

# The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) Policy as an Instrument for Human Resource Development Between the Reality of Implementation and Legal Ideals

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**Abstract:** Human resource development is the main foundation for successful national development, where nutritional quality is a determining factor in improving the health, education, and productivity of the community. The Free Nutritious Meals Programme (MBG) was introduced as a strategic government policy to reduce stunting rates and strengthen human resource development through nutritional interventions in schools. However, legally and empirically, the implementation of MBG still faces a gap between *das sollen* (legal ideals) and *das sein* (implementation realities). From a legal perspective, the absence of clear hierarchical regulations has resulted in weak accountability, food quality standards, and inter-agency coordination. Meanwhile, from a policy perspective, disparities in quality between regions, potential health risks, and fiscal sustainability challenges have been identified. This study uses a qualitative method with a normative-analytical approach through literature review to examine the compatibility between legal norms and MBG policy practices. The results show that MBG must be placed within the framework of a *rechtstaat* by strengthening the legal basis, food safety standards, equitable access, and cross-sector integration. Strengthening regulatory and governance aspects is expected to enable MBG to become not just a social programme, but a legal instrument that guarantees children's rights to adequate nutrition and promotes sustainable and equitable human resource development in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Public Policy, MBG, Legal Ideals

## Introduction

Human resource development constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the success of national development. The quality of human resources is strongly influenced by nutrition, health, and education from an early age. The phenomenon of stunting and malnutrition in Indonesia remains a serious issue, as the prevalence of stunting in 2023 was still recorded at 21.6 per cent according to the Ministry of Health, meaning that more than one in five children experiences impaired growth (Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2023). This condition directly affects cognitive ability, academic performance, and economic productivity in the future (Lestari et al., 2024). Consequently, nutritional intervention has become an urgent necessity in order to reduce the multidimensional impact of malnutrition on national development. In response to this issue, the government has introduced the Free Nutritious Meal programme (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG), which aims to improve the nutritional status of schoolchildren, reduce stunting rates, and enhance the quality of education and health among the younger generation. The MBG programme is positioned as a strategic policy that not only focuses on improving nutrition but also serves as an instrument for human resource development by addressing aspects of health, education, local economic empowerment, and social protection (Ludher, 2024; Suprpto, 2025).

In practice, however, the implementation of MBG still faces significant challenges. From the perspective of governance, early evaluations indicate weaknesses in supervisory mechanisms, uneven distribution, and disparities in programme quality across regions (Suprpto, 2025; Febryanti, 2025). In terms of food provision capacity, many kitchens or local providers have not yet met hygienic and food safety standards, thereby posing potential health risks (BPOM RI, 2024). Several regions have even reported cases of food poisoning related to meals provided under the MBG programme, reflecting weaknesses in quality control mechanisms (CNN Indonesia, 2025). Furthermore, programme success indicators tend to focus primarily on the number of meal portions distributed, while long-term impacts on nutritional status, educational attainment, and human resource development have not yet been systematically measured (Ludher, 2024). From a fiscal perspective, the programme also faces sustainability concerns, as the substantial budget

allocation raises questions regarding long-term financing consistency amid national budget limitations and competing development priorities (OECD, 2024). International literature indicates that school feeding programmes in many developing countries only achieve significant improvements in children's nutrition and educational outcomes when they are integrated with broader public health initiatives, sanitation improvements, and family nutrition education programmes (Watkins, 2024; Kristjansson et al., 2023). This evidence suggests that the success of the MBG programme cannot rely solely on the distribution of food but requires a coordinated multisectoral approach involving various institutions and stakeholders within the broader framework of human development.

Normatively, the MBG policy should function as an instrument for fulfilling citizens' fundamental rights as guaranteed by the constitution, particularly Articles 28C and 28H of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which affirm the rights of citizens to education, health, and welfare. The programme is also aligned with global commitments within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to ending hunger and improving health and well-being (UNDP, 2023). From the perspective of public policy, the MBG programme ideally should be implemented in accordance with the principles of good governance, policy accountability, and a commitment to social justice as the ultimate objective of development (Nugroho, 2024).

