

Free Nutritious Meals, Political Legitimacy, and Capability Expansion in Indonesia

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Abstract : Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis - MBG) is a major welfare initiative following the 2024 presidential election. This article examines MBG as a nutritional intervention, an electoral welfare instrument, or a policy mechanism that expands substantive freedoms, using qualitative interpretive policy analysis. Analysis reveals MBG's dual nature: it offers developmental benefits while aligning with electoral interests. The program's fiscal and political scale, demonstrated by its IDR 71 trillion initial allocation, projected expansion to IDR 171 trillion, and aim to reach 82.9 million beneficiaries by 2029, is extraordinary. Yet, several constraints rapid rollout, centralised governance, limited civic society participation, uneven geographic coverage, and food safety controversies limit MBG's capacity to convert meal provision into sustainable citizen capabilities, framing the argument for its transformative potential and limitations. This study argues that MBG illustrates welfare populism's dual function: it can improve nutrition, school participation, and local economies, but may also reinforce executive legitimacy and dependency in the absence of strong accountability. The program's transformative impact relies on shifting toward capability-centred governance, territorial equity, robust food safety enforcement, and empowerment of beneficiaries. This clarifies the main argument and the conditions for MBG's effectiveness.

Keywords : Free Nutritious Meals; Welfare Populism; Capability Approach; Social Policy Governance; Indonesia

Abstrak : Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) Indonesia merupakan inisiatif kesejahteraan utama setelah pemilihan presiden 2024. Artikel ini mengkaji MBG sebagai intervensi gizi, instrumen kesejahteraan elektoral, atau mekanisme kebijakan yang memperluas kebebasan substantif, menggunakan analisis kebijakan interpretatif kualitatif. Analisis mengungkapkan sifat ganda MBG: menawarkan manfaat pembangunan sekaligus selaras dengan kepentingan elektoral. Skala fiskal dan politik program ini, yang ditunjukkan oleh alokasi awal sebesar Rp 71 triliun, proyeksi perluasan menjadi Rp 171 triliun, dan target untuk menjangkau 82,9 juta penerima manfaat pada tahun 2029, sangat luar biasa. Namun, beberapa kendala—peluncuran yang cepat, tata kelola terpusat, partisipasi masyarakat sipil yang terbatas, cakupan geografis yang tidak merata, dan kontroversi keamanan pangan—membatasi kapasitas MBG untuk mengubah penyediaan makanan menjadi kemampuan warga yang berkelanjutan, yang menjadi landasan argumen tentang potensi transformatif dan keterbatasannya. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa MBG menggambarkan fungsi ganda populisme kesejahteraan: dapat meningkatkan gizi, partisipasi sekolah, dan ekonomi lokal, tetapi juga dapat memperkuat legitimasi dan ketergantungan eksekutif jika tidak ada akuntabilitas yang kuat. Dampak transformatif program ini bergantung pada pergeseran menuju tata kelola yang berpusat pada kemampuan, kesetaraan teritorial, penegakan keamanan pangan yang kuat, dan pemberdayaan penerima manfaat. Hal ini memperjelas argumen utama dan kondisi untuk efektivitas MBG.

Kata kunci: Makanan Bergizi Gratis; Populisme Kesejahteraan; Pendekatan Kemampuan; Tata Kelola Kebijakan Sosial; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Large-scale school feeding programs represent a contemporary form of social policy that combines nutritional intervention, educational incentives, social protection instruments, and highly visible state performance. Globally, school meals are among the largest social safety nets, with direct linkages to nutrition, education, and household food security (UNICEF, World Health Organization, & World Bank, 2023). In low- and middle-income countries, school meals have been associated with improved attendance, food security, and selected health and learning outcomes, although the magnitude of effects varies depending on program design, targeting, and implementation quality (Jomaa *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2021). This dual character makes school feeding politically attractive to governments seeking rapid welfare visibility.

Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Program (*Makan Bergizi Gratis*—MBG) is shaped by political and social tensions. Prabowo Subianto made MBG his flagship promise during the 2024 presidential election and launched it after assuming office. MBG directly targets child nutrition, human capital, and local economic activation. It began with IDR 71 trillion and is now discussed as needing much more, aiming for 82.9 million beneficiaries by 2029 (Badan Gizi Nasional, 2025; Karmini & Alangkara, 2025). Its scale makes MBG one of Indonesia's key non-infrastructure welfare initiatives. The central issue is whether a major welfare promise can create real freedom or merely serve as political legitimation.

This question is particularly important in Indonesia because welfare expansion has long been intertwined with democratisation, patronage, and executive image-building. Comparative studies show that democracy and electoral competition can expand social spending, while social protection can improve education and food security when its design and accountability mechanisms are strong (Baird *et al.*, 2013; Devereux, 2016; Huber & Stephens, 2012). Studies on Indonesia show that post-authoritarian democracy has generated broader social expenditure, yet this expansion has not eliminated clientelistic mediation or elite control over welfare benefits (Aspinall, 2014; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Berenschot, 2018). Under Joko Widodo's leadership, redistributive policies and infrastructure-centred development were often presented as technocratic responses to inequality, while simultaneously strengthening presidential popularity and weakening ideological opposition (Mietzner, 2020; Power, 2018; Warburton, 2016).

Populism provides one theoretical entry point for understanding this dynamic. Populism is commonly conceptualised as an ideology or political style that constructs politics as a conflict between the morally pure people and an unresponsive elite (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In government, however, populism is not limited to rhetoric; it also appears as a governing logic that prioritises direct executive responsiveness, personal attribution, and visible distribution over the development of deliberative institutions (Moffitt, 2016). In Indonesia, populist strategies have moved across nationalist, religious, technocratic, and welfare domains, depending on elite coalitions and campaign imperatives (Hadiz & Robison, 2017; Mietzner, 2020). MBG should therefore be examined as part of the broader work of welfare populism: it addresses real social problems, but also operates through a political grammar of direct generosity from leader to people.

A second entry point is policy implementation. Classical literature shows policies often change between formal design and real outcomes (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Lembaga-

lembaga di garis depan, praktik-praktik diskresioner, hambatan logistik, ekonomi politik lokal, dan pengaturan akuntabilitas mengubah apa yang sebenarnya diterima warga (Hupe & Hill, 2007). MBG relies on the new National Nutrition Agency (*Badan Gizi Nasional*) and a growing network of service units for procurement, kitchen management, food safety, distribution, and monitoring. This structure can help coordination, but it may create risks if rollout outpaces learning. School feeding results depend on menu quality, targeting, hygiene, supply chains, and adapting to local conditions (Gelli *et al.*, 2019; Jomaa *et al.*, 2011; McEwan, 2013).

The Capability Approach offers a third, stronger perspective. Sen (2014) argues that development is best assessed by the freedoms people have to lead lives they value, rather than by resource inputs. Nussbaum (2011) adds that key human capabilities include bodily health, integrity, practical reason, affiliation, and control over one's environment. For MBG, it's not only about meals distributed, budgets spent, or kitchens opened. The real question is whether the program expands the opportunities for children and households to be nourished, to learn, to participate, and to exercise agency. A meal can improve short-term functioning, but capability expansion needs sustainable conditions, safe food, equitable access, responsive governance, and beneficiary voice (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010; Robeyns, 2005).

This study contends that MBG must be understood as a policy with dual purpose: it both advances emancipatory potential and acts as a tool for executive legitimation. Only by integrating perspectives from nutritional science, public administration, political economy, and capability theory can its full significance be captured. The article's contribution lies in clarifying that MBG transcends simple welfare or spectacle, reflecting the complex functions it serves.

