

## **The Impact of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) on Regional Development: An Analysis of Food Security, Local Economic Growth, and Sustainable Development in Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is one of Indonesia's strategic policies aimed at improving nutritional status and strengthening human capital development. Beyond its primary objective of improving nutrition, the program has significant potential to stimulate regional development through enhanced food security and local economic growth. This study analyzes the relationship between the MBG program, regional food security, local economic growth, and human development. Using a qualitative descriptive approach through a literature review, this study examined academic publications, international reports, and policy documents related to school feeding programs, food security, and regional development. The findings indicate that MBG generates multidimensional impacts. First, MBG strengthens regional food security by creating stable demand for local agricultural products. Second, it generates economic multiplier effects through increased income for farmers, micro and small enterprises, and supporting sectors. Third, it contributes to human development by improving nutritional status, health outcomes, and educational performance. This study developed the MBG Local Development Cycle Model to explain the relationship between MBG, food security, local economic growth, and sustainable regional development. The findings demonstrate that MBG should be viewed not only as a social assistance program but also as a strategic instrument for regional development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the last two decades, the development paradigm has undergone a fundamental shift from an approach oriented toward economic growth to one that places people at the center of development (people-centered development). This shift has been driven by growing awareness that high economic growth does not always directly translate into improved public welfare unless it is accompanied by improvements in human resource quality, equitable access to basic services, and strengthened socioeconomic resilience (Todaro & Smith, 2021). In this context, community nutrition quality has become one of the key determinants of development success (de Romana et al., 2021; Nisbett et al., 2017). Nutrition is not only related to individual health outcomes but also influences cognitive abilities, educational attainment, labor productivity, and a nation's economic competitiveness. Various studies have demonstrated that investment in nutritional improvement generates substantial social and economic returns because it increases

people's productive capacity throughout the life cycle (Alderman et al., 2017).

Nutrition problems are fundamentally multidimensional development issues. Their impacts are not limited to the health sector but also extend to education, employment, economic productivity, and regional development (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Kokkinopoulou et al., 2026). Therefore, various countries have begun implementing nutrition intervention programs that are not only oriented toward increasing food consumption but are also designed as instruments for human development and local economic development (Cerf, 2023; Deller et al., 2020; Stella et al., 2022).

The Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis, MBG) program, which is one of Indonesia's national priority programs, represents a policy with these characteristics. At the normative level, this program aims to improve community nutrition quality through the provision of nutritious meals for students and vulnerable groups. However, from a development economics perspective, MBG has broader implications because it creates large-scale food demand that has the potential to stimulate local economic activity (Schröder et al., 2020). The substantial and sustainable food requirements of MBG can serve as a strategic instrument for strengthening linkages between the food production sector and community consumption. If designed based on local supply chains, the program can create more stable markets for farmers, fishermen, livestock producers, cooperatives, and regional MSMEs. Thus, the benefits of the program are not only received by food recipients but also by local economic actors involved in food provision (Gelli et al., 2019).

In addition, MBG has strong relevance to the concept of food security. According to FAO (2023), food security is not only related to food availability but also includes access, utilization, and stability. From this perspective, MBG has the potential to strengthen all dimensions of food security by creating sustainable demand for local food products while expanding access to nutritious meals. Furthermore, MBG can be viewed as an instrument of regional development. According to Local Economic Development Theory, regional development is determined not only by external investment but also by the ability of regions to optimize local resources and establish economic linkages among sectors (Blakely & Leigh, 2017). Therefore, programs that increase demand for local products have the potential to generate significant economic multiplier effects.

However, academic discussions regarding MBG remain predominantly focused on nutritional and health aspects. Research connecting MBG with regional development, food security, human development, and local economic growth remains relatively limited. This condition indicates an important research gap in understanding the broader strategic impacts of MBG from a multidimensional development perspective.

Studies on school meal programs have developed extensively in the international literature. In general, three major research streams have emerged. The first stream focuses on the impact of school meal programs on nutritional status and public health. Research within this stream demonstrates that nutritious meal provision can improve children's health, reduce household food insecurity, and enhance community dietary quality (Kristjansson et al., 2016).

