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THE FREE NUTRITIOUS MEAL PROGRAM: A SOLUTION OR A BURDEN TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

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ABSTRACT

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is a government policy aimed at improving the quality of human resources through fulfilling the nutritional needs of the community. This study aims to analyze the MBG program as both a solution and a burden in national development. The method used is a literature review by examining various journals, government data, and scientific sources related to nutrition, human development, and public policy. The results of the study indicate that the MBG program has the potential to improve nutritional quality, support the physical and cognitive development of children, and help reduce stunting and malnutrition rates. On the other hand, the implementation of the program faces several challenges, including large budget requirements, distribution constraints, uneven food quality, and the risk of budget misuse. In addition, the effectiveness of the program still depends on the quality of governance, supervision, and policy sustainability. Therefore, the MBG program needs to be implemented in a targeted, transparent, and sustainable manner in order to make an optimal contribution to national development.

Keywords: Free Nutritious Meal Program; National Development; Human Resources; Stunting; Public Policy.

INTRODUCTION

Nutritional conditions in Indonesia continue to present significant challenges, particularly as reflected in the high prevalence of stunting and unequal access to nutritious food across different regions. Data from the 2024 Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI) (Kementerian Kesehatan, 2025) indicate that the national stunting prevalence remains at 19.8 percent, although it has declined from 21.5 percent in the previous year. This figure suggests that nearly one-fifth of Indonesian children still experience growth disorders associated with nutritional deficiencies and inadequate caregiving practices. At the same time, disparities in economic conditions and food accessibility contribute to unequal dietary quality between urban areas and disadvantaged regions. Nutritional issues are not merely related to food shortages but also involve the quality of dietary intake, which is influenced by economic, educational, and social factors. Several regions continue to face limited access to healthy food distribution, insufficient nutrition education, and inadequate healthcare facilities. Data from the Ministry of Health also reveal disparities in stunting rates across regions, with higher prevalence observed in Eastern Indonesia compared to several provinces in Java and Bali. These conditions demonstrate that nutritional problems in Indonesia possess structural dimensions that cannot be resolved solely through temporary assistance programs.

The quality of human resources is strongly influenced by public health and nutritional conditions from an early age (Amran et al., 2025). Children who experience malnutrition are at risk of facing physical and cognitive developmental barriers that may affect their learning abilities and future work productivity. Various studies have shown that stunting is associated with reduced concentration, weakened immunity, and lower workforce quality. In the context of national development, these issues pose a challenge because the country requires a generation capable of competing amid technological advancements and global competition.

National development fundamentally depends not only on economic growth and infrastructure development but also on the readiness and quality of the people who drive the development process. Countries with low-quality human resources often encounter obstacles in enhancing productivity and innovation across various sectors (Assyava et al., 2024). This situation makes nutrition a crucial issue within public policy, as it is directly linked to the quality of future generations. When health and nutritional problems remain inadequately addressed, national development may face increasing social and economic inequalities.

In response to these conditions, the government has promoted the Free Nutritious Meals Program (Program Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) as an intervention aimed at improving the nutritional status of the population, particularly school-aged children. The MBG Program was designed as a nationwide policy targeting approximately 82.9 million beneficiaries, including students, toddlers, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers throughout Indonesia. The broad scope of the program indicates that the government considers nutritional improvement a key priority in human development. However, the large number of beneficiaries also requires effective governance to ensure equitable and targeted distribution. Without a well-managed implementation system, the extensive coverage of the program may instead create disparities in service delivery between regions with adequate infrastructure and those facing accessibility constraints (Badan Gizi Nasional, 2026).

The program was introduced with the expectation of helping to meet nutritional needs while reducing stunting and malnutrition rates in Indonesia. Beyond being viewed as a health policy, the program is also associated with efforts to improve human resource quality from an early age. Consequently, the Free Nutritious Meals Program has become part of the national development agenda that places human development at its core (Mursalin et al., 2026). Nevertheless, the implementation of the program has generated considerable debate among the public and academic communities. Some argue that the program can serve as a long-term solution for improving the quality of future generations, particularly among vulnerable groups. Others raise concerns regarding the substantial budget required, the readiness of distribution systems, and the potential dependency of communities on government assistance. These differing perspectives indicate that public policies are evaluated not only based on their intended objectives but also on their effectiveness, efficiency, and broader socio-economic impacts.