This study asks: to what extent does MBG function as an instrument of electoral populism, coalition-building, and bureaucratic control, and as a mechanism that expands or constrains citizens' substantive capabilities? The analysis examines the policy's political construction, governance framework, and implications for citizens' capabilities. It offers an interpretive and normative analysis grounded in secondary evidence, rather than evaluating nutritional outcomes through primary biomedical data. The argument asserts that MBG's long-term value lies not in meal quantity but in the state's capacity to transform welfare distribution into social policy that is accountable, safe, equitable, and enhances substantive capabilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive policy analysis. Interpretive policy analysis treats policy not merely as a set of administrative instruments, but as a process of meaning-making through which political actors define problems, construct beneficiaries, justify institutional choices, and create narratives of legitimation (Yanow, 1999). This approach is appropriate for examining MBG because the program simultaneously constitutes a nutritional intervention, a campaign promise, a fiscal priority, and a symbolic project of state presence. A purely technical evaluation would be unable to capture how electoral visibility, bureaucratic centralisation, and public health claims are interwoven in the program's design and early implementation.

The analytical strategy combines three mutually complementary methods. The first is a critical discourse analysis of policy statements, campaign narratives, official program descriptions, and public justifications surrounding MBG. This layer traces the transformation of the program from the campaign promise of free lunches into the technocratic language of free nutritious meals.

The aim is not to treat language as a superficial packaging device, but to identify how rebranding and justification encode political priorities. Particular attention is given to the shift from a gift-like symbolism of welfare provision to a framework of human capital and nutrition, since this discursive shift helps explain how a campaign instrument acquires policy legitimacy.

The second method is comparative institutional analysis. This layer examines MBG's governance framework by mapping the roles of the National Nutrition Agency (*Badan Gizi Nasional*), relevant ministries, local governments, service units, oversight bodies, schools, and non-state actors. Institutional analysis is necessary because the Capability Approach requires attention to conversion factors: the social, administrative, and political arrangements that determine whether resources become real freedoms (Robeyns, 2005). Food allocation can be converted into nutritional capabilities only if procurement systems, food safety mechanisms, distribution channels, monitoring arrangements, and feedback processes function reliably across Indonesia's diverse territorial conditions.

The third method is normative capability assessment. This article evaluates MBG based on five capability dimensions derived from Sen (2014), Nussbaum (2011), and social policy applications of the Capability Approach: nutritional health, cognitive and educational development, economic agency, social participation, and geographical equity. These dimensions were selected because they correspond to the most common public justifications for school feeding and to the major risks identified in the early debates surrounding MBG. Nutritional health concerns food quality and safety. Cognitive and educational development concerns the program's capacity to support learning and school attendance. Economic agency concerns its possible linkages with local food economies. Social participation concerns the voice of civil society, parents, and beneficiaries. Geographical equity concerns whether resources reach areas with the greatest needs.

The data are drawn from secondary sources. Core documentary materials include government regulations, budget statements, public program documents, parliamentary and media reports, policy papers, and secondary evaluations, including early assessments of MBG's objectives, budget, and governance (Pora *et al.*, 2025). These materials are read alongside peer-reviewed literature on Indonesian welfare politics, populism, social protection, public policy implementation, school feeding, food security, and capability theory. The analysis also draws on selected investigative and international news sources to capture early implementation controversies, since MBG is a current policy whose operational evidence is still developing.

A document analysis protocol was used to reduce selective reading. Following Bowen (2009), logic of qualitative document analysis, each source was classified according to type, authoring institution, date, evidentiary function, and relevance to one of the three analytical layers. Government documents were used primarily to identify formal mandates, fiscal commitments, institutional arrangements, and beneficiary targets. Peer-reviewed articles were used to establish theoretical and comparative claims. Policy papers were used to identify critiques of program design and civil society concerns. News sources were used to trace the public chronology of rollout, implementation, and reported incidents. This layered treatment of sources helps prevent the analysis from conflating official aspirations, scientific evidence, and public controversy.