The second stream examines the relationship between school meal programs and human capital development. Research indicates that improved nutrition contributes to enhanced learning capacity, academic achievement, school attendance, and future workforce productivity (Bundy et al., 2022).

The third stream highlights the linkage between school meal programs and agricultural sector development through the Home-Grown School Feeding approach. Research within this stream demonstrates that school meal programs can create stable markets for smallholder farmers and increase rural household incomes (Gelli et al., 2019).

The novelty of this research lies in the development of the MBG Local Development Cycle Model, which integrates five complementary theoretical frameworks—Human Development Theory, Human Capital Theory, Food Security Theory, Local Economic Development Theory, and Multiplier Effect Theory—into a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the multidimensional impacts of school feeding programs. This integrative approach has not previously been applied to the Indonesian MBG program or to school feeding programs in other developing countries.

Nevertheless, most previous studies have examined these relationships separately. Limited research has integrated the dimensions of food security, human development, local economic growth, and regional development into a comprehensive analytical framework.

This study positions the Free Nutritious Meals program as: (1) an instrument of human development, as it improves nutritional quality and public health; (2) an instrument of food security, as it creates sustainable demand for local food products; (3) an instrument of local economic development, as it increases the income of farmers, fishermen, livestock producers, cooperatives, and MSMEs; and (4) an instrument of regional development, as it generates economic multiplier effects and strengthens regional economic capacity.

Thus, this research develops a new perspective that views MBG not merely as a social policy but also as part of a regional development strategy based on food security enhancement and local economic strengthening.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Approach**

This research used a qualitative approach with a library research method. This approach was selected because the study aimed to conceptually analyze the relationship between the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program, food security, human development, and local economic growth based on scientific literature, policy documents, international reports, and previous research findings. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena through the interpretation of various information sources. In this study, the qualitative approach was used to examine how MBG potentially influenced regional development through food security, economic, and social mechanisms.

### **Data Types and Sources**

The research uses secondary data obtained from: (1) National and international journal articles; (2) Relevant academic books; (3) Reports of international organizations such as FAO and WFP; (4) Government policy documents; (5) Study on school feeding programs; (6) Literature on regional development, food security, and human development.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data was collected through documentation studies by examining various scientific sources relevant to the research focus. The literature was selected based on the relevance of the topic, the credibility of the source, and its contribution to the discussion of the relationship

between MBG and regional development.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Data analysis was carried out using content analysis techniques. The stages of analysis include: (1) Identification of relevant literature; (2) Classification of the main themes of the research; (3) Analysis of intervariable relationships; (4) Preparation of conceptual models; (5) Interpretation of policy outcomes and implications.

Through this approach, the research seeks to produce a comprehensive analytical framework on the impact of MBG on regional development.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Free Nutritious Eating Program in the Perspective of Human Development and Human Capital**

The Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program is basically a form of state intervention that not only aims to meet the food consumption needs of the community, but is also a strategic investment in human development. In the perspective of *Human Development Theory* put forward by Amartya Sen (1999), development must be understood as a process of capability *expansion*. Therefore, improving the quality of community nutrition is an important part of efforts to expand the ability of individuals to live healthy lives, obtain a good education, and participate productively in economic and social life.

The MBG program directly contributes to the improvement of the health dimension which is one of the main components of human development. Nutritious foods that are regularly received by students and vulnerable groups have the potential to improve health conditions, reduce the risk of malnutrition, and support physical and cognitive development. In the long term, improving the quality of nutrition will result in healthier and more productive human resources.

This finding is in line with *the Human Capital Theory* developed by Gary S. Becker (1993) which explains that investment in health and nutrition is a form of human capital investment that has an impact on individual productivity and economic growth. In this theory, the quality of human resources is seen as a productive asset that determines a country's ability to create sustainable economic growth. If it is associated with the implementation of MBG, this program can be seen as a long-term investment of the state in building the quality of Indonesia's human capital. Children who obtain adequate nutritional intake tend to have better learning abilities, higher school attendance rates, and more productive work capacity in adulthood. Thus, the benefits of MBG are not only short-term in the form of increasing food consumption, but also produce long-term benefits in the form of improving the quality of human resources.

