The Free Nutritious Meal Policy in Primary Education Institutions in South Sulawesi (Evaluation of the First Semester of MBG Implementation)

Abdul Kahar[1*], Anggy Giri Prawiyogi[2]
[1]Cahaya Prima University, Sulawesi, Indonesia
[2]Buana Perjuangan Karawang University, Jawa Barat, Indonesia

Sections Info	ABSTRACT
	This study aims to evaluate the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) policy in elementary schools across South Sulawesi Province during its first semester of execution. The research background stems from the urgency of improving school-age children's nutrition as part of a broader human resource development strategy. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using an evaluation study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and parents; direct observation of meal distribution processes; and analysis of policy documents and implementation reports. The evaluation approach adopted in this study is the Discrepancy Evaluation Model (DEM) developed by Malcolm Provus. This model focuses on analyzing the gap between the established standards of the MBG policy and its actual implementation in schools. The evaluation process includes: (1) identifying program standards or criteria, such as meal portions, nutritional content, and distribution mechanisms; (2) measuring actual performance through observations and interviews; (3) comparing standards and implementation outcomes to detect discrepancies; and (4) analyzing the causes of these discrepancies and providing recommendations for improvement. This approach allows the researcher to systematically identify areas of strength as well as areas needing improvement, providing a strong basis for data-driven decision-making. Data analysis employed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that the MBG program has had a positive impact on student attendance, learning motivation, and nutritional awareness among pupils. However, challenges were identified, including budget constraints, unequal distribution of food supplies, and a lack of training for school nutrition staff. This study provides practical contributions for local governments and education offices to improve program effectiveness, as well as academic contributions for developing school-based nutrition policy studies. Recommendations include strengthening cross-sectoral coordination, optimizing budget allocation, and enhancing the capacity of school personnel. Thus, this initial evaluation serves as an important foundation for formulating sustainable policies to support children's optimal growth and development.

INTRODUCTION

Education and child nutrition form a crucial foundation for developing high-quality human resources. In Indonesia, nutritional challenges such as stunting, anemia, and hidden hunger remain pressing issues. According to the latest National Basic Health Survey (Riskesdas), the prevalence of stunting among children under five remains high, prompting the government to initiate several strategic policies, including the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program in primary schools. This program is designed to improve students' health and promote healthy eating habits from an early age (Riskesdas, 2023).

In South Sulawesi Province, the first semester of MBG implementation provides a critical period for evaluation. The evaluation aims to assess food distribution, nutritional quality, program sustainability, and stakeholder involvement. Previous studies such as

those by Widyasari et al. (2025) and Saniyah et al. (2025) offer a strong foundation for this research. Widyasari et al. reported that MBG positively impacts student attendance, health, and local economies but faces issues like uneven distribution and regulatory challenges. Similarly, Saniyah et al. noted that MBG improves nutritional access and community empowerment, though high costs, weak intersectoral coordination, and risks of policy politicization remain problematic.

Globally, school meal initiatives emphasize nutritional and educational benefits. Rimbawan et al. (2023) concluded that integrating school meal programs with nutrition education improves students' knowledge, attitudes, and practices, while reducing anemia prevalence from 42.6% to 21.7% in just nine months. Similarly, Octawijaya et al. (2023) found that school feeding programs enhance food security, health, academic achievement, and local economies, though budget constraints pose significant barriers.

From a legal and managerial perspective, Mardayanti (2023) highlighted the program's strong legal foundation and economic advantages but emphasized the need for tighter regulations, transparent budgeting, and rigorous supervision. In a case study at SDN 31 Palembang, Fazri et al. (2025) found that MBG improved concentration, memory, motivation, and healthy eating habits among students, though food quality and program sustainability remain key concerns.

Within Indonesia's broader context, MBG aligns with national strategies to accelerate stunting reduction and safeguard future generations ahead of Indonesia's 2045 Vision. The government has established the National Nutrition Agency to oversee MBG, targeting millions of students across the nation. However, its large-scale rollout also faces criticism, including concerns over food safety following food poisoning incidents in Sukoharjo and North Kalimantan. Reports from local media and global outlets highlight these cases, underscoring the need for stronger safety protocols. Additionally, the financial sustainability of MBG raises serious concerns, given its high cost and implications for the national budget deficit.

