
Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program Draws Positive Attention at UN Headquarters in Geneva

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Abstract

Child nutrition fulfillment programs are an important issue in global development, especially in developing countries that are still facing the problem of inequality of access to nutritious food. One of the approaches that is widely applied is the school feeding program as an effort to improve children's health, welfare, and educational quality. Indonesia implements this policy through the Free Nutritious Eating Program (MBG) which also received positive attention in international forums at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in Geneva. This research aims to analyze the school feeding program policy through the MBG Program and examine the social and cultural implications it causes. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through documentation studies, indirect observations of seminar materials, and literature studies from relevant scientific sources. Data analysis is carried out through data reduction, descriptive presentation, and systematic conclusion drawing by triangulating sources. The results of the study show that the MBG Program has a strategic role in improving children's nutritional status, supporting the learning process, and becoming a long-term investment in human resource development. In addition, this program also contributes to strengthening the national food system through the use of local food and has implications for the formation of community consumption culture. However, the implementation of the program still faces challenges in distribution, nutrition quality monitoring, and coordination between institutions. Thus, the MBG Program embodies health, education, food policy, and cultural identity in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

In the global context, one of the issues that is getting more attention is food policy and child welfare (Nwagboso, 2026). Nutrition problems are still a major challenge in various countries, especially in developing countries (Gharge & Wineman, 2026). Access to healthy and nutritious food is uneven, which has an impact on children's health and development (Gupta et al., 2026). Studies have shown that malnutrition in children can affect their cognitive abilities, health, and learning achievement in school (Adugna et al., 2026; Nikalansooriya et al., 2025; Tia et al., 2025). Countries are developing school-based intervention programs that aim to improve children's nutritional status while supporting the education process (Daniel et al., 2026; Sello et al., 2026).

One of the forms of policy that is widely implemented is the school feeding program (school feeding programs). This program aims to provide nutritious food for students during learning activities at school. Various studies show that school feeding programs have a positive impact on children's health and well-being (Affonso et al., 2025; Locke et al., 2025). The program helps reduce hunger among students, and contributes to increased study concentration,

student attendance in school, and improved academic achievement (Putu et al., 2025). School feeding programs can also reduce social inequality by providing access to nutritious food for children from low-income families (Liang et al., 2025).

School feeding programs are one of the important social development strategies (Blais, 2025). Many countries integrate the program in education, health, and food security policies (Ximenes, 2025). The program is also a long-term investment in human resource development, as children who obtain adequate nutritional intake have a greater chance of developing optimally (Assefa, 2025). School feeding programs can have a positive impact on children's physical health, social behavior, and well-being (Okah et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian context, the government has also developed policies that are in line with these global efforts through the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program (Prameshti et al., 2025). This program was launched as one of the national initiatives to improve the quality of community nutrition, especially school-age children, and support human resource development (Surendra et al., 2026). The MBG program is designed to provide free nutritious meals to millions of beneficiaries, including school children, early childhood, and pregnant and lactating mothers (Rassanjani & Rahmi, 2025). This initiative is one of the largest social programs ever implemented in Indonesia in the field of community nutrition fulfillment (Naufal et al., 2025). The MBG program has health goals, and has a broader social and economic impact. This policy is expected to improve the quality of education through increased concentration and learning readiness of students (Mahananny et al., 2026).

The MBG program has the potential to strengthen the national food system by involving the local agricultural sector as a food supplier. Interestingly, the MBG program has also received attention from the international community. The program was presented in an international forum at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in Geneva and received positive responses from various parties (Huni et al., 2025). This international attention shows that the food policy implemented in Indonesia is considered to have the potential to become a model for other countries in developing child welfare programs through food-based and education-based approaches (Hadiningrat et al., 2025).

In addition to policy and health aspects, school feeding programs can also be analyzed from a cultural perspective. Food functions as a biological need, and is part of a society's social and cultural identity. The practice of food consumption reflects cultural values, culinary traditions, and the relationship between the community and the environment in which they live. Policies related to the distribution of food to the community also have implications for the food culture and culinary identity of a country (Scheidecker et al., 2025).

The cultural study approach is important in understanding how food policy, including school feeding programs, can affect people's social practices. School feeding programs that utilize local foodstuffs, for example, can contribute to the preservation of culinary traditions while strengthening people's cultural identities. Food policy is a health or economic policy, and as part of the cultural dynamics that shape people's consumption patterns (Affonso et al., 2025).

Studies of school feeding programs are relevant in the field of public health, and in the study of culture and public policy. Analysis of food policies such as the MBG program can provide a broader understanding of the relationship between countries, communities, and food culture. This is especially important in the context of the Southeast Asian region, where the

diversity of food culture and social systems provides its own color in the implementation of public policies in the field of food and child welfare.