The discourse analysis was conducted chronologically. First, the analysis identified program descriptions during the campaign period, then compared them with post-election institutional language and implementation announcements. It asked how beneficiaries were named, which problems were emphasised, which solutions were foregrounded, and which governance choices

were presented as natural or urgent. This sequence made it possible to identify whether the public meaning of the program shifted from an electoral gift to a nutrition policy to a human capital investment, and whether such a shift altered or merely repackaged the underlying political logic.

The institutional analysis draws on concepts from implementation and accountability studies. Pressman dan Wildavsky (1973) concern with implementation gaps, account of street-level bureaucracy. Bovens (2007), accountability framework, and Ansell dan Gash (2008) model of collaborative governance are used to assess whether MBG governance promotes adaptive learning, transparency, participation, and enforceable responsibility. This analysis is especially important for a program that depends on a large number of service units and daily, repeated deliveries. Failures in such a program are not merely isolated logistical problems; they may reveal structural weaknesses in safety standards, reporting incentives, monitoring authority, and public grievance mechanisms.

The capability assessment uses the logic of qualitative comparative judgment rather than a statistical model. Because the program remains in an early stage of implementation and reliable national outcome data are still incomplete, this article does not claim to estimate causal effects on nutrition or learning. Instead, it compares potential capability contributions with realised or plausible capability constraints, drawing on available secondary evidence. For each dimension, the assessment asks whether MBG merely provides inputs, such as meals, or whether it plausibly expands the conditions of agency and freedom. This distinction lies at the core of the Capability Approach and avoids reducing social policy evaluation to output counting.

This study has several limitations. It does not employ household surveys, anthropometric data, school attendance microdata, kitchen inspections, or interviews with beneficiaries and implementers. Therefore, it cannot estimate the program's net causal impact. Its contribution is interpretive and theoretical: it clarifies how MBG's early design and political economy shape the conditions under which capability expansion may or may not occur. Future research should test this argument through mixed-methods fieldwork, district-level comparative analysis, and longitudinal tracking of nutritional outcomes, learning outcomes, local procurement, and citizen feedback.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

MBG as an Electoral Instrument: The Political Construction of a Welfare Promise

The institutional formation of MBG cannot be separated from its electoral origins. The program entered the national policy agenda as a campaign promise designed to be widely intelligible. In its earliest political form, the phrase "free lunch" emphasised direct material delivery: a tangible benefit offered to households through the figure of the presidential candidate. This made the program politically powerful because it translated complex problems of stunting, school participation, and household expenditure into an immediately comprehensible promise. In the grammar of electoral welfare, such a promise is valuable because it can be communicated repeatedly, easily visualized, and personally associated with the leader.

The subsequent shift from "free lunch" to "free nutritious meals" was not merely a semantic change. It moved the promise from a gift-like populist idiom toward a technocratic idiom of nutrition and human capital. This rebranding enabled MBG to retain its electoral recognition while acquiring a more credible policy justification. In this respect, the program illustrates the governing

logic of populism described by Moffitt (2016), in which political performance is translated into institutional action without losing the symbolism of direct linkage between leader and people. The nutritional framework is real and important, but it coexists with a political logic in which speed, scale, and visibility become measures of governmental success.

The speed of rollout is central to this discussion. A national school feeding system requires procurement standards, kitchen infrastructure, food safety systems, menu planning, trained personnel, local coordination, and monitoring. However, the political value of MBG depends on demonstrating delivery soon after the election. This creates an inherent tension between administrative readiness and symbolic responsiveness. Implementation studies show that complex policy systems become vulnerable when time pressure compresses learning and coordination (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). In the case of MBG, the pressure to demonstrate that a flagship promise was being fulfilled appears to have encouraged a delivery-first approach rather than a phased, capability-first approach.

The program's fiscal trajectory also reflects electoral priorities. The initial allocation of IDR 71 trillion already represented an extraordinary commitment, while discussions of expansion toward IDR 171 trillion further reinforce the view that MBG is not an ordinary sectoral intervention but a defining marker of the new administration. This is analytically important because welfare visibility is not fiscally neutral. When a flagship program becomes the primary evidence of executive responsiveness, scaling it down becomes politically costly even when implementation risks remain unresolved. The program, therefore, creates a commitment structure in which political legitimacy and budgetary expansion mutually reinforce one another.

