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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public Perception of The Free Nutritious Meal Program in Tahalak Village Ujunggading

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze community perceptions of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Tahalak Ujung Gading Village, Batang Angkola District, South Tapanuli Regency. The MBG program is a government policy aimed at improving the nutritional status of the community, especially school children, and supporting the quality of human resources. This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to understand the community's experiences and views on the program. Research informants were selected through a purposive sampling technique, including parents of students, teachers, village officials, and community leaders. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed through data reduction, theme categorization, and meaning drawing. The results of the study indicate that in general the community has a positive perception of the MBG program. For parents, this program is seen as economic assistance that can reduce household expenses, while for teachers, this program helps improve students' concentration and focus on learning. Village officials and community leaders view this program as a form of government concern for community welfare. However, the study also found several technical obstacles such as delays in food distribution, limited menu variety, and lack of information to parents regarding the program's implementation. Overall, the MBG program is considered to provide tangible benefits to the community and has the potential to improve family welfare and the quality of learning in schools. Therefore, improvements in coordination, communication, and menu variety are needed to ensure optimal and sustainable program implementation.

Keywords: Child Nutrition; Family Welfare; Free Nutritious Meals; Public Perception; Public Policy.



ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis persepsi masyarakat terhadap pelaksanaan Program Makan Siang Bergizi Gratis (MBG) di Desa Tahalak Ujung Gading, Kecamatan Batang Angkola, Kabupaten Tapanuli Selatan. Program MBG merupakan kebijakan pemerintah yang bertujuan untuk meningkatkan status gizi masyarakat, khususnya anak-anak sekolah, dan mendukung kualitas sumber daya manusia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologis untuk memahami pengalaman dan pandangan masyarakat terhadap program tersebut. Informan penelitian dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling, termasuk orang tua siswa, guru, pejabat desa, dan tokoh masyarakat. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis melalui reduksi data, kategorisasi tema, dan penarikan makna. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa secara umum masyarakat memiliki persepsi positif terhadap program MBG. Bagi orang tua, program ini dipandang sebagai bantuan ekonomi yang dapat mengurangi pengeluaran rumah tangga, sedangkan bagi guru, program ini membantu meningkatkan konsentrasi dan fokus belajar siswa. Pejabat desa dan tokoh masyarakat memandang program ini sebagai bentuk kepedulian pemerintah terhadap kesejahteraan masyarakat. Namun, penelitian ini juga menemukan beberapa kendala teknis seperti keterlambatan distribusi makanan, variasi menu yang terbatas, dan kurangnya informasi kepada orang tua mengenai implementasi program. Secara keseluruhan, program MBG dianggap memberikan manfaat nyata bagi masyarakat dan berpotensi meningkatkan kesejahteraan keluarga dan kualitas pembelajaran di sekolah. Oleh karena itu, perbaikan dalam koordinasi, komunikasi, dan variasi menu diperlukan untuk memastikan implementasi program yang optimal dan berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: gizi anak; kesejahteraan keluarga; makanan bergizi gratis; persepsi publik; kebijakan publik.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Developing quality human resources is one of the main pillars in realizing the national development vision towards Golden Indonesia 2045. This effort cannot be separated from adequately meeting the nutritional needs of the community, especially for vulnerable groups such as school-age children, toddlers, and pregnant and breastfeeding mothers. From a public policy perspective, fulfilling the right to adequate food and nutrition is a state responsibility that must be realized through planned, integrated, and sustainable policies (Nango et al., 2025). In recent years, the issues of stunting, malnutrition, and unequal access to nutritious food have become strategic issues in national health development. These problems not only impact individual health but also affect cognitive development, learning capacity, and the productivity of future generations. According to data from the Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI), the prevalence of stunting has decreased, but it still requires serious attention, especially in rural areas. This indicates a gap between designed policies and actual conditions in society (Pambudi, 2024).

This problem is influenced by several factors, these include family economic constraints, program distribution constraints in rural areas, low nutritional knowledge, and suboptimal policy communication to the public. To address these issues, the government established the National Nutrition Agency and launched the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG), which aims to improve

nutritional status while supporting the learning process. (National Nutrition Agency, 2024) In public policy studies, public perception of programs can be explained through the Theory of Symbolic Interactionism and the Construction of Social Reality, which emphasizes that the meaning of policies is formed from the experiences and social interactions of the community. The context of Tahalak Ung Gading Village as a rural area with diverse economic conditions is important in understanding the implementation of this program (Bappenas, 2025). Based on preliminary findings, parents view the program as financial assistance, while teachers see it as improving learning concentration. However, there are challenges such as delayed distribution, menu variations, and a lack of public information. These differing perceptions indicate that the public is not homogeneous in its interpretation of the policy. Therefore, it is important to examine public perceptions as a basis for program evaluation (Case et al., 2025).

Previous studies on food assistance programs in school settings have generally focused on quantitative approaches, such as measuring children's nutritional status or the program's administrative effectiveness. Research on the subjective dimension, particularly regarding how communities interpret nutritious meal programs as a social practice at the local level, remains relatively limited. Yet, understanding public perception plays a crucial role in determining the success of public policy. Positive perceptions can encourage community participation and support for the program, while negative perceptions have the potential to hinder policy implementation on the ground (Eliza et al., 2024).

