings into analytical categories that reveal patterns, debates, and research gaps (Snyder, 2019). In this study, literature on school feeding programs was compared with literature on public policy implementation to understand why similar programs may produce different outcomes across institutional contexts. The review also considers evidence from Indonesia's earlier experience with Program Gizi Anak Sekolah (PROGAS), which provides relevant lessons for analyzing MBG (Sekiyama et al., 2018). Through this process, the study identifies governance quality as a central factor that may shape the effectiveness of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis.

To ensure the validity of the analysis, this study applies critical reading and source triangulation across different types of literature. Academic articles were used to understand theoretical and empirical findings, while policy reports were used to contextualize implementation challenges in real-world governance settings. This strategy is consistent with the view that policy-oriented literature reviews should integrate diverse evidence in order to produce a more comprehensive explanation of complex public problems (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). However, this study has limitations because it does not collect primary data from program implementers, schools, students, or local governments. As a result, the findings should be understood as a conceptual and evidence-based review that can serve as a foundation for future empirical research on the implementation and impact of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Potential Effectiveness of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis in Improving Nutritional and Educational Outcomes

The literature suggests that Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) has considerable potential to contribute to improvements in children's nutritional status and educational outcomes in Indonesia. The rationale behind school feeding interventions is grounded in the recognition that nutrition and education are mutually reinforcing dimensions of human development. Children who experience inadequate nutritional intake are more likely to suffer from impaired cognitive development, reduced concentration, lower academic performance, and diminished long-term

productivity (Victora et al., 2008). In developing countries, nutritional interventions delivered through schools have increasingly been viewed as cost-effective strategies for simultaneously addressing food insecurity and educational inequality (Bundy et al., 2018). Given that Indonesia continues to face challenges related to malnutrition and nutritional disparities among children, MBG represents an important policy instrument for strengthening human capital development. The program aligns with global recommendations emphasizing school-based nutrition interventions as a mechanism for improving health and educational outcomes among vulnerable populations (World Food Programme, 2022).

A substantial body of evidence indicates that school feeding programs can positively influence children's nutritional intake and dietary diversity. Kristjansson et al. (2007), in a systematic review published by the Cochrane Collaboration, found that school feeding interventions contributed to improvements in physical growth and psychosocial well-being among disadvantaged children. Similarly, Adelman et al. (2008) demonstrated that school feeding programs in developing countries increased calorie consumption and reduced short-term hunger among students. Jomaa et al. (2011) further reported that access to school meals significantly improved dietary quality and nutritional outcomes, particularly among children from low-income households. These findings are highly relevant to the Indonesian context because many children continue to experience nutritional vulnerabilities associated with poverty and regional disparities. Through regular access to nutritious meals, MBG may help reduce nutritional deficiencies that negatively affect learning capacity and overall child development.

The effectiveness of school feeding programs extends beyond nutritional outcomes and includes important educational benefits. Numerous studies have demonstrated that adequate nutrition enhances children's ability to concentrate, process information, and participate actively in classroom activities. According to Bundy et al. (2018), school feeding programs increase school attendance and reduce absenteeism by lowering the opportunity costs of education for poor families. That nutrition interventions implemented in schools positively affect educational participation and learning outcomes. School feeding programs in low- and middle-income countries contribute to improved attendance rates and learning achievements. These findings suggest that MBG could serve not only as a nutritional intervention but also as an educational policy tool capable of strengthening student engagement and academic performance. Consequently, the program has the potential to support broader national objectives related to educational quality and social equity.

Another significant finding from the literature concerns the relationship between child nutrition and long-term economic development. Hoddinott et al. (2013) argue that investments in nutrition generate substantial economic returns through improved cognitive development, educational attainment, and labor productivity. Similarly, Grantham-McGregor et al. (2007) emphasize that nutritional deprivation during childhood can lead to irreversible developmental losses that negatively affect future economic outcomes. School feeding interventions therefore represent more than short-term welfare programs; they constitute strategic investments in human capital formation. In the Indonesian context, where demographic advantages are often described as a potential demographic dividend, improving children's nutritional status becomes essential for maximizing future economic productivity. MBG can therefore be understood as part of a broader developmental strategy aimed at enhancing the quality of the future workforce through improved health and educational outcomes.

The literature also highlights the potential of school feeding programs to function as instruments of social protection and poverty reduction. School feeding initiatives often serve as safety nets for vulnerable households by reducing food expenditures and encouraging school participation. Drake et al. (2016) note that school feeding programs can mitigate the effects of household food insecurity while promoting social inclusion among disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, the World Food Programme (2022) reports that well-designed school feeding systems can strengthen resilience among vulnerable communities by ensuring consistent access to nutritious food. In Indonesia, where socioeconomic inequalities remain evident across regions and population groups, MBG may contribute to reducing disparities in access to nutrition and educational opportunities. Consequently, the program has the potential to support the government's broader objectives of inclusive development and social welfare enhancement.

