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FREE NUTRITIOUS MEAL POLICY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FOOD SECURITY, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Hilman Rasyid*[1], G. Ginanjar Masruri[2], Heru Nugraha[3], Ara Hidayat[4]
[1234]Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia,

Corresponding author: hilmanrasyid10@gmail.com
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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) policy in schools as a strategy to strengthen food security, improve education, and realize social justice. The study is motivated by high levels of nutritional vulnerability among school-age children, which affect learning concentration, attendance, and academic achievement. This research employs a library research and qualitative-critical analysis approach, reviewing relevant scientific journals from the last five years on MBG, food policy, education, and social development. Results indicate that MBG significantly enhances children's access to nutritious food, promotes educational participation, and reduces social inequality through equitable and inclusive benefit distribution. Additionally, MBG supports local economic empowerment by involving local food producers and contributes to sustainable development by integrating social, economic, and environmental aspects. In conclusion, MBG is a multidimensional public policy effectively addressing nutritional, educational, and social inequality issues while supporting sustainable national development goals.
Keywords: Free Nutritious Meal, Food Security, Education, Social Justice, Sustainable Development

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas implementasi kebijakan Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) di sekolah sebagai strategi untuk memperkuat ketahanan pangan, meningkatkan pendidikan, dan mewujudkan keadilan sosial. Latar belakang penelitian ini adalah tingginya angka kerawanan gizi pada anak usia sekolah yang berdampak pada konsentrasi belajar, kehadiran, dan prestasi akademik. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan studi pustaka dan analisis kualitatif-kritis, dengan telaah literatur jurnal ilmiah lima tahun terakhir yang relevan mengenai MBG, kebijakan pangan,

pendidikan, dan pembangunan sosial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa MBG secara signifikan meningkatkan akses anak-anak terhadap makanan bergizi, mendorong partisipasi pendidikan, serta mengurangi ketimpangan sosial melalui distribusi manfaat yang merata dan inklusif. Selain itu, MBG mendukung pemberdayaan ekonomi lokal melalui keterlibatan produsen pangan setempat dan berkontribusi terhadap pembangunan berkelanjutan melalui integrasi aspek sosial, ekonomi, dan lingkungan. Kesimpulannya, MBG merupakan kebijakan publik multidimensi yang efektif mengatasi isu gizi, pendidikan, dan ketimpangan sosial sekaligus mendukung tujuan pembangunan nasional yang berkelanjutan.
Kata kunci: Makanan Bergizi Gratis, Ketahanan Pangan, Pendidikan, Keadilan Sosial, Pembangunan Berkelanjutan

A. INTRODUCTION

Child and student nutrition remains a serious challenge in Indonesia's human development agenda. Although various development indicators show improving trends, problems of undernutrition, imbalanced nutrient intake, and food vulnerability among school-age children persist at significant levels, particularly among low-income communities and regions with limited food infrastructure (Vargas Amézquita et al., 2025). These conditions directly affect children's physical health, cognitive development, and learning capacity, which ultimately influence the long-term quality of Indonesia's human resources.

Nutritional problems in Indonesia do not occur in isolation but are closely linked to unequal access to nutritious food across regions and social groups. Development disparities between western and eastern Indonesia, differences in geographic characteristics, and socio-economic inequalities contribute to the uneven distribution of nutritious food (Siti Fatimah et al., 2025). Children from poor households, remote areas, and regions with high levels of food insecurity face a greater risk of malnutrition than those living in urban areas or in families with better economic conditions. This inequality reflects not only economic challenges but also structural injustice in the fulfillment of citizens' basic rights.

Within the welfare state framework, the fulfillment of the rights to food and education constitutes a fundamental obligation of the state. The right to adequate food and the right to quality education are recognized as interrelated and indivisible human rights. The state bears a constitutional responsibility to ensure that all citizens, particularly children and students, have access to nutritious food as a prerequisite for educational success (Justicia Salsabila & Wahyudi, 2025). Without adequate nutritional support, formal education risks losing its effectiveness, as students are not in optimal physical and mental conditions for learning.

