



Free nutritious meal program as a political commitment: An analysis of its influence on the quality of education in Indonesia

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Abstract

The quality of education plays a fundamental role in human resource development, particularly in developing countries such as Indonesia. However, efforts to improve educational quality cannot solely focus on pedagogical aspects, as students' health conditions and nutritional status also constitute important determining factors. This study aims to critically examine the effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) as a form of political commitment in improving educational quality in Indonesia. The research employs a qualitative approach using a library research design supported by public policy analysis. Data were collected from scientific journals, international institutional reports, government policy documents, and relevant academic publications related to school feeding programs and nutrition interventions.

The findings indicate that school feeding programs have significant potential to improve students' concentration, attendance, learning motivation, and academic achievement. Nutritional interventions are also closely associated with the development of human capital and educational equity. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the MBG program is strongly influenced by policy implementation factors, including institutional capacity, governance quality, budget sustainability, infrastructure readiness, and monitoring systems. From a legal-politics perspective, the program reflects the state's commitment to fulfilling citizens' social rights in education and health sectors. However, the study also identifies challenges related to policy politicization, bureaucratic effectiveness, and the risk of implementation inefficiency. Therefore, strengthening regulations, improving inter-institutional coordination, and implementing evidence-based evaluation mechanisms are essential to ensure that the program contributes sustainably to educational quality and human resource development in Indonesia.

Keywords: Free nutritious meal program, school feeding program, educational quality, public policy, human capital, political of law, nutrition intervention, Indonesia

Introduction

The quality of education plays a crucial role as a fundamental indicator in the development of human resources, particularly in developing countries such as Indonesia. However, efforts to improve educational quality cannot be viewed solely from a pedagogical perspective, as students' health conditions and nutritional status also constitute equally important determining variables. Numerous scientific studies have confirmed that adequate nutritional intake is directly associated with the optimization of cognitive development, concentration, and students' academic achievement. Within the policy context, nutrition-based interventions, such as school feeding programs, represent a relevant strategy to address these challenges.

At both global and national levels, school feeding programs have been proven to serve as catalysts for student participation and academic performance. The provision of nutritious meals at school contributes directly to strengthening cognitive abilities^[1]. In line with this, recent literature indicates that school lunch programs are effective in meeting students daily nutritional needs, which in turn improves body mass index (BMI) and overall student health conditions^[2]. As a developing country, Indonesia continues to face complex nutritional challenges among school-age children, particularly the phenomenon of the triple burden of malnutrition, which includes undernutrition, obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies^[3]. As a strategic response, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (*Makan Bergizi Gratis / MBG*) has emerged as an integration of the health and

education sectors. Conceptually, this program is not merely focused on improving nutritional status but is also projected to enhance the quality of classroom learning.

Several empirical studies in Indonesia reinforce the argument that free school meal programs generate multifaceted positive impacts. The implementation of such programs contributes to increased student attendance, strengthens learning motivation, and significantly improves academic outcomes^[4]. Furthermore, improvements in social interaction and learning concentration within the school environment have also been identified^[5]. Nevertheless, systematic review studies conducted across Asia reveal that although academic achievement tends to improve, the effectiveness of such programs in alleviating malnutrition still demonstrates varying results^[6].

Despite its potential, the implementation of the MBG program faces major challenges related to management effectiveness and budget efficiency. Several studies highlight technical constraints in the field, ranging from menu variability and nutritional standards to distribution mechanisms and the lack of synchronization among stakeholders. This reality emphasizes that the success of the program depends not only on policy ambition but also on governance quality and precise implementation mechanisms^[7]. Based on these dynamics, this study aims to critically examine the effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a manifestation of political commitment in improving the quality of education in Indonesia. This study is expected to provide a comprehensive perspective on the

correlation between nutritional interventions and educational outcomes, while also evaluating the extent to which this policy can support the sustainability of human resource development in the future.

Literature Review

The relationship between nutritional status and educational quality has long been a central concern in interdisciplinary studies between health and education. Theoretically, adequate nutrition plays a crucial role in the development of brain function, particularly among school-age children, which subsequently affects cognitive abilities, memory, and learning concentration^[8]. Furthermore, human capital theory positions education and health as two fundamental pillars in enhancing the quality of human resources. From this perspective, nutritional interventions, including school feeding programs, represent long-term investments that not only improve health outcomes but also enhance productivity and educational achievement at the individual level^[9].

