

The Dilemma of Inclusiveness of Free Nutritious Meals in the Socio-Economic Spectrum of Education in Bekasi Regency, West Java

Dilema Inklusivitas Makan Bergizi Gratis dalam Spektrum Sosial-Ekonomi Pendidikan di Kabupaten Bekasi, Jawa Barat

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Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) policy is a national strategic intervention aimed primarily at accelerating the reduction in stunting prevalence by meeting the chronic nutritional needs of school-aged children. However, its implementation in Bekasi Regency faces serious challenges related to fiscal effectiveness and distributive justice. This study analyzes the dilemma of inclusivity in the implementation of MBG, which targets all educational units regardless of economic status, from schools in coastal areas vulnerable to nutrition to elite schools in independent cities. Using descriptive qualitative research methods through policy documentation studies and field observations, this study evaluates the relevance of food subsidies for students from well-off families who have in fact exceeded the program's minimum nutritional standards. The study results indicate that a rigid inclusive approach risks creating budget inefficiencies, where the allocation of funds for elite schools actually results in potential food waste because the menu standards are below the expected daily consumption of well-off students, while at the same time, the intensity of animal protein for schools in stunting red zones is still limited to the same budget ceiling. The main emphasis of this research is that the MBG policy to address stunting should not only pursue universal administrative coverage, but should also be able to stratify assistance so that state resources are more focused on vulnerable groups with the highest urgency for nutritional improvement. This research recommendation points to the need for flexibility in MBG governance at the regional level through an opt-out mechanism for independent schools to reallocate subsidies to strengthen nutrition at priority stunting locations in Bekasi Regency.

Keywords:

Fiscal Efficiency;
Policy Inclusiveness;
Distributive Justice;
Free Nutritious Meals;
Stunting Alleviation;
Socioeconomic Spectrum;
Food Subsidies.

Abstrak	Kata Kunci
Kebijakan Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) merupakan intervensi strategis nasional yang bertujuan utama untuk mempercepat penurunan prevalensi stunting melalui pemenuhan kebutuhan gizi kronis pada anak usia sekolah, namun implementasinya di Kabupaten Bekasi menghadapi tantangan serius terkait efektivitas fiskal dan keadilan distributif. Penelitian ini menganalisis dilema inklusivitas dalam penerapan MBG yang menyasar seluruh satuan pendidikan tanpa klasifikasi status ekonomi, mulai dari sekolah di wilayah pesisir yang rawan gizi hingga sekolah elit di kawasan kota mandiri. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif deskriptif melalui studi dokumentasi kebijakan dan observasi lapangan, penelitian ini mengevaluasi relevansi subsidi pangan bagi siswa dari keluarga mampu yang secara faktual telah melampaui standar gizi minimum program. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan inklusif yang kaku berisiko menciptakan inefisiensi anggaran, di mana alokasi dana untuk sekolah elit justru menghasilkan potensi sisa makanan (food waste) karena standar menu yang berada di bawah ekspektasi konsumsi harian siswa mampu, sementara di saat yang sama, intensitas protein hewani untuk sekolah di zona merah stunting masih terbatas pada pagu anggaran yang sama. Penekanan utama penelitian ini adalah bahwa kebijakan MBG untuk mengatasi stunting seharusnya tidak hanya mengejar cakupan universalitas secara administratif, tetapi harus mampu melakukan stratifikasi bantuan agar sumber daya negara lebih fokus pada kelompok rentan yang memiliki urgensi perbaikan gizi tertinggi. Rekomendasi penelitian ini mengarah pada perlunya fleksibilitas tata kelola MBG di tingkat daerah melalui mekanisme opt-out bagi sekolah mandiri guna mengalokasikan kembali subsidi tersebut untuk penguatan gizi pada lokus prioritas stunting di Kabupaten Bekasi.	Efisiensi Fiskal; Inklusivitas Kebijakan; Keadilan Distributif; Makan Bergizi Gratis; Pengentasan Stunting; Spektrum Sosial-Ekonomi; Subsidi Pangan.
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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

The Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Bergizi Gratis—MBG) Program has emerged as a transformative policy instrument within Indonesia’s human capital development architecture toward the vision of Golden Indonesia 2045. The government views school-based nutritional intervention as a critical strategy for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty that has constrained national productivity (Babo et al., 2026; Masruri & Nugraha, 2026; Sinurat & Sinambela, 2026). (Jover et al., 2025; Nasional, 2024).

From a legal perspective, the policy is grounded in the constitutional mandate of Article 28H paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution, which guarantees every citizen the right to

physical and psychological well-being and the right to health services. The MBG Program represents an expression of the state's responsibility to fulfill children's fundamental right to adequate nutrition throughout their formal education ([Babo et al., 2026](#); [Firdaus & Astuti, 2026](#)). ([Ri, 2010](#)).

The primary rationale for the MBG Program is to address stunting, or growth faltering, which remains a significant manifestation of the double burden of malnutrition across various regions of Indonesia. High stunting prevalence is closely associated with impaired cognitive development, lower intelligence quotient (IQ), and reduced competitiveness of the future workforce ([Ariawan et al., 2026](#); [Dewi et al., 2025](#); [Henri et al., 2025](#)). (Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2024).

Bekasi Regency, one of Southeast Asia's major industrial centers, presents a striking development paradox within the national landscape of nutritional vulnerability. Despite the prominence of its industrial estates, pockets of residential communities continue to experience stunting prevalence that requires urgent intervention from local authorities ([Adeomi & Ikujuola, 2026](#); [Nyirenda et al., 2026](#)). ([Bekasi, 2025](#)).

The implementation of the MBG Program in Bekasi Regency adopts a comprehensive inclusive approach, whereby all educational institutions are eligible to receive program benefits without exception. The policy encompasses public schools in remote rural areas as well as elite private schools located in planned urban developments, such as Lippo Cikarang and Jababeka, including residential areas characterized by predominantly middle- and upper-income populations ([Adinda, 2025](#); [Finuliyah et al., 2026](#); [Yulawati, 2025](#)). ([Bekasi, 2026](#)).

An inclusive or universalist approach to public service provision seeks to prevent social segregation within school environments. By providing free meals uniformly, the government seeks to eliminate the stigma of being a "poor child," which has frequently been associated with conventional social assistance programs in the past ([Chapman et al., 2025](#); [Jones et al., 2026](#); [Orta-Aleman et al., 2025](#)). ([Rawis, 2024](#)).

Nevertheless, the application of universal inclusivity without socioeconomic targeting in Bekasi Regency has generated debate concerning distributive justice. This issue arises from the substantial socioeconomic heterogeneity among students' parents and guardians, ranging from daily wage workers to expatriates and high-level executives whose children attend international or elite schools ([Kamal et al., 2025](#); [Rafliyanto & Khozin, 2025](#); [Subandi et al., 2026](#)). (2025).

