

The Role of Non-formal Education in Sustaining the Impact of Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) When Food Assistance Ends

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Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program is a strategic policy of the Indonesian government aimed at improving students' nutritional status and learning outcomes by providing free, nutritious meals in schools. While various studies report positive impacts of the MBG program on student attendance, concentration, and academic achievement, its implementation has also been marked by issues such as budget wastage, regional disparities in access, and questions regarding the sustainability of its effects once the program ends. Conversely, community-based nutrition education and parenting programs falling within the realm of nonformal education have the potential to foster deeper changes in the knowledge and dietary habits of families, particularly children, at a significantly lower cost. This article employs a literature review method to synthesize findings from previous research and compare the effectiveness of these two approaches. The review indicates that the MBG program excels in delivering quickly measurable short-term impacts, whereas community based non formal education offers the potential for more sustainable outcomes by targeting behavioral changes at the family level. The article recommends integrating both approaches, suggesting that strengthening nutrition education for parents through non formal education channels should accompany school based nutrition program to ensure that the impact persists even after food assistance ceases.

Keywords: Free Nutritious Meals; Nonformal Education; Nutrition Education; Community; Program Sustainability.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian government has introduced the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) Program as a national-scale investment in human capital, primarily aimed at improving students' nutritional status, school attendance, and academic performance (Yelvianti, 2025), consistent with a broader body of scholarship that frames education and nutrition related public spending as a long-term investment in human capital development (Siregar et al., 2022). By mid-2026, the program had reportedly benefited tens of millions of students throughout Indonesia, with the government asserting that its implementation had contributed positively to attendance, learning motivation, and academic achievement. Supporting evidence from several studies suggests that MBG beneficiaries, particularly students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, demonstrated greater improvements in learning concentration and academic performance compared with students from middle- and upper-income groups (Qomarrullah et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the implementation of MBG has not been free from challenges. An audit concerning the budget for the development of kitchens or Nutrition Fulfillment Service Units (Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi/SPPG) identified indications of considerable budgetary waste. This was followed by the permanent closure of hundreds of kitchens and plans to establish thousands of new kitchens within a relatively short period (Masruri & Nugraha, 2026). Such developments raise important concerns about the efficiency, consistency, and long-term sustainability of a top-down policy that is highly dependent on government funding. These concerns have become increasingly relevant amid public criticism and student demonstrations in August 2026, during which excessive expenditure related to MBG kitchens was also raised as a major issue. This situation demonstrates that questions surrounding the efficiency and sustainability of MBG extend beyond

academic discussion and represent an immediate policy concern requiring critical assessment and more comprehensive solutions.

Research on school-based food assistance programs in Indonesia has, to a considerable extent, focused on examining their effects on children's nutritional conditions and educational outcomes. Studies concerning the Program Gizi Anak Sekolah (ProGAS), for instance, have investigated changes in children's nutritional circumstances and aspects of the learning environment. More recent evaluations of the Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program have also indicated potential benefits for students' concentration during learning activities and a reduction in learning difficulties related to hunger (Pramesthi et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the provision of nutritious food through government programs can generate immediate benefits in both nutritional and educational domains. Nevertheless, the continuation of such benefits may remain closely associated with the availability and continuity of food assistance provided through the program. This raises a further issue concerning whether healthy eating practices and nutrition-related behaviors can be maintained by children and families when direct food assistance is no longer available.

Alongside food-based interventions, previous research has explored nutrition education delivered at the family and community levels as a strategy for improving parents' capacity to support children's nutritional needs. Evidence from an Indonesian randomized controlled trial showed that nutrition education was able to improve mothers' knowledge, self-efficacy, and complementary feeding practices (Mardani et al., 2024). Such findings indicate that educational interventions have the potential to influence the capacity and practices of caregivers rather than merely providing short-term nutritional support. This evidence is further supported by community-based research demonstrating that nutrition education for parents can enhance their understanding of appropriate feeding practices for children (Khatimah et al., 2025). Despite these findings, research on nutrition education and parenting has generally developed independently from studies examining government-supported food assistance. Consequently, their potential to operate as complementary approaches within the implementation of a national program such as MBG has not yet been sufficiently explored.