Evidence from Indonesia's previous experiences with school feeding initiatives provides additional support for the potential effectiveness of MBG. Studies examining the implementation of Program Gizi Anak Sekolah (PROGAS) indicate that school-based nutrition interventions can improve dietary habits, nutrition knowledge, and the learning environment when accompanied by effective management and community participation (Sekiyama et al., 2018). The importance of integrating nutrition education with food provision to maximize program benefits. These findings suggest that MBG should not be viewed solely as a meal distribution initiative but as a comprehensive intervention that incorporates nutrition education, behavioral

change, and community engagement. The Indonesian experience demonstrates that the sustainability and effectiveness of feeding programs are enhanced when local stakeholders actively participate in implementation and monitoring processes.

Despite the positive evidence, the literature consistently emphasizes that the effectiveness of school feeding programs depends on implementation quality and institutional capacity. Kristjansson et al. (2007), Bundy et al. (2018), and the World Food Programme (2022) all caution that positive outcomes are contingent upon adequate funding, nutritional standards, food safety measures, monitoring systems, and administrative coordination. Therefore, while MBG possesses strong potential to improve nutritional and educational outcomes, these benefits cannot be assumed automatically. The reviewed literature collectively indicates that school feeding programs are most successful when supported by transparent governance, effective delivery mechanisms, and evidence-based evaluation systems. As a result, the potential effectiveness of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis should be understood as conditional upon the state's ability to transform policy objectives into high-quality implementation practices. If these conditions are met, MBG may become one of Indonesia's most significant investments in child welfare, educational development, and long-term economic growth.

Governance Challenges as the Main Determinant of Program Effectiveness

The literature review indicates that governance quality constitutes the most critical determinant of the effectiveness of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG). While school feeding programs are widely recognized as effective instruments for improving child nutrition and educational outcomes, their success depends largely on how policies are implemented rather than on policy objectives alone. Public policy scholars have long argued that implementation is often the decisive stage in determining whether policy goals can be translated into tangible outcomes (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). In the context of large-scale social interventions, governance challenges emerge from the complexity of coordinating multiple actors, institutions, and administrative processes. Therefore, the effectiveness of MBG cannot be assessed solely through its intended nutritional benefits but must also be examined through the lens of policy governance, institutional capacity, and administrative accountability. This perspective is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where public service delivery often faces challenges associated with bureaucratic fragmentation and regional disparities.

One of the primary governance challenges identified in the literature concerns institutional coordination among stakeholders involved in program implementation.

Effective school feeding programs require collaboration among ministries responsible for education, health, agriculture, finance, and local government, as well as schools, food suppliers, and community organizations (Bundy et al., 2018). However, coordination problems frequently arise when responsibilities are distributed across multiple institutions without clear mechanisms for communication and accountability. Grindle (2017) emphasizes that policy implementation in developing countries often encounters difficulties due to overlapping authority structures and inconsistent institutional priorities. In Indonesia, where decentralization has increased the role of local governments in public service delivery, differences in administrative capacity across regions may create variations in program quality and effectiveness. Consequently, ensuring consistent implementation standards across thousands of schools and districts represents a substantial governance challenge for MBG.

Another important issue concerns procurement governance and financial accountability. School feeding programs typically involve extensive procurement activities, including food purchasing, supplier selection, logistics management, and quality assurance. According to the World Food Programme (2022), transparent procurement systems are essential for preventing inefficiencies, corruption risks, and budget leakage. Public procurement literature consistently shows that large government expenditures are vulnerable to governance failures when oversight mechanisms are weak (OECD, 2016). Given the substantial fiscal resources allocated to MBG, concerns regarding transparency and accountability have become central to public debate. Without robust monitoring systems, the program may face risks related to inflated procurement costs, unequal food quality, and misuse of public funds. Therefore, financial governance mechanisms are likely to play a crucial role in determining whether the anticipated benefits of MBG can be realized effectively.