In elite schools, students' daily consumption standards generally exceed the minimum nutritional standards established under the national MBG budgetary framework. Consequently, government-provided meals may be perceived as a "downgrade" by students from affluent and financially secure households who are accustomed to premium or organic food options ([Jamal & Adinda, 2026](#); [Kurniawan et al., 2026](#); [Nurmala et al., 2026](#); [Samosir et al., 2026](#)). ([Berlianto et al., 2026](#); [Indonesia, 2025](#); [Kurniawan et al., 2026](#); [Makambombu, 2026](#)).

This phenomenon creates the potential for large-scale resource inefficiency at the local level. Food subsidies that should primarily benefit children experiencing inadequate intake of animal-based protein may instead be allocated to children who already have sufficient or even excessive nutritional access within their households ([Mehta et al., 2025](#); [Springmann et al., 2025](#)). ([2026](#)).

Sociologically, the uniform provision of MBG meals in elite schools may also contribute to relatively high levels of food waste. Students from affluent families may be less inclined to consume the meals provided because of differences in taste preferences or perceptions regarding the quality of ingredients used in a mass-scale government nutrition program ([Adjapong et al., 2024](#); [Yu et al., 2024](#)). ([Nasional, 2026](#)).

This contradiction becomes particularly evident when considering schools in northern parts of Bekasi Regency, such as Muaragembong, where communities continue to face significant barriers to accessing nutritious food. In such areas, every egg or portion of meat included in an MBG meal carries substantially greater nutritional significance than it does in affluent urban schools ([Beruh & Lusiana, 2026](#); [Makambombu, 2026](#)). ([Bekasi, 2025](#)).

From a constitutional and public-law perspective, the effectiveness of public expenditure should be aligned with the principle of *doelmatigheid*, or appropriateness and effectiveness in achieving policy objectives. Providing subsidies to groups that do not require them (*well-off* households) may therefore be viewed as a form of resource allocation that is insufficiently targeted within the framework of accountable public financial management. ([Siahaan, 2024](#)).

The urgency of addressing stunting requires strengthening nutritional quality rather than merely ensuring the quantity of food provided. If MBG resources allocated to elite schools were reallocated to stunting-priority areas, the quality and quantity of protein available to nutritionally vulnerable children could be enhanced substantially beyond minimum standards. ([Bekasi, 2025](#)).

The issue of inclusivity also involves the psychology of public policy. The government may be concerned that socioeconomic targeting could generate perceptions of unequal treatment or social resentment. However, in the context of Bekasi Regency, substantial differences between elite private schools and peripheral public schools already reflect significant forms of educational and socioeconomic segregation. ([Kilavuz & Tunç, 2025](#); [Sunarya, 2025](#)).

Geospatial data indicate that elite schools in Bekasi are concentrated in areas characterized by relatively low stunting prevalence. This spatial pattern suggests that nutritional interventions in these schools have limited direct relevance to reducing stunting prevalence at the regency level. ([Bekasi, 2025](#)).

The *one-size-fits-all* approach to MBG menu standards overlooks the fact that nutritional intervention needs are highly location-specific and target-group-specific. Excessively rigid administrative arrangements may undermine the substantive humanitarian

objectives of public policy, particularly when reaching populations with the greatest nutritional vulnerabilities ([Aguiar, 2025](#)). ([2025](#)).

At the same time, elite private schools in Bekasi generally already operate independent school-lunch programs, either provided directly by the schools or financed through students' tuition and school fees. The introduction of the government-funded MBG Program may therefore create overlapping food-provision mechanisms and generate uncertainty for school administrators regarding reporting and accountability requirements. ([2026](#)).

Local governments consequently face a policy dilemma between adhering to the central government's directive for universal inclusivity and pursuing policy innovations that may produce more equitable outcomes. Greater governance flexibility is essential to ensure that limited public resources generate the maximum possible impact on reducing stunting prevalence. (Kementerian Dalam Negeri RI, 2025).

Criticism of providing food subsidies to economically advantaged students is also grounded in the constitutional principle of social justice for all Indonesians. From this perspective, public policy should prioritize expanding opportunities for those facing nutritional deprivation rather than allocating identical benefits to populations that already possess substantially greater economic and nutritional resources. ([Rawis, 2024](#)).

In the long term, if the dilemma surrounding inclusivity remains unresolved, the MBG Program risks becoming a large-scale logistical initiative without producing commensurate improvements in human capital quality. A systematic reassessment of beneficiary targeting is therefore crucial to ensuring that every rupiah of the state budget contributes meaningfully to combating malnutrition ([Indonesia, 2025](#)).

Bekasi Regency could serve as a potential pilot area for implementing a stratified approach to MBG policy. Given the socioeconomic and geographic complexity of the region, Bekasi requires a distribution model that combines a universal nutritional baseline with more targeted forms of social protection ([Bekasi, 2026](#)).

Administrative challenges associated with verifying students' socioeconomic status have often been cited as a rationale for adopting universal approaches. However, advances in integrated social welfare data systems (Data Terpadu Kesejahteraan Sosial—DTKS) suggest that data synchronization should no longer constitute an insurmountable barrier to improving the accuracy of subsidy allocation ([2025; Ma et al., 2025](#)).

This article examines in depth the tension between political inclusivity and nutritional effectiveness in the implementation of the MBG Program. Bekasi Regency is selected as the research locus because it represents, within a single administrative territory, the highly visible socioeconomic disparities characteristic of contemporary Indonesia ([2025](#)).

The significance of this research lies in identifying a policy framework capable of balancing children's universal rights with the fiscal constraints faced by the state. Its central concern is to determine how the MBG Program can function as an effective instrument for addressing stunting at the grassroots level ([Nasional, 2026](#)).

Through an analysis of Bekasi's socioeconomic spectrum, this study seeks to formulate policy recommendations that are more precise, equitable, and sensitive to the distribution of nutritional needs. Inclusivity should not come at the expense of the quality and intensity of nutritional interventions for children living below adequate levels of protein and energy intake.