The separation between these two areas of research constitutes an important gap in the current literature. MBG is not solely concerned with providing food to students, as its implementation has increasingly been accompanied by efforts to promote nutrition knowledge and healthy eating behaviors. However, empirical evidence examining how food assistance can be combined with non-formal and community-based educational approaches remains relatively limited. This issue is particularly relevant when considering the long-term sustainability of program outcomes. Food provision may directly respond to children's immediate nutritional requirements, whereas educational interventions can equip families with knowledge, skills, and practical capacities that may support healthier choices in their daily lives. This development provides a basis for considering nutrition education not simply as a supplementary activity accompanying food distribution, but also as a potential means of strengthening the sustainability of healthy behaviors among families and communities.

The role of non-formal education is particularly relevant within this context because its implementation can be adapted to the circumstances, characteristics, and learning needs of communities. Community-based learning activities can provide opportunities for individuals to acquire knowledge and develop capacities that are relevant to problems encountered in their everyday lives. Research on non-formal education conducted through community learning settings has demonstrated that such educational processes can gradually contribute to improvements in community knowledge and capacity. At the same time, the study also indicates that achieving complete learner independence is not necessarily an immediate outcome and may require a longer and continuous learning process (Lukman, 2021). Accordingly, non-formal education should not be viewed merely as a mechanism for transferring information. Its broader contribution lies in facilitating the development of practical competencies, awareness, and habits that individuals and families can implement within their everyday environment and potentially sustain over time.

On the basis of the foregoing studies, the present research places community-based nutrition education and parenting within the broader issue of sustaining the benefits generated by MBG. Previous studies have predominantly examined food assistance in relation to immediate nutritional or educational outcomes, while research on nutrition education has tended to assess its effects separately from government food-assistance programs. This study therefore seeks to bridge these two areas by examining the potential complementary role of non-formal, community-based educational approaches in strengthening families' capacity to maintain healthy dietary and parenting practices. In this perspective, the sustainability of MBG outcomes is not considered solely in terms of the continued provision of food, but also in relation to whether families acquire the knowledge, skills, and behavioral capacities necessary to continue applying healthy practices independently. Thus, the study addresses the gap between government-led food assistance and sustained behavioral change at the family level, particularly in circumstances where the provision of government-supported food assistance is reduced, temporarily interrupted, or eventually discontinued.

The novelty of this article is reflected in its attempt to bring together two policy domains that have predominantly been examined independently: state-driven school nutrition policy through MBG and community-based nutrition education and parenting within the field of non-formal education. These domains are examined through a comparative analytical framework that emphasizes impact sustainability rather than focusing exclusively on the short-term outcomes that have characterized much of the existing evaluation of MBG. From this perspective, the article proposes that non-formal education should be viewed not simply as a technical supplement but as a strategic component in maintaining the long-term effects of national nutrition policies. This reasoning is further supported by recent public policy scholarship, which has increasingly reconceptualized community empowerment not merely as a policy output but as a long-term policy outcome tied to a broader shift from top-down implementation toward more participatory and collaborative governance arrangements (Wijaya & Munandar, 2026). The importance of this perspective is further supported by the considerable state resources allocated to MBG, while the extent to which its benefits can be sustained after program termination has received comparatively limited attention in policy and academic discussions. If the positive effects of MBG fail to persist following program discontinuation or budgetary constraints, the substantial financial investment may not yield outcomes proportional to its long-term objectives. Therefore, comparing MBG with community-based non-formal education approaches is necessary to provide an evidence-based basis for developing nutrition and education policies that are more integrated and sustainable.

An important question arising from this context is whether the direct provision of meals through MBG constitutes the most effective strategy for achieving sustained improvements in students' nutritional conditions and learning outcomes. Alternatively, other approaches may offer stronger long-term effects, including the strengthening of community-based nutrition education and parenting through non-formal education pathways. Such approaches may include nutrition education activities conducted through Community Learning Centers (Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat/PKBM), the empowerment of Posyandu cadres, and parent education programs. Community-based interventions focus on developing knowledge and establishing healthy habits at the family level. In theoretical terms, these changes may encourage more lasting behavioral transformation while reducing dependence on the continued availability of government-funded programs.

