

THE MEANING OF "NUTRITIOUS" IN PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF DEPOK CITY ON MAKAN BERGIZI GRATIS (MBG) PROGRAM

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Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is a national policy aimed at improving children's nutritional quality and human resource development in Indonesia. This study aims to analysis how residents of Depok City interpret the concept of "nutritious" food within the MBG program. The study employs a qualitative approach based on a constructivist paradigm through interviews with parents, students, and community members. The analysis utilized Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response model. The results indicate that the community interprets nutritious food not only based on nutritional content but also on cleanliness, freshness, taste, and family health experiences. There is a gap between government nutritional standards and community perceptions. Negative experiences regarding food quality erode public trust and lead to food waste behaviour within the MBG program.

Keywords: Public Communication, Nutritional Meaning, Free Nutritional Meal Program, Community, Food Waste

Abstrak

Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) merupakan kebijakan nasional untuk meningkatkan kualitas gizi anak dan pembangunan sumber daya manusia Indonesia. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pemaknaan masyarakat Kota Depok terhadap konsep makanan "bergizi" dalam program MBG. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan paradigma konstruktivis melalui wawancara kepada orang tua, siswa, dan masyarakat. Analisis menggunakan teori Encoding-Decoding Stuart Hall dan model Stimulus-Organism-Response. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan masyarakat memaknai makanan bergizi tidak hanya berdasarkan kandungan nutrisi, tetapi juga kebersihan, kesegaran, rasa, dan pengalaman kesehatan keluarga. Terdapat kesenjangan antara standar gizi pemerintah dan persepsi masyarakat. Pengalaman negatif pada kualitas makanan melemahkan kepercayaan masyarakat dan memunculkan perilaku food waste dalam program MBG.

Kata kunci : Komunikasi Publik, Makna Bergizi, Makan Bergizi Gratis, Masyarakat, Food Waste

INTRODUCTION

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is a strategic policy of the Indonesian government aimed at improving the nutritional quality of students and supporting national human resource development (Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). This program is also positioned as a government effort to reduce stunting rates and strengthen the development agenda towards Golden Indonesia 2045 (Bappenas, 2023). In its implementation, the concept of "nutritious food" is based on formal nutritional standards that emphasize a balance of carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, and minerals (Almatsier, 2019). However, in social practice, people do not always interpret the concept of nutrition solely based on government technocratic standards.

In urban communities like Depok city, nutritious food is understood through everyday experiences related to taste, cleanliness, freshness, food safety, and family eating habits. Various public responses to the MBG menu, such as criticism of stale food, unpleasant odors, and distribution hygiene, demonstrate the differences in interpretation between the government and the beneficiaries. This phenomenon can be understood through Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding theory, which explains that society has the ability to interpret and negotiate messages produced by institutions based on their social experiences (Hall, 1980). Messages or programs produced by institutions are not always fully accepted by the public; instead, they are influenced by social experiences, needs, and preferences.

For example, research by Kuswanti et al. (2026) positions the public as active subjects interpreting messages received through everyday social and environmental experiences. This communication approach views the audience as an active participant in producing social meaning. Previous research on the MBG program has generally focused on aspects of nutrition, program effectiveness, and health policy. However, little research has examined how the public interprets the concept of "nutrition" from the perspective of communication and social experience. Therefore, this study aims to explore the meanings of the concept of "nutrition" in the MBG program among the Depok City community and the negotiation of meaning that occurs between government standards and community experiences. This research is expected to contribute to the study of public communication and health communication, particularly in understanding the importance of community social experience in the implementation of public food policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) Program

This is a public policy aimed at improving children's nutritional status by providing free healthy meals in schools (Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). This program is positioned as a state intervention to fulfill the community's basic right to healthy and nutritious food (Bappenas, 2023). In its implementation, the MBG serves not only as a health program but also as a public communication instrument that represents the state's presence in community life (Effendy, 2003). The concept of nutritious food in the MBG program is based on formal nutritional standards that include a balance of carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, and minerals (Almatsier 2019). However, in social practice, food is understood not only as a biological need but also as part of a community's culture, family experiences, and social identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