Based on the background above, this study aims to analyze the school feeding program policy through the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program in Indonesia, to examine the social and cultural implications arising from its implementation, and to understand how this program reflects the relationship between food policy, cultural identity, and child welfare in the Southeast Asian context. The benefits of this research are twofold. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of food policy scholarship by integrating public health, education, and cultural studies perspectives, particularly in the under-researched context of school feeding programs as a form of cultural identity formation in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Practically, the findings provide strategic guidance for policymakers, program implementers, and community stakeholders in designing more effective and culturally sensitive school feeding programs that not only improve children's nutritional status but also strengthen local food systems and preserve culinary traditions as part of national cultural identity.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the policy of school feeding programs through the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Indonesia and its implications on social and cultural aspects. Research data were obtained from primary sources in the form of international seminar materials that discussed the MBG program at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in Geneva, and supported by secondary data from relevant scientific journals, books, and previous research. Data collection techniques were carried out through documentation studies, indirect observation of seminar materials, and literature studies. Furthermore, data were analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques which included data reduction, presentation of data in the form of descriptive narratives, and drawing conclusions based on systematic interpretation. To ensure the validity of the data, this study used source triangulation by comparing the results of seminars and scientific literature, resulting in a comprehensive analysis of the role of food policy in improving children's welfare and shaping the dynamics of food culture in society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

School Feeding Program Policy Analysis

School feeding programs are part of social policies that aim to improve community welfare through the fulfillment of basic needs, especially for children. In the framework of public policy, programs like this are often positioned as a form of state intervention to ensure that vulnerable groups have access to resources that are important for their health and development. According to the concept of social welfare policy, the state has the responsibility to protect and improve people's welfare through various social programs related to education, health, and the fulfillment of basic needs (Midgley, 2021).

In a global context, various studies show that school feeding programs play an important role in improving children's health, welfare, and educational participation (Locke et al., 2025; Assefa, 2025). The program serves as food assistance for students, and is part of a sustainable human development strategy because it is related to improving the quality of health, cognitive

development, and educational achievement of children (Nikalansooriya et al., 2025; Adugna et al., 2026).

School feeding programs can also be analyzed through the perspective of food policy. Food policy emphasizes how the government regulates food production, distribution, and consumption systems to ensure public availability and access to healthy and nutritious food (Lang & Barling, 2022). In practice, food policy is related to public health, and is related to national food security, agricultural systems, and resource distribution more broadly. Through school feeding programs, the state seeks to create a more equitable food distribution mechanism while ensuring that school-age groups have access to proper and nutritious food. School feeding policies are designed by considering local food sources, domestic production systems, and their impact on the economic and social development of communities (Huni et al., 2025; Putu et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian context, the MBG Program policy reflects the state's efforts to address various challenges related to nutrition and child welfare issues. Indonesia still faces various nutritional problems, such as stunting, micronutrient deficiencies, and inequality of access to healthy food in various regions. The MBG program is designed to provide nutritious food for school children and community groups that need special attention, such as pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. This policy shows that the government focuses on improving the quality of education, and pays attention to health factors that affect children's learning abilities. School feeding programs in Indonesia have the potential to improve the quality of student nutrition while improving the learning environment at school (Pramesthi et al., 2025; Mahananny et al., 2026). Strengthening the governance of school-based nutritious feeding programs is also an important factor so that the policy can run effectively and sustainably (Hadiningrat et al., 2025).

The role of the state in food distribution through the school feeding program is also an important aspect in the implementation of this policy. The government has the responsibility to design a food distribution system, set nutritional standards, and coordinate various parties involved in the implementation of the program. In practice, such a policy requires governance involving various actors, ranging from government agencies to the local food sector. In the case of Indonesia, the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) involves the central government, local governments, schools, and food providers from the local community and agricultural sector. This approach shows that food policy cannot be implemented in isolation from the broader social and economic system. Strengthening the governance of school-based feeding programs is also an important factor in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of the program (Hadiningrat et al., 2025). The use of domestic food sources in school feeding programs is also considered to strengthen the national food system while supporting the local economy (Huni et al., 2025; Putu et al., 2025).

The impact of school feeding policies on children's welfare can be seen from various aspects, both health and education. Children who obtain regular nutritious food intake tend to have better physical conditions and higher concentration skills in the learning process. Various studies show that school feeding programs have a positive contribution to improving children's health, cognitive development, and educational participation (Locke et al., 2025; Nikalansooriya et al., 2025).

Nutrition interventions that are integrated with education programs have also been proven to be related to improving the academic performance of students in various countries (Adugna

et al., 2026). In Indonesia, the MBG program is expected to help reduce the gap in access to healthy food and improve the quality of life of children in various regions. School feeding programs provide short-term benefits in the form of meeting nutritional needs, and are understood as long-term social investments that play a role in the development of future generations (Assefa, 2025; Mahananny et al., 2026).

