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PROJECTED BENEFITS OF THE FREE NUTRITIOUS MEALS PROGRAM IN INDONESIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BASED ON SOCIAL JUSTICE THEORY AND HUMAN CAPITAL

Pardomuan Robinson Sihombing

BPS-Statistics Indonesia, Jln dr Sutomo No 6-8 Jakarta
Correspondence Author Email: robinson@bps.go.id

ABSTRACT

Background: Indonesia faces a paradoxical development phenomenon: intense and persistent economic growth, high child poverty rates, and stunting prevalence. The government initiated the Free Nutritious Meals Program (FNMP/ MBG) in response.

Purpose: This study aims to analyze the projected multisectoral benefits of the MBG program. The method used is a theoretical qualitative literature review, framed by Human Capital Theory and Justice as Fairness Theory.

Design/methodology/approach: A comparative analysis was conducted on school feeding programs in Brazil (PNAE), China (NNIP-RCES), and Japan (Kyūshoku).

Findings: The results show that international programs have had a significant impact: PNAE in Brazil has empowered the local farming economy, NNIP-RCES in China has measurably improved academic achievement, and Kyūshoku in Japan has integrated nutrition with character education.

Implication: These findings imply that MBG has the potential to be a strategic investment that not only improves nutrition but also enhances educational outcomes, stimulates the local economy, and functions as an instrument of fundamental social justice in Indonesia.

Paper type: Literature review

Keyword: *economy; food; Kyūshoku; MBG; PNAE*

A. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is currently facing a crucial development paradox. On the one hand, the country is showing significant economic progress, with the national poverty rate continuing to decline to 9% in March 2024 (Nurmansu, 2024). However, on the other hand, this progress has not been fully felt by children, whose poverty rate reaches 22.4%, more than double the national average (Nurmansu, 2024). This gap is physically manifested in the form of a high prevalence of *stunting*, which stands at 19.8% in 2024, a figure still above the threshold set by the WHO (Kemenkes, 2025). Faced with this fundamental challenge, the Indonesian government initiated the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) as a nationwide policy intervention to break the intergenerational poverty and malnutrition cycle.

Previous research on large-scale school feeding programs at the international level offers a rich spectrum of lessons. A study of *the Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* (PNAE) in Brazil shows that the program has not only succeeded in improving the nutritional status of students, but has also effectively become a driver of the local economy by empowering small farmers (Sidaner et al., 2013)(Arpan & Sophian, 2024). In China, an evaluation of *the National Nutrition Improvement Program for Rural Compulsory Education Students* (NNIP-RCES) provides strong empirical evidence that nutritional interventions directly improve the academic achievement of rural students,

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particularly in language and mathematics (Wang et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Japan's *Kyūshoku* model, integrated with the *Shokuiku* philosophy, is an example of best practice in integrating nutrition provision with non-cognitive character education such as responsibility and cooperation (Hopson, 2025)(Kurotani Kayo, 2019). At the domestic level, preliminary evaluations of the MBG pilot program show potential for increased nutritional intake, but at the same time highlight significant implementation challenges, ranging from logistical complexities in an archipelagic country to fiscal sustainability to quality control (Mohammad Ridwan et al., 2025) (Institute for Development of Economics and Finance (INDEF), 2024).

Although there have been many international case studies and preliminary reports on domestic challenges, there is still *a* significant *research* gap. There has been no comprehensive analysis synthesizing lessons from these various international models to project the potential multidimensional benefits of MBG programs in the unique context of Indonesia through a robust theoretical framework. Most public discourse remains focused on technical and budgetary aspects, without exploring the potential of MBG as an investment in human capital and an instrument of social justice. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap. This paper aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the projected benefits of the MBG program by conducting a comparative study of successful models in Brazil, China, and Japan. This analysis will be framed using the dual lens of Human Capital Theory and Justice as Fairness Theory to provide a holistic understanding and generate strategic and applicable policy recommendations.

B. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a theoretical qualitative library research method, an approach relevant for answering conceptual and comparative research questions. This method is a series of systematic activities, including collecting, reading, recording, and processing data from various library sources to construct an analytical argument without conducting field research (Zed, 2014)(Alfansyur & Mariyani, 2020). This approach is more than just a compilation of literature; it is an interpretive process to synthesize information, identify patterns, and construct a new framework of understanding a phenomenon (Adlini et al, 2022). This research process involves identifying and collecting relevant data sources—including reputable scientific journals, multilateral agency reports, government policy documents, and *policy* briefs—followed by systematic data extraction and in-depth analysis guided by a predetermined theoretical framework.

To maintain scientific rigor, qualitative research such as this translates the concepts of validity and reliability into a more holistic concept, namely *trustworthiness* (Mishler, 1990); (Stiles, 1993); (Christou, 2025), Credibility (*credibility*), or truth value, is sought through source triangulation by comparing data from various documents to confirm findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). Meanwhile, dependability (*Dependability*, or consistency, is ensured by creating a transparent "*decision* trail." The criteria for selecting country case studies and theoretical frameworks are explicitly described, allowing the research process to be traced and understood (Christou, 2025).

Two complementary theoretical lenses frame the analysis in this study. The first lens is Human Capital Theory, pioneered by Theodore Shultz and Gary Becker. This theory views knowledge, skills, and health as fundamental forms of capital for economic productivity (Schultz, 1961). In this context, the MBG program is not seen as a social cost, but rather as a productive investment in human resource foundations. Consistent nutritional interventions are expected to improve students' cognitive functioning and school attendance, ultimately improving academic achievement and producing a more productive workforce in the future (Bundy et al., 2018). Thus, this theory provides an economic efficiency-based justification for MBG programs. The second theoretical lens is John Rawls' Theory of Justice as Fairness, which provides a normative and ethical foundation. Rawls argues that a just society must organize its basic structures to provide the most significant benefit to its *least-advantaged* members (Sandel, 1994). Its two main principles are *Fair Equality of Opportunity* and *the Difference Principle* are highly relevant. MBG can be analyzed as an instrument of justice that

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mitigates the impact of the "birth lottery," ensuring that children from low-income families have more equal opportunities to develop their potential. Because the benefits of this program are inherently felt most by the groups that need it most, MBG directly fulfills the demands of the Difference Principle. These two theories provide comprehensive justification, framing MBG as a wise economic investment and a moral imperative.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A comparative analysis of similar programs in other countries is essential to project the potential and anticipate the challenges of the MBG program in Indonesia. Three countries—Brazil, China, and Japan—were selected as the primary case studies because they represent a spectrum of highly diverse implementation models. Brazil offers a model based on universal rights and local economic empowerment, China presents an example of targeted interventions with quantifiable impacts, while Japan showcases a holistic model that has evolved into an integrated pedagogical tool. Analysis of these three approaches provides a rich blueprint for designing effective and sustainable programs in the Indonesian context.

Table 1: Comparison Matrix of School Feeding Programs in Brazil, China, Japan, and Indonesia Projections

Criteria	Brazil (PNAE)	China (NNIP-RCES)	Japan (Kyūshoku & Shokuiku)	Indonesia (MBG - Projection)
Program Name	National School Feeding Program (PNAE)	National Nutrition Improvement Program for Rural Compulsory Education Students (NNIP-RCES)	Gakkō Kyūshoku (School Lunch) & Shokuiku (Nutrition & Food Education)	Free Nutritious Meals (MBG)
Model & Scope	Universal. Covers >40 million students across all public, philanthropic, and community-based primary education levels.	Targeted. Covers >37 million students in concentrated rural and poor areas.	Nearly Universal. Covers >99% of public elementary schools and ~90% of public junior high schools.	Universal (projected). Targets students from early childhood education to high school, Islamic boarding schools, toddlers, and pregnant/nursing mothers.
Main Objectives	1.Meet students' nutritional needs. 2.Promote local family farming. 3.Nutrition education.	1.Improve the nutritional status of rural students. 2.Promote educational equity.	1. Provide balanced nutrition. 2. Educate on non-cognitive values (responsibility, cooperation, hygiene). 3. Introduce local food culture.	1. Prevent *stunting*. 2. Improve health and nutrition. 3. Develop high-quality human resources.
Funding Mechanism	Co-financing. The federal government (FNDE) transfers funds to state and city governments, contributing funding.	Centralization. Funded mainly by the central government.	Cost-sharing. Municipal governments cover infrastructure and labor costs; parents pay for raw materials (subsidized, with relief for low-income families).	Centralization (initial). Funded by the state budget (initial allocation of Rp71 trillion).