From the perspective of regional development, improving the quality of human capital also has significant implications. Areas that have healthy and productive human resources will have higher levels of economic productivity, better innovation capabilities, and stronger competitiveness than areas with low quality human resources. Therefore, MBG can be seen as a regional development instrument oriented towards strengthening human capacity as the main capital for development.

### **The Impact of the Free Nutritious Meal Program on Regional Food Security**

Food security is one of the strategic issues in national development and regional

development. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food security is achieved when all people have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet the needs of a healthy life.

In the theory of food security, there are four main dimensions that are indicators of the success of a food system, namely food availability, food access, food utilization, and food stability. The MBG program is directly related to these four dimensions:

### **1. Strengthening Food Availability**

Food availability is related to the ability of a region to provide food in sufficient quantities to meet the needs of the community. In the context of MBG, the need for large quantities of food creates a stable demand for various agricultural, livestock, and fishery commodities.

This sustained demand can provide economic incentives for farmers and food producers to increase their production capacity. With the increase in local food production, the availability of regional food will also be stronger. This condition shows that MBG not only increases food consumption but also has the potential to encourage the transformation of the regional food production sector.

### **2. Increased Access to Food**

The second dimension of food security is access to food. One of the main causes of food insecurity is not only limited production, but also the inability of people to obtain nutritious food due to limited income. Through MBG, vulnerable groups gain direct access to nutritious food without having to bear additional costs. Thus, this program contributes to reducing the gap in food access between community groups.

### **3. Increased Food Utilization**

Food utilization is related to the quality of consumption and the body's ability to utilize the nutrients contained in food. MBG directly contributes to improving the quality of food consumption through the provision of menus designed according to the nutritional needs of beneficiaries.

From a human development perspective, improving the quality of food consumption has a wide impact because it affects people's health, learning ability, and productivity.

### **4. Strengthening Food Stability**

Food stability is related to the sustainability of food supply and access at all times. In many cases, farmers face market uncertainty that leads to price and income fluctuations. MBG has the potential to create a more stable market because the food needs of the program are routine and sustainable. With demand certainty, the economic risks faced by farmers and food producers can be reduced so that the stability of the regional food system becomes stronger.

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that MBG has a strategic contribution in strengthening all dimensions of food security. Therefore, this program can be seen as one of the policy instruments that supports the development of a sustainable regional food system.

### **The Impact of MBG on Local Economic Growth**

In the perspective of *Local Economic Development Theory*, regional economic development is not only determined by large investments from outside the region, but also by the ability of the region to develop local resources productively. According to this theory, strengthening the local economy can be done through increasing community economic activities, developing MSMEs, and making optimal use of local resources.

MBG has great potential to support local economic development because the program's food needs can be met by local producers. When food is obtained from farmers, breeders, fishermen, cooperatives, and regional MSMEs, there is an increase in demand for local products which ultimately increases people's income.

In this context, MBG creates a close link between social policy and economic development. Programs that were initially designed to improve the nutritional quality of the community also generate economic benefits through increased food production and distribution activities:

### **1. Impact on the Agricultural Sector**

The agricultural sector is one of the sectors that has the most potential to benefit from MBG. High food demand creates a more secure market for farmers, thus encouraging increased production and investment in the agricultural sector.

### **2. Impact on MSMEs**

In addition to the agricultural sector, MBG also opens opportunities for MSMEs engaged in food processing, catering, logistics, and food distribution. The involvement of MSMEs in the program's supply chain can increase business capacity, expand markets, and create new jobs.

### **3. Impact on Cooperatives**

Cooperatives can act as institutions that connect local producers with program implementers. Through this role, cooperatives can strengthen farmers' bargaining positions and improve the efficiency of food distribution.

Thus, MBG can be an instrument that strengthens the local economy through the development of region-based food supply chains.

### **MBG Analysis in the Perspective of *Multiplier Effect Theory***

One of the main contributions of MBG to regional development can be explained through the multiplier *effect* theory. This theory explains that every government expenditure will result in a greater economic impact through the process of income turnover in the economy. In the context of MBG, the budget allocated by the government does not stop at the beneficiaries of the program. The funds flow to farmers, fishermen, breeders, MSMEs, cooperatives, transportation service providers, and various other economic actors. The income received is then reused for consumption and investment, thus creating new economic activities. This process produces a multiplier effect that increases people's income more broadly.