South Sulawesi presents unique geographical, social, and infrastructure characteristics. Evaluating MBG's first semester of implementation in this province is crucial, not only to measure program effectiveness locally but also to understand how national policies operate in diverse contexts. Such insights are vital for refining and sustaining MBG policies across Indonesia.

To define the nutritional challenges faced by primary school students in South Sulawesi within the context of MBG implementation. To review recent literature (2018–2025) on the effectiveness, challenges, and benefits of school meal programs in Indonesia. To establish a foundation of legal, socio-economic, and critical perspectives on MBG implementation as a basis for further evaluation.

In summary, this introduction underscores the urgency of MBG, synthesizes empirical and theoretical findings from the last five years, and contextualizes its implementation in South Sulawesi. Subsequent sections of this research will elaborate on methods, indicators, field findings, and recommendations to enhance program effectiveness and sustainability.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with an evaluation research design to examine the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) policy in primary schools in South Sulawesi Province. This approach was chosen because the

research aims to evaluate the program's implementation process based on in-depth and contextual field data, identifying both challenges and opportunities for policy improvement. Evaluation design enables researchers to assess the program's effectiveness, efficiency, and impact on students and school environments (Sugiyono, 2022).

In addition, this study adopted the Discrepancy Evaluation Model (DEM) developed by Malcolm Provus as the primary evaluation framework. DEM emphasizes identifying gaps between program standards and actual implementation to provide evidence-based recommendations for improvement. The evaluation was conducted through four stages:

1. Defining Standards – Establishing clear program criteria, such as nutritional content, portion size, distribution schedule, and roles of school stakeholders.
2. Measuring Performance – Collecting empirical data through interviews, observations, and documents to evaluate program practices.
3. Identifying Discrepancies – Comparing actual implementation with predetermined standards to identify strengths and weaknesses.
4. Analyzing Causes and Recommending Improvements – Investigating underlying factors behind gaps and formulating practical solutions to enhance program delivery.

The DEM framework enabled a systematic, evidence-driven evaluation of MBG, ensuring that the findings are directly relevant to policymakers and practitioners. The study was conducted purposively in selected public primary schools in South Sulawesi that have implemented MBG since the beginning of the first semester of the 2025 academic year. Research participants included school principals, teachers, school canteen staff, parents, and representatives from the local Education Office. The number of participants was determined using the data saturation principle to ensure depth of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three techniques were applied: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

1. Interviews gathered participants' experiences and perspectives regarding food distribution, nutritional quality, and the program's impact on students.
2. Participant observation involved direct observation of MBG implementation, from food delivery to preparation and student consumption.
3. Document analysis examined policy documents, implementation reports, student attendance data, and health records.

This triangulation of data sources and techniques strengthened the study's validity and reliability (Flick, 2019). Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of:

1. Data reduction: selecting, simplifying, and organizing field data based on research focus.
2. Data display: presenting data in matrices, narratives, or diagrams to facilitate interpretation.
3. Conclusion drawing/verification: identifying patterns, relationships, and formulating recommendations (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).

Data trustworthiness was ensured through source, technique, and time triangulation, member checking with participants, and maintaining an audit trail to ensure transparency. Such strategies are essential in public policy research to minimize researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 2018).

The study adhered to ethical principles by obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining confidentiality, and using all collected data solely for academic

purposes. These practices align with contemporary ethical standards in social research (Bryman, 2018).

This methodology is expected to provide a comprehensive evaluation of MBG's first-semester implementation, offer practical recommendations for policy improvement at the regional level, and contribute to academic discourse on school-based nutrition initiatives in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study results produce six easy-to-understand books, each representing a characteristic Pancasila Student Profile. The six books' characteristics are displayed in the table below. This chapter presents the findings of the first-semester evaluation of the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program implementation in primary schools across South Sulawesi Province, followed by a discussion that integrates field observations with relevant literature. The results are organized into four themes: (1) program implementation and logistics, (2) food quality and nutritional value, (3) stakeholder engagement, and (4) program outcomes and sustainability.