Public Perception

Perception is the process by which individuals interpret stimuli received through experience, knowledge, and the social environment. According to Deddy Mulyana, perception is influenced by past experiences, cultural background, and an individual's psychological state (Mulyana, 2018). In the context of public policy, public perception is a crucial indicator for assessing the success of government communications. The public does not always receive policy messages in their entirety. Negative experiences in program implementation can lead to new interpretations that differ from the policy's initial objectives. This phenomenon is also reflected in recent studies and surveys regarding the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Indonesia. Research on parents' perceptions of MBG in Kayong Utara found that although many parents supported the program, concerns regarding food taste, hygiene, and the direct health impact on children still influenced public acceptance of the policy (Minarsih et al., 2025). In addition, national surveys revealed that although most Indonesians agreed with the MBG program, the level of public satisfaction remained lower than the level of support, indicating that implementation experiences strongly affect public perception toward the program (Indikator Politik Indonesia, 2025).

The Meaning of "Nutritious" from a Social Perspective

The meaning of "nutritious" in society is not only related to the nutritional content of food, but also encompasses taste, cleanliness, food safety, freshness, and suitability to family preferences (Le Moal et al., 2021). In interviews, informants explained that food is considered nutritious if it contains vegetables and protein, and does not pose a health risk to children. Some informants linked their understanding of healthy food to their family's experiences with illnesses such as diabetes, cholesterol, allergies, and digestive disorders. This suggests that the meaning of "nutritious" is shaped by social experiences and family health experiences (Fitriyani, Sahar, & Wiarsih, 2011). In addition, perceptions of healthy food are also influenced by everyday family interactions, eating habits, and cultural understandings of food safety and well-being (Meyer et al., 2023).

Food Waste

Food waste is the phenomenon of uneaten or wasted edible food (FAO, 2019). In the context of the MBG program, food waste occurs when food does not suit the recipient's taste, the quality of the food decreases, or the community perceives the food as unsafe to consume (Putri et al., 2025). This phenomenon serves as an important indicator of the level of public acceptance of government food programs (Ana Dina et al., 2026). The high level of food waste indicates a mismatch between the food standards produced by the country and the consumption experience of the community (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

Encoding-Decoding Theory

Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding Theory explains that the communication process is not linear, as audiences do not always receive messages according to the meaning constructed by the message creator (Hall, 1980). In this theory, institutions or message producers encode a particular meaning, while audiences decode it based on their social, cultural, and knowledge experiences (Storey, 2018). Thus, society has the ability to accept, negotiate, and even reject messages conveyed by institutions. In the context of this research, the government encodes the concept of "nutritious" through formal nutrition standards that emphasize carbohydrate, protein, vitamin, and mineral content in the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG). However, the community, as program recipients, decodes the concept based on daily experiences, food quality, taste, cleanliness, and the health of children in the family. This suggests that the meaning of nutritious food is shaped through community social experiences, not solely based on formal government definitions.

Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory

The Stimulus-Organism-Response theory explains that every environmental stimulus is first processed by an individual before producing a specific response (Effendy, 2003). The resulting response is influenced by the individual's psychological state, experience, and perception of the stimulus received. In this study, the stimulus in question is the food menu in the MBG Program, including taste, food quality, hygiene, and distribution process. The organisms in this study are the community, parents, and students as program recipients. After undergoing an interpretation process based on social and family health experiences, the stimulus produces various responses, such as acceptance, criticism, rejection, and even food waste behaviour toward MBG food. Thus, the S-O-R theory is used to understand how community experiences influence their responses to the implementation of government programs.

Conceptual Framework Development

This research is based on the assumption that the meaning of "nutritious" in the MBG Program is not universally understood by the public. The government, as policymaker, constructs the concept of "nutritious" based on formal nutritional standards that encompass a balance of carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, and minerals. This concept is then communicated to the public through the implementation of the MBG program as a form of public policy. However, the public is not passive in receiving the message. Based on Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding theory, the public decodes government messages based on social

experiences, family mealtime culture, health experiences, and direct experience with the quality of the food they consume. Therefore, the public's understanding of "nutritious" may differ from the government's formal definition.