Therefore, a study of public perceptions of the MBG Program is crucial, particularly in the context of rural communities. Analyzing community experiences and perspectives can provide a more comprehensive picture of how the policy is implemented and the extent to which the program truly functions as an instrument for improving community welfare, rather than simply being understood as temporary assistance (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025).

Based on the background description presented above, this study aims to examine community perceptions regarding the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Tahalak Village, Ung Gading. The focus of the research is not limited to describing community views regarding the program's goals and benefits, but also seeks to examine how these perceptions are formed through the interaction of various social, economic, and cultural factors that develop in the local community (Statistics, 2024). Using a qualitative approach, this research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, assessments, and responses of the community as a group that directly benefits from the program.

Academically, this research has relevance because it was carried out in the early stages of implementing the MBG Program as one of the national strategic policies in the field of nutritional fulfillment (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025). Analysis of public perception in the early phase of policy implementation is important because it can provide an overview of the level of public acceptance, while also serving as a basis for a more contextual policy evaluation process. The findings of this study are expected to provide constructive input for the policy improvement process, particularly in adapting program implementation to the social conditions of the community at the local level. In addition to providing empirical contributions, this research is also expected to enrich academic

studies in the field of community development and public policy, particularly those related to the implementation of community-based social intervention programs. From a practical perspective, the results of this study are expected to be a consideration for local governments and program implementers in improving the effectiveness of implementation, transparency of management, and sustainability of the Free Nutritious Meal Program at the village level.

Qualitative research in public policy studies focuses on how individuals and social groups interpret a policy through their experiences, interpretations, and social interactions. This approach views policy not merely as a formal document or written rule, but as a social practice understood and implemented by various actors in everyday life. Therefore, subjective experiences, social meanings, and narratives that develop within society are crucial elements in the analysis process. Theoretically, this research is based on the perspective of symbolic interactionism and the theory of social reality construction, which developed from the traditions of phenomenological and interpretive thought in the social sciences.

The Symbolic Interactionism perspective, pioneered by George Herbert Mead and later developed by Herbert Blumer, explains that social meaning is formed through the process of human interaction. In this interaction, individuals interpret the symbols, language, and actions that emerge in their social environment. Thus, public policy is not only understood as administrative regulations, but also as a social process that is continuously interpreted, implemented, and negotiated by the community and the institutions involved. In the context of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), for example, the concept of "nutritious food" is not only determined by government policy standards, but is also shaped through the understanding, experience, and discussions that develop among the community, program implementers, and local institutions involved in its implementation (Erlinawati, 2025).

This view aligns with the Theory of Social Construction of Reality introduced by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. This theory explains that social reality does not emerge as something completely objective and separate from humans, but rather is formed through a continuous process of social interaction. This reality is produced and reproduced through social practices, collective narratives, and the power relations that develop within society. In the context of health policy or social programs, community experiences of a program can vary due to the influence of local dynamics, the role of village elites, parental involvement, and the contribution of educational institutions in implementing the program.

Based on this theoretical framework, this study starts from the assumption that community perceptions of the MBG program cannot be understood solely as individual responses to government policy. These perceptions are the result of social interactions influenced by local social structures, collective community experiences, and power relations that develop at the local level. Therefore, this study does not focus on quantitatively measuring the policy's impact, but rather on how communities interpret the program within the context of their social lives. These interpretations are formed through historical experiences, cultural values, and social practices that occur in the daily lives of village communities. To explain how public perceptions of a policy are formed, this study also utilizes two additional relevant theoretical frameworks. These theories help

broaden our understanding of the policy-making process by examining it not only from the perspective of social interactions but also from the dynamics of policy structures and practices at the local level.

This research refers to the Interpretive Theory of Public Policy, extensively developed by Frank Fischer and Maarten Hajer. This perspective views policy implementation as more than just a technical process of implementing government-determined rules. Instead, policy is understood as an interpretive process involving various actors with different backgrounds, interests, and understandings. In this approach, policy is seen as a social discourse (policy as discourse) that is continuously interpreted and negotiated by actors in the field. Thus, the meaning of policy can change according to the social, cultural, and political context in which the policy is implemented. This research also uses the Community-Based Food Security perspective, which emphasizes the importance of local experience and knowledge in understanding how communities assess programs related to food and welfare. This approach positions communities as the primary actors in determining the success of a program, as their perceptions of food availability, access, and quality are strongly influenced by socioeconomic conditions and daily practices that develop in the community environment.