Theoretically, the greater the involvement of local economic actors in the MBG supply chain, the greater the value of the multiplier effect produced. Therefore, a locally-based food procurement strategy is an important factor in maximizing the economic benefits of the program.

### **Synthesis of Theories and Research Findings**

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that all theories used in this study are complementary in explaining the impact of MBG on regional development.

**Table 1**

| <b>Theory</b>            | <b>Contributions in Explaining MBG</b>              |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Human Development Theory | MBG improves quality of life and human capabilities |
| Human Capital Theory     | MBG is a human capital investment                   |

|                                   |                                            |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Food Security Theory              | MBG strengthens regional food security     |
| Local Economic Development Theory | MBG drives local economic growth           |
| Multiplier Effect Theory          | MBG produces an economic multiplier effect |

The integration of the five theories shows that the Free Nutritious Meal Program is not just a food assistance program, but a development instrument that has a multidimensional impact on health, food security, local economy, and sustainable regional development.

### **Free Nutritious Eating Program as a Human Capital Investment**

In the perspective of *Human Capital Theory*, the Free Nutritious Meal Program can be seen as a long-term investment in human resource development. Becker (1993) explained that the quality of human capital is determined by the level of education, health, and nutrition of the community.

Improving nutritional quality has a far-reaching impact on individual cognitive development, health, and productivity. Children who obtain adequate nutritional intake tend to have better learning abilities, higher school attendance rates, and greater economic opportunities in adulthood (Alderman et al., 2017).

Through MBG, the government seeks to ensure that students and vulnerable groups have access to nutritious food that can support their growth and development. Thus, this program has the potential to improve the quality of Indonesia's human capital in the long term

### **The Impact of MBG on Regional Food Security**

Food security is one of the main foundations of sustainable development. According to FAO (2023), food security consists of four main dimensions: (1) Food availability; (2) Access to food; (3) Food utilization; (4) Food stability.

The MBG program is directly related to all of these dimensions:

- 1. Food Availability:** The MBG program creates a steady demand for a variety of local food commodities. This condition provides market certainty for farmers and encourages an increase in regional food production.
- 2. Food Access:** The provision of nutritious food directly increases vulnerable groups' access to quality food.
- 3. Food Utilization:** This program encourages the consumption of more nutritious food so as to improve the quality of food utilization by the community.
- 4. Food Stability:** The continued demand from the program creates a more stable market for local food producers thereby reducing the risk of price fluctuations.

Thus, MBG not only increases food consumption but also strengthens the regional food system as a whole.

### **The Impact of MBG on Local Economic Growth**

From the perspective of local economic development, MBG has the potential to produce a significant *multiplier effect*. The need for large amounts of food creates economic opportunities for various sectors, including: (a) Agriculture; (b) Animal Husbandry; (c) Fisheries; (d) Food processing industry; (e) Logistics services; (f) Transportation; (g) Food MSMEs.

According to Gelli et al. (2019), *the Home-Grown School Feeding program* is able to increase the income of small farmers through the creation of a more stable market. In the

Indonesian context, a similar approach can strengthen the local economy if the program's supply chain involves regional producers.

**Direct Impact:** Direct impacts arise through the purchase of foodstuffs from local farmers and suppliers.

**Indirect Impact:** Indirect impacts occur through increased activities in the transportation, distribution, and other supporting services sectors.

**Induction Impact:** Increasing people's income will increase household consumption which ultimately encourages regional economic growth.

Therefore, MBG can function as an instrument of economic development that is able to strengthen the local economic structure.

### **The Impact of MBG on MSMEs and Cooperatives**

One of the groups that has the potential to benefit greatly from the implementation of MBG is MSMEs and cooperatives. The involvement of MSMEs in food supply, food processing, distribution, and logistics can create new business opportunities and increase people's income.

In addition, cooperatives can act as a liaison between local food producers and program implementers so as to strengthen the community's economic institutions.