School feeding programs constitute one form of public policy intervention that has been implemented in various countries. Research conducted by the World Food Programme demonstrates that school feeding programs can increase educational participation rates, reduce absenteeism, and improve students' learning concentration^[10]. Empirically, studies have found that school feeding programs have a significant impact on improving student attendance and academic achievement, particularly in developing countries^[11]. On the other hand, the Food and Agriculture Organization emphasizes that the success of school feeding programs is highly dependent on the quality of implementation, including distribution mechanisms, the sustainability of funding, and the nutritional adequacy of the meals provided^[12].

The Impact of Nutritious Meal Programs on Learning Outcomes

Various studies indicate that nutritious meal programs provide empirical evidence regarding their secondary objectives, although the findings remain varied. In general, however, these programs demonstrate potential positive impacts on academic achievement, cognitive function, dietary intake, nutritional status, and micronutrient conditions^[13]. In Indonesia, empirical studies have also produced similar findings. A study conducted by^[14] found that school meal programs contribute to improving students' learning concentration and participation. Another study by^[6], employing a systematic review approach, revealed that school feeding programs across Asia have a positive impact on academic achievement, although their effects on nutritional status vary depending on the duration and quality of the intervention. Nevertheless, several studies also suggest that the impact of such programs is not always significant in the short term. This is influenced by various factors, including families' socioeconomic conditions, the quality of teaching, and students' learning environments^[15].

Free Nutritious Meal Program from a Public Policy Perspective

From the perspective of public policy, the Free Nutritious Meal Program can be understood as a form of state intervention aimed at improving public welfare through a cross-sectoral approach. This policy targets not only health aspects, but also education and poverty alleviation.

According to the evidence-based policy framework, the effectiveness of a policy is determined by the alignment between program design, implementation, and evaluation based on empirical data. In this context, the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Indonesia needs to be comprehensively evaluated to ensure that its objective of improving educational quality can be achieved optimally^[16]. Furthermore, the policy implementation theory proposed by George C. Edwards III emphasizes that policy success is influenced by four major factors: communication, resources, implementers' disposition, and bureaucratic structure. Weaknesses in any of these factors may hinder the effectiveness of the program in practice^[17].

Although numerous studies have examined school feeding programs, most of them primarily focus on their general impacts on health and educational participation. Studies that specifically connect the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a form of political commitment with educational quality remain relatively limited, particularly within the context of Indonesia following the 2024 general election. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive examination of the program from both educational and public policy perspectives.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research design enriched with public policy analysis. This approach was selected because the study aims to critically examine the effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a form of political commitment and its implications for the quality of education in Indonesia based on existing scientific findings.

The qualitative approach enables an in-depth analysis of the relationship between nutritional interventions and educational outcomes, while also providing space to evaluate the policy within broader social, economic, and institutional contexts.

Discussion

The Free Nutritious Meal Program as an Instrument of Legal Politics

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (*Makan Bergizi Gratis / MBG*), as part of the governmental agenda of Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, can be understood as a welfare-state-oriented policy. According to Satjipto Rahardjo (2009), legal politics refers to the fundamental direction of legal policy utilized by the state to achieve specific social objectives. In this context, the MBG program reflects the state's effort to guarantee citizens' basic rights, particularly in the fields of education and health. This is also consistent with the principle of fulfilling social rights as mandated in the constitution of Indonesia^[18].

From an empirical perspective, policies such as school feeding programs have been proven to generate positive impacts on human development. Studies demonstrate that school feeding programs constitute one of the most effective interventions for improving educational participation and children's health in developing countries^[19].

Program Effectiveness from a Public Policy Perspective

Empirical studies indicate that nutritious meal programs have positive effects on educational quality. The implementation of school feeding programs in developing

countries has been shown to increase student attendance rates, improve learning participation, and enhance students' academic achievement ^[20]. Furthermore, various studies reveal that school meal programs positively contribute to improving nutritional status and increasing school attendance. However, their impact on academic achievement tends to vary and is strongly influenced by the design and quality of program implementation ^[21]. Within the context of Indonesia, research demonstrates that the provision of nutritious meals in schools improves students' learning concentration and participation ^[14]. These findings further indicate that school feeding programs across Asia contribute positively to enhancing students' academic performance. Nevertheless, the success of such programs largely depends on implementation consistency, management quality, and policy sustainability to ensure optimal outcomes ^[6].