Coalition Politics and the Governance Architecture of MBG

The second finding concerns institutional design. MBG is governed by a centralised structure rooted in the National Nutrition Agency (*Badan Gizi Nasional*) and not fully integrated into the existing education system, which creates ambiguity. For elections, centralisation connects program delivery to the national executive. From a governance perspective, it raises questions about coordination with ministries and local health institutions. This concentrates responsibility in an institution linked to the president and reduces actual governments, schools, health offices, procurement actors, and civil society organisations.

Centralisation is justified where standardisation is essential, especially in food safety, menu composition, procurement rules, and national reporting. Indonesia's territorial diversity makes excessive centralisation risky. A uniform model may not suit local food systems, infrastructure, cultural diets, school conditions, or remoteness. Research shows that successful school feeding programs require both national financing and locally responsive implementation, as well as reliable supply chains (Jomaa dkk., 2011; Gelli dkk., 2019). If MBG centralises authority while decentralising operational risks to service units, it may create a governance gap: accountability remains national, while day-to-day failures occur locally.

The coalition dimension is clear in the range of institutions involved in public discussions about the program. Large welfare programs create opportunities in procurement, logistics, construction, service contracts, and political credit. In Indonesia's patronage-rich democracy, distributive programs become part of elite bargaining and local mediation networks (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Berenschot, 2018). This does not mean MBG is only clientelism. Rather, it means

implementation choices must be evaluated based on who controls resources, who benefits from contracts, who monitors delivery, and whether beneficiaries can claim rights as citizens. Security institutions are significant in some implementation narratives. Military participation or command-style administration can help mobilise logistics quickly, especially in a geographically complex country. However, welfare functions need civilian accountability, transparent procurement, nutritional expertise, child safety protection, and public trust. Studies of Indonesian democracy warn that centralised executive power and militarised governance weaken civilian oversight and normalise exceptional authority (Power, 2018; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). MBG sits at the boundary between welfare administration and command governance.

Table 1. Chronology of MBG policy evolution from electoral promise to national implementation

Period	Key moment	Political significance
2024 campaign	Free lunch/free nutritious meal promise becomes a central electoral message.	Turns nutrition and household support into a highly visible campaign commitment.
August 2024	National Nutrition Agency is created as a dedicated body.	Centralizes authority and strengthens presidential attribution.
October 2024	Prabowo Subianto assumes the presidency.	Transforms campaign commitment into governing obligation.
6 January 2025	MBG begins phased national implementation.	Demonstrates rapid delivery of the flagship welfare promise.
2025 fiscal year	Initial Rp 71 trillion allocation is discussed alongside larger expansion scenarios.	Shows high fiscal priority and political cost of retrenchment.
2025 implementation	Reports emerge of logistical, targeting, and food safety challenges.	Tests the program's accountability and institutional learning capacity.

Source: Researcher's Process, 2026

MBG and Citizens Capabilities: Expansion or Constraint?

There is a systematic gap between MBG's potential contribution to capabilities and the conditions of its early realisation. Its potential is substantial. If safe, nutritious, and regular meals reach disadvantaged children, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and toddlers, the program can contribute to overall health, reduce short-term hunger, support school attendance, and alleviate household food expenditures. International evidence supports the proposition that school

feeding can improve certain nutritional and educational outcomes, although these effects are not automatic and depend on the quality of program design (Wang *et al.*, 2021).

The central issue is that meals are not identical to capabilities. Functionings refer to the actual states achieved, such as receiving a meal during the school day. Capabilities refer to the real freedoms to achieve valued states of being and doing, such as being well nourished, learning effectively, and participating in social life with dignity (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2014). MBG provides a function when a child receives a meal. The program expands capabilities only when the meal is safe, nutritionally adequate, reliably delivered, integrated with health and education systems, and governed in a manner that enables beneficiaries and communities to exercise voice.

