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Comparative Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Public and Private Schools as a Form of Social Justice

Andi Meiky Al Paris ^{1*}, Citra Abriyanti Octavia Sitorus ¹, Oksep Adhayanto ¹

¹ Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji, Tanjungpinang, Kepulauan Riau, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: andial230507@gmail.com

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (*Program Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG*) in Indonesia through the lens of social justice, with a comparative focus between public and private schools. Employing a normative juridical research method with a qualitative descriptive approach, the findings reveal that the current MBG distribution pattern remains universal and institution-based, without differentiating students' economic conditions. This results in an imbalance of effectiveness: the program is considered highly targeted and produces significant impact in public schools, which serve students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, yet risks being poorly targeted and generating budgetary waste in private schools predominantly attended by students from affluent families. The study concludes that although an equality-based approach has been achieved, the substantive social justice principle of equity has not been fully realized. Consequently, policy evaluation is needed to shift the distribution of assistance toward a need-based approach, ensuring more effective, efficient, and purposeful resource allocation for vulnerable groups.

Keywords: Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG); Social Justice; Education Policy; Aid Distribution

Introduction

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), launched as a national policy, reflects the state's commitment to realizing social justice in the field of education particularly in fulfilling students' right to nutritious food. The government designed this program as an effort to reduce nutritional disparities among school-age children, lower the risk of stunting, and improve student attendance, motivation, and learning concentration. According to its policy documents, MBG is designed to reach all students from various socioeconomic backgrounds, without distinguishing between public and private schools. Normatively, the program is thus directed as a fair and inclusive instrument across all educational institutions. However, at the implementation level, considerable differences have been observed, particularly when comparing public and private schools.

In public schools, MBG tends to operate in a more structured manner, as these institutions fall directly under the supervision of local and central government. Consequently, funding, technical guidelines, and supervisory mechanisms are better coordinated. In many public schools, the program is carried out on nearly every school day, covering all students from lower to upper grades without exception. This aligns with the social justice principle that every child has the right to nutritious food regardless of their family's social status. On the other hand, research conducted across various districts indicates that school kitchen infrastructure, labor availability, and commodity quality remain limiting factors, meaning that nutritional and food safety standards are not always optimally met. Nevertheless, public schools generally demonstrate greater compliance with official distribution schemes, national menu standards, and monitoring mechanisms from education and health agencies. As a result, MBG implementation in public institutions appears more consistent with its social justice objectives.

In contrast, MBG implementation in private schools is considerably more complex and uneven. Large private schools managed by strong foundations with access to community funding are generally able to adopt the program by supplementing menus, arranging meal schedules more flexibly, and even engaging nutritionists to design nutritional variety. However, a significant number of private schools have not implemented MBG optimally due to several factors: limited operational funding, insufficient support from local government, weak coordination with relevant agencies, and a management orientation that prioritizes tuition-based financing. In this context, disparities arise in how students are treated, as not all children in private schools receive the full benefit of the free nutritious meal program particularly in institutions that charge meal fees or restrict the program to select students.

These differing implementation patterns raise a crucial question regarding the concrete manifestation of social justice within the MBG program. If the program is genuinely intended to fulfill children's basic rights, there should be no significant differences in access and quality between public and private schools. Yet the reality on the ground suggests that institutional ownership, management capacity, and local policy support are the primary determinants of the program's effectiveness. Data from various social studies indicate that MBG has had a positive impact on nutritional resilience, increased attendance, and improved learning concentration; however, these effects are greater and more stable in schools supported by the government with adequate resources particularly public schools. In private schools, the impacts tend to vary: evident in some institutions, yet highly limited in others.

From a social justice perspective, the Free Nutritious Meal Program must be evaluated not merely by the number of districts implementing it, but also by the equality of outcomes and treatment afforded to students across all types of institutions. While the program has undoubtedly improved conditions for many children especially those from low-income families it has simultaneously exposed a structural institutional disparity between public and private schools. It is for this reason that research entitled "Comparative Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Public and Private Schools as a Form of Social Justice" is considered highly relevant and significant. Through this study, the authors analyze the extent to which MBG is genuinely implemented equitably across both types of institutions, and examine the factors that either strengthen or constrain effective implementation in public and private schools alike. The findings are thus expected to provide a clear picture of the degree to which MBG policy truly serves as a concrete instrument of social justice for all students in Indonesia, regardless of their socioeconomic background or the type of educational institution they attend.

