

Perceptions of the Implementation of Free Nutritious Meals Using Local Government Budget Funds in Penajam Paser Utara Regency

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the perceptions of the community and stakeholders regarding the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) funded by the Regional Budget (APBD) in Penajam Paser Utara Regency. The research approach is a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation of key informants, including school principals, teachers, and Education Office officials. The results show that, in general, the informants have a positive perception of the MBG Mandiri program as a strategic policy of the local government aimed at improving students' nutritional quality and supporting the achievement of human development goals. This program is considered to have a direct impact on increasing student motivation, participation, and awareness of the importance of healthy eating in the school environment. However, the program's implementation still faces several obstacles, including limited healthy kitchen facilities, insufficient human resource readiness, and differences in managerial capabilities across schools. In addition, the program's effectiveness is highly dependent on transparency in APBD management, cross-sector coordination, and active community participation. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen governance, increase implementers' capacity, and establish a sustainable evaluation mechanism so that the MBG Mandiri program can run more effectively and sustainably. The results of this study are expected to provide input for local governments in formulating more participatory and equitable public policies in the field of school children's nutrition.

Keywords:

Free Nutritious Meals, Community Perceptions, APBD, Public Policy, School Nutrition

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian government continues to strive to improve the quality of human resources through development policies oriented towards health, education, and community welfare. One of the strategic steps taken is through the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program, which is designed to ensure that every school-age child receives a balanced and healthy nutritional intake. This program not only aims to reduce stunting and malnutrition rates but also supports improved learning concentration, character building, and equitable social welfare in various regions. According to (Abadi et al., 2025), free school meal interventions have a significant effect on the nutritional status and academic performance of school children, while highlighting implementation disparities in low-income areas.

In its implementation, local governments are given the authority to manage and implement the program independently through the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD). However, in various regions, including Penajam Paser Utara (PPU) Regency, the implementation of the free nutritious meal program with an independent funding scheme still faces challenges. The problems that arise include limitations in resources, the effectiveness of fund distribution, budget transparency, and differences in perception between program implementers and beneficiary communities. Public perception of the implementation of this program is important to examine because it

directly affects participation, trust, and policy sustainability at the local level (Salam, 2023).

Penajam Paser Utara Regency has unique social and economic characteristics as the main buffer zone for the development of the Capital City of Nusantara (IKN). With this strategic position, the local government is required to be able to manage resources efficiently so that public policies, including the Independent Free Nutritious Meals program, can run effectively and have a broad impact. Research by (Jauchar et al., 2022) shows that the development of IKN has had a major implication on the distribution of national welfare and has opened up short-term economic opportunities through infrastructure investment in PPU and its surroundings. The realization of the PPU Regional Budget shows a commitment to supporting community welfare programs, but there is still a gap between the allocation of funds and the results of implementation in the field. Some parties assess that the distribution of the program is not yet equitable, while some communities feel the direct benefits of improved nutrition and awareness of healthy eating patterns. This phenomenon is consistent with findings that rapid urbanization and development can give rise to socio-economic inequality and changes in the lifestyles of local communities (Syaban & Appiah-Opoku, 2024).

Based on these phenomena, this study attempts to describe the community's perceptions of the implementation of the Independent Free Nutritious Meals program using the APBD in Penajam Paser Utara Regency. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method, with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the views, experiences, and assessments of the community and program implementers regarding the effectiveness, transparency, and impact of this policy. This approach is considered appropriate because it provides space to explore the meaning and social interpretation from the perspective of local actors. As explained by (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), a descriptive qualitative approach helps researchers understand social phenomena based on their natural context through data collection in the form of interviews, observations, and documentation.

In addition, this research also has academic and practical urgency because it can be the basis for evaluating the implementation of APBD-based programs in other regions. Understanding the perceptions of the community can help the government in formulating policies that are more participatory, transparent, and equitable. The results of this study are expected to serve as recommendations for policymakers to strengthen the synergy between local governments, schools, and communities in realizing the effective and sustainable implementation of the Independent Free Nutritious Meals program, in line with the national development vision towards Indonesia Emas 2045.

1. Public Policy in the Context of Regional Decentralization

Public policy in Indonesia is basically implemented within a decentralization framework that gives local governments broad authority to manage government affairs and public services according to local needs. This system allows each region to develop and finance development programs through the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD), including social programs such as the Independent Free Nutritious Meals program. Decentralization reforms in Indonesia have increased the role of regional spending in the provision of public services and fostered policy innovation at the local level. However, they also highlight that policy effectiveness is

still influenced by institutional capacity and suboptimal coordination across levels of government (Wiryawan & Otchia, 2022).