In terms of nutritional health, the program's capability potential is high but vulnerable. MBG can diversify diets and reduce short-term hunger. However, food safety problems, inadequate kitchen supervision, weak inspections, or excessive rollout speed may undermine the program's moral foundation. A welfare program such as MBG cannot be deemed successful merely because it reaches many beneficiaries, distributes many meals, or meets certain quantitative targets. If, in practice, the program exposes children to risks, particularly food poisoning, unhygienic meals, poor nutritional quality, or weak kitchen oversight, then those numerical achievements cannot provide either moral or policy justification. This is why accountability and inspection systems must be treated as constitutive elements of capability expansion, rather than as additional administrative considerations.

In terms of cognitive and educational development, the program's contribution depends on more than calories alone. Evidence from Chile shows that merely increasing caloric content does not necessarily improve educational outcomes when nutritional composition and learning conditions are not addressed (McEwan, 2013). Similar systematic reviews show that the effects of school feeding vary across measures of attendance, cognition, and nutrition (Jomaa *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2021). MBG may support learning, but only if it is connected to school quality, health screening, micronutrient standards, and targeted attention to the most vulnerable children.

In terms of economic capability, MBG can stimulate local economies through procurement from smallholder farmers, food processors, cooperatives, and local kitchens. This is the promise of school feeding as a social protection model that can bridge nutrition, education, and rural livelihoods. However, its economic impact depends on procurement rules. If contracts are dominated by centralised suppliers or politically connected actors, local multiplier effects may be weak. If small producers are included through transparent standards, predictable payments, and technical support, the program can expand economic capabilities beyond its direct beneficiaries.

In terms of social participation, the capabilities currently realised appear more limited. A program designed as presidential generosity tends to construct beneficiaries as recipients rather than as agents. The Capability Approach rejects this view because agency is part of development itself (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 2014). Participatory governance would require school committees, parents, local health actors, civil society organisations, and beneficiaries to monitor quality, report problems, and influence menu arrangements and service delivery. Without these channels, MBG risks remaining a form of programmatic welfare rather than participatory social citizenship.

Geographic Equity, Food Safety, and the Realisation Gap

The program's capability constraints are shaped by territorial factors. Indonesia's stunting burden is unevenly distributed, with regions such as eastern Indonesia facing greater logistical and

nutritional challenges than urban areas in Java. A capability-centred program would prioritise the most disadvantaged and hardest-to-reach populations. However, early implementation debates indicate that service visibility, administrative convenience, and voter density may incentivise concentration in areas where delivery is more straightforward and public recognition is higher. This approach risks perpetuating territorial inequality while presenting itself as universal welfare.

The tension between epidemiological need and political visibility is illustrated by the contrast between densely populated Java and provinces with high stunting rates, such as East Nusa Tenggara and Papua. Indonesia's official nutritional status surveys consistently reveal territorial disparities in stunting prevalence, highlighting the importance of geography in capability-sensitive targeting (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2022). Concentrating service units in areas with large media markets and densely populated schools may yield rapid output figures, but risks neglecting communities where malnutrition is most acute. While this strategy aligns with electoral welfare by delivering visible benefits to large populations and generating political returns, it is problematic from a capability justice perspective because it does not prioritise expanding freedoms for the most disadvantaged.

Food safety incidents further exacerbate the realisation gap. International literature on school feeding underscores that safety, hygiene, and monitoring are essential for achieving positive outcomes (Jomaa *et al.*, 2011). In the context of MBG, public reports of food poisoning incidents serve as a measure of accountability. The critical issue extends beyond the number of incidents to whether the system incentivises transparent reporting, thorough investigation, appropriate sanctions for negligence, compensation for affected families, and procedural redesign. Capability expansion depends on institutional learning from failure, whereas welfare populism tends to prioritise maintaining success narratives. The long-term sustainability of MBG depends on the approach adopted.