The contrasting views surrounding the Free Nutritious Meals Program make it important to analyze its potential impacts. Policies related to basic public needs often exert wide-ranging influences on education, health, economic development, and social stability. Therefore, discussions of this program should not be limited to its popularity as a social assistance initiative but should also assess the extent to which it contributes to sustainable national development. A critical analysis is

necessary to ensure that the program is not merely symbolic but is capable of producing tangible improvements in the quality of Indonesia's human resources.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a literature review method, which involves examining, analyzing, and synthesizing various sources of literature relevant to the research topic. The sources utilized in this study included scientific journals, research articles, government reports, official statistical data, and other scholarly publications related to the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG), national development, human resource quality, stunting, and public policy in Indonesia and other countries. Literature collection was conducted through academic databases and platforms such as books, Google Scholar, as well as official websites of government institutions, including the Ministry of Health and the National Nutrition Agency (BGN).

The selection of literature was based on several criteria, including relevance to the research topic, recency of publication (with priority given to sources published between 2022 and 2026), and the credibility of the sources. The collected literature was then critically analyzed to identify the potential benefits, challenges, and effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meals Program within the context of national development. This process enabled the study to provide a comprehensive discussion supported by scientific evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Program as a Solution for Improving Human Resource Quality

The Free Nutritious Meals Program is widely regarded as one of the government's efforts to improve human resource quality through the fulfillment of children's nutritional needs from an early age (Lendra et al., 2025). Nutritional problems in Indonesia remain a serious challenge, as many children continue to experience inadequate nutrient intake that affects both physical growth and learning capacity. Under certain economic conditions, not all families are able to provide meals with sufficient nutritional content on a daily basis. Consequently, schools are increasingly viewed not only as institutions for formal education but also as spaces for social intervention that support students' health and well-being.

Nutrition is closely linked to children's physical growth and cognitive development (Mahardika et al., 2022). Deficiencies in protein, iron, and certain vitamins can affect cognitive abilities, memory, and intellectual development in the long term. Children suffering from malnutrition tend to be more vulnerable to illness and have weaker immune systems than those with balanced nutritional intake. These conditions demonstrate that the quality of human resources is shaped not only through education but also through health conditions and dietary patterns established from an early age. The influence of nutrition is also evident in the learning process. Students who attend school without breakfast or in poor physical condition often struggle to concentrate during lessons. The Free Nutritious Meals Program is expected to help students obtain adequate energy and nutrients, enabling them to participate more effectively in learning activities. However, the success of the program depends largely on the quality of the meals provided, as nutritionally unbalanced meals may reduce the program to a mere formality without generating significant improvements in students' learning outcomes.

In addition to its impact on education, the Free Nutritious Meals Program is associated with efforts to reduce stunting and malnutrition in Indonesia. Stunting affects not only children's physical growth but also brain development and future productivity (Mu'tafi et al., 2024). When nutritional problems are addressed from an early age, the likelihood of producing a healthier and more productive generation increases. This issue is particularly important because poor public health can hinder a country's ability to enhance its competitiveness amid global economic development and technological advancement.

In the long term, improved nutritional quality has the potential to influence workforce quality and national development as a whole. A generation that grows up healthy is more likely to possess stronger learning abilities, higher productivity, and greater competitiveness than a generation affected by nutritional deficiencies during childhood. Improvements in human resource quality can positively affect various sectors, including the economy, education, and national innovation. Therefore, the Free Nutritious Meals Program is viewed not merely as a social assistance initiative but also as part of a broader human development strategy linked to the nation's future.

The Program as a Burden on National Development

Despite its social objectives, the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) has also raised concerns regarding the substantial financial burden placed on the state budget (Kiftiyah et al., 2025). A nationwide program requires significant funding due to the procurement of food supplies, distribution systems, labor costs, supervision mechanisms, and daily operational activities across diverse regions. In 2026, the government allocated IDR 335 trillion for the implementation of the MBG Program, targeting approximately 82.9 million beneficiaries throughout Indonesia (Badan Gizi Nasional, 2026). This large allocation reflects the government's commitment to improving nutritional quality and addressing stunting and malnutrition. However, such a substantial budget also raises questions about the efficiency of public resource utilization. From a national development perspective, the government must ensure that the benefits generated are proportional to the costs incurred so that the program becomes more than a politically popular policy and instead delivers measurable improvements in human resource quality and public welfare (Zulaika et al., 2025).

Given the country's numerous development priorities, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, and employment creation, allocating IDR 335 trillion to a single program has sparked debates regarding policy priorities. Some observers question whether the funds could generate greater benefits if directed toward strengthening other sectors of development.

Another concern relates to the nutritional quality of the meals distributed through the program. Reports indicate that not all meals fully meet the nutritional standards required by children, with some cases involving insufficient portions or imbalanced nutritional content. In several instances, implementation has prioritized quantity over the quality of ingredients used. These conditions suggest that successful implementation depends not only on governmental commitment but also on the ability to maintain consistent service quality across regions.

