

## **Strengthening the governance of free nutritious meals based on schools in Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

*Efforts to improve the nation's intelligence and advance public welfare must be a commitment of the Indonesian people, and this must be realized through pro-people and sustainable government policies. Many challenges are faced, including preparing a healthy, intelligent generation with Pancasila character, to become a superior generation, especially in welcoming the Golden Indonesia Era in 2045. One such effort is the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), which is implemented by strengthening school-based governance. The hope is that this will accelerate services and equitable distribution of nutritional needs for communities throughout Indonesia. The challenge is not easy, requiring commitment from the central and regional governments to focus on and ensure the success of the MBG program. This research design is a qualitative descriptive study with a thematic narrative approach to identify and describe efforts to strengthen school-based MBG governance in Indonesia, where currently there is a gap in the role of schools limited to channeling MBG to SPPG and student beneficiaries. Through in-depth interviews with one of the BGN partner foundations, the SPPG, and schools in Tangerang City, qualitative data was obtained, which was then analyzed using a thematic narrative approach. The results showed that: a) the role of schools in the governance of the Free Nutritious Meal Program is currently limited to distributing MBG from SPPG to beneficiary students at their schools. Efforts to strengthen the governance of school-based Free Nutritious Meal Program must begin with a government commitment between BGN and the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Culture to collaborate with schools as SPPGs that serve MBG for their students, supported by the Ministry of Health.*

*Keywords: Free Nutritious Meals, Role of Schools, Astacita Program*

### **BACKGROUND**

Enhancing the nation's intelligence and advancing public welfare must be the Indonesian people's commitment, realized through pro-people and sustainable government policies. Many challenges are faced, including preparing a healthy, intelligent generation with Pancasila character to become a superior generation, especially in welcoming Indonesia Emas (Golden Indonesia) in 2045. One crucial aspect that must be prepared is adequate nutrition for the community, especially school-age children from toddlers outside of early childhood education (PAUD), early childhood education (PAUD) to high school, as well as pregnant and breastfeeding mothers.

National stunting prevalence data is 19.8%; wasting prevalence is 5.3% and anemia is 48.9%; and anemia in pregnant women is 17.9%. (Indonesian Nutrition Status Survey or SSGI Data, 2024). UNICEF also noted that children in Indonesia currently experience the Triple Burden of Malnutrition (TBM): undernutrition, overnutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies. 18.7% of school children aged 5-12 years are stunted. Wasting/thinness is 11%, obesity is 19.7%, and anemia is 16.3%. Meanwhile, nutritional problems among toddlers include underweight (15.7%), and the prevalence of stunting in toddlers remains at 21.5%. These figures are still considered high by the WHO. Other nutritional challenges experienced by Indonesian children include school-age children not eating a healthy breakfast before going to school (65%), children aged 5-14 years old consuming insufficient fruits and vegetables (97.7%), and school children choosing unhealthy snacks, such as excessive consumption of sweets, daily (54%). ([www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)).

The Indonesian Ministry of Health confirms that approximately 1 in 5 Indonesian children experience nutritional problems, either in the form of malnutrition, stunting, or obesity. This is a serious concern, especially considering the importance of good nutritional status to support students' learning abilities and academic achievement. This situation is exacerbated by various factors, including low nutritional knowledge among parents and teachers, limited access to nutritious food, and unhealthy consumption patterns ([www.kemkes.go.id](http://www.kemkes.go.id)). Indonesian children are experiencing the triple burden of malnutrition (TBM): malnutrition in the form of malnutrition and stunting, micronutrient deficiencies such as anemia, and overweight and obesity (<https://www.badankebijakan.kemkes.go.id/pakar-ingatkan-ancaman-triple-burden-gizi/>).

This condition significantly impacts not only physical health but also children's academic performance and psychological development. This situation is exacerbated by various factors, including limited access to nutritious food, low awareness of the importance of nutrition, and unstable family economic conditions. This must be a focus of attention for the government, specifically the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), to intervene in nutrition through services and fulfilling community nutritional needs.

