



- This policy brief presents key insights from the implementation study on the *Makan Bergizi Gratis* (MBG) program in Indonesia, focusing on community experiences and perspectives.
- Using participatory approaches photovoice the study emphasized the everyday realities of accessing MBG from the perspective of the beneficiary.
- Participants shared experiences regarding food quality, distribution systems, nutritional adequacy, values, cultural norms, food safety and students with special needs.

Through Their Eyes:

A Portrait of the Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program in Schools

Overview of MBG

Optimal nutrition from an early age is one of the essential foundations for developing quality human resources. Nutritional problems during early life have a significant impact on the quality of life in the future (Prado and Dewey, 2014; Galler et al., 2021). Children require a balanced nutritional intake for strong immunity, better cognitive development, and to support optimal learning readiness (Stevens et al., 2022; Sánchez et al., 2024). Conversely, malnutrition may lead to decreased concentration, leading to lower participation in learning and posing long-term risks towards productivity (Shagti et al., 2025).

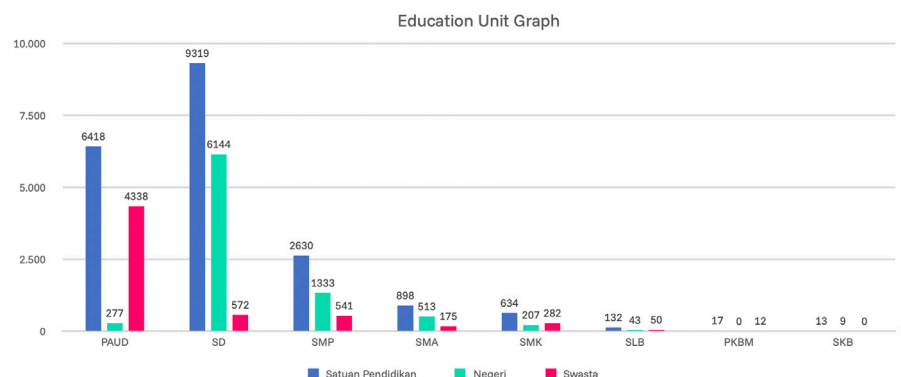
The government has emphasized the improvement of human resources quality as a strategic priority, in line with Article 28C and Article 34 of the 1945 Constitution, which affirm the right of every citizen to welfare and the fulfillment of basic needs. Furthermore, Law No. 17 of 2023 concerning Health and Law No. 18 of 2012 concerning Food provide the legal basis for the state to guarantee the availability of and public access to sufficient, safe, high-quality, and nutritious food.

The *Makan Bergizi Gratis* (MBG) is part of the priority agenda of the administration of President and Vice President-elect Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, which prioritizes improving the quality of human resources as a primary focus of national development. The MBG is a policy intervention aimed at strengthening the nutritional quality of children, particularly in schools. This program is designed as a strategy to support improvements in the quality of education and sustainable human resource development.

In general, the MBG program is perceived as a manifestation of the government commitment to improve child welfare and strengthen access to nutritious food. It provides tangible support for children's basic needs in schools. However, some MBG recipients have expressed concerns about food quality, distribution consistency, and program implementation in schools. These varying perceptions emphasize the importance of open public communication and continuous evaluation mechanisms.

Presidential Decree No. 83 of 2024 concerning the National Nutrition Agency has been issued, which regulates the establishment of the agency as an institution responsible for coordinating and implementing policies to accelerate nutrition improvement, particularly meeting children nutritional needs through the free nutritious meal program. Priority is given to children because growth is globally recognized as an important marker of a population nutritional and health status (BAPPENAS and UNICEF, 2017).

The graph shows that the largest number of educational units are primary and early childhood