Based on this background, this article addresses three main research questions: (1) What empirical evidence from the existing literature demonstrates the effects of the MBG program on students' school attendance, learning concentration, and academic achievement? (2) What empirical evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of community-based nutrition education and parenting in changing family dietary patterns and health-related behaviors? and (3) Which approach, based on the available literature, demonstrates greater sustainability in contributing to the development of students' human capital, and in what ways can the two approaches complement one another?

In accordance with these research questions, this article seeks to identify and synthesize previous research findings concerning the impacts of both approaches and to compare their respective effectiveness and sustainability. Through this comparison, the article develops an argument concerning the strategic role of non-formal education as both a complementary approach and a means of strengthening the sustainability of school-based nutrition programs. The study employs a literature review by synthesizing previous findings on the effects of MBG, on the one hand, and community-based nutrition education and parenting, on the other. The findings from these two areas are subsequently compared in terms of their effectiveness and sustainability in supporting the long-term development of students' human capital.

2. METHOD

This study adopted a literature review methodology with a narrative-thematic approach to integrate and synthesize findings from relevant previous research, following established guidance for conducting rigorous narrative literature reviews in the social sciences (Snyder, 2019). To provide greater methodological transparency, the literature search and selection procedure is reported systematically through four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion consistent with common practice for reporting literature-selection procedures in narrative and semi systematic reviews. The literature search was conducted through two complementary streams. The first was a primary systematic search addressing the core empirical research questions of this review (the effects of MBG and of community-based nutrition education/parenting). The second consisted of supplementary targeted searches conducted to identify literature addressing the specific theoretical and methodological constructs used to build the analytical framework of this review: namely human capital investment, program sustainability, the evolution of community empowerment policy, parental/family involvement in child nutrition, Posyandu cadre empowerment, PKBM-based non-formal education, adult-learning (andragogy) principles, education-access disparities, and narrative literature-review methodology itself.

The primary systematic search was conducted through Google Scholar. Google Scholar was selected as the primary database because it offers substantially broader coverage than SINTA, Scopus, or ResearchGate for Indonesian public-policy and education literature specifically, and because it is the only one of the four databases that displays the total number of matching records directly and transparently on the results page, allowing that number to be documented precisely rather than estimated. Scopus requires institutional subscription access and does not expose a comparably transparent total-result count to unaffiliated searches; ResearchGate does not report a standardized total-result figure; and SINTA indexes only nationally accredited Indonesian journals, which would have systematically excluded the international, English language evidence needed to answer the first two research questions. For these reasons, Google Scholar results were used for the numerical identification count, while SINTA, Scopus, and ResearchGate were retained as supplementary verification databases in the eligibility stage, used to confirm that the selected articles were also indexed, accessible, and traceable through at least one additional academic database.

For the primary search stream, the keyword "impact of the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program" was combined with a second query joining "learning motivation," "students' academic achievement," "community-based nutrition education," and "empowerment" (the last term covering Posyandu empowerment and PKBM-based nutrition parenting). Articles from this stream were included when they met four empirical inclusion criteria: (1) published between 2020 and 2026; (2) written in Indonesian or English; (3) examined the effects of school-based nutrition programs or community-based nutrition education on students, families, or learners; and (4) published as scientific journal articles, research reports, or official study reports available online, presenting empirical data or findings. For the supplementary stream, because its purpose was to substantiate the theoretical constructs and the review methodology rather than to be re-synthesized as primary empirical evidence, three adjusted inclusion criteria were applied instead: (1) the source directly and specifically supported a named theoretical construct, empirical claim, or methodological step used in this review; (2) the source was traceable through Google Scholar and/or SINTA with a resolvable, active DOI; and (3) foundational

theoretical or methodological references were not restricted to the 2020–2026 window, since they describe established constructs rather than time-sensitive empirical outcomes a common and accepted allowance in literature reviews for conceptual and methodological citations.

