Journal of Public Policy, Governance and Local Government
Volume 1, Issue 3, August 2026 | E ISSN : 3163 - 4583

When Political Promises Become a Fiscal Burden: An Analysis of the Implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Program

Rahmat Kausar
Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Intan Lampung
Email: rahmatkausarha@gmail.com
**Corresponding author: rahmatkausarha@gmail.com*

Article Info

Article History
Received:
July, 14, 2026

Accepted:
August, 26, 2026

Published:
August, 28, 2026

Keywords
accountability; fiscal burden; free nutritious meals; governance; public policy.

Kata Kunci
akuntabilitas; beban fiskal; kebijakan publik; makan bergizi gratis; tata kelola.

Abstract

Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis, MBG) program represents the transformation of an electoral promise into a large, nationwide recurrent spending commitment. Although international evidence supports school feeding as an instrument of social protection, education, and human capital development, its effectiveness depends on fiscal capacity, accurate targeting, nutritional quality, food safety, procurement integrity, and monitoring. This study analyzes MBG implementation through a rapid systematic literature review of scholarly publications, official documents, and credible policy data published between 2011 and June 2026. The review synthesizes evidence across four dimensions: substantive benefits, fiscal risks, implementation capacity, and public accountability. The findings indicate that school feeding can improve attendance, household food security, selected nutritional outcomes, and local food-system linkages when program design and delivery are adequate. However, the rapid expansion of MBG into a major national expenditure item creates risks of budget rigidity, weak targeting, supplier concentration, uneven kitchen standards, food-safety incidents, and broader macro-fiscal pressure. The analysis also shows that measuring success only by meals distributed is insufficient because program performance should be assessed through nutritional, educational, safety, fiscal, and local-economic outcomes. The study concludes that MBG requires phased expansion, vulnerability-based prioritization, transparent and decentralized procurement, real-time food-safety monitoring, outcome-based evaluation, and explicit fiscal safeguards. Without these reforms, a nutrition intervention intended to strengthen human capital may become politically popular while imposing growing administrative and fiscal burdens.

Abstrak

Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) di Indonesia menunjukkan transformasi janji elektoral menjadi komitmen belanja publik berulang berskala nasional. Meskipun bukti internasional mendukung program makan sekolah sebagai instrumen perlindungan sosial, pendidikan, dan pembangunan modal manusia, efektivitasnya bergantung pada kapasitas fiskal, ketepatan sasaran, mutu gizi, keamanan pangan, integritas pengadaan, dan sistem pemantauan. Penelitian ini menganalisis implementasi MBG melalui rapid systematic literature review terhadap publikasi ilmiah, dokumen resmi, dan data kebijakan kredibel yang terbit

DOI: https://doi.org/10.26740/jppglg.v1i3.54755

antara 2011 dan Juni 2026. Kajian disintesis ke dalam empat dimensi, yaitu manfaat substantif, risiko fiskal, kapasitas implementasi, dan akuntabilitas publik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa program makan sekolah dapat meningkatkan kehadiran siswa, ketahanan pangan rumah tangga, sebagian indikator gizi, serta keterhubungan dengan sistem pangan lokal apabila desain dan pelaksanaannya memadai. Namun, ekspansi MBG yang cepat menjadi salah satu pos belanja nasional utama menimbulkan risiko rigiditas anggaran, lemahnya penargetan, konsentrasi pemasok, ketidakseragaman standar dapur, insiden keamanan pangan, dan tekanan makro-fiskal. Analisis juga menunjukkan bahwa keberhasilan tidak cukup diukur dari jumlah porsi yang disalurkan, tetapi perlu dinilai melalui capaian gizi, pendidikan, keamanan, fiskal, dan ekonomi lokal. Penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa MBG memerlukan perluasan bertahap, prioritas berbasis kerentanan, pengadaan yang transparan dan terdesentralisasi, pemantauan keamanan pangan secara real-time, evaluasi berbasis outcome, dan pagar fiskal yang tegas. Tanpa reformasi tersebut, kebijakan gizi yang ditujukan untuk memperkuat modal manusia berisiko menjadi populer secara politik tetapi semakin membebani administrasi dan fiskal negara.