In this context, the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) policy emerges as a strategic and affirmative form of state intervention. MBG is designed to ensure the fulfillment of children's and students' nutritional needs through the provision of healthy and nutritious meals free of charge, especially for

vulnerable groups. This policy is not merely a social assistance program, but also a public policy instrument aimed at reducing social inequality, improving educational quality, and strengthening national food security (Agustini, 2025).

The urgency of the MBG policy is further reinforced by the relationship between nutritional status, learning capacity, and the quality of human resources. Numerous studies indicate that good nutrition contributes significantly to improved concentration, memory, school attendance, and academic achievement among students (Vargas Amézquita et al., 2025). Conversely, undernutrition can lead to cognitive impairment, fatigue, and low learning motivation. Therefore, state investment in fulfilling students' nutritional needs through MBG represents a long-term investment in the development of high-quality and competitive human capital.

Beyond its impact on the education sector, the MBG policy also has important implications for national food security. Food security is not only understood as national food availability, but also encompasses access, utilization, and stability of food for all segments of society. Globally, school-based nutritious meal programs have been shown to enhance food access for vulnerable groups while promoting more inclusive food systems (Locke et al., 2025). In the Indonesian context, MBG has the potential to serve as an instrument for strengthening food security if integrated with the empowerment of local food producers, sustainable supply chains, and strict food quality control mechanisms.

Nevertheless, the MBG policy faces various challenges in its implementation, including issues related to distribution, funding sustainability, food quality, and cross-sectoral coordination. Therefore, comprehensive and multidisciplinary academic studies are required to understand the MBG policy more holistically. Most previous studies tend to examine school meal programs from a single sectoral perspective, such as health or education alone, without integrating dimensions of food security and social justice.

Based on these conditions, this study offers a contribution and novelty through an integrative approach that links the MBG policy to three main perspectives: food security, education, and social justice. This approach conceptualizes MBG as a cross-sectoral policy that not only aims to fulfill nutritional needs, but also serves as an instrument for social equity and the strengthening of citizens' fundamental rights. Accordingly, this study reinforces the normative and conceptual framework of public policy analysis, particularly in understanding the role of the state in ensuring welfare and social justice through food and education policies (Siti Fatimah et al., 2025; Justicia Salsabila & Wahyudi, 2025).

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a document-based qualitative research design with a descriptive–analytical approach, using policy analysis as its primary analytical framework. A qualitative approach is adopted because the study focuses on

examining the substance, direction, and implications of the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) policy as a cross-sectoral public policy, based on an analysis of policy texts and scholarly literature, without involving field data collection such as interviews or surveys (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data sources consist of official policy documents as primary data, including laws and regulations, program documents, and government policy statements related to MBG, as well as secondary data in the form of peer-reviewed journal articles and reports from relevant national and international institutions. Data were collected through document analysis and a limited systematic literature review, while data analysis was conducted using content analysis and policy analysis grounded in three perspectives: food security, education, and social justice. This analytical framework is applied to assess the consistency, orientation, and implications of the MBG policy in fulfilling the rights to food and education and in addressing social inequality.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Free Nutritious Meals Policy from a Food Security Perspective

a. MBG as a Strategy to Ensure Access to Nutritious Food

The Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) policy represents a strategic public policy intervention to strengthen food security, which in the food context entails not only the physical availability of food but also equitable access to safe and nutritious food for all population groups, particularly school-age children. Free school meal programs provide direct access to daily food consumption that meets nutritional standards, thereby serving as an important mechanism for addressing food insecurity among children and low-income households (Suprapto et al., 2025).

Globally, school feeding programs have been identified as effective instruments for improving access to nutritious food through the provision of meals designed according to robust nutritional guidelines and supported by policies that ensure the sustainability of healthy food supplies (Bandoni et al., 2024). In addition, such policies support key dimensions of food security—namely availability and access—by ensuring that adequate nutrition is consistently available to students on a daily basis. Active school participation in MBG implementation reduces the likelihood that children experience hunger, malnutrition, or micronutrient deficiencies that can hinder their growth and development (dos Santos et al., 2022).

b. Policy Impacts on Local and National Food Systems

The implementation of MBG affects local and national food systems not only in terms of consumption but also across supply chains and food provisioning mechanisms. Free meal policies generate systematic demand for nutritious food that meets established standards, including vegetables, fruits, and animal- or plant-based protein sources. This demand, in turn, can stimulate local food

production and create added value for small-scale producers in various regions (Suprapto et al., 2025).