In this research, public perception is influenced by several factors, such as food taste, cleanliness, freshness, food safety, distribution quality, and the suitability of the menu to family consumption habits. These factors serve as stimuli received by the public during the implementation of the MBG Program. Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response model, these stimuli are processed by individuals based on their experiences and psychological conditions before producing a specific response, such as acceptance, criticism, rejection, or food waste behaviour. This study also positions food waste as a form of social response to the mismatch between government-produced food standards and the community's consumption experience. Therefore, this study views the success of the MBG Program as being determined not only by meeting formal nutritional standards but also by the government's public communication in building social legitimacy and a sense of meaning within the beneficiary community.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a constructivist paradigm and employs phenomenology as its methodological approach. The qualitative method was chosen to explore how community members interpret the concept of "nutritious food" within the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program, since it enables investigation of meanings, experiences, and social realities that cannot be captured by quantitative measures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The constructivist paradigm holds that social reality is produced through human interaction and subjective interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 1991); accordingly, this study treats the meaning of "nutritious" as a social construction shaped by family practices, dietary culture, health experiences, and interactions with the MBG program.

Twelve informants were purposively sampled to provide in-depth insights into program implementation and reception. Informants were grouped into three categories: five student beneficiaries (key informants), five parents or guardians (primary informants), and three teachers or school staff involved in meal distribution (supporting informants). Depok City, West Java, was selected as the study site for its heterogeneous population and its role as a focal area for government child-nutrition initiatives, making it a representative context for examining community responses to MBG.

Data collection occurred over a two-week period beginning in early April and included face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews and direct field observations. Interviews followed a three-stage process—pre-interview agreement, implementation (moving from general questions to core topics such as definitions of "nutritious," menu suitability, taste, hygiene, and distribution challenges), and post-interview clarifications—and were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Observations documented meal preparation and distribution practices, dining environments, nonverbal cues, and logistical issues to complement interview data.

Phenomenology was used to centre participants' lived experiences of food quality, hygiene, taste, and perceptions of nutrition as they relate to MBG's implementation in Depok. This combination of constructivist framing, purposive sampling, and phenomenological inquiry enables a rich, contextualized understanding of how meanings are produced, contested, and negotiated among students, parents, school staff, and program implementers.

Research Object and Unit of Analysis

The primary research object is public perception of the meaning of "nutritious food" within the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Depok City. This study examines how the government's formal nutritional standards are interpreted, negotiated, and responded to by community members as program beneficiaries, and how those processes shape local understandings of what counts as nutritious.

The units of analysis are parents of students receiving MBG, student beneficiaries who directly experience the meals, and community members who are aware of or affected by the program. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, chosen for their involvement, knowledge, and experience with MBG (Sugiyono, 2019). This sampling strategy enables the collection of in-depth, relevant data on the social constructions and everyday meanings attributed to "nutritious food" in the program's local implementation..

Data Collection Techniques

This study employed a qualitative methodology to examine how the concept of "nutritious meals" is produced, contested, and negotiated in interactions between the state and local communities, situating policy legitimacy as a discursive process rather than merely an administrative outcome. Combining policy discourse analysis with an investigation of public reception, the research adopts a critical qualitative stance to explore relationships among public communication, state discourse, and community agency in the social-policy context of Indonesia.

Empirical data were gathered through in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted with purposively sampled informants who could provide rich insights into the MBG program. Interviews followed a semi-structured guide that allowed the researcher to balance focused inquiry with flexibility to probe emergent themes; each session began with general questions and progressed to core issues such as participants' definitions of "nutritious," menu suitability, taste, hygiene, and distribution challenges. Interviews lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and formed the primary data corpus for analysis.

Field observations complemented interviews by documenting meal preparation and distribution practices, dining environments, beneficiary responses, and other contextual details not always captured through interviews. Observational notes recorded nonverbal cues and logistical issues to enrich interpretation and support triangulation.

Throughout data collection, ethical procedures were followed, including informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, and brief post-interview clarifications (member checks) when needed to verify or elaborate participants' accounts. The combination of discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, and observational data provided triangulated evidence for a nuanced understanding of how MBG's nutritional aims are perceived and enacted in Depok.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis technique used in this study refers to the interactive model developed by Miles dan Huberman. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), qualitative data analysis consists of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was conducted by selecting, categorizing, and simplifying interview and observation data relevant to the research focus. Afterward, the data were presented systematically through narrative descriptions to identify patterns, themes, and relationships among findings. The final stage involved drawing conclusions by interpreting the meanings emerging from participants' experiences and relating them to the theoretical framework used in the study, particularly the Encoding-Decoding theory and Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model.