Table 1. Preliminary Comparative Table of MBG Implementation in Public and Private Schools

| Aspect | Public Schools | Private Schools |
|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| Students' economic background | Diverse | Predominantly middle-to-upper class |
| Access to assistance | More necessary | Relatively less urgent |
| Program impact | Significant (supports health and learning) | Minimal (limited measurable effect) |
| Targeting accuracy | More accurate | Potentially inaccurate |
| Social justice principle | More aligned | Questionable |
| Budget efficiency | More efficient | Potential for budgetary waste |

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is a government policy designed to improve students' nutritional quality while supporting optimal learning processes. The program also represents a means of achieving social justice by ensuring that every individual within the education system has access to basic necessities. Schools are regarded as a strategic channel through which the program's benefits can be distributed equitably, irrespective of students' economic backgrounds.

However, implementation continues to face a number of challenges. One of the primary concerns is the provision of MBG to certain private schools where the majority of students come from wealthy families, while there remain public and private schools whose students belong to lower- and middle-income households that do not have full access to the program. This situation raises serious questions

about targeting accuracy and the social justice principles underpinning the program's distribution. Normatively, social justice demands proportional resource distribution that favors those most in need. The implementation of MBG should, therefore, prioritize schools with higher levels of economic vulnerability. The contrasting characteristics between the more inclusive public schools and private schools that tend toward specific economic segmentation further underscore the urgency of evaluating this program's implementation.

Method

This study employs a normative juridical approach utilizing a library research methodology. The normative juridical approach was selected because the study focuses on the analysis of legal norms and policies related to the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program from a social justice perspective. The data sources used consist of secondary data, obtained from primary and secondary legal materials, including legislation, scientific journals indexed on platforms such as Google, books, and other scientific publications relevant to the research topic. Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative descriptive method, involving the examination, interpretation, and comparison of various obtained sources in order to draw conclusions regarding differences in program implementation and their relevance to the principles of social justice.

Findings and Discussion

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in public and private schools reveals considerable differences in the aspects of planning, execution, and impact on students, as well as in its reflection of social justice. In public schools, the program tends to operate in a more structured and centralized manner, as these institutions fall directly under government supervision and receive funding support, technical guidelines, and monitoring mechanisms from education and health agencies. In many districts and cities, MBG in public schools is carried out on every school day, with menus based on national nutritional standards and served to all students regardless of their socioeconomic background. This aligns with the social justice objective that every child has the right to nutritious food without discrimination. Nevertheless, challenges persist at the operational level, including a shortage of kitchen staff, inadequate supporting facilities, and food ingredient quality that does not always meet established standards meaning that outcomes have not yet fully met optimal expectations in terms of food safety and nutritional quality.

On the other hand, MBG implementation in private schools exhibits considerably more varied patterns. Large private schools with strong foundations and independent resource management are often able to optimize the program by providing more diverse nutritious menus, supplementary dishes, and even daily management by professional staff. However, many private schools continue to experience delays or weaknesses in implementing MBG, primarily due to limited operational funding, insufficient budgetary support from local government, and weak coordination with relevant agencies. In some cases, private schools have been compelled to charge meal fees to parents or to provide free nutritious meals only to a portion of students for instance, those from low-income families. As a result, disparities emerge in the experience and benefits of MBG among students in private schools, which stands in contrast to the universality that social justice policy is expected to uphold.

These implementation differences raise fundamental questions about the concrete realization of social justice within the MBG program. While the program has demonstrated the capacity to improve nutritional status, food security, school attendance, and learning concentration particularly in government-supported schools children enrolled in under-resourced private institutions receive comparatively fewer and less equitable benefits. Several recent studies indicate that well-implemented MBG can reduce the risk of stunting, strengthen food security, and improve learning participation at the primary level; however, these effects are more pronounced in public schools than in the majority of

private schools. This points to a structural bias within the education system, whereby resources and opportunities are not managed equitably across different types of educational institutions.