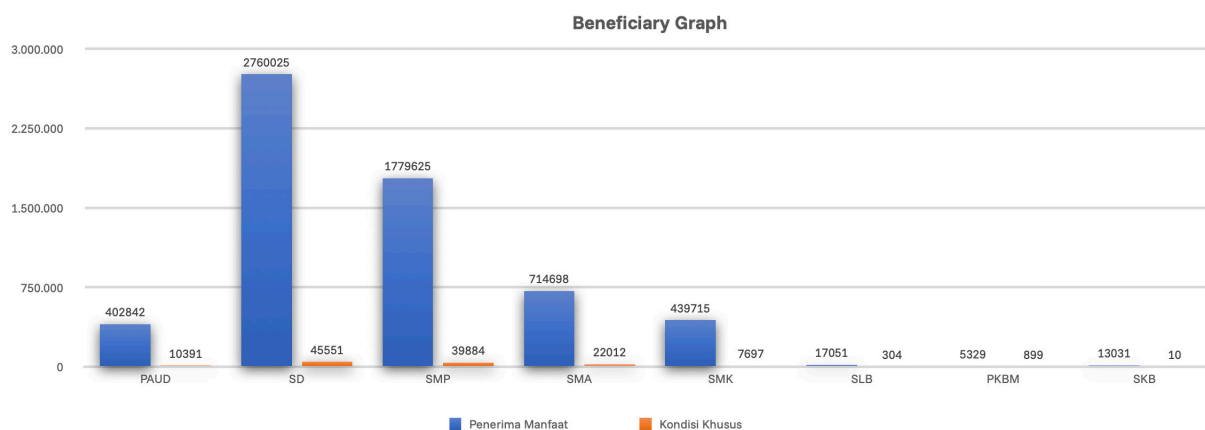


Source: <https://mbg.pdm.kemendikdasmen.go.id/> of February 21, 2026

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education (PAUD). This level is the foundation of the education system, reflecting the government commitment to ensure access to education. The MBG program targets students from early childhood through secondary school, helping to improve nutrition and enhance learning concentration. These efforts are expected to improve the quality of human resources and support future productivity.

Individual in-depth interviews allowed participants to reflect on the meaning behind their photographs. These narratives, along with visual data, were analyzed thematically to identify key themes, common challenges, and practical recommendations for strengthening MBG implementation in various school settings.



Source: <https://mbg.pdm.kemendikdasmen.go.id/> of February 21, 2026

The graph shows that the largest number of MBG beneficiaries are at the elementary school level (2.7 million students), followed by junior (1.7 million students), and senior high school (714,000 students). This is consistent with the MBG program target, which focuses on students in the age groups. Furthermore, the number of students at the elementary and senior high school levels is the largest compared to other levels. Providing nutritional support at these age levels is expected to foster a high-quality and productive future generation.

However, the implementation of public policies in the field is often faced with diverse dynamics. Program implementation requires contextual and adaptive adjustments. MBG is affected not only by budget planning and nutritional standards, but also the readiness of school infrastructure, interagency coordination, distribution systems, food quality monitoring mechanisms, and actual public perception, especially among recipients.

A study concerning the Free Nutritious Meal Program requires an examination not only of the policy design but also the dynamics of implementation and the accompanying social responses. An analysis of the realities regarding implementation will provide a crucial basis for formulating more effective, adaptive, and sustainable policy recommendations. The success of a policy is measured by the extent to which it provides tangible benefits to society. In other words, the primary definition of a successful policy addresses societal needs and real problems.

Study Approach

The Photovoice study successfully recruited 15 participants who were beneficiaries and experienced in implementing the MBG program in three different cities in Java, Indonesia. Participants included junior and senior high school teachers and students who were directly involved in and impacted by the program in their respective schools.

Each selected city study coordinator received instruction on photovoice and basic training on photography ethics, including consent, privacy, and respectful representation. They then proceeded into the field to recruit participants and provide guided instruction on taking photographs, assist with the photo-taking process, conduct in-depth interviews related to the photographs, and record reflections. Participants documented their daily experiences with MBG, capturing moments that reflected on school meal distribution and classroom dynamics. A total of 75 photographs were collected for the study. Fieldwork lasted four to six weeks.



Photo a: This photo was taken by a teacher with the narrative “activities foster togetherness, independence, and a sense of pride in being able to contribute to classmates.”

Through their Eyes: A Portrait of MBG Implementation

Beyond Nutrition: Character Building and School Culture

In addition to providing nutritional support, MBG serves as a daily routine that reinforces the values of discipline, responsibility, and mutual respect. Students actively participate in preparing, distributing, and cleaning up after meals. Eating together creates a structured but warm environment that fosters solidarity and shared responsibility.

This program represents the principle of reciprocal cooperation, where

collective participation makes the process more meaningful and meaningful. MBG is not just about feeding students, but also about developing character through practical activities.



Photo b: This photo was taken by a teacher with the narrative “Cooperation in sharing responsibilities.”



Photo c: This photo was taken by a student with the narrative “this activity fosters togetherness, independence, and a sense of pride in being able to contribute to classmates.”

Attention to students with special needs

This study highlights the need for clearer adaptation mechanisms for students with special needs or disabilities. Implementation requires flexibility in menu design, attention to allergies or texture needs, and stronger coordination between schools and service providers.

Ensuring that MBG reaches all students equitably is crucial to upholding its social justice mandate.

One teacher participant reported her experience: *“I learned that the student was suffering from kidney problems, so she couldn’t consume the MBG menu like her friends.”*



Photo d: This photo was taken by a student with the narrative “The beauty of sharing.”