These findings are summarised in Table 2. The program is interpreted differently depending on the analytical lens applied. Electoral populism emphasises visibility, attribution, and legitimation. Policy implementation focuses on institutional coordination, safety, and delivery capacity. The Capability Approach prioritises substantive freedoms, agency, and equity. The value of this three-part framework is in demonstrating that MBG's challenges are not accidental deviations from a neutral program, but rather arise from the interplay between electoral origins, institutional design, and normative ambition.

Table 2. Integrated analytical framework for evaluating MBG

Dimension	Electoral populism	Policy implementation	Capability approach
Design logic	Visibility, attribution, and broad reach.	Rapid rollout through new institutional architecture.	Expansion of substantive freedoms.
Targeting	School children as visible and organized recipients.	Phased expansion from initial beneficiaries to national scale.	Priority for least advantaged groups and high-stunting regions.

Accountability	Presidential credit and coalition discipline.	Agency reporting, audits, food safety controls.	Citizen voice, civil society oversight, enforceable rights.
Success indicators	Popularity, media visibility, fulfillment of campaign promise.	Meals served, kitchens active, budget absorption.	Nutrition, learning, agency, territorial equity.
Main risks	Politicized welfare and dependency.	Logistical failure, poisoning incidents, fiscal crowding.	Welfare without agency and uneven capability conversion.

Source: Researcher's Process, 2026

Discussion

The findings show that MBG can be understood as welfare populism with a dual function. Its emancipatory potential is not fictitious. Indonesia continues to face challenges in child nutrition, regional inequality, and human capital development. Well-managed, nutritious school feeding and maternal nutrition programs can contribute to bodily health, learning readiness, household food security, and local economic activity. International evidence is sufficient to justify school feeding as a serious policy instrument when it is well-targeted, safely delivered, and integrated with broader education and health systems (Jomaa *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2021). The problem is that developmental potential does not automatically survive the political conditions of policymaking.

The hegemonic function of MBG emerges from the very features that make it politically attractive. The program is highly visible, repeatedly delivered, emotionally resonant, and easily associated with the executive. These characteristics make it useful for legitimising a new presidency, consolidating coalition discipline, and communicating direct concern for ordinary households. Populist governance often narrows the distance between leader and people by presenting institutional mediation as unnecessary or obstructive (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004). MBG does not abolish institutions, but it creates a strong chain of presidential attribution. The risk is that accountability becomes directed upward toward the executive rather than outward toward citizens.

This duality complicates any simple assessment. It would be analytically weak to condemn MBG merely because it has electoral origins. Many democratic welfare programs are born from electoral promises, and democratic competition can generate valuable social rights. The more important issue is whether electoral incentives are disciplined by evidence, participation, and rights. If a campaign promise is translated into a program with transparent targeting, independent food safety controls, civil society monitoring, and territorial redistribution toward areas of greatest need, its electoral origin need not undermine capability expansion. Conversely, if the program prioritises rapid visibility over institutional readiness, it risks becoming a spectacle of paternalistic welfare.

The Capability Approach is particularly useful because it shifts attention from program inputs to conversion conditions. Budgets, meal counts, kitchen counts, and beneficiary counts are powerful political metrics, but they remain incomplete. They indicate state activity, not human freedom. A child who receives unsafe food, a school that cannot report problems, or a remote region that receives fewer service units despite a higher stunting burden are all examples of failed

conversion. The state has provided inputs, but the conditions required for capability expansion are absent. This distinction is crucial for evaluating MBG beyond the politics of output (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 2014).

The governance implications are substantial. First, food safety must be institutionalised as a non-negotiable public health system, rather than treated as a logistical supplement. This requires mandatory kitchen certification, regular inspections, independent incident reporting, transparent publication of violations, and clear sanctions. Second, targeting must be recalibrated according to territorial needs and the life-cycle approach. Evidence on the first 1,000 days of life shows that stunting prevention requires attention to pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, infants, and toddlers, not only school-age children. A school-centred program may still be beneficial, but it must not displace earlier nutritional interventions.