ISSN : 3046-689 X (ONLINE)

Criteria	Brazil (PNAE)	China (NNIP-RCES)	Japan (Kyūshoku & Shokuiku)	Indonesia (MBG - Projection)
Local Involvement & Supply Chain	Very strong & regulated by law. At least 30% of federal funds must be used to purchase products from local family farmers.	Variable. Depends on local implementation, but there is no strong national mandate like in Brazil.	Strong. Emphasis on using local raw materials (*chisan-chishō*) to introduce students to local products.	Expected. Targets the involvement of local MSMEs, but there is no institutionalized mechanism yet.
Non-Nutrition Education Component	Exists through food and nutrition education initiatives.	Limited, with a primary focus on nutrition and academic outcomes.	Very Strong & Integrated. Lunch is part of the curriculum (*tokubetsu katsudō*). Students participate in serving & cleaning up, instilling responsibility & cooperation.	Not clearly defined in the initial program design.
Main Documented Impacts	- Increased consumption of fruits & vegetables. - Increased income for local farmers (~32.6%). - Improved academic performance.	- Increased height and weight. - Significant improvement in language (+0.223 SD) and mathematics (+0.172 SD) scores. - Increased high school enrollment rate (+8.2%).	- Low childhood obesity rates. - Formation of lifelong healthy eating habits. - Instilling social values and responsibility.	- (Projected) Reduction *in stunting*, improvement in learning outcomes, economic stimulus for MSMEs.

Brazil's National School Feeding Program (PNAE) stands as one of the oldest and largest programs in the world, having transformed from mere food aid into a pillar of national food security policy. Its main strength lies in its solid legal foundation, whereby school meals are no longer just a policy, but a universal right guaranteed by the 1988 Constitution and reinforced by Law No. 11,947 of 2009 (Almeida & Pacheco, 2022) (Silva et al, 2022). This legislation ensures the program's sustainability, which reaches more than 40 million students. The PNAE philosophy is highly innovative and has a dual purpose: to improve children's nutritional status while serving as an economic driver for small farmers. This data is institutionalized through a legal mandate requiring that at least 30% of federal funds be used to purchase food directly from family farmers (Alves Da Silva et al., 2023) (Marinho et al., 2025). Its implementation is decentralized with a model *Co-financing*, whereby the federal government transfers funds to local governments, which are also required to contribute, thereby encouraging local ownership. The impact has proven to be significant, not only increasing fruit and vegetable consumption in schools, but also significantly increasing local farmers' incomes by up to 32.6% and correlating positively with improvements in student academic performance.

Unlike Brazil's universal model, China implements a highly targeted approach through the National Nutrition Improvement Program for Rural Compulsory Education Students (NNIP-RCES). Launched in 2011, this program is a strategic intervention to address the development gap between urban and rural areas, targeting more than 37 million students in poor regions. Its main objective is to promote educational equity by addressing malnutrition as one of the root causes of low academic achievement in rural areas (Sidaner et al., 2013). The main strength of this model lies in its rigorous, data-driven impact evaluation. Quantitative studies show robust evidence of its success. In addition

ISSN : 3046-689 X (ONLINE)

to improving physical growth indicators, the most notable finding is its direct impact on learning outcomes. The program has significantly improved students' language scores by 0.223 standard deviations and math scores by 0.172 standard deviations. Furthermore, its long-term impact is evident in an 8.2% increase in high school enrollment rates (Wang et al., 2022). This is convincing empirical evidence that nutritional interventions can directly translate into measurable improvements in human capital.

Japan offers a model school food program (*Gakkō Kyūshoku*) that has evolved beyond simply providing meals to become an integral part of a holistic educational experience. With a foundation in the philosophy *of Shokuiku* (food and nutrition education) institutionalized through the Basic Act in 2005, the program has a dual mandate: to provide balanced nutrition and to instill non-cognitive values. The program is nearly universal and mandatory, with all students eating the same menu in the classroom, rather than in a cafeteria, to ensure inclusivity (Hopson, 2025). The uniqueness of the Japanese model lies in its process as a pedagogical tool. Students, taking turns (*kyūshoku tōban*), are responsible for serving food and leading the cleanup process. This entire daily ritual is considered part of the formal curriculum under the category of "special activities" (*tokubetsu katsudō)*, which effectively functions as a "hidden curriculum" for teaching discipline, responsibility, teamwork, and gratitude (Hopson, 2025).The funding model is cost-sharing (*cost-sharing*), where the local government covers infrastructure and labor costs, while parents pay for highly subsidized raw materials, with relief for low-income families.