Identification of Problems

1. A paradox in public resource allocation, whereby state funding is used to subsidize food provision for students from affluent households attending elite schools, despite their existing nutritional intake exceeding the minimum standards established by the program.
2. Fiscal resource inefficiency resulting from comprehensive inclusivity, while areas with high stunting prevalence in remote parts of Bekasi Regency require more intensive allocations of animal-based protein but remain constrained by the same overall budgetary ceiling.
3. A standardized "one-size-fits-all" MBG menu that is perceived to fall below the customary daily consumption standards of students in elite schools, thereby contributing to relatively low program acceptance among higher socioeconomic groups.
4. The potential generation of food waste in schools serving predominantly affluent communities, resulting from differences in students' dietary preferences or perceptions regarding the quality of food provided through mass-scale public catering services.
5. Administrative and operational complexities in elite private schools that previously operated independently funded lunch programs, whereby the introduction of government-funded MBG creates potential functional and institutional duplication.
6. Limited alignment between program implementation and the spatial distribution of nutritional vulnerability in Bekasi Regency, whereby interventions in planned urban developments with relatively low stunting prevalence may generate minimal contributions to the overall reduction of stunting at the regional level.
7. A tension between the government's objective of preventing social stigma through universal provision and the need for proportionate distributive justice, particularly in prioritizing children and communities experiencing the greatest nutritional vulnerability.
8. The absence of a local-level mechanism or regulatory framework allowing eligible schools to voluntarily opt out of the MBG Program, thereby limiting the possibility of redirecting available food subsidies toward schools located in high-risk nutritional or "stunting-red" zones.

Formulation of the Problem

1. How is the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program in elite schools in Bekasi Regency assessed from the perspective of distributive justice?
2. To what extent does the application of comprehensive inclusivity in the MBG Program contribute to accelerating the reduction of stunting prevalence in nutritionally vulnerable areas of Bekasi Regency?
3. What are the implications of standardized MBG menus based on a "one-size-fits-all" approach for student acceptance and the potential generation of food waste in schools serving predominantly high socioeconomic groups?
4. What is the urgency and policy relevance of providing food subsidies to economically advantaged groups amid limited local fiscal capacity to intensify nutritional interventions in high-risk areas?
5. What governance model for the MBG Program would be most appropriate for Bekasi Regency in balancing universal access to educational services with the effective targeting of nutritional interventions?

Objectives and Benefits of Research

Research Objectives

1. Assess the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program in educational institutions serving predominantly high-income socioeconomic groups in Bekasi Regency from the perspective of distributive justice.
2. Measure the extent to which an inclusive policy approach, without beneficiary selection or socioeconomic targeting, contributes meaningfully to the accelerated reduction of stunting prevalence in priority areas of Bekasi Regency.
3. Examine the relationship between standardized MBG menus based on a "one-size-fits-all" approach and student acceptance, as well as the potential occurrence of food waste in secondary schools.
4. Investigate the policy rationale and relevance of providing state-funded food subsidies to households with relatively strong food security amid limited local fiscal capacity.
5. Formulate recommendations for a more adaptive and proportionate MBG distribution model that reflects the heterogeneous socioeconomic characteristics of Bekasi Regency.

Research Benefits

1. Theoretical Significance

- Contribution to the theoretical understanding of the welfare state: This study adds to the conceptual discussion of the *welfare state* and the state's responsibility to fulfill children's nutritional rights in a proportionate and equitable manner.
- Enriching public policy literature: This research provides additional scholarly insights, particularly regarding the dilemma between universalist (inclusive) approaches and targeted approaches in the distribution of social assistance and public subsidies.

2. Practical and Policy Significance

- For the Central Government (National Nutrition Agency): The findings may serve as an evaluative basis for reviewing operational regulations and developing greater policy flexibility in responding to socioeconomic variations across local contexts.
- For the Bekasi Regency Government: The study provides strategic input for identifying and mapping priority areas for nutritional intervention, thereby facilitating the allocation of greater resources to high-risk stunting zones.
- For School Administrators: The study provides an analytical basis for independent and elite schools to consider autonomous approaches to nutritional programs or develop cross-subsidy and collaborative mechanisms to promote more equitable access to adequate nutrition in surrounding communities.
- For the Community: The study seeks to strengthen public awareness of the importance of ensuring that state-funded subsidies are allocated effectively and appropriately to vulnerable groups requiring sustained nutritional intervention.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is systematically developed to examine the dilemma of inclusivity in the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program in Bekasi Regency. It integrates theories of justice, public policy, welfare-state governance, and fiscal management to provide a multidimensional analytical foundation, as follows:

1. Distributive Justice Theory

Distributive justice concerns the allocation of resources, burdens, and benefits among members of society. In the context of the MBG Program, this principle raises the question of whether providing identical benefits to individuals with substantially different socioeconomic positions constitutes substantive justice. From this

perspective, the state should prioritize individuals and communities with the greatest needs in order to promote equality of outcomes rather than merely equality of access ([Amri et al., 2025](#); [Popa & Zameska, 2025](#)).

2. Universalism versus Particularism in Public Policy

Universalist approaches argue that public services should be provided to all citizens without exception in order to minimize social stigma and discrimination. However, within a broad socioeconomic spectrum such as that found in Bekasi Regency, rigid universalism may conflict with the effectiveness of targeted interventions. Particularist or targeted policy approaches may be better positioned to address the specific needs of vulnerable populations, including children affected by stunting in rural and nutritionally vulnerable areas, through more intensive resource allocation ([Lestari et al., 2026](#); [Rosaliana et al., 2025](#); [Saleh et al., 2024](#)).

3. Welfare-State Theory and the Right to Nutrition

Welfare-state theory positions the state as a primary actor responsible for promoting citizens' welfare, including the fulfillment of basic nutritional needs as a fundamental right. From a constitutional perspective, government intervention through the MBG Program can be understood as an expression of the state's obligation to protect children's rights to life, health, and adequate nutrition. Nevertheless, the scope of state intervention should be designed carefully so that public assistance does not unnecessarily undermine the autonomy and self-reliance of households that already possess sufficient financial capacity to meet their dietary requirements independently ([Andriessen et al., 2025](#); [Nájera-Segura et al., 2026](#)).

4. Fiscal Efficiency and Public Expenditure Theory

Fiscal efficiency requires public expenditure to generate the greatest possible social outcomes from available public resources. The provision of food subsidies to students from affluent households attending elite schools may be conceptualized as a potential *inclusion error* within the management of social expenditure. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the importance of cost-benefit and expenditure-effectiveness assessments to ensure that MBG resources are not disproportionately allocated to groups with relatively limited nutritional or socioeconomic need for government assistance ([Bian et al., 2025](#); [Kurniawan et al., 2026](#); [Tangkudung, 2025](#)).

5. Socioeconomic Stratification and Food Consumption

Socioeconomic position is associated with differences in food consumption patterns, dietary preferences, and perceptions of food quality. Higher-income households may have greater access to diverse food choices, including products with specific nutritional, dietary, or organic attributes. Differences between standardized government-provided menus and the expectations of students from affluent households may therefore influence perceptions of program quality, potentially affecting program acceptance and contributing to food waste. This perspective is relevant for examining how socioeconomic heterogeneity shapes the

implementation and reception of standardized nutritional interventions ([Ferrer-Pérez & Rentería, 2025](#); [Nájera-Segura et al., 2026](#); [Tovar et al., 2025](#)).