By combining these two theoretical frameworks, this research not only examines the process of policy interpretation through social interactions, as explained in the symbolic interactionist perspective, but also considers how the policy structures and narratives constructed by the government are internalized, reinterpreted, or even questioned by communities in the practice of social life at the village level. This approach allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how public policy is understood and implemented in the local context

To clearly position this research within the body of scientific research, a review of several previous studies addressing public perceptions, nutrition policy implementation, and food aid programs is necessary. This review aims not only to summarize previous research findings but also to identify the approaches used, limitations of the analysis, and areas for further research. Sari and Nugroho (2018) Examining how parents perceive the school feeding program in urban Central Java. The results indicate that most parents view the program primarily as economic assistance for families, rather than as an effort to improve children's health. While this study used a phenomenological approach to understand respondents' subjective experiences, its limited focus on parental perspectives and the urban context leaves the dynamics of the roles of other actors—such as teachers or local officials—uncovered. Furthermore, this study does not fully explore how power relations at the local level influence how communities interpret the program. Yuliana (2019) Highlighting teachers' experiences implementing a school nutrition program in the Flores region. The study found that teachers not only implemented the policy administratively but also adapted it to classroom practices. However, because the analysis focused more on teachers' experiences as the primary actors, this study failed to account for the broader interactions between teachers, parents, schools, and village institutions in shaping a shared understanding of the program.

Rahmawati et al. (2020) Using an interpretive approach to examine the implementation of food aid distribution in Eastern Indonesia, the study found that some communities viewed the food aid program not only as a form of social support but also as a local political instrument that could strengthen the legitimacy of certain actors. While this research is supported by a wealth of qualitative data, the analysis focused more on the political dimension of the policy and did not delve deeply into the meaning of the daily experiences of community members as program recipients. Hasan and Dewi (2022) Examining the implementation of school feeding programs outside Java, this study emphasizes the importance of community participation. This study shows that the program's success is heavily influenced by the involvement of local social networks. The research also found differences in perspectives between formal actors such as teachers and government officials and informal actors, such as parents. However, this research has not yet deeply analyzed how these differences in meaning are shaped by the dynamics of power relations that develop at the local level. Kristanto and Wulandari (2025) Evaluating the national nutrition program using a policy network approach. This study reveals differing interpretations of the program's objectives between national and local actors. While the analysis is comprehensive in mapping inter-institutional relationships, it does not delve deeply into the experiences and interpretations of the community, the program's primary target group.

Several general trends can be identified from these studies. First, many studies show that communities often view food programs not only as health interventions but also as a form of economic assistance or even as part of local political dynamics. Second, most studies still focus on a single group of actors, thus under-delineating the meaningful interactions between various social actors. Third, analysis of the power relations that influence the formation of public perceptions is still relatively limited.

The conceptual framework in this study is based on a synthesis of theoretical foundations and the results of previous research. Through this synthesis, this study seeks to understand how public perceptions of a policy do not emerge spontaneously, but rather are formed through social processes involving various actors and everyday experiences. Therefore, this research framework integrates three interrelated main dimensions. This research highlights the process of constructing social meaning that emerges from repeated interactions among various social actors at the local level. In this context, the community is not only the recipient of policies, but also plays an active role in interpreting and giving meaning to these policies through conversations, shared experiences, and everyday social practices that develop within the community. This process occurs within the social space of Tahalak Ujung Gading Village, where social relationships between residents, families, educational institutions, and village officials contribute to shaping the community's perspective on the programs being implemented.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to deeply understand the community's experiences and perspectives on the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG). This approach was chosen because the research focuses not on statistical measurements but rather on how the community perceives, understands, and gives meaning to the program in their daily lives (Case et al., 2025). This approach is used because it is in accordance with the research objectives, namely to examine public perceptions formed through experience and social interaction, as explained in the symbolic interactionism approach and the construction of social reality. Epistemologically, this research is based on an interpretive paradigm that views that each individual can have a different understanding of the same policy, so that public perception is understood as the result of their experience, social interaction, and environmental conditions.

The research was conducted in Tahalak Ujung Gading Village, Batang Angkola District, South Tapanuli Regency, which is characterized by a rural community with the majority working as farmers and in the informal sector. Therefore, these socioeconomic conditions serve as an important context in understanding community perceptions of government programs. This location was selected based on the existence of nutritional issues and limited access to food that are relevant to the research focus. The research subjects were community members directly involved in the implementation of the MBG program, selected through purposive sampling techniques. These included parents or guardians of students, teachers or school staff, village officials, and community or religious leaders who were considered knowledgeable and involved in the program. Additional informants were possible through snowball sampling until data saturation was reached. This selection of informants aimed to obtain a variety of perspectives based on different social roles, thereby providing a more comprehensive picture of community perceptions (Syafiqoh, 2025).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, direct observation of program implementation in schools, and documentation in the form of policies, activity archives, school data, and supporting photographs. The data obtained were then analyzed through a process of data reduction, grouping and categorization based on main themes such as program benefits, food quality, government roles, and implementation constraints, as well as drawing meaning by interpreting the relationship between community experiences and the village social context. This analysis process was carried out to identify the relationship between problems that occurred, causal factors, and community perceptions of the MBG program. To maintain data validity, this study used source triangulation and technical triangulation, member checking with informants, systematic recording of the research process to maintain dependability, and researcher reflection to remain objective in interpreting field data (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025).

3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

3.1 An Analysis of Public Perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program: Implications for Family Welfare and Learning Focus

Differences in public perception regarding the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), particularly between parents as beneficiaries and teachers as implementers in schools. These differences in perception can impact the program's effectiveness because each party has a different focus and interests in interpreting the program's objectives.