Strengthening Social Bonds and Emotional Well-being

The experience of eating together fosters peer relationships and enhances the classroom atmosphere. This is especially meaningful for students who are orphans or lack an extended family.

Students reported feeling happier, more connected, and more motivated after eating together. Teachers observed that classrooms became more conducive to learning, especially during the last lesson of the day.

MBG contributes to emotional well-being by reducing anxiety about hunger and promoting a sense of belonging within the school community.

One participating teacher emphasized that the impact of MBG goes beyond omprong:

“This situation shows that the MBG program contributes to creating a more positive learning environment, where meeting nutritional needs goes hand in hand with strengthening social relationships and improving students’ psychological well-being.”

Another participating teacher confirmed that the impact of MBG:

“... the learning environment becomes more conducive because students are more prepared to receive the material. This certainly makes it easier for us to deliver lessons.”

This reflection shows how nutritional provision and social-emotional well-being are interconnected. When students feel physically met, socially accepted, and psychologically comfortable, a positive and cwell-



Photo e: A snapshot taken by a teacher participant with the caption: “Nutritious Food, a Step Towards Achievement.”

socially accepted, and psychologically comfortable, a positive and comfortable classroom atmosphere is fostered. Teachers observed that students appeared more engaged, less distracted by hunger, and more cooperative during learning sessions.

Adequate nutrition and readiness to learn

The menu generally includes carbohydrates, plant and animal proteins, vegetables, and fruits. Students report feeling more energetic and focused after meals, with fewer complaints of fatigue or hunger during afternoon sessions. Providing structured, balanced meals supports readiness for participation in learning activities.

Meanwhile, in another school, participating teachers also reported that the menu served met the “four healthy five perfect” principle, with a composition that included sources of carbohydrates, animal and vegetable protein, vegetables, fruits, and other nutritional supplements: *“The students were seen enjoying the four healthy five perfect menu served in standard containers (stainless steel food trays) in an orderly and conducive atmosphere.”* According to the teacher, the menu arrangement demonstrated the provider’s efforts to maintain nutritional balance, not only focusing on satiety, but also on adequate nutrition to support student growth and development, as well as concentration in learning.

Operational Adjustments and Teacher Workload

Food distribution at school is not carried out haphazardly, but rather follows a systematic process. The school implements an organized system in which designated parties oversee allocation, monitor portion sizes, and ensure that each class receives its assigned portion in an orderly manner. Teachers play a direct supervisory role during the distribution process. Their involvement reflects the school’s institutional commitment to supporting the MBG program and safeguarding student well-being. The direct role of teachers in food distribution demonstrates the school’s commitment to supporting the MBG program and its concern for student safety.

However, this commitment also highlights a crucial operational reality: the additional workload placed on teachers. In some schools, responsibilities related to food oversight have increased administrative and logistical demands. To alleviate this burden, schools have adopted adaptive strategies, such as assigning teachers to work rotating shifts (teacher on duty) and involving student representatives to support collection and distribution. These adjustments demonstrate schools’ dedication to maintaining the MBG and the need for clearer operational guidelines to prevent increased workloads for teaching and administrative staff.



Photo f: Teacher participants took a photo with the caption: *“Teachers on duty took shelter under a tent and in front of a fan while overseeing the distribution of MBG.”*

Food Safety, Freshness, and Trust

Across the school, students described moments of joy during communal meals, highlighting how eating together strengthens friendships and creates a sense of community. For some students, MBG reduced financial stress and ensured they didn’t feel hungry during class. However, some students noted that some menu items felt monotonous or unappealing, or that the food tasted bland. Occasionally, reports of spoiled food further impacted perceptions of quality.

Concerns about food safety were identified as a critical issue. Reports of spoiled food on certain days and food poisoning incidents at other schools have impacted students’ perceptions and beliefs.



A student participant wrote a narrative in Photo g: *We like the MBG menu because we can eat together with friends, but sometimes we don’t like the MBG menu because the menu is boring and not very interesting...”*



Photo f: *“Today some of the food went stale.”*

Periodic evaluation related to Distribution and Quality

These findings highlight the importance of regular evaluation of the distribution process and food quality to ensure program consistency and effectiveness. Monitoring delivery timeliness, hygiene standards, portion accuracy, and student acceptance is crucial to prevent inefficiencies, reduce waste, and maintain trust. Ongoing quality assurance strengthens accountability and supports the long-term sustainability of the MBG program.