In the context of implementing regional-based social policies, the success of implementation is largely determined by public perception and participation in the programs being carried out. Positive perceptions of the quality and benefits of school nutrition programs increase community involvement and parents' willingness to support the program's sustainability. This confirms that public policies oriented towards social services, such as the Independent Free Nutritious Meals program, require a combination of accountable budget management and high public acceptance in order to have an optimal impact on the welfare of the local community (Octawijaya et al., 2023).

2. Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG)

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is a school nutrition intervention policy that aims to meet the nutritional needs of school-age children and support the improvement of human resources (Octawijaya et al., 2023). This program is in line with the concept of school feeding, which is widely implemented in various developing countries to reduce malnutrition and improve student achievement. The implementation of school feeding programs in Indonesia still faces limitations in terms of coverage and dependence on external providers such as canteens or local vendors, thus requiring policy strengthening at the regional level (Sekiyama et al., 2018).

In the context of regional policy, the MBG program is a manifestation of decentralization in the health and education sectors, which uses the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD) as its main source of funding. Regional-based implementation allows for adaptation to local socio-economic conditions, but also requires transparent governance and inter-agency coordination so that the benefits of the program can be felt evenly. The role of regional expenditure on public services is very significant, but the success of implementation still depends on institutional capacity and budgetary oversight mechanisms at the local level (Wiryawan & Otchia, 2022).

3. Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD) Management

Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD) management is one of the main pillars in the implementation of regional autonomy, which aims to ensure that the distribution of public resources is effective and in line with community needs. Fiscal decentralization provides space for local governments to set spending priorities, including in the provision of social programs and public services such as the Free Nutritious Meals Program. However, uneven regional institutional capacity is often a major obstacle in budget implementation, resulting in delays and inefficiencies in the use of public funds. These findings indicate that the success of regional policies depends not only on the size of the allocated budget, but also on the technical and managerial capacity to manage it (Vidyattama et al., 2022).

In addition to institutional aspects, transparency and accountability in regional financial management also determine the effectiveness of public programs. Regional financial efficiency has a positive effect on budget implementation performance in various districts/cities in Indonesia, especially in programs oriented towards community welfare (serambi.org). Therefore, in the context of implementing the APBD-based Independent Free Nutritious Meals program in Penajam Paser Utara Regency, good governance principles such as transparency, participation, and accountability

need to be consistently internalized so that the use of public budgets truly has an impact on improving nutrition and community welfare (Anggraini & Prayoga, 2024).

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to deeply understand the perceptions and readiness for the implementation of the Independent Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) funded through the APBD in Penajam Paser Utara Regency. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meanings, views, and experiences of participants contextually through narrative data that emerge from social interactions. According to (Creswell & Creswell, 2022), the descriptive qualitative method is used to identify phenomena naturally based on the respondents' perspectives without manipulating variables. The data in this study were obtained through in-depth interviews with various informants, such as school principals, teachers, and officials from the Penajam Paser Utara Regency Education and Culture Office, who were directly involved in the implementation of the MBG Mandiri program.

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide that focused on the main themes, namely understanding the program's objectives, benefits for students, school readiness (facilities, human resources, and coordination), forms of local government support, and strategies for managing the regional budget (APBD) to ensure transparency and accountability. The data obtained was then analyzed using data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing techniques as described by (Miles et al., 2018). The results of the analysis were presented in the form of a narrative description that described the perceptions and readiness of each respondent, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the implementation of the MBG Mandiri program at the educational unit level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Perceptions of the Objectives and Benefits of the MBG Mandiri Program

The interview results showed that the informants, including school principals, teachers, and education officials, had a common understanding of the essence of the Independent Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program as a strategic effort by local governments to improve the health and learning concentration of students. This program is considered important for reducing stunting rates and forming healthy eating habits from elementary school age. According to (Rimbawan et al., 2023), the implementation of nutritious meal programs in Indonesian schools has been proven to reduce the prevalence of anemia from 42.6% to 21.7% within nine months of intervention, which has a significant effect on improving learning concentration and participation. These empirical findings reinforce the perception of the PPU community that the MBG Mandiri program serves as a long-term social investment for improving the quality of human resources in the region.

However, some informants assessed that the effectiveness of the program was not yet evenly distributed across all schools due to differences in the readiness and technical understanding of implementers in the field. The principal of SDN 032 Penajam emphasized that the benefits of the program were only felt in terms of increased enthusiasm for learning, while the impact on students' health and nutritional habits still needed to be strengthened. A study by Bryant et al. (2023) confirms that

the success of school meal programs is greatly influenced by consistency in food quality, school meal culture, and continuous nutrition education. Thus, the community's positive perception of the MBG Mandiri program needs to be balanced with technical evaluation and sustainability monitoring to optimize its benefits.