Additional issues have emerged regarding food safety due to poor distribution and storage practices. Several reports have documented cases of spoiled, unhygienic, or damaged food being delivered to students. Such incidents pose risks of food poisoning, potentially endangering the health of children who are intended to benefit from the program. These challenges illustrate the difficulties associated with supervising large-scale programs, particularly when distribution covers extensive geographic areas and involves large volumes of food.

Inefficiencies in management and distribution also represent significant challenges. Remote areas with limited transportation infrastructure often face difficulties in receiving fresh and nutritious food supplies (Khatmawati & Putri, 2026). The longer the distribution chain, the greater the likelihood of delays, food spoilage, and increased operational costs. As a result, program implementation may not be equally effective across urban and remote regions.

Large scale programs are also vulnerable to budget misuse and corruption. Food procurement, distribution partnerships, and vendor selection processes may create opportunities for budget manipulation if supervision is not conducted rigorously. On the other hand, public dependence on government assistance may emerge if the program is not accompanied by economic empowerment initiatives and nutrition education. Effective implementation of public policies requires transparency, accountability, and good governance to ensure that program objectives can be achieved efficiently and sustainably (Anggraini et al., 2025). This condition indicates that social assistance policies may create dependency when communities are not encouraged to develop self-reliance in meeting their basic needs.

Program Effectiveness from a National Development Perspective

The effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meals Program from a national development perspective cannot be measured solely by the number of students receiving meals each day (Manalu et al., 2025). The government must assess whether the program genuinely contributes to sustainable improvements in human resource quality. In the context of national development, public expenditure should generate long-term benefits for society. Without clear evaluation mechanisms, the program risks becoming a populist policy that attracts political attention while delivering limited substantive outcomes.

One important aspect in assessing program effectiveness is the prioritization of the national budget. The government faces various development needs, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, and poverty reduction, all of which require substantial financial resources (Amelia, 2026). Debates surrounding the program demonstrate that public policies are closely related to policy priorities and the strategies used to achieve their intended objectives effectively and equitably (Purnama & Djunaidy, 2025). When a significant portion of the budget is allocated to the Free

Nutritious Meals Program, questions arise regarding the balance of national development policies as a whole.

The relationship between costs and outcomes is another key consideration. If significant financial resources are invested but stunting rates, malnutrition levels, and educational quality show little improvement, the effectiveness of the program may be questioned. Conversely, if the program consistently improves children's health, learning concentration, and nutritional status, its contribution to national development becomes more evident. Such evaluations require transparent data and oversight mechanisms involving not only government institutions but also civil society and independent organizations.

The program should also be assessed based on its long-term impact on human resource development (Aprillia et al., 2025). Comparative studies of similar policies in other countries indicate that the effectiveness rate of Indonesia's nutritious meal program is approximately 72.5 percent, lower than India's 88.3 percent and Scotland's 90.4 percent. These differences suggest that policy success depends not merely on the existence of the program itself but also on governance quality, funding stability, oversight systems, and interagency coordination. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening implementation mechanisms to ensure that the MBG Program not only reaches a large number of beneficiaries but also generates meaningful improvements in nutritional status and educational outcomes (Desti Rahmawati et al., 2026).

National development requires a healthy, productive, and competitive generation capable of responding to increasingly complex global challenges. If the program succeeds in improving children's health and educational outcomes from an early age, its benefits may ultimately be reflected in future workforce quality. However, such outcomes cannot be achieved instantly, as improvements in human resource quality require long-term and consistent efforts.

Program sustainability remains a critical challenge from a national development perspective (Melo et al., 2024). Large-scale social programs are often vulnerable to policy changes resulting from political transitions, economic pressures, or fiscal constraints. When implementation lacks consistency, the expected benefits become more difficult to achieve. This situation demonstrates that the success of the Free Nutritious Meals Program depends not only on its initial objectives but also on the state's ability to maintain implementation quality, transparency, and long-term continuity.

CONCLUSIONS

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) has considerable potential as one of the government's efforts to improve the quality of human resources through the fulfillment of the population's nutritional needs. The provision of nutritious meals can support physical growth, cognitive development, and children's learning concentration. In the long term, improvements in nutritional quality contribute to the development of healthier, more productive, and more competitive human resources capable of supporting the achievement of national development goals. On the other hand, the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program also faces various challenges that require serious attention. The substantial budget allocation, distribution constraints, disparities in food quality across regions, and the potential misuse of public funds indicate that the program's success depends not only on its intended objectives but also on the quality of its governance and implementation. Therefore, the program can serve as a solution for national development when implemented effectively; however, it may become a burden if it is not managed efficiently, transparently, and sustainably.

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