The approach commonly referred to as *home-grown school feeding*, whereby schools procure food from local farmers, demonstrates that school meal policies can strengthen local food systems, increase smallholder farmers' incomes, and reduce dependence on imported food by supporting sustainable domestic production (Deaconu et al., 2025). Furthermore, global assessments of school feeding programs indicate that such policies can form part of broader strategies for developing inclusive food systems by addressing farmer welfare, food price stability, and resilience to external shocks, including economic crises and climate change (dos Santos et al., 2022).

c. Implementation Challenges: Distribution, Sustainability, and Food Quality

Despite its significant benefits, the implementation of MBG presents several challenges directly related to food security.

First, logistical and distribution challenges are prominent. The provision of nutritious meals requires robust supply chain systems, encompassing procurement, storage, and distribution to schools, particularly in remote areas or regions with limited infrastructure (Suprapto et al., 2025).

Second, the financial and operational sustainability of the program constitutes a critical concern. Heavy reliance on government budgets or donor funding without long-term financing mechanisms may threaten program continuity. Therefore, stable financing models are required, including the involvement of the private sector and local communities (dos Santos et al., 2022).

Third, ensuring food standards and quality is essential. The consistent provision of nutritious food demands strict nutritional standards and effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure the quality and safety of raw materials. In the absence of strong oversight, meals may fail to meet nutritional requirements or may pose hygiene and safety risks, thereby undermining expected health and educational outcomes (Suprapto et al., 2025).

A comprehensive policy approach to MBG—integrating nutritional guidelines, local support for healthy food production, and robust monitoring systems—can mitigate these challenges, strengthen food security, and extend the program's benefits to both younger generations and the wider community (dos Santos et al., 2022; Bandoni et al., 2024).

2. The Free Nutritious Meals Policy and Its Implications for Education

a. The Influence of Nutrition on Concentration, Attendance, and Academic Achievement

The availability and quality of students' nutrition contribute significantly to cognitive capacity, concentration, and academic performance. Adequate nutrition supports children's ability to maintain attention during the learning process, reduces hunger that may disrupt the absorption of instructional material, and enhances mental readiness to participate in classroom activities. Empirical studies

indicate that adequate student nutrition is positively correlated with higher levels of concentration, active engagement in learning activities, and improved academic achievement (Zaenudin, 2025). These findings are consistent with international research demonstrating that school feeding programs enhance cognitive functioning and classroom engagement by improving the nutritional status of school-aged children (Wall et al., 2022; Appiah, 2024).

Nutritional adequacy also affects student attendance. Children who receive nutritious meals at school tend to attend more regularly, as their basic needs are met without the necessity of seeking food elsewhere or leaving school early (Appiah, 2024). From a theoretical perspective, learning focus improves when students' physiological needs are fulfilled, enabling them to utilize their cognitive capacities optimally throughout the learning process (Wall et al., 2022).

b. MBG as an Instrument for Expanding Educational Access and Retention

Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) programs in schools have been adopted by many countries as part of education policy frameworks to address nutritional barriers and achieve more inclusive educational outcomes. Empirical evidence shows that free meal programs increase student participation in learning activities, reduce the risk of school dropout, and improve educational retention (Appiah, 2024). MBG programs directly provide incentives for families to send their children to school regularly, particularly in low-income or remote areas, thereby strengthening educational retention and lowering dropout rates.

Moreover, the availability of nutritious food at school helps mitigate economic constraints that often underlie high levels of absenteeism and school dropout. In this regard, MBG functions as a key policy instrument for narrowing educational disparities between lower- and middle-income groups.

c. The Role of Schools as Centers for Social and Health Services

Schools function not only as formal educational institutions but also as centers for social and health services for children. The implementation of MBG expands the role of schools by fostering environments that support students' nutrition, health, and overall well-being in a holistic manner. Schools that consistently implement nutritious meal programs can serve as platforms for family nutrition education, early detection of students' nutritional status problems, and the integration of basic health services, such as routine health screenings.