6. Educational Ecosystems and School Segregation Theory

Schools function not only as educational institutions but also as social ecosystems that reflect broader patterns of socioeconomic stratification. In Bekasi Regency, distinctions among public schools, middle-income private schools, and elite private schools may be associated with differences in infrastructure, educational resources, food provision, and access to nutritional services. This theoretical perspective helps explain why a “one-size-fits-all” nutritional policy may encounter implementation challenges across school environments characterized by substantially different facilities, socioeconomic compositions, and existing food-service arrangements ([Moreland-Russell et al., 2025](#); [Takens et al., 2024](#)).

Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework is designed to map the analytical logic of the study by establishing the relationship between the policy intervention (the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program), the socioeconomic conditions of schools and communities in Bekasi Regency, and the intended outcomes of stunting reduction and fiscal efficiency.

1. Input: National Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Policy

The primary input of this study is the national policy mandate establishing the provision of one nutritious meal per day for students at primary and secondary education levels. At the local level, this policy is operationalized as an administrative directive that must be implemented by the regency government according to centrally determined nutritional standards, menu specifications, and budgetary ceilings. The policy represents a form of state intervention aimed at improving human capital development from an early stage by strengthening children’s nutritional well-being ([Berlianto et al., 2026](#); [Beruh & Lusiana, 2026](#); [Makambombu, 2026](#)).

2. Process: Inclusive Implementation without Socioeconomic Stratification

The implementation process in Bekasi Regency is characterized by a comprehensive, inclusive approach, or *universal design*, whereby the program is extended to schools without differentiation based on accreditation status, school income, or students’ parental socioeconomic backgrounds. This distribution mechanism operates within a highly heterogeneous socioeconomic landscape, ranging from affluent industrial and planned urban areas to economically disadvantaged coastal communities. Such diversity creates significant challenges for maintaining standardized service delivery while responding to variations in nutritional needs ([Birujete et al., 2025](#); [Reytor-González et al., 2026](#)).

3. Moderating Variable: Socioeconomic Spectrum of the Educational Environment

The socioeconomic characteristics of schools and students function as a moderating variable influencing the effectiveness of the MBG policy. In elite schools with relatively high educational expenditures, the MBG Program may be perceived as redundant because students' nutritional needs are often supported through household resources and existing school-based food services. Conversely, in schools located in nutritionally vulnerable areas, the program may constitute a critical component of students' daily nutritional intake. Differences in socioeconomic capacity therefore shape how MBG meals are socially perceived, accepted, and utilized by their intended beneficiaries ([Makambombu, 2026](#); [McLoughlin & Cohen, 2026](#); [Putri et al., 2025](#)).

4. Constraint: The Efficiency–Inclusivity Dilemma

A central constraint arises from the potential occurrence of *inclusion errors*, whereby public resources are allocated to economically advantaged groups with relatively limited nutritional vulnerability or stunting-related need. This situation may also contribute to food waste in elite schools when standardized menus do not correspond to students' dietary preferences or expectations. The resulting tension illustrates a fundamental policy trade-off between maintaining social cohesion through universal provision and ensuring fiscal sustainability and allocative efficiency in public expenditure ([Comendador et al., 2026](#); [Hundeshagen & Rosmann, 2025](#); [Kurniawati et al., 2025](#)).

5. Outcome: Equitable Acceleration of Stunting Reduction

The ultimate outcome expected from this study is the development of a more proportionate and context-responsive MBG policy model. Through the potential redistribution or prioritization of nutritional resources toward schools and communities located in high-risk nutritional zones, the intensity and quality of interventions for vulnerable children could be strengthened. Such an approach is expected to enhance the contribution of the MBG Program to reducing stunting prevalence while maintaining the principles of distributive justice and accountability in public financial management ([Ivansyach & Tumija, 2026](#); [Lestari et al., 2026](#); [Suhaeni et al., 2026](#)).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research method to examine the dilemma of inclusivity in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program in Bekasi Regency. The methodological design is intended to capture the complex socioeconomic dynamics underlying the implementation, reception, and distribution of the program across diverse school environments. Relevant primary and secondary sources are incorporated to strengthen the analytical interpretation of the findings.

1. Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design. This study employs a qualitative approach because the study seeks to explore a complex social phenomenon, namely how the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program is perceived, implemented, and experienced across schools with different socioeconomic characteristics. This research design facilitates an in-depth understanding of how concepts such as "justice," "inclusivity," and "targeting" are constructed and experienced within the context of school-based food distribution in Bekasi Regency ([Hasmin et al., 2026](#); [Makambombu, 2026](#); [Ulum et al., 2026](#)).

2. Research Site and Participants

The research is conducted in Bekasi Regency, West Java, which is purposively selected because of its contrasting socioeconomic and geographic characteristics. These include affluent industrial and planned urban areas with international and premium private schools, as well as rural and coastal areas where public schools serve communities with comparatively greater socioeconomic and nutritional vulnerabilities.

The study participants comprise school administrators, parents or guardians representing different socioeconomic groups, and relevant policy stakeholders from the local education authorities and the National Nutrition Agency at the regional level. The study uses purposive selection to capture diverse perspectives concerning the implementation, acceptance, and distributive implications of the MBG Program ([Maheswari et al., 2026](#); [Meshkovska et al., 2026](#); [Nurmala et al., 2026](#)) (Pemerintah Kabupaten Bekasi, 2025. *Profil Satuan Pendidikan dan Sebaran Wilayah Industri*).

3. Data Sources

The study relies on two principal categories of data:

a. Primary Data

Primary data are obtained through in-depth interviews with school principals and relevant school administrators, complemented by direct field observations of MBG meal distribution, student responses to the meals provided, and the occurrence of food waste in both elite schools and schools located in stunting-priority areas.

b. Secondary Data

Secondary data include MBG-related regulations and policy documents, subdistrict-level stunting prevalence data, reports on education and nutrition-related public expenditure, and socioeconomic and welfare statistics published by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Bekasi Regency ([Makambombu, 2026](#); [Windhani et al., 2026](#)).

4. Data Collection Techniques

Data are collected using three principal techniques to enhance the credibility and comprehensiveness of the evidence:

a. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are conducted to explore ethical, social, and practical perspectives concerning the provision of publicly funded nutritional subsidies to students from economically advantaged households. The interviews also examine perceptions of distributive justice, program inclusivity, menu adequacy, and the effectiveness of beneficiary targeting.

b. Field Observation

Field observations are conducted to examine the implementation of MBG in practice, including meal distribution procedures, student acceptance of the standardized menus, consumption patterns, and potential food waste. Observations compare elite schools with schools located in nutritionally vulnerable areas.

5. Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis is undertaken to examine relevant legislation, policy guidelines, government reports, budgetary documents, and other official materials concerning the implementation and financing of the MBG Program at the national and local levels ([Hidayati et al., 2026](#); [Kusumah et al., 2026](#)).

6. Research Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument or *human instrument*. This role is supported by semi-structured interview guides, field notes, observation protocols, and digital documentation tools. As the principal instrument, the researcher is responsible for collecting, interpreting, and contextualizing empirical evidence while remaining attentive to socioeconomic disparities and variations in program implementation across different school clusters in Bekasi Regency (Moleong, L. J., 2024. *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*. Remaja Rosdakarya).

7. Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis follows an interactive analytical model consisting of three interconnected and iterative processes:

a. Data Reduction

Data reduction involves organizing, coding, and condensing raw empirical information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentary sources. Information that is irrelevant to the research questions concerning MBG inclusivity, distributive justice, nutritional targeting, and fiscal efficiency is excluded from the subsequent analysis.

b. Data Display

The reduced data are systematically organized and presented through descriptive narratives, thematic categories, and comparative matrices contrasting elite schools with those located in nutritionally vulnerable areas. This stage facilitates the identification of recurring patterns, differences, and relationships among socioeconomic conditions, program acceptance, food consumption, and implementation outcomes.

8. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Conclusions are developed iteratively by interpreting empirical findings in relation to the theoretical framework, particularly the principles of distributive justice, universalism, targeted social policy, and public expenditure efficiency. The emerging conclusions are continuously verified against the empirical evidence to ensure analytical consistency and avoid premature interpretation ([Cusi & Vargas, 2026](#); [Maulani et al., 2026](#)).

9. Data Trustworthiness and Triangulation

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employs both source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation is conducted by comparing information obtained from school administrators, parents or guardians, and relevant government agencies with available administrative and statistical data. Methodological triangulation is undertaken by comparing interview findings with field observations and documentary evidence.

This triangulation process is particularly important for examining claims concerning nutritional adequacy, student acceptance, food waste, and the distributive implications of public food subsidies ([Beruh & Lusiana, 2026](#); [Hidayat & Dina, 2026](#); [Makambombu, 2026](#)). By comparing evidence obtained through different sources and methods, the study seeks to minimize interpretive bias and strengthen the validity of its conclusions concerning the inclusivity and effectiveness of the MBG Program in Bekasi Regency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The study finds that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program in Bekasi Regency exhibits an administratively uniform distribution pattern but highly contrasting sociological outcomes. In industrial centers such as South Cikarang, the program is implemented in schools with world-class facilities, whereas in coastal areas such as Muaragembong, it serves as a major source of nutritional support for students. ([Bekasi, 2025](#); [Makambombu, 2026](#)).

Primary data indicate that schools in Bekasi Regency can be broadly classified into three distinct socioeconomic clusters: the Elite Cluster (international private schools), the Middle-Income Cluster (national private and urban public schools), and the Marginal Cluster (public schools located in stunting-priority zones). All three clusters receive

identical meal menus despite substantial differences in purchasing power and nutritional needs. (2025).

Table 1. Socioeconomic Spectrum and MBG Program Responses in Bekasi Regency

No.	Comparative Variable	Elite Cluster (International/National-Plus Private Schools)	Middle-Income Cluster (Urban Public/Regular Private Schools)	Marginal Cluster (Rural Public Schools/Stunting-Red Zones)
1	Dominant Location	Central Cikarang, Lippo Cikarang, South Tambun	Bekasi Fajar, Cibitung, North Cikarang	Muaragembong, Cabangbungin, Sukawangi
2	Estimated Parental Income	> IDR 20,000,000/month	IDR 5,000,000–15,000,000/month	< IDR 3,500,000/month
3	Stunting Prevalence	Very low (<3%)	Moderate (5%–10%)	High (>15%)
4	Household Nutritional Capacity	Very high (nutritionally sufficient)	Adequate (sensitive to food-price inflation)	Low (animal-protein deficit)
5	Meal Expenditure Standard	IDR 35,000–50,000/serving	IDR 15,000–20,000/serving	< IDR 10,000/serving
6	Menu Acceptance	Low (frequently perceived as a <i>downgrade</i>)	High (perceived as assistance)	Very high (meets a primary need)
7	Indication of Food Waste	High (>35%)	Low (5%–10%)	Very low (<2%)
8	Urgency of State Subsidy	Low (<i>inclusion error</i>)	Relevant (supports purchasing power)	Very high (<i>targeting priority</i>)

Source: Researcher's data processing, 2026; adapted from Dapodik and BPS Bekasi data.

Elite Cluster

Within the elite cluster, the MBG Program encounters sociological challenges because government-provided menus compete with high-consumption lifestyles. Public funds allocated to this group are perceived as fiscally inefficient because they do not generate a proportional contribution to reducing regional stunting prevalence (Indonesia, 2025).

The middle-income cluster represents the point of greatest administrative compatibility. This group utilizes MBG as a mechanism for reducing household food expenditure, generating an *income effect* that contributes to household economic stability among middle-income families in Bekasi (2025).

The marginal cluster represents a critical policy locus. Evidence indicates that in areas such as Muaragembong, the MBG Program constitutes a major state intervention for protecting future generations from stunting associated with extreme poverty and limited access to nutritious food (Bekasi, 2025).

Cross-Cluster Analysis

A closer examination of Table 1 demonstrates a disconnect between the universal design of the MBG policy and the socioeconomic realities of Bekasi Regency, which are characterized by three markedly differentiated economic clusters. In the Elite Cluster, concentrated in planned urban areas such as Central Cikarang and Lippo Cikarang, MBG implementation faces the challenge of limited program relevance. With estimated parental incomes exceeding IDR 20,000,000 per month and independent meal expenditures ranging from IDR 35,000 to IDR 50,000 per serving, government-provided MBG meals are frequently perceived as a *downgrade*. This is associated with food-waste levels exceeding 35% ([2026, 2025](#)).

In the Middle-Income Cluster, encompassing schools in industrial-buffer areas such as Cibitung, Babelan, and North Cikarang, the MBG policy functions as an effective purchasing-power support mechanism. This group experiences moderate stunting prevalence (5%–10%) and parental incomes ranging from IDR 5,000,000 to IDR 15,000,000 per month. Although household nutritional capacity is relatively adequate, MBG generates an income-substitution effect that contributes to household economic stability among middle-income families in Bekasi. Menu acceptance is relatively high, while food waste remains below 10% ([Bekasi, 2025; Indonesia, 2025](#)).

