

Evaluation of the Free Meal Policy: Solution or Challenge in Poverty Alleviation?

¹Amirah Luthfiyyah Marchellia, ²Manasi Kanal Haq, ³Reyhan Rachman

Faculty of Law, University of Al-Azhar Indonesia

Corresponding Author :
ratulaw@gmail.com

Abstract

The free meal program in Indonesia was initiated as an effort to address the issues of stunting and poverty, especially among children and vulnerable groups. This research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy through a normative approach and international comparison, with examining the applicable regulations and comparing the implementation in the United States and Japan. The analysis results show that although this policy is capable of improving access to nutritious food, great challenges are still faced in terms of distribution, funding, and management, especially in remote area. In addition, incidents such as food poisoning cases and infrastructure gaps show that the readiness for implementation still needs to be improved. This study suggests the need to strengthen community-based distribution systems, integrate nutrition education, and collaborate cross-sector collaboration to support program sustainability. With a more comprehensive approach and based on local values, the free meal policy is expected to be more effective in improving the quality of nutrition and the welfare of the Indonesian people.

Keywords: free meals, public policy, stunting, policy evaluation, community nutrition

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the countries with the highest rates of stunting, especially among toddlers and children. According to data from the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia the year 2024, the data obtained shows that around 24% experienced stunting in the year in 2021, there was a decrease of about 3%, bringing it down to 21% in 2024, although it decreased. But Indonesia remains the highest country in the world suffering from stunting, especially in toddlers and children. And according to the WHO, the minimum target standard for stunting is below 20% from this issue, the planning of the Prabowo government program emerged Gibran to reduce stunting during children's growth period. Therefore, this is the reason this is what inspired the flagship program of President Prabowo and Gibran, namely the Free Nutritious Meal program. The main objective of this program is to improve human resources human resources through nutritional improvement for children in their growth phase, this is also backed by cognitive abilities and an average IQ score of 78.9, Indonesian children rank 127 out of 197 countries based on data released by the World Population Review website in the year 2024. children who have a low Intelligence Quotient (IQ) are one of the cause is stunting. this is what underlies the urgency of the Free Nutritious Meal Program Nutritional Free Meals are implemented.

The free meal policy in Indonesia aims to address the issue of poverty and improve the welfare of the community, especially among vulnerable groups such as children and pregnant women. The main objective of this policy includes providing access nutritious food that can reduce the economic burden on poor families, improve their nutritional status nutrition, as well as supporting children's education so that they can learn better and excel in school. However, the effectiveness of this policy in addressing stunting, which is a chronic nutritional problem that hinders the growth and development of children, needs evaluated further. Stunting in Indonesia reached 21.6% in 2021, and the free meal policy is expected to provide sufficient and nutritious food to prevent this condition. However, challenges in food distribution, public understanding of the importance of nutrition, and food quality monitoring are crucial factors that must be considered to ensure that this policy is truly effective in reducing the prevalence of stunting and improving overall community welfare.

In the effort to combat poverty and stunting, several solutions that have implemented and proven effective in previous research include programs free lunch programs integrated with nutrition education. One of the proposed solutions is the provision of nutritious food in schools, which not only provides nutrition that is needed but also raises awareness among children and parents about the importance of balanced nutrition. A recent systematic review from Cochrane that includes 38 studies in 25 countries concluded that school meal programs for children from low-income families in low-income countries can increase school participation rates by about 3% and achievement scores mathematics by 14%. Research shows that this program can improve student attendance and academic achievement, as well as reducing stunting rates among children. In addition, training for health workers and teachers on the importance of nutrition and the way of presenting healthy food also becomes part of the proposed solution, so they can provide accurate information to the public. Monitoring and evaluation programs continuous evaluation is also necessary to ensure that the food provided meet the necessary nutritional standards and to identify areas that require improvement. By adopting this comprehensive approach, it is hoped that the free meal policy can be more effective in achieving its goals.