Discussion: Projected Benefits and Implications of MBG in Indonesia

A comparative analysis of school feeding programs in Brazil, China, and Japan provides a powerful lens through which to project the potential benefits of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program and formulate strategies to overcome implementation challenges. By applying the frameworks of Human Capital Theory and Justice as Fairness Theory, we can map out the multidimensional implications of this ambitious policy. From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, MBG should be viewed as a fundamental investment with significant potential returns across various sectors. Improved Educational Outcomes and Productivity: China's experience with the NNIP-RCES program provides the most convincing empirical evidence. Consistent nutritional interventions are directly correlated with improved academic achievement (Wang et al., 2022).

For Indonesia, where the quality of education and learning outcomes remain a significant challenge, the MBG has the potential to be a game changer. By ensuring that students, especially those from low-income families, come to school with full stomachs and adequate nutrition, this program can improve their ability to concentrate, absorb lessons, and participate actively. The projections are a decrease in absenteeism, an increase in net enrollment rates (NER), and ultimately, an improvement in national average scores, especially in disadvantaged areas. This early increase in human capital will result in a more educated and productive workforce in the next 15-20 years, providing a substantial return on investment for the national economy.

Local Economic Stimulus and Supply Chain Development: The PNAE model in Brazil shows how school feeding programs can be engineered to become powerful instruments of local economic development (Silva et al, 2022). The initial design of the MBG, which targets the involvement of local MSMEs, is a positive first step. However, this involvement must be institutionalized and strengthened to maximize its impact. By adopting a mandate similar to that in Brazil—for example, requiring a minimum allocation of 30% of the procurement budget to be spent on products from small farmers, women farmers' groups, village cooperatives, and local food MSMEs—the MBG can create stable and predictable demand. This data would stimulate local agricultural production, shorten food supply chains, reduce dependence on large suppliers, and inject liquidity directly into the rural economy. The formation of a virtuous cycle in which government social funds are recycled to empower the local community economy is one of the greatest potentials of this program (*virtuous cycle*) Recycling government social funds to empower the local community economy is one of the greatest potentials of this program.

ISSN : 3046-689 X (ONLINE)

Multisectoral Returns: Development economics literature confirms that investment in school feeding programs generates benefits that cross sectoral boundaries (Appiah et al., 2024). The Rp71 trillion budget for MBG should not be viewed solely as a cost to the health sector (reduction of *stunting*) or education (improved learning). It is an integrated investment that generates returns in the health sector (reduction in the burden of malnutrition-related diseases), the education sector (improved quality of human resources), the social protection sector (non-cash transfers that increase family food security), and the agriculture/economy sector (empowerment of local producers). This multisectoral understanding is crucial for budget justification and program success evaluation in the long term.

Implications of Social Justice through the Lens of Rawls' Theory

From the Justice as Fairness Theory perspective, MBG is not only a matter of economic efficiency, but also a moral imperative to build a more just society. Reducing the "Birth Lottery" and the Impact of Moral Arbitrariness: John Rawls argues that one of the greatest injustices is when a person's life prospects are determined by factors beyond their control, such as the family into which they are born (Rawls, 2005). In Indonesia, a child born into a low-income family has a higher probability of suffering from *stunting* and poverty, which will limit their potential for life. MBG serves as a corrective mechanism to this "birth lottery." By universally providing nutrition—a fundamental prerequisite for brain and physical development—to all children in school, the state actively ensures that economic background does not become a life sentence.

Realizing *Fair Equality of Opportunity*: This principle demands more than just formal access to education; it demands *fair* and *practical* opportunities to utilize that access (Rawls, 2005). A child who is hungry or malnourished, even if seated in a classroom, does not have a fair chance to learn compared to his or her well-nourished peers. MBG, therefore, is an enabling policy that forms the foundation for the effectiveness of all investments in the education sector. This program ensures that all children have a more equal "starting line" to absorb knowledge and develop their talents.