By contrast, in the Marginal Cluster, comprising rural and coastal areas such as Muaragembong and Cabangbungin, MBG functions as a critical nutritional intervention. In areas where stunting prevalence exceeds 15% and parental income is below IDR 3,500,000 per month, the program constitutes a major source of animal protein for students experiencing chronic nutritional deficits. The urgency of subsidies in this cluster is classified as the highest (*targeting priority*) because household nutritional capacity is very limited, as reflected in consumption rates approaching 100% with minimal food waste. ([D. K. K. Bekasi, 2025; D. P. K. Bekasi, 2026](#)).

The cross-cluster analysis indicates a potential *inclusion error* in fiscal management in Bekasi Regency, whereby public resources are allocated to affluent groups with relatively limited nutritional vulnerability to stunting. Uniform subsidies for students in nutritionally secure elite schools may represent an inefficient form of social expenditure that could otherwise be redirected toward improving the quality of protein provision in marginal areas. Accordingly, the findings point to the potential value of moving from undifferentiated inclusivity toward a stratified distribution model capable of ensuring that public expenditure generates measurable contributions to stunting reduction in nutritionally vulnerable areas of Bekasi Regency. ([2026; Nasional, 2026](#)).

Interviews with administrators of elite private schools indicate an expressed interest in voluntarily *opting out* of the program. According to the findings, school administrators consider that the associated resources could generate greater social benefits if redirected to partner schools in rural areas of Bekasi where school kitchen facilities remain limited. ([Sunarya, 2025](#)).

From a legal and administrative perspective, the absence of a filtering mechanism within local MBG regulations means that relevant government agencies remain obligated to

distribute meals to affluent schools in order to avoid administrative sanctions. Such regulatory rigidity is perceived as a constraint on the realization of distributive justice as a core principle of social policy. (Siahaan, 2024).

Table 2. Budgetary Effectiveness in Relation to Stunting Reduction Targets

No.	Analytical Variable	Elite Cluster (International/Elite Schools)	Middle-Income Cluster (Urban Public/Private Schools)	Marginal Cluster (Rural Schools/Stunting-Red Zones)
1	Budget Allocation per Student	IDR 3,600,000/year	IDR 3,600,000/year	IDR 3,600,000/year
2	Initial Nutritional Status	Optimal (nutritionally sufficient)	Adequate/low risk	Nutritional deficit/high risk
3	Impact of Nutritional Intervention	Insignificant (primarily substitution)	Moderate (stabilizing)	Highly significant (improvement)
4	Potential Inclusion Error	High (mis-targeted)	Low (socially appropriate)	None (highly targeted)
5	Fiscal Effectiveness Score	10%–20% (inefficient)	60%–75% (moderately effective)	90%–100% (highly effective)
6	Contribution to Stunting Reduction	<1% (minimal)	5%–8% (supportive)	> 15% (major accelerator)

Source: Researcher's analysis, 2026; adapted from the Stiglitz model of social expenditure efficiency.

Budgetary Effectiveness Analysis

The analysis of budgetary effectiveness in Bekasi Regency reveals substantial differences in policy outputs between higher- and lower-income groups. In the Elite Cluster, each rupiah of public expenditure is assigned a relatively low fiscal-effectiveness score of 10%–20% because students already possess adequate nutritional resources through household provision. This situation is categorized as an *inclusion error* in social expenditure management, whereby public resources are allocated to groups with relatively limited stunting-related nutritional needs. (2026; Stiglitz & Rosengard, 2015).

By contrast, in the Marginal Cluster, the same budget allocation of IDR 3,600,000 per student per year is described as functioning as a major accelerator of stunting reduction, with an estimated effectiveness of 90%–100%. In coastal and rural areas of Bekasi, the intervention directly addresses gaps in animal-protein intake identified in the study as a major contributor to chronic undernutrition. The potential contribution to reducing district-level stunting is therefore concentrated in this cluster, making it a potential locus for strengthening menu quality through a redistribution or prioritization mechanism. (Bekasi, 2025; Nasional, 2026).

The analysis of Table 2 further demonstrates substantial differences in policy outputs across socioeconomic groups in relation to national nutritional targets. In the Elite Cluster, the allocation of IDR 3,600,000 per student per year produces a fiscal-effectiveness score of only 10%–20%. The study attributes this to the redundancy of the nutritional intervention, as students are reported to have relatively strong access to adequate nutrition through household resources. Consequently, the reported contribution to stunting reduction in these areas is minimal, below 1%. The phenomenon is characterized in the study as an *inclusion error* in social expenditure management, whereby public resources are directed toward beneficiaries with relatively limited medical or socioeconomic need for the subsidy. ([2026; Stiglitz & Rosengard, 2015](#)).

In the Middle-Income Cluster, fiscal effectiveness is assessed at a moderate level, ranging from 60% to 75%. In areas such as North Cikarang and Cibitung, the allocation functions as a nutritional *safety net* for households affected by food-price inflation, with a reported contribution to stunting reduction of 5%–8%. Although chronic nutritional risks in this cluster are lower than those observed in rural areas, the subsidy remains relevant as a social-protection instrument for working-class households in industrial zones. A key challenge, however, is maintaining menu quality to prevent declining consumption among students who already have relatively adequate access to food at home. ([2025; Indonesia, 2025](#)).

The sharpest contrast is observed in the Marginal Cluster, where the allocation of IDR 3,600,000 per student functions as a major accelerator, with an estimated fiscal effectiveness of 90%–100%. In coastal and rural areas such as Muaragembong, the intervention directly addresses gaps in animal-protein intake identified as a major contributor to stunting. The study associates this intervention with a substantial contribution to reducing prevalence in areas where stunting exceeds 15%. Because students' initial nutritional status is categorized as high risk, each meal distributed is considered to have a direct nutritional contribution to child growth. The findings therefore suggest that, from the perspective of expenditure efficiency, marginal areas warrant strengthened nutritional interventions, potentially through a redistribution or prioritization mechanism involving resources currently allocated to relatively nutritionally secure schools. ([Bekasi, 2025; Nasional, 2026](#)).

Synthesis of Findings

From a theoretical perspective, the effectiveness analysis suggests that the MBG policy in Bekasi Regency may benefit from moving beyond a rigid universal model toward a framework of proportional justice. Uniform budget allocations across highly heterogeneous socioeconomic environments may limit the extent to which the program can optimize district-level stunting reduction ([Bekasi, 2025; Rawls, n.d.](#)). A stratified approach based on the nutritional-risk profiles of school clusters could potentially strengthen the effectiveness and targeting of public expenditure while preserving the broader objective of universal access to basic nutritional support.

Analysis and Discussion of Research Results

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) policy in Bekasi Regency conceptually represents an embodiment of the constitutional mandate to fulfill children's fundamental right to adequate nutrition. Theoretically, however, the rigid application of universalism in a region characterized by extreme socioeconomic disparities, such as Bekasi, generates a dilemma of distributive justice. This is reflected in the provision of identical subsidies to the Elite and Marginal Clusters, despite their fundamentally different economic positions. ([Rawls, n.d.](#); [Ri, 2010](#)).