One of the drawbacks of the free meal policy is the challenge in terms of funding and budget management. This program requires a very large budget, which can burden the national budget if not managed properly. For example, it is estimated that this program could spend around Rp100 trillion in the first year and reach Rp460 trillion per year when fully implemented. This concern strengthened by the World Bank's statement emphasizing the importance of maintaining the health the state revenue and expenditure budget, as well as the need for thorough preparation to ensuring that this program does not become a heavy burden on Indonesia's fiscal performance. Besides that, food distribution issues also pose a challenge, especially in remote areas with difficult accessibility. This can cause disparities in the delivery program benefits, where not all children have equal access to food nutritious. Therefore, although the free meal policy has great potential to help in alleviating poverty and stunting, careful planning and mature management to address these challenges.

To address the shortcomings in the free meal policy, several solutions that can be proposed, including more efficient budget management to ensure optimal use of funds, as well as the improvement of food distribution infrastructure to be more effective, especially in remote areas. In addition, partnering with the private sector in the provision food supplies and funding can help reduce the burden on the government budget. Education and training for school staff and parents regarding the importance of balanced nutrition is also very important to enhance the community's

understanding of the benefits of nutritious food nutritious. Finally, building a sustainable monitoring and evaluation system will allowing the government to assess the impact of the program and make necessary adjustments necessary to improve its effectiveness.

2. METHOD

The research method used in this study is the normative research method, that is, research that focuses on the analysis of written legal norms as the basis for evaluating the effectiveness of a policy. Normative research is used to assess the extent to which the free meal policy promoted by the government is in line with the applicable laws and regulations in Indonesia, particularly in the efforts poverty alleviation and stunting in children. Legislative approach becomes the main foundation in examining relevant regulations, such as the Law Number 36 of 2009 on Health, national strategic policies related to nutrition improvement, and the technical implementation regulations from the relevant ministries, including the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology.

In addition, this research also uses a comparative approach, which is conducted by examining the implementation of similar policies in other countries such as the United States National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and Japan with kyushoku. The goal is to compare the effectiveness, coverage, and challenges of the free meal policy in Indonesia with other countries that have similar programs and have been running them longer earlier. The data sources in this research include primary legal materials such as laws and implementing regulations, secondary legal materials such as scientific literature, journal articles, and previous study results, as well as tertiary legal materials in the form of legal encyclopedias and other supporting documents. The analysis is conducted qualitatively to uncover the implications normative and provide more effective and legally-based policy recommendations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Comparison of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Indonesia with the implementation of similar programs in countries like the United States and Japan.

The free nutritious meal policy initiated by Prabowo Gibran, which has the goal of reducing stunting cases and helping to alleviate the economic burden on the community. In its implementation, there are still many challenges, obstacles, and evaluations that need to be examined. In this research, we will compare the implementation of the United States and Japan to create an efficient and effective stunting-free Indonesia not only as a political propaganda tool. We made a comparative analysis based on the categories in the table below.

Table 1. Comparison of Free Nutritious Meal Programs

| Aspect | Indonesia | America | Japan |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|----------|
| Name | Free Nutritious Meals | National School Lunch Program | Kyoshoku |
| Beginning of the Year implementation | January 6, 2025 | 1946 | 1889 |

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Legislation | Presidential Regulation Number 83 Year 2024 regarding National Nutrition Agency | National School Lunch Act 1946 | Shokuiku Kihon Hō 1954 |
| Spending annual budget | 750 M/year with target of 17.9 recipients | 18.7 M/year with target 30 million | 51.1T / all Japanese society |
| Source of funds | State Budget (free of charge) | The government only providing subsidies not free fully | The government only providing subsidies not completely free |
| Foundation of physiological | Prevention of stunting and nutritional fulfillment | Promoting nutritious food and health and Long-term education for children | Having a background or a strong philosophical foundation strongly rooted in Buddhist tradition, which emphasizing the value interdependence and gratitude for food |
| Management system | Implementation MBG Program in Indonesia is still hampered infrastructure and distribution, especially in remote areas | National School Lunch Program in America The United States is centrally managed by the USDA. centrally by the USDA with implementation at school level, supported by subsidies federal and strict nutritional supervision strict. | It has a system management that decentralized yet remains standardized, with each school is equipped kitchen and specialized staff, including licensed nutritionists licensed that regulates menu and food safety food. Infrastructure adequate and task distribution clearly becomes the |