Within this framework, the MBG policy normatively requires clear legal certainty and robust accountability mechanisms in programme management as well as in the supervision of public expenditure (Nugroho, 2024). In addition, all meals distributed through the programme must comply with nutritional standards, hygiene requirements, and food safety regulations in accordance with public health provisions (BPOM RI, 2024). Policy design should also be grounded in strong scientific evidence and integrated with broader health, education, and community nutrition awareness programmes (Kristjansson et al., 2023). Equitable access represents another fundamental principle, ensuring that children in remote areas, economically disadvantaged communities, and other vulnerable groups receive equal benefits from the MBG programme (Hidayat, 2023). At the same time, fiscal sustainability constitutes a crucial factor in ensuring that the programme can operate not only in the short term but also in the long term through effective budget planning and the empowerment of local economic actors, including farmers and local food enterprises participating in the programme's supply chain (Fauzi & Sari, 2024). In practice, the reality of policy implementation reveals an imbalance between food availability, distribution, and quality standards provided to programme beneficiaries. Disparities in meal quality across regions remain evident due to limitations in infrastructure, service provider capacity, and distribution mechanisms (Febryanti, 2025). This condition reflects a gap between the empirical reality of policy implementation and the legal ideals that emphasise the fulfilment of adequate, nutritious, safe, and equitable food as a fundamental right of citizens within the broader framework of human resource development (Nugroho, 2024).

Furthermore, the dimension of fiscal sustainability illustrates a divergence between normative expectations and policy realities. In practice, programme implementation is often constrained by limited budget allocations, uncertain funding patterns, and potential inefficiencies in the utilisation of public funds (OECD, 2024). Normatively, however, public policy demands sustainable fiscal management through effective and efficient long-term budget planning oriented towards achieving social justice (Fauzi & Sari, 2024). Another challenge arises from policy fragmentation among ministries, government agencies, and regional administrations, which has weakened programme coordination and hindered effective policy integration at the implementation level (Suprpto, 2025). From the perspective of legal ideals, however, human development policies should be implemented through harmonisation and cross-sectoral integration in order to ensure coherence with the national development vision and the broader objectives of justice-oriented legal governance (Nugroho, 2024).

The gap between the reality of policy implementation and its normative legal ideals highlights the importance of comprehensive academic research on the MBG policy within the context of human resource development in Indonesia. Such research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between the normative dimensions of policy and its practical

implementation, while also identifying the factors contributing to the gap between the two. Through this approach, the study is expected to formulate policy improvement strategies that are not only technical but also normative in nature, thereby ensuring that the future implementation of the MBG policy aligns with legal norms, constitutional values, and the broader direction of globally competitive human resource development. The objectives of this research are to examine the reality of the implementation of the Governing-Based Management policy in human resource development in Indonesia, to explore the legal ideals that should guide the implementation of the policy, to identify the factors contributing to the gap between implementation reality and legal ideals, and to formulate strategies for aligning MBG policy implementation with legal norms and national development objectives.

### **Methods**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a normative–analytical method to examine the Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) policy as an instrument for human resource development in Indonesia by comparing *das sein*, which reflects the reality of policy implementation, and *das sollen*, which represents the legal ideals that should normatively guide the policy. The qualitative approach is adopted because it enables an in-depth analysis of legal norms, policy concepts, and various academic perspectives presented in the scientific literature (Novianti, 2024). The research is conducted through library research by utilising secondary data sources consisting of legislation, policy documents, official government reports, and relevant academic publications related to the research topic. This literature-based approach is used to identify concepts, theories, and normative frameworks associated with human resource development policies and the governance of social programmes (Fatahillah et al., 2025). Data are collected through a systematic literature search and subsequently analysed qualitatively using content analysis and thematic analysis to identify patterns, concepts, and relationships among ideas emerging from the reviewed sources (Fatahillah et al., 2025). The analysis is carried out descriptively and comparatively in order to examine the gap between legal norms and the reality of policy implementation. The validity of the data is ensured through document triangulation by comparing various legal and academic sources, thereby maintaining the objectivity, validity, and reliability of the research findings (Novianti, 2024; Novianti, 2025).