Accordingly, the role of schools extends beyond academic instruction to encompass social service functions that contribute to the development of healthy, productive, and prosperous human resources. The integration of formal education with social and health services is expected to generate long-term benefits for the quality of national education systems and broader societal welfare.

3. The Free Nutritious Meals Policy within the Framework of Social Justice

a. MBG as an Expression of the State's Presence in Protecting Vulnerable Groups

From a social justice perspective, the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) policy represents a concrete manifestation of the state's presence in

fulfilling citizens' basic right to adequate and nutritious food. The right to food is an integral component of human rights and constitutes a prerequisite for the realization of other social rights, including the rights to education and health. Accordingly, state intervention through MBG can be understood as a form of social protection for vulnerable groups, particularly school-aged children from low-income households and communities experiencing food insecurity (Pratiwi et al., 2025).

Public policy literature emphasizes that school feeding programs are part of social safety net schemes designed to reduce structural vulnerability arising from poverty and unequal access to basic resources. Such programs enable the state to reach socially and economically disadvantaged groups, thereby helping to close gaps in access to nutritious food that are otherwise determined by household economic capacity (Sari et al., 2025). In the global context, school feeding policies are also positioned as instruments of the welfare state, oriented toward protecting vulnerable populations and enhancing long-term human resource quality (Bandoni et al., 2024).

Thus, MBG should not be viewed merely as a food assistance program, but as a manifestation of the state's responsibility to ensure distributive justice, particularly for children who structurally possess limited bargaining power within economic and social systems (Nango et al., 2025).

b. An Analysis of the Equitable Distribution of Policy Benefits

A key aspect in assessing the MBG policy from a social justice perspective is the equitable distribution of its benefits. Universally designed school meal programs have the potential to reduce social stigma and enhance a sense of equality, as all students receive the same benefits without classification based on economic status (Sari et al., 2025). International studies indicate that universal free school meal schemes are more effective in ensuring equitable benefit distribution than highly targeted programs, as they reduce administrative exclusion and targeting errors (Bandoni et al., 2024).

However, in practice, the equitable distribution of MBG benefits is strongly influenced by governance capacity, the quality of beneficiary data, and the readiness of regional infrastructure. Several studies in Indonesia suggest that variations in regional capacity lead to differences in the quality of MBG services, in terms of meal quantity, nutritional quality, and continuity of provision (Agustini, 2025; Jati et al., 2025). Such disparities may result in unequal benefit distribution, particularly between urban and rural or remote areas.

Therefore, equity in MBG extends beyond the physical distribution of meals to include equality in service quality, access to information, and the participation of local communities in program management. Without adequate attention to these dimensions, the social justice objectives of the MBG policy risk being insufficiently achieved (Agustini, 2025).

c. The Potential for the Reproduction or Reduction of Social Inequality

Theoretically, the MBG policy entails two possible impacts on social inequality structures. On the one hand, when designed inclusively and implemented according to principles of distributive justice, MBG has the potential to reduce social inequality by expanding access to nutritious food for low-income groups, which in turn contributes to improved health outcomes, learning readiness, and long-term social mobility (Bandoni et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2025).

On the other hand, critical literature cautions that free meal policies may also reproduce inequality if implementation is uneven. When regions with stronger fiscal and institutional capacities are able to deliver MBG at higher quality levels than less developed areas, interregional disparities may widen (Jati et al., 2025). Moreover, reliance on state budgets without well-developed sustainability planning may render the program vulnerable to political and fiscal shifts, ultimately disadvantaging vulnerable groups as the primary beneficiaries (Nango et al., 2025).

Within a social justice framework, MBG should therefore be understood as a mechanism for redistributing opportunities rather than merely redistributing food. This implies that the policy must be integrated with broader education, health, and poverty alleviation policies in order to generate structural impacts in reducing social inequality and sustainably strengthening social cohesion (Bandoni et al., 2024).