In the identification stage, the primary search stream produced 296 records (292 from the first keyword and 4 from the second combination). In the screening stage, these records were examined by title and abstract to remove duplicates and records unrelated to MBG or to community-based nutrition education and parenting, leaving 8 records. In the eligibility stage, all 8 records were assessed in full text against the four empirical inclusion criteria described above; none were excluded, yielding 8 included primary empirical studies.

In parallel, 13 supplementary targeted searches were conducted on Google Scholar, one for each theoretical or methodological construct listed above. In the identification stage, these 13 searches together surfaced approximately 130 candidate records for initial screening. In the screening stage, each set of candidate records was screened by title and abstract for direct relevance to its corresponding construct, and for credibility and traceability, narrowing the pool to 13 records (one representative source per construct). In the eligibility stage, all 13 records were assessed in full text against the three adjusted criteria described above and were cross-verified for an active, resolvable DOI through Google Scholar and/or SINTA; none were excluded, yielding 13 included supplementary references.

Combining both streams, a total of 21 sources were included in this review (8 primary empirical studies and 13 supplementary theoretical/methodological references), as summarized in the selection flow diagram in Figure 1.

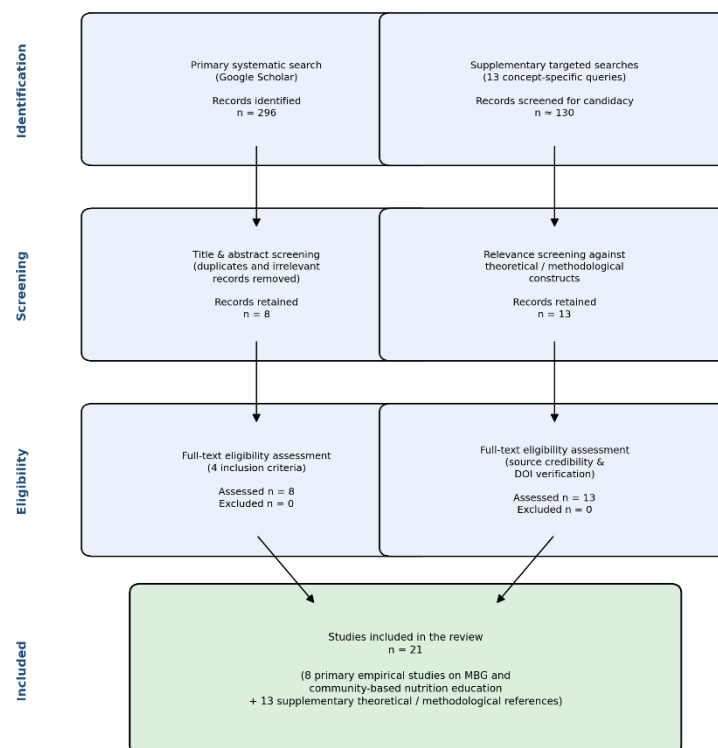


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the literature identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion

Analysis of the 8 primary empirical studies was conducted through thematic mapping, from which a comparison matrix was developed covering short-term impact indicators (attendance, concentration, nutritional status) and long-term impact indicators (behavioral change, post-program sustainability). The 13 supplementary references were used to ground the theoretical framework, justify the

methodological approach, and provide corroborating evidence for specific claims made during the thematic synthesis, rather than being entered into the comparison matrix itself.