Introduction

The Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis, MBG) Program is one of the most prominent social policies under the Prabowo Subianto administration. Normatively, providing nutritious meals to students, pregnant women, and vulnerable groups has strong moral legitimacy because it is associated with the fulfillment of basic rights, improved nutrition, reduced stunting, and human capital development. International literature also shows that school feeding programs can improve school attendance, reduce household consumption vulnerability, and support selected nutritional outcomes when they are implemented with adequate menu standards, food-safety controls, and governance arrangements (Alderman & Bundy, 2012; Cohen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, criticism of MBG should not begin with rejection of its nutritional objectives, but with an assessment of its fiscal design, implementation capacity, and governance quality.

The main concern emerges when an electoral promise is transformed into a very large government spending commitment. In the early phase of 2025, the program was associated with a budget of Rp71 trillion and a target of millions of beneficiaries. Subsequent developments were much larger. Reuters reported a 2025 allocation of Rp171 trillion, disbursement of Rp4.4 trillion or 2.6 percent as of June 12, 2025, 4.9 million beneficiaries, and 1,716 catering units. In the 2026 State Budget, the MBG allocation was reported to have increased to Rp335 trillion, almost comparable to defense spending, while government expenditure in January 2026 rose by 26 percent year on year and MBG spending in January alone reached Rp19.5 trillion (Reuters, 2025a, 2025b, 2026a). These figures show that MBG is no longer merely a social intervention. It has become one of the major centers of gravity in national fiscal policy.

The macroeconomic context further complicates the issue. In May 2026, Bank Indonesia emphasized that rupiah stability was affected by global volatility, a stronger United States dollar, energy prices, domestic foreign-exchange demand, and market perceptions. BPS-Statistics Indonesia also recorded that Indonesia's imports in January-March 2026 reached US$61.30 billion, an increase of 10.05 percent compared with the same period of the previous year, while exports reached US$66.85 billion. Under these conditions, a large recurrent spending program can narrow fiscal space and influence investor expectations, although it cannot be treated as the sole cause of exchange-

rate depreciation or broader macroeconomic pressure (Bank Indonesia, 2026; BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2026; Reuters, 2026b). MBG therefore needs to be analyzed not only as a nutrition policy but also as a public policy with implications for fiscal discipline and government credibility.

From an implementation perspective, school feeding may appear simple because it involves producing and distributing meals. Administratively, however, it is a complex program that requires beneficiary validation, food procurement, menu standardization, kitchen hygiene, daily distribution, quality control, complaint management, and auditing. Countries with more established school feeding systems show that program benefits depend on the quality of administrative routines rather than on the promise of free meals alone (Gelli & Daryanani, 2013; Jomaa et al., 2011; Sumberg & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011). When coverage expands too quickly, procurement risks, distribution delays, waste, and food-safety incidents can rise proportionally. The scale of MBG therefore places exceptional demands on the capacity of public institutions and service providers.

Against this background, this article addresses three research questions. First, how has the MBG political promise been transformed into a recurrent fiscal burden in the State Budget? Second, what lessons does international literature provide regarding the benefits and conditions for successful school feeding programs? Third, which governance risks are most significant in MBG implementation, and what policy design would be more fiscally prudent and socially effective? The contribution of this article lies in synthesizing school-feeding literature, policy implementation theory, public accountability, and recent fiscal data to assess MBG in a balanced manner. The analysis recognizes the program's potential social benefits while critically examining its fiscal and administrative risks.

Literature Review

School-feeding literature has developed from three major traditions: nutrition policy, education, and social protection. The systematic review by Wang et al. (2021) shows that school feeding programs in low- and middle-income countries can improve selected educational and health indicators, but the effects are not uniform because they depend on program design, intensity, food quality, and beneficiary characteristics. Cohen et al. (2021) likewise found that universal school meals can increase student participation in school-meal programs and are associated with improvements in food security and diet quality in some contexts, while effects on body mass index and academic achievement are more variable. These findings indicate that the benefits of school feeding are conditional rather than automatic.

Cross-country empirical studies reinforce this conclusion. Afridi (2011) found that school meals in India had a positive effect on school participation, while Singh et al. (2014) positioned the Midday Meal Scheme as a social safety net that supports vulnerable households. Chakraborty and Jayaraman (2019) demonstrated effects on learning achievement through longer exposure to the program, whereas McEwan (2013), in the Chilean case, showed that educational impacts depend on program intensity and targeting. Kazianga et al. (2014), studying Burkina Faso, found that school meals and take-home rations can alter intra-household allocation and child outcomes, but cost design and targeting remain important determinants of efficiency.