Furthermore, organizational culture and management factors also influence MBG implementation. In public schools, management tends to be more compliant with official guidelines, given their accountability to central and regional government policies and formal reporting obligations. In private schools, decisions are frequently shaped by foundation policies, financial capacity, and service orientation toward parents. In this context, social justice is not solely a matter of policy design, but also concerns the way institutions manage and prioritize resources, and the extent to which they regard the MBG program as part of their social mission rather than a mere administrative obligation. When private school management views MBG as an additional financial burden, the principles of social justice risk being undermined.

From a policy standpoint, the MBG program represents an important step toward realizing the right to food and the right to quality education. However, for the program to be truly fair and inclusive, improvements are needed in resource distribution, technical support, and oversight of private schools, so as to prevent disparities in program experience and benefits between public and private institutions. Accordingly, MBG implementation across both types of institutions serves as a measure of the extent to which the state is capable of guaranteeing social justice in education that is, equal opportunity for all children to access nutritious food, regardless of the type of institution they attend or their family's social status.

1. Implementation Patterns of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG)

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Indonesia follows an institution-based distribution pattern, in which schools serve as the primary unit of both receipt and delivery of program benefits. In practice, all students enrolled in designated recipient institutions receive benefits collectively, without any classification based on socioeconomic status.

The implementation of school meal programs in Indonesia is carried out through coordination among school staff, teachers, and parents. Interview findings from relevant studies indicate that the school-based approach was chosen because it is considered more efficient in terms of logistics distribution and facilitates field-level monitoring.

However, this approach carries implications for the program's targeting accuracy. Because no differentiation is made based on students' economic conditions, the distribution of the program tends to be administratively universal in nature. This situation gives rise to a potential misalignment between the policy's stated objective of serving vulnerable groups and the realities of implementation on the ground.

2. Implementation in Public Schools

MBG implementation in public schools demonstrates a closer alignment with the policy's objectives, particularly in improving the welfare of students from lower and middle-income economic groups. Public schools are generally characterized by inclusivity, with a student body drawn from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, though predominantly comprising students with limited economic means.

Various studies on school meal programs indicate that nutritional interventions delivered through schools have positive impacts on improving dietary quality, enhancing nutritional status, and increasing student concentration and participation in the learning process. This is further affirmed in research on School Feeding Programs in Indonesia, which states that school meal programs contribute to sustaining students' educational continuity through improvements in nutritional intake.

Given these characteristics, MBG implementation in public schools can be considered more closely aligned with the need-based principle of social justice, as the program directly reaches those

most in need and produces a relatively significant impact in terms of both health and educational outcomes.

3. MBG Implementation in Private Schools

In contrast to public schools, MBG implementation in private schools exhibits more complex dynamics owing to the heterogeneous nature of these institutions. Private schools do not represent a single socioeconomic group; rather, they encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from low-fee schools serving lower- and middle-income communities to elite institutions catering to students from affluent families. In practice, MBG is provided to private schools without clear classification based on the level of need among students. On one hand, this policy remains relevant for low-fee private schools, as it contributes to meeting students' nutritional needs and supporting the learning process much as it does in public schools. On the other hand, in high-fee private schools, the program becomes less effective in achieving its primary policy objective of supporting vulnerable groups. This situation reveals a potential targeting inaccuracy in program implementation. Such findings are consistent with research published through the Universitas Gadjah Mada repository, which identifies one of the principal challenges in school meal programs as the failure to account for variations in the socioeconomic conditions of beneficiaries. Accordingly, MBG implementation in private schools reflects a duality of outcomes remaining relevant for certain groups while potentially conflicting with the principles of social justice for others.

4. Comparative Analysis of MBG Implementation in Public and Private Schools

The differing characteristics of public and private schools directly affect the effectiveness of MBG implementation. The more inclusive nature of public schools allows the program to reach those most in need, resulting in more tangible benefits in terms of nutritional improvement and learning quality. Conversely, in private schools, the diversity of students' economic backgrounds leads to uneven program outcomes and, in some cases, inadequate targeting. Despite the application of the same distribution approach, implementation outcomes differ significantly due to the varying socioeconomic conditions of students across each school type.