Therefore, it is necessary to examine efforts to strengthen the governance of Free Nutritious Meals. It is hoped that this will create a learning environment that supports school-based health in Indonesia, with the hope of further accelerating service coverage and fulfilling nutritional needs for communities across the archipelago.

In this study, the research questions are: a) What is the current role of schools in the governance of Free Nutritious Meals? b) What are the efforts to strengthen the governance of school-based Free Nutritious Meals? The aim is to identify and describe the role of schools in the current governance of Free Nutritious Meals and the efforts made to strengthen the governance of school-based Free Nutritious Meals.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

In principle, governance is a series of activities encompassing planning, organizing, implementing, and controlling, which aligns with the management functions proposed by George Terry. In his book *Contemporary Human Resource Management: Transformation of the Indonesian Workforce Towards the Industrial Revolution 4.0 from a National Resilience Perspective*, Hadiningrat et al. (2025) explain that the POAC management functions constitute a series of interconnected cycles that function as a system to achieve goals effectively and efficiently.

The governance of Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) must be based on the concept of Balanced Nutrition, where the composition of daily food consumption contains nutrients in types and quantities appropriate to the body's needs, while taking into account the principles of dietary diversity, physical activity, clean living behavior, and maintaining a normal body weight regularly. Nutrients consist of energy-producing nutrients (carbohydrates, fats, and proteins), cell-building nutrients (proteins), and regulatory nutrients (vitamins, minerals, and water). Each person's nutritional needs differ, and there is a measurement known as the Nutritional Adequacy Intake (RDA), which indicates the amount of various nutrients that must be met by an individual or group based on age, gender, and health condition. The RDA is used as a guideline for meeting nutritional needs to maintain health and prevent nutritional problems, both deficiencies and excesses.

The MBG program, a quick-win program from President Prabowo Subianto's Astacita (Astacita), is a public policy aimed at intervening in community nutrition issues and preparing a superior generation to welcome the Golden Generation of Indonesia in 2045. Public policy is a decision made by public authorities whose existence is binding on many people (Badjuri and Yuwono, 2002). Its implementation is highly dynamic and influenced by numerous factors such as regulations, institutions, human resources, budget, and technology.

The MBG program in Indonesia was first implemented by President Prabowo Subianto after Indonesia's 80th anniversary of independence. We lag far behind other countries that initiated free lunch programs for students hundreds of years ago. They are now enjoying remarkable progress thanks to their high-quality and competitive human resources. Benchmarks for implementation in several countries include:

#### 1. Free Lunch in Finland

The Free Lunch Program in Finland began in 1943, aiming to ensure that students receive adequate nutrition to maintain their health and focus throughout the school day (Kuusipalo & Manninen, 2023). The free lunch program also improves student academic achievement (Heim et al., 2022).

#### 2. Free Lunch in Japan

The free lunch program in Japan, known as "Kyushoku," began in 1954 and has become an essential part of the Japanese education system. Its primary goal is to provide nutritious meals for students, supporting their physical and cognitive growth. The menus adhere to strict nutritional guidelines and involve students in meal preparation and serving to foster responsibility and cooperation. The "Kyushoku" program contributes significantly to children's health, reducing the risk of obesity and malnutrition, and fostering a sense of responsibility and cooperation (Moffat & Thrasher, 2016).

#### 3. Free Lunch in Brazil

The Brazilian Lunch Program, known as the "Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar" (PNAE), began in 1955 to ensure adequate nutrition and services for students, particularly those from low-income families. The program aims to address malnutrition and improve student quality in school (Pedraza et al., 2018). PNAE provides free meals to students from elementary to high school. Meals typically consist of rice, beans, vegetables, and fruit, with an emphasis on using local and organic produce to support local farmers. The menus are designed by nutritionists and must meet specific nutritional standards (Kitaoka, 2018). PNAE has successfully provided nutritious meals to students, improving the quality of education, and reducing social disparities.