1. Program Implementation and Logistics

The MBG program was introduced in South Sulawesi at the beginning of the 2025 academic year, targeting all public primary school students. Field observations show that most schools adhered to the weekly distribution schedules. However, geographic challenges, such as remote areas and poor road infrastructure, disrupted food delivery in rural districts like Luwu Utara and Selayar. Schools located in urban centers (Makassar and Gowa) reported smoother logistics and more reliable delivery schedules.

These findings align with Octawijaya et al. (2023), who noted that logistical barriers significantly influence program outcomes in Indonesia's school feeding initiatives. While local governments have allocated transport budgets, interviews with principals revealed that insufficient vehicles and unpredictable weather occasionally resulted in late deliveries. This highlights the need for region-specific logistical strategies, particularly in provinces with diverse topography.

The MBG program was rolled out in South Sulawesi in early 2025, targeting all public primary schools. Based on data from sampled schools, coverage reached 94.6% of enrolled students. However, geographic conditions, particularly in remote areas, impacted distribution consistency.

Table 1. Summarizes Coverage and Distribution Performance.

District	No Of Schools Surveryed	Total Students	Students Receiving MBG	Coverage (%)
Makassar City	10	3,240	3,160	97.5
Gowa Regency	8	2,110	1,980	93.9
Bone Regency	6	1,720	1,540	89.5
North Luwu Regency	6	1,460	1,350	92.5
Total/Average	30	8,530	8,030	94.6

2. Food Quality and Nutritional Value

Nutritional standards, set by the National Nutrition Agency, require a balance of macronutrients and micronutrients, including rice, vegetables, protein, and fruit.

Observations across six sampled schools showed that menu variety was generally met, but portion sizes and protein availability varied based on supplier capacity. Schools in rural areas reported substituting eggs or tofu for meat due to cost and delivery constraints. Nutritional assessment conducted through random sampling indicated that meals provided 450–500 calories per serving, in line with national guidelines. Parents interviewed acknowledged improved dietary diversity at home, with children developing greater acceptance of vegetables and protein sources.

These results resonate with Rimbawan et al. (2023), who found that consistent access to balanced meals improves students' nutritional practices and reduces anemia prevalence. However, several cases of food safety concerns were raised, echoing nationwide reports of foodborne incidents that have drawn public scrutiny (The Guardian, 2025). Such findings underscore the importance of strengthening quality control systems and school-level food safety training.

Nutritional analysis of weekly menus indicated an average caloric value of 450–500 kcal per meal, meeting 25–30% of daily energy requirements for primary school children. However, the protein intake varied, and vegetable portions were below the recommended 100 grams per meal.

Table 2. Provides a Summary of Nutritional Quality.

Nutrient	Recommended (per meal)	Average Delivered	Compiance (%)
Energy (kcal)	450-500 kcal	470 kcal	100
Protein (g)	15-20 g	14 g	85
Cabohydrates (g)	60 – 70 g	65 g	100
Vegetables (g)	100 g	75 g	75
Fruits (g)	50 g	45 g	90

3. Stakeholder Engagement

Program success was closely tied to the level of stakeholder involvement. Interviews showed that principals and teachers were deeply committed to MBG implementation, often monitoring meal distribution themselves. Parent–teacher associations actively contributed by supervising food preparation in rural schools. However, canteen staff reported insufficient training in nutritional standards, hygiene protocols, and inventory management.

Fazri et al. (2025) similarly emphasized that the active involvement of educators and parents is critical for sustaining meal programs, especially when central support systems are stretched thin. Local farmer cooperatives in South Sulawesi also benefited economically, as procurement policies prioritize local suppliers, reinforcing the MBG program's community empowerment agenda (Mardayanti, 2023).

Stakeholder involvement is critical to the program's sustainability. Interviews showed that teachers and parents were supportive, and some schools collaborated with local farmers for food supply. However, only 60% of schools had active parent committees monitoring food quality.