However, from the perspective of legal politics, policy effectiveness is determined not only by empirical outcomes but also by the capacity of the legal system to regulate and supervise policy implementation. Referring to the policy implementation theory proposed by George C. Edwards III (1980), the success of a program is highly dependent on communication, resources, implementers' disposition, and bureaucratic structure. Weaknesses in these aspects may lead to disparities between policy objectives and realities in practice.

The Dimension of Social Justice and Educational Equity

The MBG program possesses significant potential to support the principle of social justice, particularly in reducing disparities in access to education. Investment in health and education is regarded as a crucial factor in enhancing the quality of human resources, individual productivity, and long-term economic growth. Therefore, the provision of nutritious meals for students can be understood as a form of state investment in human capital development and the improvement of future generations' quality ^[9]. Empirical studies demonstrate that school feeding programs are capable of increasing students' participation in education while significantly reducing absenteeism. These findings indicate that a relatively simple intervention, such as providing meals in schools, can generate broader impacts on improving the quality and sustainability of education systems, particularly in developing countries ^[12].

Within the context of Indonesia, the MBG program has the potential to become an instrument of social redistribution that reduces economic barriers to educational access. However, the success of the program in realizing social justice depends heavily on targeting accuracy and distribution effectiveness. Without strong supervision, the policy risks being misdirected, as highlighted in various public policy evaluation studies in developing countries.

Legal-Political Criticism of the Free Nutritious Meal Program

Despite its progressive objectives, the MBG program has also faced criticism from the perspective of legal politics, particularly regarding the potential politicization of the policy. According to studies within the framework of Critical Legal Studies, law and public policy are often not neutral but are instead influenced by political interests and power relations ^[22]. In this context, the MBG program may be viewed as part of a political legitimacy strategy whose

effectiveness must be objectively examined. Furthermore, policy evaluation studies emphasize that the success of school feeding programs is highly dependent on good governance, transparency, and accountability. Without such mechanisms, the program may be vulnerable to budget inefficiency or even corruption ^[23]. Therefore, from the perspective of legal politics, it is essential to ensure that the MBG program does not merely function as a populist policy, but is genuinely supported by strong regulations, effective supervisory systems, and data-driven evaluations.

Implications for the Development of Legal Politics in Indonesia

The MBG program demonstrates a shift in the direction of Indonesia's legal politics toward a more responsive approach to societal needs. This is consistent with the concept of progressive law proposed by Satjipto Rahardjo, which emphasizes that law should be oriented toward human welfare. However, to ensure policy success, strengthening regulatory and implementation aspects remains essential. Studies also indicate that the success of social programs is strongly determined by policy integration, institutional capacity, and effective monitoring systems. Thus, the MBG program may serve as an important instrument for human development in Indonesia. Nevertheless, its success largely depends on the consistency of legal politics, the quality of governance, and the government's commitment to implementing the policy sustainably.

Conclusion

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (*Makan Bergizi Gratis / MBG*) can be understood as part of the direction of Indonesia's legal politics, which places public welfare, particularly in the fields of education and health, as a policy priority. In this context, the program is not merely a political promise, but also reflects the state's effort to fulfill citizens' fundamental rights through a more integrated approach between the education and nutrition sectors. Based on various scientific studies, nutritious school meal programs fundamentally possess strong potential to improve educational quality. The provision of adequate nutritional intake has been proven to contribute to enhanced learning concentration, increased student attendance, and improved academic achievement. This demonstrates that nutritional intervention can serve as an effective instrument in supporting the improvement of human resource quality.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of legal politics, the effectiveness of a policy is determined not only by its objectives and benefits, but also by the quality of its regulation and implementation. The MBG program still faces several challenges, including infrastructure readiness, targeting accuracy, bureaucratic capacity, and the potential for budget inefficiency. Without good governance, the program risks failing to achieve its intended objectives optimally.

In addition, the potential politicization of the policy must also be anticipated. Within the framework of legal politics, public policies should ideally not be merely populist or short-term in nature, but rather oriented toward sustainability and the long-term interests of society. Therefore, consistent governmental commitment is required to ensure that the MBG program is implemented transparently, accountably, and based on scientific

evaluation. Thus, it can be concluded that the Free Nutritious Meal Program has considerable potential to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. However, its success depends heavily on the consistency of legal politics, the quality of policy implementation, and the effectiveness of supervisory systems. In the future, strengthening regulations, improving interinstitutional coordination, and conducting data-based evaluations will be essential to ensure that the program delivers tangible impacts on the development of Indonesia's human resources.

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