School Feeding Program in the Perspective of Food Culture

In cultural studies, food is a biological necessity to sustain life, and has a strong social and cultural meaning. Various studies in food anthropology show that food is often a symbol of a society's identity because consumption patterns, types of foodstuffs, and the way they are served reflect cultural values that develop in a particular community. Mintz and Du Bois (2022) explain that eating practices cannot be separated from the social and cultural context of the people who consume them. Policies related to food distribution, including school feeding programs, are also indirectly related to the dynamics of food culture that develops in society (Scheidecker et al., 2025).

Food as a symbol of cultural identity can be seen from the culinary diversity that develops in various regions. Each region has its own distinctive foods that are influenced by geographical conditions, natural resources, and local traditions that are passed down from generation to generation. In Indonesia, the diversity of local foods such as rice, corn, tubers, fish, and various types of vegetables shows the richness of culinary culture that has developed in people's lives. Through the school feeding program, the government has the opportunity to introduce nutritious food that at the same time represents the local culinary identity to the younger generation. This approach is also in line with various studies that emphasize the importance of integrating local culture in food policy and school feeding programs (Affonso et al., 2025; Ximenes, 2025).

Food policies implemented by the state can also affect people's consumption practices. When the government provides certain foods regularly through school feeding programs, it has the potential to shape children's eating habits in the long term. Lang and Barling (2022) explain that food policies have an important role in shaping people's consumption patterns because they affect the availability, access, and preference for certain types of food. In school feeding programs, food menus provided to students can be a means to introduce healthy eating patterns while forming more balanced consumption habits from an early age. Nutritional interventions through school feeding programs can have a positive impact on children's health and development (Locke et al., 2025; Adugna et al., 2026).

In practice, the use of local food ingredients in school feeding programs also has an important meaning from the perspective of food culture. Foodstuffs that come from the local area are easier to obtain, and have a closeness to people's eating habits. In Indonesia, for example, the use of local foods such as rice, tempeh, tofu, fish, and various types of vegetables can be part of the nutritious food menu in schools. This approach helps maintain the sustainability of the local food system, and supports the preservation of culinary traditions that are part of the community's cultural identity. The integration of local food in school feeding programs can also provide economic benefits for the community and the local agricultural sector (Huni et al., 2025; Daniel et al., 2026).

Thus, school feeding programs can be understood as health or education policies alone, and as part of the dynamics of food culture in society. Through this policy, the state seeks to improve the quality of children's nutrition while having the opportunity to introduce cultural

values related to food and people's consumption patterns. In the context of Indonesia, which has a very rich diversity of culinary cultures, school feeding programs have the potential to be an important space to strengthen the relationship between public policy, food culture, and people's consumption practices.

Relevance to the Research Topic

The material presented in the seminar has a strong connection with the research topic entitled Food Policy, Cultural Identity, and School feeding programs: A Southeast Asian Perspective on Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program. The discussion of the MBG Program in an international forum at the UN headquarters showed that food policy is an effort to meet the nutritional needs of the community, and part of a broader social development strategy. School feeding programs can be seen as public policies that are at the intersection of health, education, and food culture aspects. This perspective is in line with the focus of research that seeks to understand how food policy can affect people's consumption practices while reflecting the cultural identity that develops in a region.

In addition to providing an overview of the implementation of food policy in Indonesia, this seminar also showed how the MBG program has received attention from the international community. This strengthens the understanding that national food policy can have relevance in the global discourse on child welfare and human development. For research examining the relationship between food policy and cultural identity in the Southeast Asian region, the information gained from this seminar is important because it provides an empirical context on how countries develop school feeding programs as part of social policies.

This seminar contributes to the development of a more comprehensive research framework. Through the presentation of the material and the discussions that took place, there is an understanding that the analysis of school feeding programs needs to consider various dimensions, ranging from public policy, food systems, to community cultural dynamics. Thus, this seminar helps to enrich research perspectives in seeing the relationship between food policy, public consumption practices, and cultural identity in the Southeast Asian region, especially in the context of the implementation of the MBG program in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The seminar on “Indonesia’s Free Nutritious Meal Program Draws Positive Attention at UN Headquarters in Geneva” highlighted the importance of food policy as part of sustainable social development, particularly in supporting the welfare and nutritional needs of school-age children. The discussion emphasized that the MBG program is not only aimed at improving nutrition, but also serves as a long-term investment in human development by integrating health, education, and social welfare policies through the provision of nutritious meals for vulnerable communities. The seminar also demonstrated how school feeding programs contribute to reducing inequalities in access to nutritious food, improving children’s health and learning outcomes, and strengthening inclusive social development efforts. To improve implementation, the seminar recommended stronger cross-sectoral coordination among government ministries, along with regular training for local implementers on food safety, nutrition standards, and the use of local food resources. Future research should explore the long-term effects of the MBG program on academic performance, local economic growth, and culinary identity preservation,

as well as conduct comparative studies with school feeding programs in other Southeast Asian countries to identify adaptable best practices for Indonesia.

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