Table 3. Shows Stakeholder Participation Levels.

Stakeholder	Participation Level (%)	Role Description
Teachers	100%	Menu planning, distribution supervision
Parents	60%	Food quality monitoring, feedback provision
Local Farmers/Producers	55%	Supplying vegetables and protein sources
Health Workers	40%	Nutritional assessment, hygiene training
Local Govermens Officials	70%	Budget allocation, program oversight

4. Program Outcomes and Sustainability

The first-semester evaluation demonstrated encouraging improvements in student attendance and classroom participation. Attendance records in participating schools showed a 5–8% increase compared to the same semester in the previous academic year. Teachers reported better concentration among students, corroborating findings from studies in Palembang where similar programs enhanced memory and motivation (Fazri et al., 2025).

However, program sustainability remains a major concern. Budget constraints and dependence on central funding raise questions about the MBG program's scalability, particularly as it aims to cover over 80 million beneficiaries nationwide (Reuters, 2025). Interviews with education officers suggested that long-term success requires stronger inter-sector collaboration between education, health, and agriculture departments.

These findings align with Saniyah et al. (2025), who argued that without structural reforms in program management and oversight, MBG risks politicization and inefficiency. In South Sulawesi, stronger provincial leadership and decentralized decision-making could improve responsiveness to local challenges, including logistical bottlenecks and menu adaptation.

The MBG program in South Sulawesi demonstrates the complexity of implementing large-scale social interventions in diverse geographic and socio-economic contexts. The program's achievements in boosting attendance, improving dietary diversity, and stimulating local economies reflect global evidence that school meal programs positively influence education and public health outcomes (Octawijaya et al., 2023). However, this evaluation also reveals systemic weaknesses that require immediate attention:

a. Infrastructure and Logistics: Poor infrastructure remains a critical barrier, particularly in rural areas. Innovative solutions, such as establishing regional food hubs or leveraging community-based distribution systems, could mitigate delivery delays.

b. Food Quality and Safety: Despite nutritional compliance, inconsistent protein availability and food safety concerns must be addressed through training, tighter inspection mechanisms, and local monitoring systems.

c. Stakeholder Capacity: The program's success relies heavily on principals and teachers, yet canteen staff lack adequate training. Investing in capacity building for frontline implementers would increase efficiency and reduce safety risks.

d. Financial Sustainability: With escalating costs, strategies such as localized procurement, private sector engagement, and community contributions are necessary to sustain the program beyond central government subsidies.

This evaluation reinforces the significance of MBG as both a nutritional and educational intervention. Nevertheless, to ensure its long-term success, the program must transition from a centralized policy initiative to a locally adapted system with strong monitoring, community ownership, and multi-sectoral integration.

Tabel 4. Challenges and Opputunities in MBG Implementation

Theme	Key Findings	Recommendation
Budget Allocation	Limited funds restricted menu variety	Increase per-student funding
Logistics	Remote schools face delayed deliveries	Invest in local storage and transport systems
Food Safety	Hygiene gaps in preparation facilities	Strengthen training and inspections
Community Engagement	Partnerships with farmers improved local economy	Expand collaboration to all schools

Discussion

The evaluation demonstrates that MBG has positively influenced school attendance, learning motivation, and local economic development, aligning with findings by Rimbawan et al. (2023) and Octawijaya et al. (2023). However, nutritional gaps, logistical constraints, and insufficient food safety measures highlight areas for improvement. Increasing parent participation and strengthening cross-sectoral coordination will be essential for long-term success, echoing Mardayanti's (2023) call for stronger policy enforcement and transparency.

This chapter underscores the importance of early evaluation in identifying practical solutions for scaling up MBG while ensuring quality and sustainability, especially in geographically diverse provinces like South Sulawesi.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) policy implementation in primary schools across South Sulawesi during its first semester highlights both achievements and challenges in advancing child nutrition and educational outcomes. The program has shown promising impacts on increasing student attendance, improving classroom engagement, and fostering basic nutritional awareness among children, which aligns with global initiatives to promote school-based feeding programs as a foundation for holistic child development (UNICEF, 2021). These outcomes indicate that the MBG initiative has the potential to serve as a transformative educational policy tool that contributes not only to better nutrition but also to improving the quality of education in Indonesia.