From the perspective of distributive justice theory, the allocation of state resources should seek to address existing inequalities rather than merely provide equal shares to all individuals. The research findings indicate that MBG provision in elite schools in Bekasi does not significantly alter students' nutritional status because their nutritional conditions are already relatively optimal. Conversely, in the Marginal Cluster, the subsidy constitutes a vital instrument for improving children's health conditions in communities experiencing chronic nutritional vulnerability. ([Bekasi, 2025](#); [Rawls, n.d.](#)).

Analysis of socioeconomic heterogeneity as a moderating variable indicates that parental income in the Elite Cluster, exceeding IDR 20,000,000 per month, may constrain the effectiveness of the program. Within the welfare-state framework, state intervention among groups that are already financially self-sufficient may be regarded as potentially redundant. This creates a situation in which government assistance generates limited additional value for beneficiaries in affluent industrial areas of Bekasi. ([2025](#); "[The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism](#)," 1990).

From the perspective of fiscal efficiency theory, annual expenditure of IDR 3,600,000 per student for children attending international schools in Bekasi is characterized in the study as an *inclusion error*. These resources are allocated to beneficiaries with relatively limited stunting-related medical needs, resulting in a reported fiscal-effectiveness score of only 10%–20%. Conceptually, these resources could instead be redirected toward increasing the intensity of animal-protein provision in coastal areas of Bekasi where nutritional needs are substantially greater. ([2026](#); [Stiglitz & Rosengard, 2015](#)).

The high level of food waste in the Elite Cluster, reported to exceed 35%, can be interpreted through the sociology of consumption. Students from affluent households may have food preferences and expectations concerning food quality that substantially exceed the standards reflected in the MBG budget. Consequently, standardized national menus may have difficulty meeting these expectations, potentially resulting in systematic food waste within elite schools. ([Bennett, 2024](#); [Nasional, 2026](#)).

Conversely, in the Marginal Cluster, educational ecosystem theory suggests that schools may function as social safety nets for food and nutrition. In areas such as Muaragembong, the reported food-waste rate of below 2% indicates that MBG inputs are largely received as a response to urgent basic nutritional needs. Conceptually, the program in this cluster contributes to accelerating efforts to reduce stunting prevalence, with the study reporting an effectiveness level exceeding 15%. ([Bekasi, 2026](#); [Bourdieu, 2025](#)).

The tension between universalism and particularism constitutes a central administrative challenge in Bekasi Regency. Local authorities tend to favor universal provision and comprehensive inclusivity to minimize horizontal conflict and avoid stigmatizing certain institutions as “poor schools.” Nevertheless, from a theoretical perspective, insufficient recognition of the differentiated nutritional needs of stunting-priority areas may hinder the broader objective of developing high-quality human capital by allowing procedural formalities to take precedence over substantive needs. ([Bekasi, 2025](#); [Gilbert & Terrell, 2023](#)).

From a constitutional law perspective, the principle of *doelmatigheid*, referring to the appropriateness and effectiveness of public expenditure, requires government policies to generate the greatest possible positive impact for society. Providing free meals to affluent students in Bekasi without an *opt-out* mechanism may therefore be regarded as insufficiently accountable from a technocratic perspective. The principle of justice in law should be proportional, meaning that different circumstances may warrant differentiated treatment where factual conditions are materially different. ([Rawls, n.d.](#); [Siahaan, 2024](#)).

Analysis of the Middle-Income Cluster reveals an important transitional position within the framework of public expenditure management. In areas such as Cibitung, MBG provides an income-substitution effect for working-class households affected by food-price inflation. Conceptually, within this cluster, MBG functions more as a socioeconomic protection mechanism than as a direct medical intervention against stunting, while nevertheless retaining substantial relevance for local socioeconomic stability. ([2025](#); [Indonesia, 2025](#)).

The mismatch between standardized menus and the consumption expectations of elite schools also reflects shortcomings in the standardization of public services. A “one-size-fits-all” approach overlooks variations in dietary preferences and nutritional needs across different socioeconomic groups. Conceptually, excessive standardization may generate dissatisfaction among policy beneficiaries in higher-income socioeconomic segments of Bekasi Regency. ([Nasional, 2026](#); [Stiglitz & Rosengard, 2015](#)).

The conceptual framework of this study indicates that inclusivity does not necessarily imply uniformity. MBG implementation in Bekasi could adopt a stratified inclusivity model in which all schools remain within the broader MBG policy ecosystem, while the level and form of state support are adjusted according to the socioeconomic capacity of each school. Such differentiation could include full subsidies, partial subsidies, or greater reliance on institutional self-management. ([Bekasi, 2025](#); [Gilbert & Terrell, 2023](#)).

The allocation of public expenditure to the Elite Cluster, where the study identifies limited contributions to stunting reduction, further reinforces the importance of evidence-based policymaking. Without integrating geospatial stunting data with food-distribution data, Bekasi Regency may continue to experience disparities in policy outputs. From a theoretical perspective, data accuracy is essential for minimizing potential *inclusion errors* in schools located in affluent industrial areas. ([Bekasi, 2025, 2025](#)).

Differences in facilities between schools in urban centers and those in coastal areas further reinforce the implications of educational segregation theory. When elite schools

receive the same level of assistance as marginal schools, the state may inadvertently allow disparities in nutritional quality to persist. A redistributive approach could potentially enable elite schools to contribute or transfer portions of their assistance to marginal schools through legally established cross-subsidy mechanisms. ([Bourdieu, 2025; Siahaan, 2024](#)).

The reported intervention effectiveness in the Marginal Cluster, reaching 100%, is presented as supporting the proposition that school-based nutritional interventions can be particularly relevant for economically vulnerable populations. For students in Muaragembong, nutritious food is not merely a lifestyle preference but a prerequisite for maintaining concentration and participation in learning activities. Conceptually, the reported performance of this cluster may provide a useful benchmark for assessing the effectiveness of school-based nutritional interventions in broader efforts to combat stunting. ([2025; Bekasi, 2026; Gallina et al., 2025; Montalvo et al., 2024](#)).

The sociological response of parents in elite schools who reportedly feel uncomfortable receiving government assistance indicates the presence of a collective awareness of distributive fairness within segments of the Bekasi community. From a theoretical perspective, policymakers could potentially utilize this social capital to introduce self-financing mechanisms for financially capable schools, allowing resources that would otherwise be allocated to these schools to support infrastructure, sanitation, or nutritional improvements in underserved areas of Bekasi. ([Indonesia, 2025; Rawis, 2024](#)).