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **The Reality of the Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Policy in Human Resource Development in Indonesia**

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) programme in Indonesia demonstrates a complex and dynamic reality. This programme was designed as a strategic policy to improve the quality of human resources through the fulfilment of adequate nutritional needs for schoolchildren and vulnerable groups, with a very large target of beneficiaries. Analysis of various policy reports indicates that although the programme has reached millions of beneficiaries during the early stage of its implementation, its distribution remains uneven across regions in Indonesia. Remote areas and regions with limited infrastructure frequently experience delays in food distribution due to logistical constraints, inadequate transportation facilities, and suboptimal coordination among institutions (Ulil Albab Institute, 2025; Febryanti, 2025). These conditions indicate that the broad coverage of the programme has not yet been fully supported by the readiness of an adequate implementation system, thereby limiting the effectiveness of the programme in supporting human resource development and presenting a number of structural challenges.

The quality of food provided through the MBG programme has also become an important concern in various policy evaluations. Conceptually, a nutritious meal programme aims to improve children’s nutritional intake so that it can support learning concentration, increase energy levels, and encourage optimal physical growth. However, an evaluation conducted by the Center for Indonesia’s Strategic Development Initiatives shows that some of the menus provided in the MBG programme do not yet fully meet national nutritional standards and still require

improvement in terms of composition and variation (Center for Indonesia's Strategic Development Initiatives, 2025). This issue has attracted greater public attention following incidents of food poisoning involving thousands of beneficiaries, including schoolchildren, which were allegedly related to weak supervision and inadequate food safety procedures in the implementation of the programme (Reuters, 2025). Such incidents highlight the need to strengthen quality control, distribution supervision, and food safety standards so that the MBG programme can truly provide optimal health benefits.

In addition to issues concerning food quality, coordination among government institutions is also an important factor influencing the success of programme implementation. Several studies indicate that the implementation of the MBG programme involves multiple government institutions, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Social Affairs, thus requiring effective coordination mechanisms to ensure that the programme operates in an integrated manner. However, in practice, overlaps of functions, lack of policy synergy, and weak integrated monitoring systems among institutions are still frequently identified (Suprpto, 2025; Maharani & Siregar, 2024). These conditions have led to a number of implementation problems, such as food distribution that does not accurately reach the intended beneficiaries, delays in assistance delivery, and inconsistencies in service standards across regions. These governance issues not only affect the quality of programme implementation but may also reduce public trust in government policies.

From the perspective of human development, nutritious meal programmes have the potential to generate impacts through several key pathways. Such programmes can directly improve nutritional status by reducing the risks of malnutrition, stunting, and anaemia, and indirectly enhance learning ability by improving concentration, energy, and school attendance among students. In the long term, improved nutritional status may also increase labour productivity and overall human resource quality (World Bank, 2024). However, these impacts are highly dependent on the quality of the food provided, the adequacy of nutritional content, and the continuity of programme distribution. If one of these components does not function optimally, the impact on cognitive development and long-term productivity may be limited or even insignificant.

The heterogeneity of the impacts of the MBG programme is also influenced by various contextual factors at the household and community levels. Factors such as the socio-economic conditions of families, food consumption patterns, dietary culture, and the quality of the learning environment can influence the effectiveness of the programme in improving human resource quality. In some cases, differences in access to health and educational services result in uneven programme benefits across regions (Andin et al., 2025). Therefore, the evaluation of the MBG policy needs to consider these contextual variables so that the assessment of programme impact can be conducted more accurately and does not lead to attribution errors in policy analysis.

Another issue frequently identified in the evaluation of the MBG programme is the limitation of policy impact measurement systems. Most programme evaluations still focus on short-term indicators such as increased school attendance, whereas biological and cognitive indicators require longer observation periods. A more comprehensive measurement should include health indicators such as children's anthropometric status, haemoglobin levels to detect anaemia, and cognitive and academic indicators that reflect students' learning abilities (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025; Widyasari, 2025). With a more comprehensive evaluation system, the impact of the programme on human resource development can be assessed more objectively and based on scientific evidence.

### **Legal Ideals as the Guiding Principles for the Implementation of the MBG Policy**

The Free Nutritious Meal policy in Indonesia has a strong legal foundation that serves as a guideline for programme implementation in practice. Normatively, the policy is supported by various regulations and national development policy documents that emphasise the importance of improving the quality of human resources through the fulfilment of adequate nutritional needs. These regulations emphasise key principles that must be fulfilled in programme implementation, including equality of access, food quality and safety, cross-sector coordination, and sustainable programme financing (Suprpto, 2025; Maharani & Siregar, 2024).