In nutritional terms, school feeding cannot be separated from the broader health and food system. Ruel and Alderman (2013), Black et al. (2013), and Victora et al. (2021) emphasize that nutrition interventions are strongest when they target critical periods and account for sanitation, poverty, caregiving practices, and access to health services. Accordingly, MBG should not be

positioned as a substitute for other nutrition policies such as interventions during the first 1,000 days of life, anemia prevention, immunization, sanitation, and primary health care. School meals can complement these interventions, but they are not the only pathway for reducing national nutrition problems.

The literature on public food procurement also warns that large-scale school feeding has serious governance implications. Sumberg and Sabates-Wheeler (2011) show that home-grown school feeding can connect local farmers with institutional markets, but such linkages require careful procurement design. Gelli et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of evaluation designs that connect agriculture, nutrition, and education, while Aliyar et al. (2015) identify substantial cross-country variation in nutritional guidelines and menu standards. If procurement focuses only on speed and the number of meals produced, a program may incur high costs while delivering food of inadequate quality.

From a public policy perspective, implementation cannot be understood as a simple administrative stage that follows political decision-making. Matland (1995) argues that implementation outcomes are shaped by the degree of policy ambiguity and conflict. Howlett (2014) emphasizes that policy design must be aligned with instrument capacity, while Ansell et al. (2017) show that collaboration can improve implementation when government, market, and societal actors operate through clear coordination mechanisms. MBG combines high political ambition, large fiscal scale, and complex multi-actor coordination, making implementation capacity central to its success.

Public accountability provides another important lens for assessing MBG. Bovens (2007) defines accountability as a relationship in which an actor is required to explain and justify conduct to a forum capable of questioning and imposing consequences. Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2016) argue that social accountability can improve service delivery when citizens have access to information, complaint channels, and responsive mechanisms. For MBG, accountability cannot be limited to reporting the number of meals distributed. It should also cover unit costs, supplier lists, nutritional standards, kitchen inspection results, complaints, food-safety incidents, and audit follow-up.

Fiscal literature helps explain why a popular program can evolve into a long-term burden on the state. Alesina and Tabellini (1990) show that fiscal decisions can be shaped by short-term political incentives. Alt and Lassen (2006) associate fiscal transparency with more disciplined debt management, while Debrun and Kinda (2017) emphasize the importance of institutions that preserve fiscal credibility. Highly popular recurrent social programs are politically difficult to reduce once coverage expands, thereby creating expenditure rigidity. In the MBG context, the risk lies not only in the size of the current year's budget, but also in the recurring political commitment that can constrain future spending choices.

Research Methods

This article employs a rapid systematic literature review oriented toward policy analysis. The approach was selected because MBG is an ongoing policy, implementation data change rapidly, and academic literature specifically examining MBG in Indonesia remains limited. The study therefore combines a review of scholarly literature on school feeding, child nutrition, policy implementation, accountability, and fiscal discipline with official data and credible reports on MBG available up to June 3, 2026.

The search strategy was thematic and used keywords in both Indonesian and English, including 'Makan Bergizi Gratis', 'free nutritious meals Indonesia', 'school feeding', 'school meals', 'home-grown school feeding', 'school feeding systematic review', 'food safety', 'public procurement', 'fiscal sustainability', 'public accountability', and 'policy implementation'. Academic sources were prioritized from relevant scholarly journals, mainly publications from 2011 to 2026, while current Indonesian data were drawn from official documents of Badan Gizi Nasional, Bank Indonesia, BPS-Statistics Indonesia, and credible international media reports that explicitly cited government figures.

Four inclusion criteria were applied. First, sources had to be directly relevant to school feeding, child nutrition, social policy, public finance, or implementation governance. Second, academic sources had to provide empirical evidence, a systematic review, or a theoretical framework that could be used to analyze MBG. Third, current Indonesian data had to originate from official institutions or reports that clearly identified the source of the figures. Fourth, political opinion pieces, social-media commentary, and claims without supporting data were excluded from the analytical basis.