The research results show that public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) vary across individuals. These perceptions vary depending on social status and the needs of each individual, both within the family and within the school community. In general, the public views this program as a form of government concern in supporting community welfare, particularly in meeting children's nutritional needs. However, how the public interprets the benefits of this program tends to be divided into two main perspectives: from a family's economic perspective and from an educational perspective at school.

These differences in perception are influenced by several factors, including family socioeconomic conditions, differences in social roles, and direct experience in receiving program benefits. Families with irregular incomes tend to feel the economic impact more directly, while teachers place greater value on the program's impact on classroom learning. For many parents, especially those with irregular incomes, the MBG program is considered very helpful because it can reduce household expenses for children's food needs. This aligns with the concept of in-kind social assistance, which Syafiqoh believes is often more effective for low-income families because it directly addresses urgent basic needs like food (Syafiqoh, 2025). In the context of this research, parents viewed the program as a tangible form of assistance that could ease the family's economic burden while ensuring that their children still received food while at school. One informant stated:

"This program is very helpful because children receive food at school, so their pocket money can be used for other needs."

Another informant also stated:

"Now it's more economical, usually I have to give money for food and snacks every day."

This situation indicates a change in household spending management, where funds previously used for children's food can be diverted to other needs such as health care, education, or basic family needs. In family economics, this is known as the income effect, which occurs when reduced spending on one need allows a family to reallocate resources to other needs deemed important (Kuntariningsih et al., 2023). Therefore, the MBG program is not only seen as a program to fulfill children's nutritional needs, but also as a form of support for family welfare more broadly.

However, the program's meaning extends beyond the economic aspect. Another dimension emerged from the teachers' perspective, highlighting the program's impact on the learning process. Teachers stated that:

"From the school's perspective, it's not just about the free food. The children are more focused on their studies because no one complains of hunger anymore."

This statement confirms the hypothesis that children's nutritional status is directly correlated with cognitive capacity and learning concentration. According to human capital theory, investing in children's health and nutrition is a fundamental prerequisite for increasing future productivity and academic achievement. This is also supported by various studies showing that school meal programs can improve students' learning concentration and academic performance (Rozi et al., nd).

These findings suggest that although parents' initial motivation may be driven by economic needs, the expected long-term impact of this program is an increase in the quality of human resources through improved nutritional status which has implications for academic achievement (Health, 2023). This difference in emphasis between parents and teachers reflects the complexity of public policy implementation, where beneficiaries and policy implementers have different but complementary priorities.

Parents see the program as a solution to immediate problems (daily finances), while teachers see it as a solution to structural problems (learning quality). Synergy between these two perspectives is crucial for the program's sustainability. Focusing solely on the economic aspects without addressing the nutritional quality that supports learning will reduce the program's long-term goals to mere short-term social assistance. (Kuntariningsih et al., 2023) Conversely, if the focus is solely on the educational aspect without considering the family's economic burden, parental participation may decline because it is deemed irrelevant to their immediate needs.

More deeply, the positive public reception of this program can also be linked to the government's legitimacy in providing public services. In the Indonesian political context, the free nutritious meal program is often seen as a manifestation of the state's commitment to human rights, particularly the rights to food and education. When the public accepts this program positively, it strengthens the government's political legitimacy at the grassroots level (Erlinawati, 2025).

However, it's important to note that this positive reception doesn't necessarily guarantee program effectiveness if it's not supported by a robust distribution mechanism. Positive perceptions generated by direct economic assistance can create strong social capital, but they can also create high expectations that must be carefully managed by the government. If distribution fails or quality declines, public disappointment can be exacerbated by already high expectations.

Therefore, understanding public perceptions should form the basis for a transparent and accountable public communication strategy. This study also shows that public perceptions are strongly influenced by their direct experience with the program. Mothers who experienced savings in pocket money had more positive perceptions than those who may not have experienced a direct economic impact. This indicates that the program is most effective for families on the poverty threshold, where any reduction in expenses has a high marginal value. For wealthier families, the program may simply be viewed as an additional benefit without a significant impact on economic well-being, which could raise issues of equity in access to program benefits. (Syafiqoh, 2025).

3.2. Dynamics of Program Implementation Effectiveness: Challenges in Logistics, Communication, and the Role of Field Bureaucracy

The main problem in terms of the effectiveness of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is the gap between the policies designed at the central level and the operational reality in the field, particularly in terms of logistics distribution, information communication, and consistency of implementation between schools (Sazali, 2025). This gap indicates that although the program has been running, its implementation has not been fully optimal.

In terms of implementation effectiveness, research findings indicate that although the program is running, there is a gap between the designed policies and operational realities on the ground. This aligns with the policy implementation theory proposed by (Sazali, 2025), which states that the success of policy implementation is highly dependent on resources, inter-agency communication, and the characteristics of implementing agents. In the context of the Free Nutritious Meals Program, the primary implementing agents are schools and food service providers, which operate under the supervision of the education and health bureaucracies.

Problems in this implementation are influenced by several main factors, namely:

1. limitations and vulnerabilities of the supply chain,
2. coordination between institutions is not optimal,
3. limitations of the information communication system to the public, as well as
4. dependence on the capacity of individual implementers at the field level.