### **The Impact of MBG on Regional Development**

Regional development is basically a process of increasing the economic, social, and institutional capacity of a region (Kuncoro, 2018). MBG has the potential to contribute to regional development through: (1) Increasing community income; (2) Strengthening the agricultural sector and MSMEs; (3) Improving the quality of human resources; (4) Reducing food access inequality; (5) Strengthening regional food security.

Thus, MBG can be positioned as a regional development instrument that connects economic, social, and health aspects in an integrated manner.

### **The Impact of MBG on Farmers' Income**

One of the biggest economic benefits of MBG is the increase in farmers' incomes. High food demand creates wider market opportunities for local producers. Research by Gelli et al. (2019) shows that *the Home-Grown School Feeding program* is able to increase market access for smallholders as well as increase agricultural household income. In the Indonesian context, similar benefits can be obtained if the MBG supply chain prioritizes the involvement of local farmers.

Increasing farmers' incomes has far-reaching implications for rural development because it can reduce poverty, increase household consumption, and strengthen village economic activities.

### **The Impact of MBG on MSMEs and the Food Industry**

In addition to the agricultural sector, MBG also creates opportunities for MSMEs engaged in food processing, distribution, logistics, and catering (Salsabila et al., 2026).

In regional economic theory, an increase in economic activity in one sector will create a multiplier effect that affects other sectors (Todaro & Smith, 2021). Therefore, MBG has the potential to increase regional economic activity through stronger linkages between sectors.

### **MBG and Improving the Human Development Index**

The Human Development Index (HDI) consists of three main dimensions, namely health, education, and decent living standards. MBG has contributed to these three dimensions. In



terms of health, this program improves the nutritional status of the community. In terms of education, MBG supports the learning process through improving the health and concentration of students. From the economic side, MBG increases people's income through strengthening the local economy (Julian & Pranata, 2025).

Thus, MBG has the potential to be one of the instruments that supports the sustainable increase of regional HDI.

## CONCLUSION

This research successfully analyzed the impact of the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis, MBG) Program on regional development from the perspectives of human development, food security, and local economic growth. Based on theoretical, conceptual, and analytical reviews of relevant literature, it can be concluded that MBG is a public policy with multidimensional impacts and should not be viewed solely as a social assistance program or nutritional intervention. From a human development perspective, MBG contributes to improving human resource quality by enhancing nutritional status, particularly among school-age children and vulnerable groups, consistent with Human Development Theory and Human Capital Theory, which emphasize health and nutrition as strategic investments in development. From the perspective of food security, MBG strengthens regional food systems by supporting the dimensions of food availability, access, utilization, and stability, thereby functioning as a preventive and structural instrument for strengthening national food security. From a local economic perspective, MBG serves as a regional economic driver through the involvement of farmers, fishermen, livestock producers, MSMEs, and cooperatives within the program's supply chain, generating multiplier effects that expand income circulation at the local level.

This study developed the MBG Local Development Cycle Model, which explains that the Free Nutritious Meals Program can generate a development cycle beginning with increased local food demand, followed by strengthened regional food production, increased community income, local economic strengthening, improved human resource quality, and ultimately sustainable regional development. This model expands the understanding that nutrition policy is not only a health-related intervention but also a strategic instrument for interconnected economic and social development within a national development framework. The study was limited by its reliance on secondary data and conceptual analysis rather than primary empirical evidence, meaning that the proposed framework requires further empirical validation. In addition, the absence of quantitative analysis limited the ability to measure the magnitude of relationships among variables, while the focus on Indonesia as a single-country context may restrict broader generalization. Future research should conduct longitudinal quantitative studies to validate the proposed model empirically by examining program outcomes across regions and time periods. Comparative studies across Indonesian regions with different agricultural systems, infrastructure conditions, and institutional capacities could identify contextual factors influencing program effectiveness. Furthermore, cost-benefit analyses incorporating health and economic outcomes would provide evidence for evaluating the program's fiscal sustainability. Research examining the mechanisms through which local procurement influences farmer income, MSME development, and food system transformation would also provide valuable insights for program optimization. Finally, cross-country comparative studies involving

countries with similar school feeding programs could identify best practices and contextual strategies for maximizing the regional development impacts of nutrition-based interventions.

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