Application *of the Difference* Principle: The Difference Principle states that social structures should be arranged to provide the most significant benefit to the least advantaged. MBG inherently fulfills this principle. Although provided universally in schools, the value of a plate of nutritious food is far greater for a child from a low-income family than for a child from a wealthy family. For poor children, this meal may be the only source of balanced nutrition they receive that day, directly improving their health and learning ability and easing their family's economic burden. Thus, MBG is an example of a public policy that progressively distributes benefits to the most needy segments of society.

The success of MBG will significantly depend on its ability to overcome complex implementation challenges. International experience offers concrete solutions. Logistics and Decentralization: Facing Indonesia's extreme geographical challenges, a centralistic "one size fits all" approach is sure to fail. Brazil's decentralization and *co-financing* model offers a way out. The central government can play a role as the setter of national standards (nutrition, food security), the leading provider of funds, and the facilitator. However, the authority for implementation-including procurement of raw materials, determination of menus appropriate to local food cultures, and distribution management—must be delegated to local governments (provinces and districts/cities). Empowering local governments will increase the program's flexibility, adaptability, and ownership.

Funding and Sustainability: To ensure long-term fiscal sustainability, a cost-sharing model like that in Japan should be considered as the program evolves. Once the program is up and running and its benefits are widely felt, the government can explore a scheme in which economically capable families contribute a small portion of the cost of raw materials. In contrast, the government continues to bear the entire infrastructure and labor cost and provides full subsidies to low-income families. This model not only eases the burden on the state budget but also fosters a sense of shared responsibility and ownership.

Program Quality and Vision: The biggest challenge for MBG is to avoid becoming merely a food distribution logistics operation. To that end, Indonesia needs to adopt a more holistic vision,

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namely "Shokuiku Indonesia," inspired by Japan (Hopson, 2025). This data means integrating MBG into the education process itself. Lunchtime can be transformed into a learning moment about nutrition, hygiene, local food culture, and social values. Involving students in the serving and cleaning process, as in Japan, does not require additional costs but can instill the character traits of responsibility, cooperation, and empathy. This vision will elevate MBG from a mere calorie fulfillment program to a program for holistic human development. Ultimately, the most significant potential of MBG lies in its role as a "system integrator" (*system integrator*), a policy platform capable of uniting national priority agendas in health, education, economic empowerment, and food security into a unified movement

D. CONCLUSION

This analysis concludes that Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program, despite facing significant fiscal, logistical, and governance challenges, has tremendous transformative potential. Framed through the Theory of Human Capital, MBG is not merely a social cost, but a strategic investment with high multisectoral return potential in education, health, and local economic development. Simultaneously, through the lens of Justice as Fairness Theory, MBG is a fundamental instrument for realizing social justice, functioning as a corrective mechanism against structural inequality and ensuring fairer opportunities for Indonesia's future generations. Lessons from international experiences are crucial: Brazil demonstrates the power of a decentralized and integrated universal model with local economic empowerment; China proves that targeted nutritional interventions can produce measurable and significant improvements in academic outcomes; while Japan offers the highest vision of a school food program that has evolved into a holistic pedagogical tool for character building. Combining these three models provides a rich and adaptable blueprint for optimizing the design and implementation of MBG in Indonesia.

A series of integrated, applicable policies is recommended to maximize potential benefits and mitigate risks. Implementation should begin with a hybrid model that intensively targets areas with the heaviest nutritional burden before expanding universally, with implementation authority decentralized to local governments to ensure local adaptation. Local economic involvement should be institutionalized through regulations requiring a minimum percentage of procurement from local MSMEs and farmers, thereby transforming the program into a tangible economic stimulus. Additionally, to avoid this program becoming merely a logistical operation, the "Shokuiku Indonesia" component must be integrated into the curriculum, transforming mealtimes into moments of character and nutrition learning, emulating holistic practices in Japan. Finally, the long-term success of all this must be supported by the development of a robust data-based monitoring and evaluation system from the outset, measuring the real impact on health, education, and economic indicators to ensure accountability, continuous improvement, and justification for the program's sustainability in the future.

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