Following the transcription process, the interview data were coded to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and experiences related to the implementation of the MBG program. The coding process involved assigning labels to significant statements from informants, grouping similar codes into broader categories, and organizing them into thematic findings. Through this process, several key themes emerged, including the social meaning of nutritious food, community experiences with the implementation of the MBG program, the influence of family health experiences on perceptions of nutrition, and food waste as a response to the perceived mismatch between government nutritional standards and actual consumption experiences. This coding procedure enabled the researchers to systematically interpret participants' perspectives and connect empirical findings with the theoretical framework employed in the study.

Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied source triangulation. Triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from multiple informant groups, including students as direct beneficiaries of the MBG program, parents or guardians, and teachers or school representatives involved in program implementation. In addition, interview findings were cross-checked with field observations and supporting documents related to the implementation guidelines of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). Source triangulation aims to improve the credibility and validity of qualitative findings by examining the consistency of information across different data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The triangulation process focused on comparing perceptions regarding food quality, taste, hygiene, nutritional value, and distribution practices. For example, students' experiences as direct recipients were compared with parents' evaluations of food quality and teachers' observations of food distribution and consumption behaviour at school. These findings were then contrasted with official government guidelines concerning the implementation of MBG. Through this process, the study sought to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the social realities experienced by program beneficiaries while remaining connected to the formal policy framework established by the government. This approach also helped minimize potential bias arising from reliance on a single source of information and strengthened the overall credibility of the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Meaning of "Nutritious" According to the People of Depok City

The results of this research highlight a sharp friction in the interpretation of the concept of "nutritious food" between the government and the public. On one hand, the state views nutrition from a technical-biological perspective, measured thru the completeness of macro-nutrient elements such as carbohydrates, proteins, vegetables, fruits, and milk. On the other hand, the community interprets the concept thru a more pragmatic lens, focusing on aspects of consumability, taste quality, and dish freshness.

Name Informant	Category Responden	School/Region Location	Accepted MBG Menu
LS	Parents of students (Occupation: Babysitter)	SMPN X (Sukmajaya)	Junior High School: Chicken katsu, salad, curvature, milk. SD: Milk, tempeh chips, bread, brownies (stale).
TW	SMK Teacher & Breastfeeding Mother (Busui)	SMK X (Cilodong)	Students: Flour/sweet and sour chicken, round eggs, fruit (longan), milk. Busui: Burger, chicken teriyaki, french fries, soy milk.
AA	Administrative Staff (TU)	SMPN X (Cimanggis)	Rice, teriyaki seasoned eggs, chicken popcorn, pickled vegetables/soup (without gravy), fruit (longan/banana), MBG milk.
VP	Parents of students	SMAN X (Cinere)	Rice, dori fish, chicken, economical burgers, bread, fruit (rotten salak), MBG brand milk.
SI	Parents of students	SDS (Grogol)	Crispy (hard) chicken, pudding, risol, bread, milk, fruit.
AI	Housewives (MBG Busui Recipients, Toddlers, & Elementary Children)	MI (Bojongsari)	Yellow rice, chicken katsu, purple yam, UHT milk, mung bean milk.
SW	Parents of students & Side Dish Traders	SMAN X (Limo)	Rice, chicken, hard- boiled eggs, spaghetti, burgers, citrus fruits, white milk.

Name Informant	Category Responden	School/Region Location	Accepted MBG Menu
ANH	High School Students	SMAN X (Sawangan)	Rice, tempe katsu (favorite), chicken, fiber/vegetables, milk (not always).
NTF	High School Students	SMAN X (Limo)	Yellow rice (favorite), chicken katsu, garlic pepper chicken, soy sauce eggs, dimsum, fruit, milk (Friday).
VA	High School Students	SMAN X (Cinere)	Yellow rice, butter chicken, yellow spiced eggs, dori (fishy), fruit, white milk.
ST	Teachers & Parents of Students	SMP (Pancoran Mas)	Orange leaf rice, chicken, hard-boiled eggs (benyek), risol, brownies (mushroom), MBG brand milk (bland).

Source : Archieve Researcher (2026)

Furthermore, the mismatch between the form of the menu and the students' expectations also triggers rejection. Although the menu sent in concept form has met nutritional elements, the practicality of its presentation often falls short of expectations, as expressed by an informant:

"The children expected the vegetable soup to have broth, but when it arrived, it didn't, so it was just stir-fried vegetables. In the end, they only ate the rice and eggs."