#### 4. Free Lunch in India

The free lunch program in India, launched in 1995 under the name "Mid-Day Meal Scheme" (MDMS), aims to provide healthy meals to elementary school students, especially those from low-income families (Sahai, 2014). This program aims to address malnutrition and improve the academic attendance and achievement of students in grades I-VIII. Research by Chakraborty & Jayaraman (2022) shows that the Mid-Day Meal Program in India contributes significantly, not only by feeding children but also by helping them learn more and reducing social inequality. The MDMS can serve as

a model for other countries seeking similar goals: improving children's well-being through effective food policies.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This research design is a qualitative descriptive approach with a thematic narrative approach. The aim is to identify and describe efforts to strengthen school-based MBG governance in Indonesia to accelerate services and equitable distribution of nutritional needs for communities across Indonesia. The thematic narrative approach was used to construct narratives based on the research variables and analyze them in the form of meaningful narratives or stories based on similar themes, presented in a script using correct Indonesian spelling.

Data collection used in-depth interviews with one of the BGN partner foundation administrators who manages SPPG and schools in Tangerang City according to the research variables to obtain valid data.

The data were then analyzed using qualitative analysis with a thematic narrative approach. The steps taken were: a) Identifying key themes in the narrative data; b) Data Coding: Coding was carried out to organize information into specific categories, thus facilitating conclusion drawing; c) Presenting findings in narrative form that describe participants' experiences and perspectives and connect them to existing literature; and d) Drawing conclusions and recommendations.

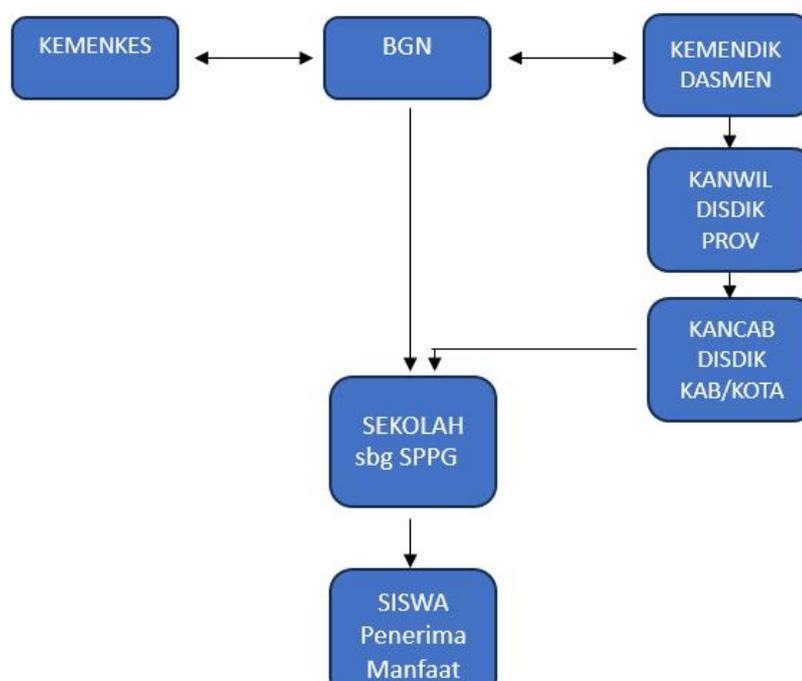
## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

According to National Agency for National Development Planning (BGN) data, the number of MBG beneficiaries will reach 55.1 million by 2025 from 19,188 SPPGs across Indonesia. However, service quality remains below minimum standards, and cases of mass poisoning occurred in several regions, with 15,117 people reported from January to November 2025. (Data from the Center of Economic and Law Studies/Celios). This demonstrates that MBG governance remains significantly deficient, requiring comprehensive improvements through various strengthening efforts from upstream to downstream to ensure the MBG program is well-targeted and successful for all, not just for a select group of individuals or businesses.