The principle of equal access constitutes the main foundation for the implementation of the MBG policy. The programme is designed to ensure that all schoolchildren and vulnerable groups are able to access nutritious food without social or economic discrimination. In addition, the principles of food quality and safety are essential requirements in the programme, meaning that the meals provided must comply with national nutritional standards and be safe for consumption by children (Andin et al., 2025). Within the framework of development policy, the MBG programme is not merely understood as a form of social assistance but also as a strategic instrument for improving education, health, and public welfare.

Regulations governing the MBG programme also emphasise the importance of coordination among government institutions in implementing the programme. Reporting, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms are designed to ensure that food distribution is conducted effectively and in accordance with established standards. Furthermore, the principles of transparency and accountability in budget management constitute an essential part of the legal framework of this policy so that the use of public funds can be openly accounted for to society (Suprpto, 2025). Nevertheless, various studies indicate that although the legal framework of the MBG programme is relatively clear, its implementation in practice still requires stricter supervision and more consistent coordination to ensure that legal objectives and human resource development goals can be achieved optimally (Febryanti, 2025).

### **Factors Causing the Gap between the Reality of Implementation and the Legal Ideals of the MBG Policy**

The gap between the reality of the implementation of the MBG programme and the legal ideals guiding the policy is influenced by various structural and social factors. One of the primary factors is weak coordination among government institutions involved in programme implementation, which leads to overlapping authorities and inefficiencies in the process of food distribution (Herdiana, 2025; Febryanti, 2025). In addition, budget limitations and resource constraints constitute significant obstacles that affect the quality of programme implementation in different regions. Socio-economic conditions among beneficiary communities also influence the effectiveness of the MBG programme. Family economic conditions, food consumption patterns, and differences in dietary culture often affect the level of public acceptance of government programmes (Andin et al., 2025). Therefore, the success of the MBG programme does not solely depend on the quality of the policy formulation but also on the government's capacity to adapt programme implementation to the social conditions of communities in various regions.

### **Strategies to Align the Implementation of the MBG Policy with Legal Norms and National Development Goals**

Efforts to align the implementation of the MBG programme with legal norms and national development goals require a comprehensive policy approach. Strategies that can be undertaken include strengthening cross-sector coordination among relevant ministries, improving the institutional capacity of programme implementers, and enhancing policy monitoring and evaluation systems (Suprpto, 2025; Fajri & Mawangi, 2025). Strengthening coordination among institutions is crucial to prevent overlapping authorities and to ensure that food distribution can be conducted more effectively across all regions of Indonesia.

In addition, improving food quality and safety must become a primary priority in the implementation of the MBG programme. Developing menus that comply with national nutritional standards, providing training for food providers, and conducting regular food quality monitoring are important steps to ensure that the programme delivers optimal health benefits for schoolchildren (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025). Community-based approaches should also be strengthened through nutrition education, parental participation, and the involvement of local communities in supervising food distribution. Optimising funding and improving human resource capacity are also crucial factors in the strategy for policy alignment. Transparent and accountable budget management, supported by data-based monitoring and evaluation systems, will ensure that the implementation of the MBG programme adheres to the principles of good governance (Fajri & Mawangi, 2025). Through the combination of clear regulations, strong institutional

capacity, and active public participation, the MBG programme has significant potential to become an effective public policy instrument in supporting sustainable human resource development in Indonesia.

### Conclusion

The Free Nutritious Meals Policy (MBG) has a strong legal basis in the 1945 Constitution, particularly Articles 28C and 34, which guarantee citizens' rights to welfare and nutritious food. However, its implementation still faces a gap between the legal ideal (*das sollen*) and reality (*das sein*), mainly due to weak coordination between institutions, bureaucratic inefficiency, and suboptimal legal oversight. To strengthen its legitimacy and accountability, the MBG needs to have a hierarchical legal basis, such as a Presidential Regulation or Government Regulation, which confirms its authority, accountability mechanisms, and uniform operational standards. The principle of *rechtstaat* requires that all stages of programme implementation, from planning and procurement to distribution, be transparent and fair. Strengthening regulations, enforcing sanctions, and public participation in oversight are key to ensuring that the MBG is not merely a social programme, but a legal instrument that guarantees children's right to adequate nutrition and strengthens sustainable human resource development in Indonesia.

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