| | | | key his success |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Funding and sustainability | MBG Program Indonesia is fully funded fully funded by the government with a budget of Rp 71 trillion in 2025, but dependency this single dependency is risky and need alternatives funding that involving various parties | Since 1946, NSLP funded by subsidies federal and contributions state, as well as maintained its sustainability through strict regulations and support legislative. | Kyushoku is supported by joint funding from central government, regional government, and parents, who ensuring sustainability and a sense of ownership program |

Looking at the comparison results in the table above, it can be seen that the meal program nutritious free meals in Indonesia are still in the early stages of implementation and are faced with a number of issues, especially related to infrastructure and the sustainability of its funding. Meanwhile that, Japan and the United States have been running similar programs for a long time with a system that is already structured and stable. Indonesia can learn from the funding system collaborative and efficient, standardized management patterns in both countries. Japan, for example, integrates cultural values into the implementation of school meal programs. school, while America emphasizes the importance of regulatory support and oversight strict nutrition. To ensure that the MBG Program truly has an impact on reduce stunting rates and improve the quality of human resources, and not merely becoming a political discourse, a more comprehensive and synergistic, involving various parties in every policy process, from planning until evaluation.

3.2 The impact of the free nutritious meal program policy in reducing the burden the economy of the community and its contribution to solving related issues.

Looking at the current state of the country's economy, the free nutrition meal program is considered inadequate. This program is ready to be implemented for developed countries like Japan with a small population but in its management, it is not entirely free but subsidized at a low price in value more realistic, but if implemented in Indonesia, it may not necessarily solve the problem, instead adding new problems because parents have to set aside more money for the costs free meal subsidies outside of other school expenses based on the data below Indonesian society still has a major problem, which is the average regional minimum wage is very low. Here is the development of the average salary of Indonesians based on data from the national statistics agency.

Table 2. Average Salary of Indonesian Residents per Year Based on the National Statistics Agency

| 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 2.736.463 | 3.070.756 | 3.178.227 | 3.267.618 |

Although there has been an annual increase, it does not mean that the average salary of the residents Indonesian society can currently meet their needs when compared the income of American citizens with an average salary of US\$ 6,455 (Rp 99.4 million per month) and the average salary in Japan in 2024 is 471,000 JPY (3,470 USD) per month or around IDR 49.2 million. Based on data from the CEOWORLD website, Indonesia ranks 120th out of 196 countries in terms of average gross monthly salary. At the ASEAN regional level, the income the Indonesian people still have higher incomes compared to countries like Myanmar, the Philippines, Cambodia, East Timor, and Laos. However, the wages are still lagging behind if compared to what is received by the residents of Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

In terms of salary, Indonesia is quite far behind, which is a factor in why Indonesian children do not can access nutritious food due to the low average salary of Indonesians so that parents have difficulties in providing nutritious food for their children. In the implementation of free nutritious meals, there are challenges and even unpleasant news, others;

- The kitchen partners who collaborate with the government stopped cooking due to there are internal obstacles between the kitchen partners and the organizers of free nutritious meals
- The Cianjur Regency Government, West Java, has declared a Status of Extraordinary Event (Epidemic Alert) after 176 people, including 78 students, experienced food poisoning after consuming food in the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program, which causing most of the victims to require hospitalization.