The analysis used thematic synthesis across four dimensions: substantive benefits, fiscal risks, implementation capacity, and governance accountability. The substantive-benefit dimension assessed whether school feeding is supported by evidence concerning nutrition, education, and social protection. The fiscal-risk dimension examined budget scale, expenditure rigidity, and implications for fiscal space. Implementation capacity was assessed through kitchen readiness, logistics, food safety, and beneficiary validation, while accountability focused on procurement transparency, complaint mechanisms, audits, and public oversight. The article does not claim to provide a causal meta-analysis of MBG; rather, it offers an evidence-informed policy review that can serve as a basis for early evaluation.

Results and Discussion

Escalation from Political Promise to Fiscal Commitment

The first finding is that MBG has rapidly escalated from a political promise into a recurrent fiscal commitment. In its initial design, the program was positioned as a nutrition intervention intended to support schoolchildren and vulnerable groups. As the target population expanded to tens of millions of people, however, the program's character shifted toward nationwide recurrent expenditure. Reuters reported that the 2025 allocation reached Rp171 trillion and that the longer-term target was directed toward 82.9 million beneficiaries. In the 2026 State Budget, the MBG allocation was reported to reach Rp335 trillion out of total state expenditure of Rp3,842.7 trillion (Reuters, 2025a, 2025b).

From a fiscal policy perspective, this scale matters because MBG is not a one-time capital expenditure. It is recurrent spending that must be financed annually for as long as the political commitment is maintained. As coverage expands, public expectations, supplier contracts, kitchen networks, and oversight costs also become embedded in the program. This pattern is consistent with fiscal literature showing that popular programs can create expenditure rigidity and make fiscal adjustment more difficult (Alesina & Tabellini, 1990; Debrun & Kinda, 2017).

Table 1. Development of MBG Policy, Coverage, and Budget

Period	Key Data	Policy Significance
2024	Badan Gizi Nasional was established as the institution responsible for implementing national nutrition services.	The institutional foundation was established before nationwide implementation.
January 2025	MBG was launched nationally with an initial target of millions of beneficiaries and an early budget associated with Rp71 trillion.	The campaign promise began to become a national public program.
June 12, 2025	Disbursement reached Rp4.4 trillion, or 2.6% of the Rp171 trillion allocation; 4.9 million beneficiaries; 1,716 catering units.	Implementation capacity lagged behind the ambition of program coverage.
2026 State Budget	The MBG allocation was reported at Rp335 trillion out of total state expenditure of Rp3,842.7 trillion.	MBG became a major spending item with implications for fiscal space.
January-February 2026	January MBG expenditure reached Rp19.5 trillion; more than 60 million beneficiaries were reported by February 21, 2026.	Rapid expansion required a mature quality-control system.
March 2026	Cumulative expenditure was reported at Rp44 trillion as of March 9, 2026, reaching 61.62 million beneficiaries.	Accelerating expenditure and coverage strengthened the need for unit-cost auditing.

Source: Compiled by the author from Badan Gizi Nasional (2026), Reuters (2025a, 2025b, 2026a, 2026c), and Associated Press (2025).

MBG, Fiscal Space, and Macroeconomic Stability

The second finding is that MBG cannot be described as the single cause of macroeconomic pressure, but it can operate as an amplifier of fiscal risk. Bank Indonesia (2026) emphasizes that pressure on the rupiah is influenced by external factors such as a stronger United States dollar, energy prices, domestic foreign-exchange demand, and global uncertainty. Nevertheless, when government expenditure rises and the deficit approaches the legal ceiling, a large spending program such as MBG can narrow fiscal room for maneuver and influence market perceptions of budget discipline.

Reuters (2026a) reported that government expenditure in January 2026 rose by 26 percent year on year to Rp227.3 trillion, while state revenue reached Rp172.7 trillion and the monthly deficit stood at Rp54.6 trillion, or 0.21 percent of GDP. During the same month, MBG expenditure reached Rp19.5 trillion. Economists cited by Reuters projected that the 2026 deficit could approach 2.93 percent of GDP, very close to the legal limit of 3 percent. These conditions show that the MBG debate concerns not only whether children receive meals, but also whether the spending design remains consistent with national fiscal credibility.

A social policy with strong moral legitimacy must still pass a fiscal-sustainability test. If MBG financing is maintained through wider deficits, cuts to other productive expenditures, or new debt without commensurate revenue growth, the program can reduce the flexibility of the State Budget. In the short term, this can appear as financing pressure; in the longer term, it can crowd out spending on education, primary health care, basic infrastructure, or more precisely targeted social protection.