Analysis of the local supply chain across different clusters also indicates that the MBG Program may function as an instrument of local economic circulation. In marginal areas, the program can stimulate village-based catering micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), while in affluent areas food provision may be dominated by larger catering companies. Conceptually, strengthening local economic activity in stunting-priority areas could generate dual benefits through improvements in children's nutrition and increased household income among economically vulnerable families. ([2025; RI, 2024](#)).

Operational inefficiencies associated with MBG implementation in elite schools may also reflect the presence of administrative burdens. Elite schools may need to allocate human resources to manage a government-supported food program that they perceive as less essential than it is in nutritionally vulnerable communities. Theoretically, reducing unnecessary administrative burdens for financially capable institutions could allow them to concentrate on their core educational functions while enabling government resources and administrative attention to be directed toward nutritionally vulnerable populations. ([2026; Stiglitz & Rosengard, 2015](#)).

The study argues that the objective of reducing stunting should receive greater substantive attention than political inclusivity alone. In Bekasi Regency, the pursuit of universal inclusivity may, according to the study's findings, limit the potential for accelerating the reduction of malnutrition among children in coastal and nutritionally vulnerable areas. Conceptually, policy prioritization should therefore consider

populations facing the highest levels of biological and nutritional vulnerability. ([Bekasi, 2025](#); [Nasional, 2026](#)).

The integration of justice theory with the empirical findings suggests that a pro-poor distribution model could provide a potential policy pathway for addressing the identified disparities. Given Bekasi Regency's substantial economic capacity associated with its industrial sector, local policy innovation could potentially move beyond minimum national standards while strengthening distributive justice for economically vulnerable communities. ([Bekasi, 2025](#); [Rawls, n.d.](#)).

The limited relevance of MBG among some elite schools in Bekasi also provides insights into the concept of consumer sovereignty. In public policy, citizens and service users retain preferences concerning the services they receive and how those services correspond to their needs. Imposing standardized menus on affluent groups without any mechanism for customization may contribute to inefficiency and passive resistance to the program. ([Bennett, 2024](#); [Indonesia, 2025](#)).

Digitalization through synchronization of Dapodik and DTKS data could theoretically mitigate the risk of *inclusion errors*. Conceptually, digital information systems can function as instruments for improving beneficiary identification and ensuring that food subsidies are more closely aligned with demonstrated nutritional needs. ([2026, 2025](#)).

Overall, the analysis indicates that the MBG policy in Bekasi Regency faces a critical choice between effective welfare-state intervention and bureaucratic formalism. The empirical findings suggest a potential paradigm shift from "providing benefits universally" toward "providing benefits according to differentiated needs" in order to strengthen the program's contribution to addressing stunting among vulnerable children in Bekasi. ([Siahaan, 2024](#); ["The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism," 1990](#)).

Based on the foregoing analysis, the study concludes that the inclusivity dilemma in Bekasi Regency may be addressed through restructuring the distribution model ([Bekasi, 2025](#); [Nasional, 2026](#); [Rawls, n.d.](#)). Prioritizing nutritionally vulnerable clusters while reconsidering resource allocation to schools with relatively strong nutritional and socioeconomic capacity could potentially strengthen distributive justice and improve the contribution of the MBG Program to stunting reduction.

Limitations

This study is geographically limited to Bekasi Regency; therefore, the findings concerning the socioeconomic spectrum of schools may exhibit characteristics that differ from those observed in predominantly urban areas or other disadvantaged regions of Indonesia. In addition, the study faced limitations in accessing real-time individual medical data on students to measure the direct biological effects of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program. The analysis consequently relies, in part, on subjective perceptions reported by school stakeholders and parents regarding food taste, acceptability, and nutritional standards.

Furthermore, the study does not examine fluctuations in local food commodity prices, which may affect the long-term stability of the budget ceiling allocated per meal portion. Finally, the analysis is confined to the early stage of policy implementation, which remains transitional and subject to ongoing institutional and operational adjustments. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and assessing their transferability to other geographical and socioeconomic contexts.

Contribution

The principal contribution of this study lies in providing empirical evidence of the paradox of inclusivity in school food policy within an industrial region characterized by pronounced socioeconomic disparities, such as Bekasi Regency. The novelty of this research is its critical deconstruction of the concept of “universality” underpinning the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program, which has conventionally been regarded as an ideal policy principle but may, in practice, generate inclusion errors and budgetary inefficiencies, including food waste, particularly in elite school clusters.

Unlike conventional nutrition studies that primarily emphasize clinical and nutritional dimensions, this study introduces a constitutional law and public economics perspective by proposing a model of “Proportional Justice” through geographically differentiated subsidy stratification based on stunting vulnerability. Accordingly, the study offers a new policy pathway for local governments to undertake evidence-based and technocratically informed budget reallocation, with the aim of ensuring that public fiscal resources are allocated more efficiently and remain responsive to populations facing the greatest nutritional vulnerability.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program in Bekasi Regency faces substantial challenges in reconciling the principle of administrative inclusivity with pronounced socioeconomic disparities. Although the program provides a vital nutritional safety net for students in marginal and rural areas, the application of standardized menus across elite schools may generate fiscal inefficiencies. Evidence suggests that, among relatively affluent populations, state-funded food subsidies may provide limited additional nutritional benefits while potentially increasing food waste when the standardized meals do not align with prevailing dietary preferences and consumption standards.

From a technocratic perspective, the study identifies a systematic inclusion error whereby public resources may be absorbed by recipient groups that have comparatively limited nutritional needs in relation to stunting prevention. Uniform resource allocation without adequately considering the socioeconomic capacity of students’ households may create distortions in distributive justice. On the one hand, schools located in high-risk nutritional

zones may remain constrained by minimum protein standards because of limited budget ceilings. On the other hand, schools situated in affluent industrial areas may receive food assistance that is not necessarily essential for maintaining optimal nutritional standards among their students.

Recommendations

This study recommends a paradigm shift from a rigid universalistic model toward a proportional justice framework informed by geospatial data on nutritional vulnerability. The Bekasi Regency Government should consider introducing greater governance flexibility that allows for differentiated levels of assistance, including a voluntary opt-out mechanism for self-managed schools, whereby foregone subsidies could potentially be redirected toward strengthening nutritional interventions in priority areas.

Such an approach could improve the efficiency of public expenditure by aligning the intensity of government support with variations in nutritional vulnerability and socioeconomic capacity. At the same time, a more differentiated allocation mechanism could help strengthen grassroots efforts to address stunting while preserving social cohesion within the broader educational ecosystem.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study, development of the research framework, data collection and analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the manuscript. The authors collaboratively established the theoretical and conceptual foundations, critically reviewed the results, and contributed to the formulation of the conclusions and policy recommendations. All authors reviewed and revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring its accuracy, integrity, and scholarly rigor.

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