Furthermore, the government and the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) need to be encouraged to enact a national Nutrition Law, which, among other things, regulates the government's obligation to provide free nutrition services and fulfillment for the public, especially toddlers and schoolchildren, pregnant and breastfeeding women. In the current partnership system developed by the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), schools serve solely as recipients of the MBG, which then serves the meal to the beneficiary students in their respective classrooms under the supervision of teachers/homeroom teachers. In this case, schools are the target of the MBG program, which is implemented directly by the Nutrition Service and Fulfillment Unit (SPPG) in partnership with a foundation or limited liability company (PT). The school's responsibility is limited to receiving the MBG and monitoring the implementation of the MBG packages, which are provided in stainless steel containers.

The school serves solely as a distributor of the MBG program, registering and receiving students eligible for MBG. Schools are subject to penalties for damage or loss of the MBG and are required to pay for the cost of the meal if any are damaged or lost. Their role is very limited, as the partnership model developed by BGN involves collaboration with companies and foundations, with a capacity to provide food for approximately 3,000 people per SPPG (Nutrition Service and Fulfillment Unit). This partnership scheme demonstrates that the capital required to establish an SPPG is substantial, meaning only certain individuals or groups with significant capital have access to BGN.

In the future, it is necessary to make schools the forefront in providing services and fulfilling nutritional needs for students in their schools so that services are of higher quality considering that the scope of services is relatively small compared to the current SPPG.





The benchmarks for free lunch management vary widely across countries. For example, in South Korea, free lunches are managed by schools, providing labor and using locally sourced ingredients to boost the local economy. Due to war and difficult economic conditions, the South Korean government was unable to allocate significant funds to provide healthy meals, and schools independently prepared free lunches in collaboration with parents and local farmers and ranchers.

The Free Lunch Program in Finland aims to ensure that students receive adequate nutrition to maintain their health and focus throughout the school day. This free lunch program also improves student academic achievement. In Japan, the free lunch program, known as "Kyushoku," is an essential part of the Japanese education system. Its primary goal is to provide nutritious meals to students and support their physical and cognitive growth. In Brazil, the "Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar" (PNAE) is designed to ensure adequate nutrition for students, particularly those from low-income families, with the goal of addressing malnutrition and improving student performance in schools. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) provides free meals to students from elementary to secondary school. It has successfully prepared nutritious meals for students, improving the quality of education, and reducing social disparities. In India, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) aims to provide healthy meals to elementary school students, especially those from low-income families. It aims to address malnutrition and improve the academic attendance and achievement of students in grades I-VIII. Research by Chakraborty & Jayaraman (2022) shows that the Mid-Day Meal Program in India contributes significantly, not only to feeding children but also to learning more and reducing social inequalities.

The free school meal program is not simply a social assistance program but also a strategic investment in human resource development. Singh and Anderson (2024) emphasize that the program's success depends on several key factors: strong political commitment, sustainable funding, community engagement, and integration with broader educational goals. The eight missions of Asta Cita (Ministry of National Development Planning/Bappenas) are: strengthening human rights, strengthening the defense system, developing infrastructure, strengthening human resources, continuing downstreaming and developing natural resource-based industries, developing villages for economic equality, strengthening political reform, and strengthening harmonious living arrangements to achieve a just and prosperous society.

Qualitative data analysis revealed that: a) the role of schools in the governance of the Free Nutritious Meal Program is currently limited to distributing the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) from the SPPG (School Supervisory Agency) to beneficiary students at their schools; b) Efforts to strengthen the governance of school-based Free Nutritious Meal Program must begin with a government commitment between the National Development Planning Agency (BGN) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud Dasmen) to collaborate with schools as SPPGs that provide MBG services to their students.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the data analysis above, it can be concluded that: a) the role of schools in the governance of Free Nutritious Meals is currently limited to distributing MBG from SPPG to beneficiary students at their schools; b) Efforts to strengthen the governance of school-based Free Nutritious Meals must begin with a government commitment between the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) and the

Ministry of Education, Culture, and Culture to collaborate to make schools SPPGs that provide MBG services for their students. Based on the above conclusions, it is recommended that the National Nutrition Agency, together with the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Culture, and the Ministry of Health, collaborate to make schools SPPGs that provide services and fulfill nutritional needs for students at their schools.

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