4. Multidimensional Synthesis and Policy Implications

a. Interlinkages among Food Security, Education, and Social Justice

The Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program represents a public policy example that connects three key dimensions of development: food security, education, and social justice. Food security encompasses not only food availability, but also access to nutritious food capable of supporting students' cognitive capacity and health (Suprapto et al., 2025). School-based food interventions reduce child nutritional vulnerability that may hinder learning development, while simultaneously strengthening long-term human capital (Sari et al., 2025). From an educational perspective, free meal policies improve student attendance and retention, thereby fostering inclusive learning environments for vulnerable groups (Bandoni et al., 2024). From a social justice standpoint, MBG functions as a mechanism for redistributing opportunities by targeting economically disadvantaged groups without discrimination, helping to minimize structural inequalities in access to education and nutrition (Pratiwi et al., 2025).

Globally, school feeding programmes are recognized as cross-sectoral instruments that support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and broader advances in social equity (Watkins et al., 2024). International reports indicate that schools providing nutritious meals contribute systemically to improving children's nutritional status and expanding equal learning opportunities for all students, especially those from disadvantaged households (Assefa, 2025). Accordingly, MBG integrates food,

education, and social justice objectives within a mutually reinforcing policy framework.

b. MBG as a Multidimensional Policy

MBG meets the criteria of a multidimensional policy, as its impacts extend beyond a single sector. From a food security perspective, MBG serves as an intervention that directly reduces nutritional deficits and strengthens access to nutritious food for school-aged children (Karomah et al., 2024). In the education sector, its effects are reflected in improved attendance, learning concentration, and the potential enhancement of academic achievement among students who receive school meals (Agustini, 2025; Sari et al., 2025). In the social dimension, MBG contributes to greater equity by providing school meals at no additional cost to low-income households (Pratiwi et al., 2025).

Global literature further emphasizes that school feeding programs integrated with food and education policies go beyond food provision alone and form part of sustainable development strategies that strengthen local food systems. Approaches such as *home-grown school feeding*, which prioritize local food sourcing, generate economic value for local farmers and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) (Wang et al., 2025; Watkins et al., 2024). This multisectoral integration reflects the non-siloed nature of MBG as an intersectoral policy capable of simultaneously addressing complex social challenges, including poverty, inequality, and educational barriers.

c. Policy Implications for Sustainable Development

The policy implications of MBG for sustainable development are broad and multidimensional. First, MBG directly supports the achievement of SDGs related to food and education. Watkins et al. (2024) report that effective management of school feeding programs can help countries advance toward Zero Hunger (SDG 2) while simultaneously improving educational quality (SDG 4) and promoting social equity under the principle of leaving no one behind.

Second, MBG contributes to local economic empowerment when linked to strategies such as *home-grown school feeding*, which encourage food procurement from local farmers and strengthen community economic resilience (Wang et al., 2025). Third, the policy also holds potential to advance environmentally sustainable development if designed according to sustainable food system principles—for example, by prioritizing environmentally friendly local nutritious menus and integrating education on sustainable consumption within schools.

Moreover, MBG can strengthen long-term human capital, as healthier and better-educated children tend to have higher employment prospects and productivity, aligning with national sustainable development goals and efforts to reduce structural poverty. However, realizing these benefits requires robust monitoring data, sustainable fiscal planning, multi-level collaboration among government institutions and communities, and continuous evaluation

mechanisms to ensure program quality, coverage, and sustainability (Suprapto et al., 2025).

D. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) policy plays a strategic role in strengthening food security, improving access to and the quality of education, and advancing social justice. MBG provides nutritious food that supports children's health and learning concentration, thereby generating positive effects on school attendance and academic performance. The implementation of this program enhances food access for vulnerable groups while simultaneously supporting local economic empowerment through the involvement of local producers and suppliers. In addition, MBG has the potential to reduce social inequality by distributing benefits in a more equitable and inclusive manner. Overall, MBG constitutes a multidimensional policy that not only addresses nutritional and educational challenges, but also contributes to sustainable development through the integration of social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

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