Table 2. Macro-Fiscal Indicators Framing MBG Implementation

Indicator	Value/Period	Implications for MBG
Government expenditure	Rp227.3 trillion in January 2026	Accelerating expenditure narrows fiscal room for maneuver.
State revenue	Rp172.7 trillion in January 2026	Revenue growth must keep pace with the surge in expenditure.
Monthly deficit	Rp54.6 trillion, or 0.21% of GDP, in January 2026	The budget recorded a deficit from the beginning of the fiscal year.
MBG expenditure	Rp19.5 trillion in January 2026	MBG became a material component of monthly government spending.
2026 State Budget deficit target	2.68% of GDP	The target remains below the legal ceiling, but the safety margin is limited.
Economists' deficit projection	Approximately 2.93% of GDP in 2026	The projection approaches the legal ceiling of 3% of GDP.
Rupiah exchange rate	Rp17,700/US$ on May 19, 2026, according to Bank Indonesia	Fiscal credibility becomes more important when the currency is under pressure.
Indonesia's imports	US$61.30 billion in January-March 2026	Foreign-exchange demand and imported inputs remain relevant to the macroeconomic context.

Source: Compiled by the author from Bank Indonesia (2026), BPS-Statistics Indonesia (2026), and Reuters (2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

The Benefits of School Feeding Are Not Automatic

The third finding is that the claim that MBG has no benefits at all is not supported by academic literature. Global evidence instead shows that school feeding can improve school participation, food security, and selected nutritional indicators. In a systematic review and meta-analysis, Wang et al. (2021) found that school feeding programs in low- and middle-income countries can generate educational and health benefits. Cohen et al. (2021) likewise found that universal school meals can increase participation in school meal programs and support food security. Studies in India, Chile, Burkina Faso, and Ghana also report benefits that vary according to program design (Afridi, 2011; Gelli et al., 2019; Kazianga et al., 2014; McEwan, 2013).

The same literature, however, does not support the conclusion that school feeding is always effective. Effects on learning achievement, nutritional status, and health are not uniform. Neervoort et al. (2013) found that evidence from randomized controlled trials on nutritional status and educational achievement remains context dependent, while Jomaa et al. (2011) emphasize that program design, meal composition, and implementation quality determine outcomes. MBG benefits therefore cannot be assumed merely because meals are distributed. They need to be demonstrated through indicators such as nutrition, attendance, learning concentration, reductions in household consumption burdens, and effects on local food systems.

Table 3. Lessons from International Literature for MBG Evaluation

Dimension	Evidence from the Literature	Lesson for MBG
Education	School feeding can improve attendance and school participation in some contexts.	Success indicators should include attendance and retention, not only the number of meals distributed.
Nutrition	Nutritional effects depend on menu composition, food quality, and integration with health services.	Menus should follow nutritional standards, age-specific needs, and health monitoring.
Social protection	Programs can reduce the consumption burden of poor households.	Targeting should prioritize vulnerable groups to improve cost effectiveness.
Local economy	Home-grown school feeding can connect local farmers with institutional markets.	Local procurement must be transparent so that it does not become a source of supplier rents.
Food safety	Large-scale programs are vulnerable when sanitation, storage, and distribution systems are weak.	Food safety should be treated as a core performance indicator, not merely a technical kitchen issue.

Source: Synthesized from Alderman and Bundy (2012), Aliyar et al. (2015), Cohen et al. (2021), Gelli et al. (2016, 2019), Jomaa et al. (2011), Sumberg and Sabates-Wheeler (2011), and Wang et al. (2021).

Governance and Implementation Risks

The fourth finding is that the most critical MBG challenges lie in governance and implementation risk. A school feeding program is a long policy chain involving beneficiary data, supplier contracts, raw materials, production kitchens, sanitation, distribution, consumption, complaint reporting, and audits. Each point creates a potential risk. At a small scale, errors can often be corrected quickly, but at the scale of tens of millions of beneficiaries, minor failures can become systemic. MBG must therefore be assessed through implementation and accountability frameworks, not only through the benevolent intention of the policy.

In the MBG context, the principal risks include procurement concentration, weak beneficiary validation, uneven kitchen quality, distribution delays, and food-safety incidents. Associated Press (2025) reported food-poisoning incidents associated with Indonesia's free-meals program in 2025. Although incident counts reported in the media should be interpreted cautiously and verified through health authorities, the existence of such cases demonstrates that food safety must be a core performance indicator rather than an administrative concern addressed only after implementation.