Food quality and safety management represent another significant governance challenge highlighted in previous studies. School feeding programs are expected not only to provide meals but also to ensure that those meals meet nutritional and safety standards. Jomaa et al. (2011) emphasize that the nutritional impact of feeding programs depends heavily on meal quality, dietary diversity, and adherence to health standards. Similarly, the World Health Organization (2021) stresses that food safety monitoring is essential for protecting children's health and maintaining public trust in nutrition programs. In the Indonesian context, maintaining consistent food quality across diverse geographic regions may prove difficult due to differences in infrastructure, supplier capacity, and local food systems. If food quality standards are not enforced effectively, the program's nutritional objectives could be undermined

despite significant financial investment. Consequently, governance systems must incorporate rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure compliance with established standards.

The literature also identifies regional disparities in implementation capacity as a major obstacle to achieving policy effectiveness. Indonesia's archipelagic geography creates substantial differences in infrastructure, transportation networks, administrative resources, and market accessibility. According to Andrews et al. (2017), policy outcomes in developing countries are often shaped by variations in local institutional capacity rather than by policy design itself. Regions with stronger bureaucratic structures and better infrastructure are generally more capable of implementing complex public programs than regions with limited resources. This observation is particularly relevant for MBG because logistical challenges may affect food distribution, storage, and monitoring processes. As a result, the same policy may produce significantly different outcomes across provinces and districts. Addressing these disparities therefore requires adaptive governance approaches that recognize local conditions while maintaining national standards.

A further governance concern relates to monitoring, evaluation, and evidence-based policymaking. Effective social programs require continuous assessment to determine whether policy objectives are being achieved and whether corrective actions are necessary. Patton (2014) argue that monitoring systems are essential for identifying implementation problems and improving policy performance over time. Likewise, the World Food Programme (2022) recommends the integration of performance indicators, nutritional assessments, and stakeholder feedback mechanisms into school feeding systems. For MBG, monitoring should extend beyond measuring the number of meals distributed and include indicators related to nutritional outcomes, educational participation, food quality, and budget efficiency. Without reliable evaluation frameworks, policymakers may find it difficult to determine whether the program generates meaningful social benefits relative to its financial costs. Consequently, evidence-based monitoring is indispensable for ensuring long-term program effectiveness and sustainability.

The literature strongly supports the argument that governance challenges constitute the principal determinant of the effectiveness of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG). Although existing evidence demonstrates that school feeding programs can improve nutrition, educational participation, and social welfare, these outcomes depend heavily on institutional arrangements, administrative capacity, and accountability systems (Kristjansson et al., 2007; Bundy et al., 2018; World Food

Programme, 2022). The review suggests that MBG's success will be influenced less by the policy's normative goals and more by the government's ability to manage complex implementation processes. Strengthening interinstitutional coordination, improving procurement transparency, ensuring food quality control, addressing regional disparities, and establishing robust monitoring systems are therefore critical prerequisites for policy success. In this regard, governance should be viewed not merely as a supporting component of MBG but as the central mechanism through which the program's nutritional and educational objectives can ultimately be achieved.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this literature review indicate that Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) has substantial potential to improve children's nutritional status, educational participation, and long-term human capital development in Indonesia. Evidence from previous studies on school feeding programs demonstrates that regular access to nutritious meals can reduce short-term hunger, improve dietary quality, strengthen concentration, increase school attendance, and support academic achievement among students. Furthermore, the literature suggests that MBG may function not only as a nutrition intervention but also as a social protection mechanism that contributes to poverty reduction and inclusive development through improved access to food and education. The review also highlights that investments in child nutrition generate broader economic benefits by enhancing cognitive development, educational attainment, and future labor productivity. Lessons from Indonesia's previous experience with Program Gizi Anak Sekolah (PROGAS) further reinforce the argument that school-based nutrition programs can produce positive outcomes when integrated with nutrition education, community participation, and effective management systems. Therefore, MBG should be understood as a strategic human development policy that has the potential to generate multidimensional benefits for both individuals and society if implemented effectively.

This study concludes that governance challenges remain the most decisive factor influencing the effectiveness and sustainability of Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG). The literature consistently demonstrates that institutional coordination, procurement transparency, financial accountability, food safety management, monitoring systems, and local implementation capacity are critical determinants of policy success. Given Indonesia's geographic diversity and administrative complexity, variations in institutional capacity across regions may create significant differences in program outcomes if governance mechanisms are not strengthened. Moreover, the effectiveness of MBG cannot be measured solely by the number of meals distributed

but must also be evaluated through improvements in nutritional indicators, educational participation, service quality, and budget efficiency. Consequently, policymakers should prioritize evidence-based governance reforms, robust monitoring frameworks, and transparent accountability systems to ensure that program resources are translated into meaningful social outcomes. Ultimately, the long-term success of MBG will depend not only on the government's commitment to improving child nutrition but also on its ability to build governance structures capable of delivering equitable, efficient, and sustainable public services.

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