The finding that "food distribution was relatively regular and children received their meals on schedule" indicates that basic distribution mechanisms have been established and are functioning reasonably well. This is a positive indicator that the school's operational capacity to manage food logistics is adequate. (Sari, 2025).

However, there are notes regarding the delay in distribution conveyed by the teacher:

"Sometimes there are slight delays, but generally it works. The kids still get to eat."

This indicates vulnerabilities in the supply chain that are not fully controlled. These delays can be caused by various factors, such as transportation issues, production delays from suppliers, and suboptimal coordination between relevant agencies and schools. This aligns with World Bank findings that, in developing countries, logistical and bureaucratic constraints are often the main obstacles to implementing social assistance programs (Sukmasari et al., 2025).

Another respondent from the school also said:

"If the delivery from the supplier is a bit late, we have to adjust the child's meal schedule."

Meanwhile, from a parent's perspective, one informant stated:

"The important thing is that the child continues to eat, even if sometimes the time is delayed."

This statement shows that despite operational constraints, the impact on beneficiaries can still be minimized.

It's important to note that despite the delay, the teacher's response, stating that it was "generally going well," demonstrates flexibility and adaptability on the part of the school. In this case, teachers and school staff act as street-level bureaucrats with the autonomy to make decisions on the ground to ensure the program continues despite obstacles. This flexibility is crucial for maintaining the program's sustainability at the micro level (Hasniati, 2022).

However, this reliance on individual initiative can also be problematic, as it can lead to inconsistencies between schools. Schools with proactive resources and educators tend to be able to manage programs effectively, while schools with limited capacity are likely to experience greater obstacles. Therefore, clearer and more uniform standard operating procedures (SOPs) are needed. Besides logistics, another major challenge is information communication. The findings indicate that:

"There are notes regarding communication of information to parents which are considered not entirely clear, especially regarding certain types of food and schedules."

This indicates an information gap between program organizers and the community. This is one factor contributing to the suboptimal participation and supervision from parents.

A parent respondent said:

"We don't always know what's on the menu or when there will be changes to the schedule."

Another respondent also added:

"If we had clearer information, we could monitor and ensure that our children were eating well."

In policy communication theory, information transparency is key to building public trust and increasing community participation. Suboptimal communication can create uncertainty and even potential distrust in a program. Furthermore, implementation effectiveness is also related to oversight and accountability. (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025) Field observations indicate that the food distribution process takes place within the school environment under teacher supervision. While this is a positive step, internal oversight alone is not enough to ensure complete transparency.

From a good governance perspective, public accountability demands community involvement in the oversight process. Without such involvement, programs risk being seen as mere administrative formalities. Therefore, more participatory oversight mechanisms are needed, such as involving school committees or parent representatives.

In line with that, one of the teacher respondents stated:

"If parents were also involved, perhaps this program could be more transparent and better."

Thus, the effectiveness of the Free Nutritious Meal Program is determined not only by the success of logistics distribution, but also by the quality of communication, inter-agency coordination, and the level of community participation. Strengthening these aspects is key to bridging the gap between policy and implementation on the ground (Sukmasari et al., 2025).

3.3 Food Quality and Sensory Acceptance Analysis: Implications for Nutrition and Consumer Preferences

Food quality is a key indicator in assessing the success of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG), as its primary goal is to improve children's nutritional status. Although the food provided is generally considered good and filling, this study found issues such as limited menu variety (menu fatigue) and mismatched food preferences among some children. This issue is important because low food acceptance can have a direct impact on children's suboptimal nutritional intake, which ultimately hinders the achievement of the program's goals. (Habib & Pratiwi, nd).

Some factors that cause this problem to arise include:

1. Limited menu variations, thus causing boredom in children.
2. Differences in individual preferences, which is influenced by cultural background, eating habits at home, and health conditions.
3. Menu planning is still centralized, so it is less adaptive to local food potential.
4. Lack of participation of parents and students, in providing input on the menu provided.

These findings indicate that social and cultural aspects have a significant role in determining the success of school-based nutrition intervention programs.

In the study of nutrition and consumer behavior, the concept of food acceptance explains that food acceptance is influenced by sensory characteristics such as taste, aroma, texture, and variety. Furthermore, menu fatigue theory states that repeated consumption of the same food can decrease appetite and interest in eating (Kuntariningsih et al., 2023). This results in a decrease in overall energy and nutrient intake. Recent research also shows that the success of school meal programs is heavily influenced by the appropriateness of menus to local preferences and stakeholder engagement. Therefore, a participatory approach is crucial to improving program effectiveness.

The results of interviews with various respondents showed variations in perceptions of food quality:

A student's statement states:

"It's delicious, ma'am. Sometimes there's chicken, sometimes eggs. I like it,"

In nutrition literature, food acceptance is strongly influenced by taste, texture, and menu variety. If children enjoy the food they are given, they are more likely to finish the portion, which directly contributes to their daily calorie and nutrient intake. Furthermore, early sensory experiences also influence children's long-term food preferences.

However, problems arise when sensory quality isn't balanced with menu variety. These findings reveal critical concerns regarding menu variety. Several parents reported that:

"It's already good, but if possible, there should be more variety so that children don't get bored."