2. Readiness and Support for Program Implementation in Schools

From observations and interviews, most schools in Penajam Paser Utara Regency showed strong commitment to supporting the implementation of MBG Mandiri, but still faced limitations in infrastructure and human resources. Several schools did not yet have adequate healthy kitchen facilities or trained cooking staff. Nevertheless, intensive coordination with school committees and education agencies has been carried out to ensure administrative and logistical readiness. Research (Octawijaya et al., 2023) supports these findings by showing that 90% of parents in Indonesia are willing to support nutrition programs if they have a positive perception of food quality and program management.

In addition, schools such as SDN 001 Babulu and SMPN 10 PPU emphasize that local government support is crucial to ensure smooth implementation. Support in the form of training for cooks, improving kitchen facilities, and collaborating with local food suppliers are factors that strengthen the sustainability of the program. Research by (Chaves et al., 2023) shows that collaboration with family farmers and local suppliers in school feeding programs improves the quality of menu provision and food logistics sustainability, particularly through the strengthening of local food chains. These findings reinforce that the effectiveness of education and nutrition policies at the local level is highly dependent on the readiness of infrastructure and the commitment of stakeholders to support the implementation of school-based social programs.

3. Transparency in APBD Management and Cross-Sector Collaboration

Transparency in APBD management is an important focus in the implementation of MBG Mandiri, especially since the program is funded by the regional budget, which requires public accountability. Based on the interview results, schools and education agencies strive to maintain transparency regarding the allocation and use of program funds through the involvement of school committees and periodic reports to the community. Research (Dian Fathirah et al., 2024) confirms that transparency and accountability have a significant effect on increasing the effectiveness of regional budget management in Indonesia.

Furthermore, cross-sector collaboration between local governments, schools, community health centers, and local food MSMEs is considered capable of strengthening program implementation integration. Efforts such as nutrition monitoring by community health centers and the use of local food ingredients from MSMEs are effective forms of synergy in supporting program objectives. Research (Saputri et al., 2024) shows that cross-sector participation and the size of local government have a positive effect on transparency and public financial efficiency in Indonesia. This confirms that inter-agency collaboration and transparent fiscal governance are prerequisites for the success of MBG Mandiri.

4. Community Participation and Program Sustainability

Community participation is a crucial aspect in maintaining the sustainability of the MBG Mandiri program. Informants mentioned that the involvement of parents, school committees, and local organizations such as PKK was very helpful in supporting the implementation of the program, from food supervision to the procurement of local

ingredients. Research by (Prayitno et al., 2025) shows that community-driven nutrition programs with strong social capital tend to have higher participation and better sustainability. This collaboration not only strengthens public trust but also expands the program's impact to local communities.

In addition, program sustainability requires special attention to resource management and funding. Respondents assessed that continuous monitoring and consistent support from local governments are key factors in ensuring that programs do not stop halfway. Research by (Setiawan et al., 2022) confirms that the analytical, operational, and political capacities of local governments have a significant influence on the sustainability of local public services. Thus, MBG Mandiri is expected to become not only an annual project based on the regional budget, but also a collaborative model between the government, schools, and the community to build a healthy and productive generation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that the Independent Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) in Penajam Paser Utara Regency is perceived positively by various stakeholders, including schools, teachers, and the education office. This program is considered strategic in efforts to improve school children's nutrition and strengthen regional human resources. However, its effectiveness has not been fully realized due to differences in readiness between schools, limited healthy kitchen facilities, and variations in the technical understanding of implementers in the field.

In addition, transparency in the management of local government budget funds and community participation play a major role in maintaining the sustainability of the program. Local government support in the form of training, guidance, and cross-sector coordination between schools, education agencies, health centers, and local food MSMEs has proven to be key to the effectiveness of the program's implementation. In general, MBG Mandiri has succeeded in creating positive changes in students' eating behaviors and strengthening awareness of the importance of balanced nutrition in the school environment, although continuous evaluation is needed to improve technical aspects and budget management.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that the local government of Penajam Paser Utara Regency improve cross-sector coordination through synergy between the Education Office, Health Office, and local businesses to strengthen the system of providing nutritious food in schools. It is also necessary to increase human resource capacity, especially in the aspects of nutrition menu management, food safety, and budget reporting so that program implementation is more transparent and accountable.

For schools, it is important to integrate nutrition education into learning activities and actively involve committees and parents in program supervision. Meanwhile, the central government can use the experience of Penajam Paser Utara Regency as a best practice model in managing APBD-based nutritious meal programs. In the future, further research needs to be conducted to evaluate the long-term impact of the program on children's nutritional status and academic performance, so that similar policies can be developed sustainably in other regions.

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