Similar complaints also arise regarding the taste and freshness of the ingredients, where students often refuse to eat with the reason :

"Ma'am, this doesn't taste good," and there are repeated findings from informants that the food sent "often... until now often, is not fresh."

Community Experience with the Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG)

During its initial rollout, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) elicited a largely positive and appreciative public response, primarily because it offered practical relief for parents burdened with preparing daily school lunches. Even though this early acceptance was cultivated through informal communication channels, the community fundamentally embraced the program's normative objectives, placing them in a dominant-hegemonic reading position. The comprehensive nature of the initial menus gave the impression that the initiative was thoughtfully designed around balanced nutritional principles. However, as the program progressed, empirical experiences on the ground began to drastically shift this perception.

Field findings uncovered systemic structural issues, particularly concerning a centralized, top-down distribution model that lacked adaptability to local contexts. Inefficiencies in delivery scheduling meant that meals were packed too early, causing trapped heat and condensation to spoil the food well before mealtime. This severe degradation in quality was corroborated by a teacher informant who discovered the food was unfit for consumption moments after distribution: "The kids just walked from the first floor to the third, and it already smelled bad on the way". Furthermore, distribution inconsistencies were evident when promised nutritional components suddenly went missing. This sparked protests from parents, who asked,

"Why is there no milk in here?"—forcing the school to reactively respond with,

"They'll give it at the end of the week".

Moreover, the inefficient distribution pipeline frequently resulted in delayed meal deliveries to several schools. Consequently, instead of completely covering the students' daily dietary needs, schools were forced to maintain alternative food options for hungry children. As one informant emphasized:

"What if the kids keep waiting for the MBG? I feel bad for them... that's why the cafeteria is still open".

A continuous string of discrepancies between prior announcements and actual meals ("They updated the menu... but what arrived was totally different") alongside only temporary improvements in food quality ("It was good for a while, but eventually went back to how it was") further tarnished the program's operational image among beneficiaries.

The accumulation of these structural failures and negative experiences ultimately triggered a complex legitimacy crisis for the MBG program, spanning substantive, discursive, and procedural dimensions. Public trust significantly eroded as operational realities on the ground clashed with the state's nutritional promises, effectively reducing the practical meaning of "nutritious" to merely "fit to eat". This massive disconnect between bureaucratic policy and actual social practice necessitates a fundamental transformation in program governance. A more dialogic communication approach and a decentralized execution strategy are urgently required to bridge the widening gap between formal nutritional standards and the everyday realities of public consumption.

Negotiating the Meaning of "Nutritious" from an Encoding-Decoding Perspective

Drawing on Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding framework, the communication of public policy is never a strictly linear or unidirectional process. In the context of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), the government acts as the primary message producer, encoding the concept of "nutritious" food based on rigid, formal standards established by health authorities. This official message is heavily grounded in scientific and regulatory frameworks, presenting the definition of nutrition as an objective, universal, and indisputable truth. However, the empirical reality on the ground presents a far more intricate dynamic. The public, acting as message recipients, does not passively absorb this state-sponsored definition through a *dominant reading*—a stance where the sender's intended message is accepted without question. Instead, the majority of beneficiaries adopt a *negotiated reading*, which is characterized by an ambivalent and dialectical approach. They legitimize and

support the overarching goal of providing free meals to children, but they actively contest the program's execution when it conflicts with their daily realities and preferences.

This negotiation is evident in how students filter the "encoded" nutritional menu. For instance, while vegetables are a key nutritional component mandated by the state, their inclusion is often met with direct resistance from the students: "If the side dish is vegetables, a lot of it is definitely left untouched." Conversely, menus that align with popular local tastes receive enthusiastic approval:

"Like yesterday, Ma'am, The chicken was delicious."

Furthermore, the disparity between the program's promises and the actual meals frequently leads to disappointment and partial rejection. As one informant highlighted regarding a menu mismatch:

"The kids expected vegetable soup... when it arrived it wasn't, so what are they supposed to eat?"

Consequently, beneficiaries practice a literal negotiated consumption, choosing to eat only the specific components they find acceptable, as noted by a teacher:

"Oh well, just eat the rice and the egg."