This statement highlights a key contributing factor, namely menu fatigue (boredom with repetitive menus). In the context of eating psychology, menu variety is crucial for maintaining children's interest in eating and ensuring a diverse nutritional intake. Research shows that a lack of dietary variety can decrease appetite and increase aversion to certain foods (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025).

The teacher also observed that:

"There are children who finish everything, and there are also those who don't really like certain menus."

which indicates that children's food preferences are individual and influenced by cultural factors, family habits, and previous eating experiences.

Another respondent (student) also stated:

"If the menu is always the same, sometimes it gets boring."

This reinforces the fact that menu variation is one of the main causes of inconsistent food consumption by students.

In terms of food safety, field observations showed that food was served in adequate portions and appeared clean, and no serious complaints related to cleanliness or food safety were reported. This is a positive indicator that hygiene standards have been effectively implemented. Food safety is a key prerequisite for any school meal program, as failure to meet this requirement can seriously impact children's health and undermine public trust in the program (Case et al., 2025). However, maintaining consistent quality across regions presents a challenge. This is related to structural factors such as service provider capacity, distribution oversight, and inconsistent operational standards.

The recurring issue of menu variation also indicates the need for a more holistic approach to menu planning. Menus must not only meet macro and micronutrient standards but also consider cultural aspects and local preferences. In the context of Indonesia, with its high culinary diversity, a decentralized menu approach could be a solution to better suit the tastes of children in each region. Furthermore, from the perspective of eating behavior theory, children's food preferences are influenced by experience, social environment, and exposure to a variety of foods. Therefore, nutrition education is a crucial factor in increasing food acceptance. Children need to be encouraged to try new foods to avoid becoming trapped in selective eating patterns. (Case et al., 2025)

A teacher also said:

"If children are accustomed to eating different foods, over time they will want to try them."

Meanwhile, parents stated:

"If the menu is in accordance with the habits at home, children usually eat more easily."

This shows that parental involvement is also an important factor in increasing food acceptance.

The food quality was assessed as quite good but still needed improvement in terms of variety, indicating that the program has reached an adequate baseline, but is not yet optimal. Key contributing factors that need improvement include a lack of menu variety, differences in individual preferences, and the suboptimal integration of cultural aspects and nutrition education. Therefore, improving program quality can be done through:

1. Locally based menu diversification
2. Integration of nutrition education for students and parents
3. Community involvement in menu evaluation
4. Strengthening the food quality monitoring system

Thus, the program serves not only as a nutritional intervention but also as a means of fostering sustainable healthy eating behaviors. A participatory approach involving schools, parents, and food service providers will increase the program's acceptability while ensuring that the food provided is not only nutritious but also palatable and safe to consume.

3.4 Dynamics of Perception Based on Social Position and Implications for Policy Legitimacy

Differences in perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program based on social status, which have implications for different forms of support and legitimacy for the policy. These differences have the potential to lead to a lack of synchronization in program implementation if not managed properly. These differences in perception are influenced by several factors, including socioeconomic conditions, differences in social roles, direct experience with the program, and level of understanding of the policy's objectives (Rozi & Mukarromah, 2025). The differences in perceptions based on social roles identified in this study are highly significant for understanding the dynamics of public policy acceptance. The data show that parents primarily perceive the program as economic assistance and a form of government attention. Informants' statements that the program helps ease the family's economic burden, particularly for parents with irregular incomes, indicate that the program serves as an indirect income redistribution mechanism. One respondent stated:

"This program is very helpful, especially for those of us whose income is not fixed."

Another respondent also stated:

"Now children's pocket money can be diverted to other needs."

In development economics literature, in-kind social assistance programs, such as food assistance, are often more effective for poor families than cash assistance because they directly address basic needs that cannot be postponed. For parents, these programs are not simply additional benefits but rather urgent needs that alter the structure of the household budget (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025). Money previously allocated for children's school snacks can now be reallocated to other, more

priority needs, such as additional education costs, healthcare, or meeting other basic needs. This phenomenon is known as the income effect in family economics, where reduced consumption costs allow for the reallocation of a family's financial resources.

On the other hand, teachers view the program as supporting the learning process and student discipline. Teachers' statements that children are more focused on learning because no one complains of hunger anymore confirm the hypothesis that children's nutritional status is directly correlated with cognitive capacity and concentration. One teacher stated:

"Children are more focused on learning because they are not hungry."

Another teacher added:

"Now students are more active in class than before."

In human capital theory, investment in children's health and nutrition is a fundamental prerequisite for improving productivity and academic achievement in the future. This finding suggests that although parents' initial motivation may be driven by economic needs, the expected long-term impact of this program is an increase in the quality of human resources through improved nutritional status which has implications for academic achievement. (Kuntariningsih et al., 2023) This difference in emphasis between parents and teachers reflects the complexity of public policy implementation, where beneficiaries and policy implementers have different but complementary priorities. Parents view the program as a solution to immediate problems (daily finances), while teachers view the program as a solution to structural problems (learning quality). Synergy between these two perspectives is crucial for the program's sustainability. If the focus is solely on the economic aspect without considering the nutritional quality that supports learning, the program's long-term goals will be reduced to mere short-term social assistance. Conversely, if the focus is solely on the educational aspect without considering the family's economic burden, parental participation may decline because it is deemed irrelevant to their immediate needs.