One teacher explained that *“timeliness of distribution needs to be maintained to avoid disruption to learning.”*

Another teacher suggested that *“Regular evaluation is also important to maintain the quality of the program.”*

POLICY INSIGHTS

This program is still in its early stages; thus, feedback for improvement is needed to ensure its continued development and meet expectations and aspirations. Overall, the program is well-liked by children and supported by teachers, but there are several areas of concern. The findings from this participatory evaluation of PhotoVoice suggest the following for practitioners and policymakers:

1. Prioritizing Quality and System Readiness Over Speed

Implementation should avoid a “rush to scale.” A phased approach that prioritizes learning, incremental improvement, and operational readiness will make MBG more efficient and resilient over time, especially as the program expands across diverse school capacities. Incremental improvements (pilot-evaluate-adjust-scale) are more cost-effective than correcting failures at scale.

2. Strengthening Core Operating Systems: Distribution and Menu Design

Schools need clear mechanisms to ensure timely delivery and regular allocation, linked to teacher work schedules and teaching schedules. Furthermore, menus should be truly nutritious yet accessible to students. Findings indicate that student acceptance depends on taste, variety, and perceived quality. “Nutrition for all” means leaving no student behind. Non-inclusive programs will reduce effectiveness and increase food waste.

Inclusion is not an add-on, but rather a core part of the MBG design. While meeting nutritional principles is an important foundation, the program’s effectiveness still depends on how well the menu is accepted and optimally consumed by students.

3. Good Supply Chain and Economic Efficiency

Reports of spoiled food or late deliveries indicate inefficiencies in logistics and supply chain management. Strengthening supply chain management, procurement monitoring, and quality control improves the efficiency of public spending allocation.

Reports of spoiled food or delayed deliveries indicate inefficiencies in logistics and supply chain management. Strengthening supply chain management, procurement monitoring, and quality control will improve the efficiency of public spending allocation. It is important to involve local MSMEs around schools, school canteens, and nutritionists from community health centers (puskesmas) within this ecosystem to ensure that what reaches students is not merely food, but nutritious food.

4. Teacher Workload and Opportunity Cost

While teachers’ direct involvement in food supervision reflects a school’s commitment, it also carries opportunity costs.

When teachers allocate time to distribution tasks, teaching time can be indirectly reduced. This creates hidden costs in the form of decreased teaching efficiency, increased workload pressure, and potential productivity trade-offs.

Clear, firm, and uniform operational governance mitigates these unwanted opportunity costs.

5. Managing Fiscal Burden with a Long-Term Investment Lens

The MBG program requires a strong fiscal commitment, while results are not immediately visible. It is a typical human resource policy where tangible results are realized over time through improvements in learning, health, and productivity.

Success should be measured through intermediary outcomes such as attendance, learning focus, food waste, menu acceptance, and nutrition and health indicators, rather than simply based on the number of portions distributed.

The MBG serves as an early-stage investment in human capital. By increasing readiness to learn, the program has the potential to improve educational attainment and long-term productivity

6. Establish and Implement Robust National SOPs to Reduce Inefficiencies and Risks

The MBG program requires careful management and better distribution by paying attention to and implementing existing SOPs clearly, firmly, and uniformly for schools and SPPGs. SOP components that need to be considered are: the roles of implementing actors, including teachers and students; standards for timely delivery and tolerance limits for delays (related to food freshness); standards for kitchen/serving equipment cleanliness, and incident handling mechanisms (e.g., spoiled food/complaints); operational nutrition standards (portion, composition, fruit & vegetable variety, protein quality); special procedures for students with special needs (allergies, dietary restrictions), including parent-school-provider communication; regular evaluations for taste, variety, food wastage, student satisfaction, and distribution quality with clear follow-up improvements.

7. Positioning MBG not only as consumption policy, but as a culture of healthy eating (PHBS)

The MBG program should go beyond food provision by fostering sustainable healthy eating habits through Behavioral Change Techniques (BCT). This can be achieved through nudging (making healthy choices the default), teacher role modeling, simple reinforcement (rewards), visual reminders, and the establishment of social norms and routines. In this way, MBG becomes a long-term behavior change instrument, not merely a consumption program and policy.

PhotoVoice is a participatory method for qualitatively assessing development programs.

Photovoice, with its participatory approach, is useful for understanding how the MBG program is “experienced” at the school level. Through student and teacher photos and narratives, the program can be examined from the perspective of those directly impacted by its implementation. By capturing moments of positive experiences and operational challenges, participants provide insights that might not emerge through conventional evaluation methods. This process not only generates constructive feedback on the distribution system, food quality, and menu preferences but also strengthens accountability and responsiveness. Photovoice allows very young students to freely express their views and experiences and explain the meaning behind the photos they take. This approach is also relevant with today’s generation, which is familiar with visual culture and enjoys using photography as a means of communication.

In this way, Photovoice supports a more inclusive and grounded evaluation of the MBG program, ensuring that policy reflections are informed by real-life experiences rather than solely by administrative data.

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