From a methodological perspective, the number of primary empirical studies identified through the systematic search ($n = 8$) remains relatively small compared with the overall coverage of the four databases considered. This limited number reflects the relatively recent emergence of research that specifically connects the two distinct policy domains of MBG and non-formal, community-based nutrition education and parenting; these two areas have not yet been widely investigated simultaneously within the same study. This is consistent with the literature gap identified in the Introduction and reinforces the relevance and novelty of the present study as an initial effort to establish a conceptual and empirical link between the two domains. The supplementary stream was therefore a deliberate and disclosed methodological choice to strengthen the conceptual grounding of the review, not a substitute for a larger primary evidence base.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Impact of the Free Nutritious Meals Program on Students

The reviewed literature indicates that the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) Program is associated with positive outcomes in students' nutritional conditions and learning processes. The program has the potential to reduce stunting and malnutrition among school-aged children, while supporting school attendance and academic performance. Government data also show broad program coverage, with most beneficiaries supporting its continuation and reporting improvements in attendance, learning motivation, and academic achievement (Qomarrullah et al., 2025).

The benefits of MBG appear to vary across socioeconomic groups. Students from lower-income backgrounds experienced greater benefits than those from middle- and upper-income groups. This finding supports the role of MBG as an affirmative action policy aimed at reducing economic barriers to adequate nutrition. In addition, research has identified a positive relationship between nutritional status and academic achievement among elementary school students, while MBG has also been associated with students' character development and enthusiasm for learning (Indra Kurniawan Siregar et al., 2026).

Despite these positive outcomes, MBG implementation continues to face challenges, including disparities in access and learning environments between rural and urban schools, as well as concerns regarding budget management, kitchen development expenditures, and operational consistency. These disparities mirror longstanding patterns of unequal educational access between regions in Indonesia, where fiscal capacity and regional characteristics have been shown to significantly influence disparities in access to basic education services, and where access gaps in more remote provinces remain wide despite various equity-oriented policy interventions (Ayuningtyas, 2021). These issues indicate that positive nutritional and academic outcomes do not necessarily guarantee program efficiency or long-term sustainability.

Overall, the findings suggest that MBG has the potential to improve students' nutritional conditions, attendance, learning motivation, and academic achievement, particularly among economically disadvantaged students. However, its effectiveness should also be assessed in terms of equitable access, budgetary efficiency, implementation consistency, and the sustainability of its benefits over time.

3.2 Effectiveness of Community-Based Nutrition Education and Parenting

Unlike MBG, which focuses on the direct provision of nutritious meals, community-based non-formal education emphasizes strengthening parents' and learners' knowledge, skills, and behaviors to support children's nutritional well-being. Parental involvement is particularly important because children's dietary habits are strongly influenced by parenting practices and nutrition-related knowledge within the family (Khatimah et al., 2025), a finding echoed by studies showing that families play a decisive role in shaping children's nutritional behavior and in determining whether adequate nutrition is actually achieved at the

household level (Munifa et al., 2022). Strengthening parents' nutritional knowledge and parenting skills may therefore help sustain healthy practices beyond the provision of school-based food assistance.

The importance of family capacity is further supported by evidence showing that parental education and household conditions are associated with children's dietary practices. A study among female students in Southeast Sulawesi found that parental education was associated with dietary diversity, indicating that children's nutritional behavior cannot be understood solely from the food available to them but also from the knowledge and resources available within the family (Effendy et al., 2024). Similarly, research on maternal child-feeding patterns in East Java demonstrated an association between feeding practices and the incidence of stunting among children, reinforcing the importance of caregiver practices in determining nutritional outcomes (Sugianti et al., 2024). These findings strengthen the argument that interventions aimed at improving children's nutrition need to consider the family as an important setting for translating nutritional knowledge into everyday practices.

Non-formal education through Community Learning Centers (Pusat Kegiatan Belajar Masyarakat/PKBM), Posyandu cadre activities, and parenting classes can function as a means of community empowerment (Sari & Hamriani, 2023; Waisawati et al., 2024). Similar evidence from community learning research demonstrates that participatory non-formal education can involve community members in identifying local conditions and developing capacities based on the resources available within their environment (Sucipto & Fatihin, 2024). These activities provide families with nutritional knowledge, parenting skills, and health awareness that can be applied independently in daily life. Community health cadres (Kader Posyandu) have long been recognized as a strategic entry point for delivering this kind of nutrition education at the grassroots level, although their effectiveness continues to be constrained by limited training, incentives, and material support, because most participants in these community based programs are adults, instructional approaches informed by andragogical principles, which emphasize learner's prior experience and self directed learning have also been found to enhance the effectiveness of nonformal education delivery within community learning centers, parent focused interventions delivered through nonformal education channels have similarly been found effective in improving parent's capacity to prevent stunting in their children (Trinanda, 2023). Astuti et al., (2024) indicate that such approaches can strengthen family capacity without requiring continuous dependence on government-provided food assistance. This reflects the principle of non-formal education, which positions learners as active participants in the process of change rather than passive recipients of assistance.