Village officials view the program as part of a national policy that must be jointly supported. A statement from village officials stated:

"This is a national program, so we in the village support it. The important thing is that it's implemented well and doesn't cause problems."

This indicates the existence of bureaucratic hierarchy and loyalty to central policies as factors influencing their perceptions. In the context of Indonesian governance, village officials often function as extensions of the central government at the local level. Their support for this program reflects compliance with bureaucratic instructions, but also demonstrates an awareness of the importance of coordination between the central and regional governments. However, this statement also carries an implicit implication regarding implementation responsibility. When village officials emphasize that "the important thing is that the implementation is good," this indicates their recognition that the program's success depends not only on policy but also on execution on the ground. This aligns with Van Meter and Van Horn's policy implementation theory, which states that performance standards and resources are key factors in successful

implementation. Village officials are in a strategic position to ensure these performance standards are met, but they also have limited resources and authority that can hinder the program's effectiveness.

Community leaders emphasized the importance of program sustainability and transparency in its implementation. Community leaders stated:

"A program like this is good, but it must be continuously monitored to ensure it remains on track."

and other statements:

"There needs to be openness so that people believe that this program is running well,"

This indicates an awareness of the importance of public accountability as a factor in shaping perceptions. In the theory of good governance, transparency and accountability are fundamental principles that must be upheld to build public trust. When community leaders demand oversight, this demonstrates that they are not merely passive recipients of programs, but are actively involved in monitoring their implementation.

This difference suggests that social position influences perspectives on the program, although overall attitudes tend to be supportive. This confirms that in public policy implementation, no single perspective is dominant. Instead, there is a dynamic interaction between various perspectives that influence each other. Parents provide social legitimacy through economic support, teachers provide pedagogical legitimacy through academic support, village officials provide bureaucratic legitimacy through administrative support, and community leaders provide moral legitimacy through supervision (Sazali, 2025).

The synergy of these four perspectives is crucial to creating an ecosystem that supports the program's sustainability. If any one element is weak, for example, ineffective oversight from community leaders, the risk of abuse increases. If economic support from parents is lacking, participation will decline. Therefore, communication strategies and policy coordination must be designed to accommodate and integrate these various perspectives to ensure the program runs harmoniously and effectively.

4. DISCUSSION

The implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (*Makan Bergizi Gratis*/MBG) Program, despite its strategic importance for human capital development, has encountered significant structural barriers. These obstacles, particularly in logistics distribution, menu variety, and policy communication, underscore a persistent gap between policy design and operational realities (National Nutrition Agency, 2024). This problem does not arise in isolation but is influenced by several interconnected factors: supply chain vulnerability, limited information systems, weak inter-agency coordination, and suboptimal public communication. From the perspective of policy

implementation theory, this condition reflects the suboptimal integration between the variables of resources, communication, and bureaucratic structure, as explained by Van Meter and Van Horn (1975).

Field data reveals that distribution delays at certain times constitute a recurring challenge. These delays indicate vulnerabilities within the supply chain that are not fully controlled. This situation suggests that the distribution system remains reactive rather than preventative, meaning problems are addressed only after they occur rather than anticipated beforehand. In modern supply chain management theory, this indicates low supply chain visibility—the system's inability to monitor the movement of goods in real time (Gelli & Suwa, 2024). Without adequate visibility, the potential for delays will continue to recur.

These delays can also be understood as a result of fragmented coordination between institutions, where food providers, education agencies, and schools are not yet fully integrated into a single, synchronous work system. In this context, bureaucracy is a major factor; logistical obstacles in developing countries often stem from the complexity of administrative coordination (Suprpto et al., 2025). Research on the early implementation of the MBG program confirms that while the program has significant potential to improve human capital, it faces implementation challenges related to food safety, logistics, and regulatory coherence (Suprpto et al., 2025). Similarly, a study on school feeding program coordination in Bojonegoro, East Java, found that coordination remains largely operational and weak in terms of institutionalization, with schools acting as passive recipients while production units control menu selection, production, and logistics, resulting in asymmetrical, largely one-way information exchange (Koordinasi SPPG Sekolah dalam Program Makan Siang Bergizi Gratis (MBG) di Indonesia, 2026).

Despite these delays, the impact on students has been relatively minimized, indicating an adaptive mechanism at the field level. Teachers and schools act as street-level bureaucrats with discretion to ensure services continue. However, this flexibility also indicates a dependence on the capacity of individual implementers. If this adaptability is not evenly distributed across schools, gaps in service quality will emerge. Therefore, stronger standardization of operational procedures is needed to ensure consistent implementation.

Some parents have perceived the menu variety as insufficient, indicating challenges in menu planning. A deeper analysis reveals that this issue is not only related to the availability of food ingredients but also to a planning approach that is not yet based on consumer preferences. In eating behavior theory, the success of nutritional interventions is highly dependent on sensory perception. Nutritious food is not necessarily effective if the child does not like it.