Good governance requires transparent unit costs, nutritional standards, kitchen audits, supplier certification, complaint mechanisms, and public reporting of incidents. Based on Bovens's (2007) accountability framework, the government cannot simply state that the program has reached a particular number of beneficiaries. It must also be able to explain how costs are calculated, who supplies the meals, how quality is inspected, how complaints are handled, and what sanctions are imposed when violations occur. Without these mechanisms, MBG risks becoming a very large program that is politically difficult to challenge but administratively fragile.

Table 4. Implementation Risk Matrix and Policy Recommendations for MBG

Risk	Policy Impact	Recommendation
Fiscal rigidity	Recurrent expenditure becomes difficult to reduce after program coverage expands.	Set explicit fiscal safeguards and expand the program gradually based on evaluation results.
Imprecise targeting	Benefits spread to less vulnerable groups and program costs increase.	Prioritize areas with high stunting, poverty, and food insecurity.
Supplier concentration	Creates risks of rent seeking, mark-ups, and dependence on large suppliers.	Publish supplier data, unit costs, and procurement audit results.
Uneven menu quality	Nutritional objectives are not achieved even when meals are distributed.	Apply age-specific nutritional standards and conduct random menu audits.
Food safety	Food poisoning undermines program legitimacy and endangers beneficiaries.	Require kitchen certification, sanitation SOPs, ingredient traceability, and real-time incident reporting.
Narrow performance measurement	Program success is measured only by the number of meals distributed.	Measure attendance, nutritional indicators, complaints, incidents, food waste, and effects on local food prices.

Source: Author's synthesis based on the literature on policy implementation, school feeding, and public accountability.

Policy Redesign: From Populist Expansion to Phased Implementation

Based on these findings, the most rational policy option is not to terminate MBG entirely but to redesign the strategy for expanding it. Complete termination could disregard potential social benefits and generate political costs, while unrestricted expansion could burden the State Budget and magnify implementation risks. A more evidence-based middle path is phased implementation, in which the program expands only after quality, food-safety, and cost-effectiveness indicators are met. This approach is consistent with policy-design theory, which emphasizes alignment between policy objectives, instruments, and state capacity (Howlett, 2014; Matland, 1995).

First, targeting should be strengthened. Rather than extending the program universally before implementation systems are mature, MBG should prioritize schools and regions with higher prevalence of stunting, anemia, poverty, and food insecurity. This approach does not reject the principle of fairness. Instead, it directs public resources toward groups for whom the marginal benefit is greatest. Second, performance indicators should shift from outputs to outcomes. The number of meals distributed measures activity, not success. More relevant measures include changes in attendance, nutritional status, beneficiary complaints, menu quality, food-safety incidents, and effects on the local economy.

Third, procurement should be regionally based and transparent. Home-grown school feeding can support local economies, but only when contracts are not monopolized by particular suppliers and small farmers can enter the supply chain on reasonable terms. Fourth, food safety should become a prerequisite for expansion. Kitchens that do not meet sanitation and ingredient-traceability standards should not serve large numbers of beneficiaries. Fifth, the government should establish a fiscal trigger. If the deficit, unit cost, or incident rate exceeds a predefined threshold, further

expansion should automatically be paused until corrective action is completed. Such a mechanism is important to ensure that political promises do not override fiscal discipline.

From a political-economy perspective, MBG illustrates the paradox of populist policy. The program is easy for the public to understand, morally difficult to oppose, and politically attractive because its benefits are immediately visible. These same characteristics, however, can make the program less exposed to critical scrutiny. Fiscal literature shows that transparency and constraining institutions are important for preventing short-term expenditure bias (Alt & Lassen, 2006; Debrun & Kinda, 2017; Wehner, 2010). MBG's success should therefore be assessed by the government's ability to balance three objectives simultaneously: nutritional benefits, fiscal discipline, and governance integrity.

Conclusion

This article concludes that Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Program should not be evaluated in purely binary terms. International literature shows that school feeding can improve attendance, food security, social protection, and selected nutritional indicators. The claim that MBG has no benefits at all is therefore inconsistent with available academic evidence. At the same time, these benefits do not arise automatically from a large budget or a high number of meals distributed. They depend on accurate targeting, nutritious menus, food safety, transparent procurement, and strong outcome evaluation.