The findings suggest that community-based nutrition education and parenting have the potential to improve family dietary patterns and health-related behaviors through increased knowledge, skills, and appropriate parenting practices. From a sustainability perspective, this approach should not be considered a replacement for MBG but rather a complementary strategy. MBG can address students' immediate nutritional needs, while community-based education can strengthen the knowledge and habits required to maintain healthier practices beyond the duration of the program. Integrating both approaches may therefore connect short-term nutritional assistance with longer-term behavioral change.

3.3 Comparison of Effectiveness and Impact Sustainability

Based on the synthesis of the two groups of literature discussed above, the key characteristics of MBG and community-based nutrition education and parenting can be compared in terms of their effectiveness and the sustainability of their impacts, as presented in the following table.

Table 1. *Program Comparison*

Aspect	Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program	Community-Based Nutrition Education and Parenting (Non-Formal)
Intervention approach	Top-down, with direct provision by the government	Bottom-up, involving the active participation of families and learners
Primary target	Students as direct beneficiaries in schools	Parents, Posyandu cadres, and PKBM learners
Cost	Substantial and recurring throughout the school year	Relatively low, primarily involving educational activities with potentially sustained effects
Short-term impact	Directly observable through improvements in students' attendance, learning concentration, and nutritional status	Less directly observable in children, as the initial changes occur in parents' knowledge and understanding
Long-term impact	Potentially vulnerable to discontinuation when funding or the program itself ends	Potential to become sustained through changes in family habits and parenting practices
Implementation risks	Budgetary inefficiency, rural-urban disparities in access, and dependence on bureaucratic systems	Dependent on the quality and consistency of community facilitators or educators

The comparison indicates that MBG is more effective in producing rapid and measurable outcomes, particularly in short-term indicators such as school attendance and nutritional status. Therefore, the program remains relevant as an affirmative policy instrument for students from economically disadvantaged families. Despite these advantages, these benefits may not be sustained if the program is discontinued or affected by budgetary disruptions, as reflected in concerns regarding budgetary inefficiency and inconsistencies in the management of food-service kitchens. This concern is consistent with broader findings on social assistance programs in Indonesia more generally, which suggest that direct material aid, when not accompanied by an empowerment component, risks fostering continued dependency rather than a durable improvement in welfare (Purba et al., 2025).

In contrast, community-based nutrition education and parenting through non-formal education generally require more time to produce observable outcomes because the initial changes occur at the family level through improvements in knowledge and daily practices before influencing children. Once these changes become internalized, however, their effects may be more sustainable because they are less dependent on continued government funding or bureaucratic stability. These findings indicate that MBG and non-formal education should not be viewed as competing approaches, but rather as complementary strategies. MBG serves as an important mechanism for addressing students' immediate nutritional needs, while non-formal education can strengthen the long-term sustainability of these benefits by fostering changes in knowledge and behavior at the family and community levels.

4. CONCLUSION

This literature review finds that the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) Program can generate immediate and measurable benefits in terms of students' school attendance, learning concentration, and nutritional status. Nevertheless, the long-term sustainability of these outcomes may be constrained by the program's reliance on government funding and challenges in program governance. Conversely, community-based nutrition education and parenting delivered through non-formal education may require more time to produce observable results than MBG, but offer greater potential for sustaining changes in family knowledge and practices without relying heavily on the continued provision of government assistance.

AI USAGE STATEMENT

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used ChatGPT and Claude to assist with language editing, paraphrasing, and proofreading. The author(s) reviewed and revised the generated content as necessary and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and content of the published work.

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