Budget efficiency that impacts the termination of employment for employees Honorary employees in government agencies or state-owned enterprises. From the impact of the third point, it has a clear effect on the decrease in travelers during. Eid al-Fitr of Ramadan 1446, this proves that free nutritious meals currently cannot solving or alleviating the burden on the community. To create a free meal program that is targeted takes a long time to establish its policies considering Indonesia is an archipelagic country where infrastructure limitations still need considered.

In developing and implementing the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), there are five crucial aspects that need to be the main focus. First, the development of a strong philosophical foundation is a fundamental first step. Referring in the practice of Kyushoku in Japan, the provision of food in schools is not only intended for fulfilment of nutrition alone, but also as a means of character formation and instilling cultural values. Therefore, the MBG Program is ideally designed with an approach that not only paying attention to nutritional aspects, but also reflecting and strengthening the diverse local cultural values in Indonesia.

Second, this program requires a standardized management system that can still adjust to local diversity. Standardization is needed to maintain quality national implementation, but it is also important to ensure flexibility in implementation so that the program can be adapted to the geographical, cultural, and infrastructural conditions in each region. Next, institutional capacity and the quality of human resources become factors determinant in the success of this program. Just like Kyushoku, which is supported by expert staff experts and professional management systems,

MBG must also emphasize investment long-term in training field officers and strengthening governance systems that efficient, transparent, and accountable.

Third, a holistic approach needs to be applied in the implementation of MBG. This program must viewed more broadly than just providing food, but rather becoming part of integrated efforts in nutrition education, the formation of healthy eating habits from an early age, and community-based food security strengthening. In addition, monitoring and evaluation sustainable monitoring and evaluation are essential to ensure the program runs effectively and remains relevant. A comprehensive evaluation system allows for continuous improvement and quick response to changes in needs and challenges that arise in the field.

4. CONCLUSION

The free meal policy in Indonesia is driven by the high rate of stunting, especially among toddlers and children. In the introduction, it is explained that although there is a decline in stunting rates, Indonesia still faces significant challenges in terms of nutrition.

This policy aims to provide access to nutritious food for vulnerable groups, such as children and pregnant women, with the hope of improving nutritional status and support education. However, the effectiveness of this policy in addressing nutritional issues chronic and stunting need to be further evaluated.

The research method used is a normative approach with analysis legislation and policy comparison in other countries, such as the United States and Japan. This research aims to assess the alignment of the free meal policy with applicable regulations and identify challenges as well as successes that can be adopted from similar programs in other countries. The data used includes laws, literature scientific literature, and previous study results, with a focus on qualitative analysis to provide legal-based recommendations.

The research results show that although the free meal policy provides access to food for the community, there are still issues with distribution and utilization that is uneven. Comparison with programs in other countries reveals that Indonesia is at an early stage in the implementation of this policy, facing challenges such as funding, infrastructure, and management that need to be improved. By therefore, a more comprehensive approach involving various parties is needed to ensure that this policy can have a significant impact in reducing stunting rates and improving the overall well-being of the community. By adopting the right measures, such as improving infrastructure distribution, community education, and collaboration with the private sector, the free meal policy is expected to become a more effective solution in tackling poverty and nutritional problems in Indonesia.

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this research can provide a positive contribution to the development of strategies to address poverty through the Nutritious Meal Program (MBG).

NOVELTY

One of the new problem-solving concepts that can help address the issue related to the free meal policy is the implementation of a community-based distribution system. By involving the local community in the distribution process, this program can not only ensuring that food aid reaches those in need, but also building awareness and collective responsibility towards good nutrition. In addition, the integration of nutrition education in schools can be a strategic step. With providing knowledge about the importance of balanced nutrition from an early age, children and parents can better understand and appreciate the benefits of nutritious food. This approach, if combined with continuous monitoring and training for health workers health and teachers, it is expected to create an ecosystem that supports improvement nutrition holistically, not just providing food. This can also reduce dependence on aid and encourage community independence in addressing nutrition and stunting issues.

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