The central criticism of MBG concerns the imbalance between political ambition, implementation capacity, and fiscal space. The escalation of the budget from its initial phase to hundreds of trillions of rupiah indicates that MBG has become a recurrent fiscal commitment capable of increasing rigidity in the State Budget. In a context of exchange-rate and energy-price sensitivity, large spending programs can intensify market concerns when they are not accompanied by credible fiscal discipline. From an implementation standpoint, the program also carries substantial risks related to procurement, kitchen sanitation, distribution, food safety, and supplier accountability.

The policy implications are clear. The government should treat MBG not as an image-building project that must be expanded as quickly as possible, but as a nutrition policy that must pass tests of effectiveness, safety, and fiscal sustainability. The main recommendations are phased expansion focused on vulnerable groups, strict fiscal safeguards, procurement transparency, unit-cost audits, real-time food-safety monitoring, and outcome evaluation covering nutrition, education, and local economic effects. Future research should conduct region-based quasi-experimental evaluations, independent audits of cost per meal, and systematic analyses of food-safety incidents so that the MBG debate moves beyond political support or opposition toward accountable empirical evidence.

References

Afridi, F. (2011). The impact of school meals on school participation: Evidence from rural India. The Journal of Development Studies, 47(11), 1636-1656. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2010.514330

Alderman, H., & Bundy, D. (2012). School feeding programs and development: Are we framing the question correctly? The World Bank Research Observer, 27(2), 204-221. https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkr005

Alesina, A., & Tabellini, G. (1990). A positive theory of fiscal deficits and government debt. The Review of Economic Studies, 57(3), 403-414. https://doi.org/10.2307/2298021

Aliyar, R., Gelli, A., & Hamdani, S. H. (2015). A review of nutritional guidelines and menu compositions for school feeding programs in 12 countries. Frontiers in Public Health, 3, 148. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2015.00148

Alt, J. E., & Lassen, D. D. (2006). Fiscal transparency, political parties, and debt in OECD countries. European Economic Review, 50(6), 1403-1439. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2005.04.001

Ansell, C., Sorensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2017). Improving policy implementation through collaborative policymaking. Policy & Politics, 45(3), 467-486. https://doi.org/10.1332/030557317X14972799760260

Associated Press. (2025, January 6). Indonesia launches free meals program to feed children and pregnant women to fight malnutrition. Associated Press.

Badan Gizi Nasional. (2026). Badan Gizi Nasional: Layanan unggulan untuk masa depan sehat Indonesia. https://bgn.go.id/

Bank Indonesia. (2026, May 21). BI-rate increased by 50 bps to 5.25%: Strengthening stability, supporting economic growth. https://www.bi.go.id/

Black, R. E., Victora, C. G., Walker, S. P., Bhutta, Z. A., Christian, P., De Onis, M., Ezzati, M., Grantham-McGregor, S., Katz, J., Martorell, R., & Uauy, R. (2013). Maternal and child undernutrition and overweight in low-income and middle-income countries. The Lancet, 382(9890), 427-451. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)60937-X

Bovens, M. (2007). Analysing and assessing accountability: A conceptual framework. European Law Journal, 13(4), 447-468. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0386.2007.00378.x

BPS-Statistics Indonesia. (2026, May 4). Exports and imports of Indonesia in March 2026 reached USD22.53 billion and USD19.21 billion, respectively. https://www.bps.go.id/

Brinkerhoff, D. W., & Wetterberg, A. (2016). Gauging the effects of social accountability on services, governance, and citizen empowerment. Public Administration Review, 76(2), 274-286. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12399

Chakraborty, T., & Jayaraman, R. (2019). School feeding and learning achievement: Evidence from India's midday meal program. Journal of Development Economics, 139, 249-265. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2018.10.011

Cohen, J. F. W., Hecht, A. A., McLoughlin, G. M., Turner, L., & Schwartz, M. B. (2021). Universal school meals and associations with student participation, attendance, academic performance, diet quality, food security, and body mass index: A systematic review. Nutrients, 13(3), 911. https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13030911

Debrun, X., & Kinda, T. (2017). Strengthening post-crisis fiscal credibility: Fiscal councils on the rise. Fiscal Studies, 38(4), 667-700. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-5890.12130