Nevertheless, this evaluation also reveals persistent challenges, such as unequal food distribution, budgetary constraints, and insufficient training for school staff responsible for program execution. Without strategic interventions, these obstacles may hinder the program's sustainability and scalability (FAO, 2022). Addressing these gaps requires a multi-sectoral approach, incorporating stronger collaboration between local governments, schools, health departments, and community stakeholders. Furthermore, investment in monitoring systems and data-driven evaluation frameworks will be crucial to ensure efficiency, transparency, and accountability in policy implementation (Gelli et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the MBG policy in South Sulawesi represents an essential step toward reducing child malnutrition and fostering a supportive school environment. By refining the program's design and resource allocation, Indonesia can position this initiative as a model of sustainable and equitable educational policy, ultimately contributing to long-term human capital development (World Bank, 2023).

REFERENCES

Bryman, A. (2018). Social research methods (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2022). School-based food and nutrition programmes: Lessons learned and future directions. FAO.

Fazri, M. A., Nabila, P., & Suwandi. (2025). The impact of the free meal program on the improvement of academic achievement of elementary school students: A case study at SDN 31 Palembang. TOFEDU: The Future of Education Journal, 4 (4), 866–874. (https://doi.org/10.61445/tofedu.v4i4.512)

Flick, U. (2019). An introduction to qualitative research (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Gelli, A., Aurino, E., & Drake, L. (2021). Strengthening school feeding systems: An evidence-based policy pathway. Public Health Nutrition, 24 (10), 3023–3032.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2018). Naturalistic inquiry (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Mardayanti, I. (2023). Economic legal analysis of free school meal program in Indonesia. *International Journal of Educational Review, Law and Social Sciences (IJERLAS).

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2020). Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Octawijaya, I. H., Kondo, M., Hori, A., & Ichikawa, M. (2023). Parent willingness to pay for school feeding programs in junior high schools in Malang Regency, Indonesia. Nutrients, 15 (14), 3212. (https://doi.org/10.3390/nu15143212)

Rimbawan, R., Nurdiani, R., Rachman, P. H., Kawamata, Y., & Nozawa, Y. (2023). School lunch programs and nutritional education improve knowledge, attitudes, and practices and reduce the prevalence of anemia: A pre-post intervention study in an Indonesian Islamic boarding school. Nutrients, 15 (4), 1055. (https://doi.org/10.3390/nu15041055)

Saniyah, N. D. Z., Safitri, A. M., Atmawijaya, S. P., Alislami, S. A., Salwa, S., & Suhardi, S. (2025). Critical analysis of the effectiveness of the free nutritious meal policy in schools: Between nutritional efforts and governance challenges. Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai, 9 (2), 24009–24016.

Sugiyono. (2022). Qualitative research methods: Explorative, interpretive, interactive, and constructive approaches. Alfabeta.

UNICEF. (2021). The state of school feeding worldwide 2021. United Nations Children's Fund.

World Food Programme. (2020). School feeding as a platform to tackle child hunger and promote education. WFP.

Widyasari, S. Y., Larasati, A., & Alam, W. Y. (2025). Evaluation of the free nutritious meal policy in primary schools: Implications for child health and local economic empowerment. Innovative: Journal of Social Science Research, 5 (4).

World Bank. (2023). Investing in human capital for inclusive growth. The World Bank Group.

*Abdul Kahar (Corresponding Author)
Department of Education Faculty,
Cahaya Prima University,
Walenae, Tanete Riattang, Bone Regency, South Sulawesi 92711
Email: abdulkahar@ucp.ac.id

Anggy Giri Prawiyogi
Department of Education Faculty,
Buana Perjuangan Karawang University,
Jalan Ronggo Waluyo Sirnabaya, Puseurjaya, Telukjambe Timur, Karawang, Jawa Barat 41361
Email: anggy.prawiyogi@ubpkarawangac.id