Third, procurement must be designed to expand economic capabilities rather than concentrate benefits. Local school feeding models show that school meals can support local agriculture when procurement rules include small producers, predictable contracts, and quality standards. For MBG, this implies transparent supplier selection, protection for local-level procurement, support for local cooperatives, and the avoidance of monopolistic distribution chains. Such arrangements would transform MBG from a consumption subsidy into a multidimensional capability program linking nutrition, education, and livelihoods. Without them, economic benefits may be captured by intermediaries rather than local communities.

Fourth, beneficiary participation must be treated as a core design principle. The absence of meaningful participation is not only a democratic deficit but also an implementation risk. Parents, teachers, students, health workers, and local civil society organisations are often the first to detect poor food quality, menu incompatibility, delivery delays, or unsafe practices. Research on social accountability shows that public programs improve when citizens have credible channels to monitor, complain, and trigger institutional responses (Fox, 2015). In MBG, participatory monitoring would help transform beneficiaries from passive recipients into rights-bearing agents.

Fifth, fiscal sustainability must be openly debated. A program of this scale may displace other public goods if its expansion becomes politically locked in before implementation learning is complete. Welfare populism is prone to escalation because the symbolic cost of reducing benefits is very high. However, the quality of social policy depends not only on generous commitments but also on intersectoral coherence. If MBG absorbs fiscal space from sanitation, primary health care, teacher quality, or targeted maternal nutrition, its net capability effect may be weaker than its headline budget suggests. Evidence-based sequencing should therefore take precedence over permanent political acceleration (Head, 2008).

This study also speaks to democratic theory. Post-authoritarian welfare politics in Indonesia have often expanded social benefits while maintaining elite control over distribution and weakening program accountability (Aspinall, 2014; Berenschot, 2018). MBG represents a new version of this pattern: a universal welfare promise implemented through a centralised executive machine. The program may raise citizens' expectations of social rights, but it may also reinforce dependence on presidential generosity unless rights, standards, and participation are institutionalised. The distinction between social citizenship and paternalistic welfare lies in whether citizens can claim, monitor, contest, and shape the program.

The limitations of this study must be stated clearly. The analysis is based on secondary sources and early implementation evidence. It does not measure children's nutritional status,

educational performance, household expenditure, or local economic multipliers. Nor does it capture the lived experiences of beneficiaries and implementers on the ground. These limitations mean that the study should be read as a theory-informed policy analysis rather than an impact evaluation. Its contribution is to identify the political and institutional conditions under which MBG may expand or constrain capabilities. Future studies should test these claims using district-level data, kitchen audits, household surveys, school attendance records, and participatory fieldwork in areas with high stunting prevalence.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Program (*Makan Bergizi Gratis* - MBG) demonstrates how a welfare promise can be simultaneously developmental and political. The analysis shows that MBG has genuine potential to expand capabilities, as safe and regular meals can improve nutrition, learning readiness, household food security, and local economic activity. However, the same program also exhibits features of electoral welfare populism: rapid rollout, strong executive attribution, centralised governance, and a preference for visible delivery. These characteristics create a gap between the program's potential and its realised contribution to substantive freedoms. The most important constraint is not the idea of school feeding itself, but the governance conditions surrounding it: uneven territorial targeting, food safety vulnerabilities, limited civil society participation, and fiscal expansion prior to institutional maturity. MBG will make a meaningful contribution to human development in Indonesia only if it is redesigned around capability conversion rather than the display of outputs. This requires prioritising regions with high stunting rates, protecting the first 1,000 days of life, enforcing independent food safety standards, transparently integrating local producers, and developing beneficiary feedback systems. The primary measure of the program's success should not be the number of meals served or public kitchens opened, but whether Indonesian citizens gain safer bodies, better learning opportunities, greater active roles for local communities, and more equitable access to public welfare.

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