Gelli, A., & Daryanani, R. (2013). Are school feeding programs in low-income settings sustainable? Insights on the costs of school feeding compared with investments in primary education. Food and Nutrition Bulletin, 34(3), 310-317. https://doi.org/10.1177/156482651303400303

Gelli, A., Masset, E., Folson, G., Kusi, A., Arhinful, D. K., Asante, F., Ayi, I., Bosompem, K. M., Watkins, K., & Abdul-Rahman, L. (2016). Evaluation of alternative school feeding models on nutrition, education, agriculture and other social outcomes in Ghana: Rationale, randomised design and baseline data. Trials, 17, 37. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-015-1118-0

Gelli, A., Aurino, E., Folson, G., Arhinful, D. K., Adamba, C., Osei-Akoto, I., Masset, E., Watkins, K., Fernandes, M., Drake, L., & Alderman, H. (2019). A school meals program implemented at scale in Ghana increases height-for-age during midchildhood in girls and in children from poor households. The Journal of Nutrition, 149(8), 1434-1442. https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/nxz079

Howlett, M. (2014). From the 'old' to the 'new' policy design: Design thinking beyond markets and collaborative governance. Policy Sciences, 47, 187-207. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-014-9199-0

Jomaa, L. H., McDonnell, E., & Probart, C. (2011). School feeding programs in developing countries: Impacts on children's health and educational outcomes. Nutrition Reviews, 69(2), 83-98. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-4887.2010.00369.x

Kazianga, H., De Walque, D., & Alderman, H. (2014). School feeding programs, intrahousehold allocation and the nutrition of siblings: Evidence from a randomized trial in rural Burkina Faso. Journal of Development Economics, 106, 15-34. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2013.08.007

Matland, R. E. (1995). Synthesizing the implementation literature: The ambiguity-conflict model of policy implementation. Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 5(2), 145-174. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a037242

McEwan, P. J. (2013). The impact of Chile's school feeding program on education outcomes. Economics of Education Review, 32, 122-139. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.08.006

Neervoort, F., Von Rosenstiel, I., Bongers, K., Demetriades, M., Shacola, M., & Wolffers, I. (2013). Effect of school feeding on nutritional status and educational achievement: A systematic review of randomized controlled trials. Clinical Nutrition, 32(2), 201-207. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clnu.2012.06.007

Reuters. (2025a, June 17). Indonesia disburses less than 3% of budget for Prabowo's flagship free meals programme. Reuters.

Reuters. (2025b, September 23). Indonesia parliament passes Prabowo's $231 billion budget for 2026. Reuters.

Reuters. (2026a, February 23). Indonesia's government spending jumps 26% in January. Reuters.

Reuters. (2026b, May 28). Rupiah bears most entrenched since 2022 as Asia FX split widens. Reuters.

Reuters. (2026c, March 11). Indonesia's spending on free meals programme at $2.6 billion, official says. Reuters.

Ruel, M. T., & Alderman, H. (2013). Nutrition-sensitive interventions and programmes: How can they help to accelerate progress in improving maternal and child nutrition? The Lancet, 382(9891), 536-551. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)60843-0

Singh, A., Park, A., & Dercon, S. (2014). School meals as a safety net: An evaluation of the midday meal scheme in India. Economic Development and Cultural Change, 62(2), 275-306. https://doi.org/10.1086/674097

Sumberg, J., & Sabates-Wheeler, R. (2011). Linking agricultural development to school feeding in sub-Saharan Africa: Theoretical perspectives. Food Policy, 36(3), 341-349. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2011.03.001

Victora, C. G., Christian, P., Vidaletti, L. P., Gatica-Dominguez, G., Menon, P., & Black, R. E. (2021). Revisiting maternal and child undernutrition in low-income and middle-income countries: Variable progress towards an unfinished agenda. The Lancet, 397(10282), 1388-1399. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00394-9

Wang, D., Shinde, S., Young, T., & Fawzi, W. W. (2021). Impacts of school feeding on educational and health outcomes of school-age children and adolescents in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Journal of Global Health, 11, 04051. https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.11.04051

Wehner, J. (2010). Institutional constraints on profligate politicians: The conditional effect of partisan fragmentation on budget deficits. Comparative Political Studies, 43(2), 208-229. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009344868