The emerging phenomenon of menu fatigue indicates that the program has not fully integrated psychological aspects into policy planning. In the long term, this condition can reduce children's food consumption, ultimately reducing the program's effectiveness in achieving nutritional goals. International research supports this concern. A study on learner preferences in a South African

school feeding program found that breakfast meals lacking flavor or being poorly prepared led to reduced consumption, with learners recommending menu diversification to include more appealing options (Learner preferences and perceptions of breakfast meals offered in a South African school feeding programme, 2026). Similarly, research on Ghana's school feeding programme revealed notable gaps in meal diversity and compliance, with caterers often deviating from planned menus due to food price inflation and a lack of clear purchasing guidelines (Liguori et al., 2026).

In Indonesia's diverse culinary culture, an overly centralized approach to menu planning has the potential to ignore local preferences. Menu decentralization is crucial to make the program more contextual and adaptive to regional needs. A study evaluating an integrated school feeding approach in the Philippines demonstrated that improving and integrating school gardens, canteen menus, and staff training can significantly enhance school food environments in resource-limited settings, with strong leadership and community participation being key success factors (Hoang et al., 2026).

The lack of detailed information provided to the public regarding the program's mechanisms indicates an information gap. A more critical analysis reveals that policy communication remains one-way (top-down), with the government focusing more on program delivery than on building dialogue with the public. In policy communication theory, effective communication must be two-way and participatory. This limited information also impacts low community involvement in program oversight. However, in the concept of good governance, community participation is a crucial element in ensuring transparency and accountability.

Research on public communication strategies for the MBG program confirms that effective public communication can increase public understanding of the importance of balanced nutrition, implementation transparency, and long-term benefits for children's health and education (Strategi Komunikasi Publik untuk Mendukung Keberlanjutan MBG, 2025). Furthermore, a study on school public communication practices in South Tangerang found that structured, transparent, and participatory communication positively supports MBG implementation, as reflected in reduced misinformation, improved parental acceptance, and smoother program execution (Garuda - Garba Rujukan Digital, 2026).

Despite these communication challenges, no open rejection of the program has been found. The existing obstacles are primarily technical and administrative in nature. This indicates that the program's legitimacy remains very strong in the eyes of the public. From a legitimacy theory perspective, this reflects high initial trust in the government. However, this trust is dynamic. If technical obstacles are not addressed promptly, trust erosion could occur in the long term. Therefore, it is crucial for the government to proactively address these obstacles.

The next problem is the potential for community dependency on the program (policy lock-in) and demands for improved service quality. Most informants hope the program will continue, indicating

that the program has become part of the community's social routine. In public policy analysis, this condition indicates the formation of policy embeddedness, where a policy is no longer viewed as an external intervention but has become part of the social system. However, this condition also carries risks. High dependency without a prepared exit strategy can create fiscal pressures for the government in the future.

Furthermore, community expectations are not limited to sustainability but also to quality improvement. From a co-production perspective, community involvement in providing input demonstrates that they are no longer the objects of policy but have transformed into active subjects. Research on sustainable school meal programs emphasizes that participatory approaches have proven to lead to improved acceptance, ownership, and trust (How to measure the sustainability of school meals: Inspirations for participatory social science in Indonesia for optimizing society's benefits from the Makan Bergizi Gratis policy, 2026). These findings indicate that the implementation of the MBG Program is in a transition phase from a distributive policy to a participatory one. The program's primary challenge is no longer community acceptance but rather optimizing the implementation system. Addressing the structural barriers requires strengthening supply chain visibility, decentralizing menu planning to accommodate local preferences, establishing two-way participatory communication channels, and institutionalizing coordination mechanisms across stakeholders. Without these improvements, the program risks perpetuating the gap between policy design and operational realities, ultimately undermining its potential to improve nutrition and human capital development in Indonesia.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study shows that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is perceived by the community as a policy that provides tangible benefits, both economically and educationally. Parents view the program as economic assistance that reduces household expenses, in line with the concepts of in-kind transfer and income effect. Meanwhile, teachers view the program as a supporting factor in improving student learning concentration, in line with human capital theory. Village officials and community leaders view the program as a form of state presence that strengthens the policy's legitimacy.

Despite technical challenges, the program still garnered public support. This demonstrates that policy success is strongly influenced by tangible benefits perceived and direct community experience in its implementation. Therefore, the MBG Program holds significant potential as an instrument for improving welfare and education quality. This research demonstrates that public policies that address citizens' basic needs have significant potential to gain strong social legitimacy, while also creating room for improvement in implementation and communication to optimize their benefits.

Based on the limitations of this study, future researchers are encouraged to expand the scope of analysis by employing a quantitative or mixed-methods approach to statistically examine how socio-demographic factors across Batang Angkola District influence public acceptance of the

program. Additionally, it is crucial to conduct longitudinal studies to measure the tangible impact of the initiative on students' nutritional status and academic performance, combined with comparative studies across different villages to assess the consistency of public perception in areas with varying degrees of accessibility. Lastly, future research should explore public governance, budgetary transparency, and the efficiency of the local food supply chain to ensure the sustainability and accountability of the Free Nutritious Meal Program at the regional level.

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