5. Social Justice Analysis and the Rationale for Including Private Schools in MBG

Based on MBG implementation data, a total of 16,282 educational units have been designated as program recipients, comprising 9,464 public schools and 6,818 private schools, with a total of 2,430,649 students as beneficiaries. These figures indicate that the program's distribution has reached both types of educational institutions on a broad scale.

Table 2. The program's distribution

| School Type | Number of Educational Units |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| Public Schools | 9,645 |
| Private Schools | 6,961 |
| Total | 16,606 |

The inclusion of private schools in the MBG program is inseparable from the universal approach adopted in public policy, which aims to simplify distribution and prevent social exclusion. Interview findings from research published through the National Center for Biotechnology Information indicate that distributing the program to all students within a given school is considered more practical than individual selection, which risks generating social stigma.

Additionally, the limited availability of integrated socioeconomic data on students is a significant factor driving the use of an institution-based distribution approach. Under conditions where data integration remains suboptimal, the government tends to favor simpler distribution

mechanisms. Furthermore, private schools, as integral components of the national education system, possess legitimate grounds for participation in government programs.

Nevertheless, when assessed in relation to the socioeconomic conditions of their students, program distribution to private schools particularly those serving upper-income groups reveals evidence of targeting inaccuracy. This results in comparatively less significant program benefits relative to public schools, and carries the potential for budgetary inefficiency.

6. Implications for Social Justice

Based on the overall findings of the analysis, MBG implementation reflects a tendency toward an equality-based approach rather than a need-based (equity) approach. The program is distributed broadly without consideration of the varying levels of need across different groups, and therefore does not yet fully embody the substantive principles of social justice. Public schools, by virtue of their more inclusive character, demonstrate a higher degree of alignment with the program's policy objectives. Conversely, in certain private schools particularly those predominantly attended by students from affluent families program implementation proves to be less relevant and suboptimal.

This situation reveals a gap between the normative objectives of the policy and the realities of its implementation in the field. A more thorough policy evaluation is therefore warranted, particularly with respect to program targeting criteria. A need-based approach becomes essential to ensuring that resource allocation can be carried out more effectively, efficiently, and purposefully.

Accordingly, the optimization of the MBG program does not rest solely on expanding its coverage, but equally on the precision of its distribution so that the program may genuinely realize improvements in students' nutritional well-being while reflecting the principles of social justice within the education sector.

Conclusion

A comparison of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) in public and private schools reveals that, despite the policy being universally designed and oriented toward social justice, the reality of its implementation continues to be shaped and distorted by differences in institutional capacity, financial support, and government involvement. In public schools, the program generally runs in a more structured, consistent, and equitable manner, owing to official funding, technical guidelines, monitoring mechanisms, and clearly defined administrative obligations from education and health authorities. As a result, nearly all students regardless of their socioeconomic background are able to access nutritious meals on a daily basis, making MBG in public schools a closer approximation of genuine social justice in fulfilling the right to food and education.

In contrast, implementation of MBG in private schools is far more varied and does not always align with the inclusivity goals the program intends to achieve. Some private schools with strong institutional and financial standing are able to optimize the program and even exceed minimum standards; however, a considerable number of institutions have been forced to reduce coverage, pass additional costs on to parents, or limit distribution to certain groups of students meaning that the benefits are not felt equally by all. This reflects a structural inequality within the education system, whereby private schools that receive less government support end up bearing an additional burden, and as a result, the social justice objectives of the MBG program are not fully realized.

It can therefore be concluded that the Free Nutritious Meals Program is, in theory, an important vehicle for advancing social justice in education, but its effectiveness depends on supporting policies, resource distribution, and institutional capacity. To strengthen the full realization of social justice, the government must develop fairer regulatory frameworks and funding mechanisms ensuring that private schools, particularly those serving students from low-income families, also receive equitable and targeted support in implementing MBG.

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