This phenomenon highlights a fundamental argument: the concept of "nutritious" is far from the singular, static, and closed definition presumed by formal bureaucratic policy. In essence, it serves as a dynamic arena of negotiation, continuously molded and contested through diverse social interactions, cultural preferences, and the everyday realities of the community. Consequently, the disconnect between the government's encoding and the public's decoding exposes a profound epistemological gap between the rigid logic of bureaucratic nutrition and the fluid logic of lived experience—a critical gap that must be addressed in the evaluation of public policy.

Health Experiences and the Formation of Perceptions of Nutritious Food

A significant finding of this study is the pivotal role of family health history in shaping how individuals evaluate "nutritious" food. Parents do not rely solely on formal nutritional theory; instead, they utilize their real-life experiences with illnesses—such as diabetes, cholesterol, food allergies, anemia, and digestive disorders—as a cognitive reference. As one parent noted regarding their selective approach:

"I am very careful because of my family's history with diabetes; I don't want my child to face the same health issues".

These experiences drive parents to look beyond basic macronutrients, focusing instead on the long-term health impact of the food on their children. Consequently, public assessments of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) are heavily weighed against perceived safety and suitability for a child's specific health condition rather than just bureaucratic standards. Ultimately, these findings indicate that perceptions of nutrition are deeply rooted in social and domestic health contexts, suggesting that public food programs must integrate community health realities into their implementation to gain genuine acceptance.

Food Waste as a Social Response to the Mismatch Between Standards and Consumption Experience

The prevalence of food waste in this study should not be dismissed as mere consumer indifference; rather, it functions as a critical social response to the misalignment between state-mandated food standards and the actual consumption experiences of students and parents. When meals are perceived as lacking freshness, being unappetizing, or failing hygiene expectations, students actively exercise their agency by refusing to eat them, disposing of them, or redirecting the food to others. As one teacher observed regarding student reactions to unappealing menu items:

"If the side dish is vegetables, a lot of it is definitely left untouched".

From a sociological lens, these actions constitute a form of "silent negotiation" regarding policies that fail to resonate with local culinary habits, tastes, and quality benchmarks. Food waste serves as a tangible expression of the growing gap between bureaucratic nutritional standards and the needs of the beneficiary community. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that the success of public food policy depends less on meeting abstract nutritional metrics and more on the program's capacity to adapt to the community's social and cultural realities. The quality of the consumption experience remains the primary driver of public acceptance for the MBG program.

Public Communication and the Social Legitimacy of the Free Nutritional Meals Program

This research demonstrates that the success of the Free Nutritional Meals Program (MBG) hinges not only on technical design or formal nutritional standards but also on the social legitimacy cultivated within the community. This legitimacy is formed through direct community experiences with service quality, distribution, and government communication. The community prioritizes several fundamental needs: transparency in food sourcing and processing, consistency in quality across regions, strict hygiene, and an open dialogue space to express feedback.

When these needs remain unmet, a significant gap develops between the government's message of "nutritious food" and the reality of the community's daily experience, leading to a decline in public trust. As one informant noted regarding the lack of transparency, when parents asked about missing components, the school often had to offer non-committal answers :

"We'll provide it at the end of the week".

Ultimately, public trust serves as crucial social capital for the sustainability of government programs. It is not built through regulations alone, but through consistent experience and responsive communication. Consequently, the success of the MBG program demands a shift toward a more participatory, empathetic, and open communication approach that treats community members as active partners rather than passive beneficiaries.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the people of Depok City interpret the concept of "nutritious" more broadly than the government's definition in the Free Nutritional Meals (MBG) Program. For the community, nutritious food is not only food that meets nutritional standards, but also must taste good, be clean, fresh, safe to consume, and align with daily family eating habits. Thus, the meaning of "nutritious" is understood by the community as a concept influenced by life experiences and food culture, not solely based on nutritional content. This study also found differences in the understanding of the concept of "nutritious" between the government and the community. The government views nutritious food based on formal nutritional standards, while the community assesses food based on their direct experiences. This difference in understanding has led to various criticisms of the MBG program's implementation.

Negative experiences such as spoiled food, unpleasant odors, and concerns about the cleanliness of food and distribution containers have affected the community's level of trust in the program. As a result, many students do not finish their meals or even throw them away. This food waste behavior indicates a mismatch between the food standards prepared by the government and the expectations of the community as beneficiaries. Therefore, this study confirms that the success of the MBG Program cannot be measured solely by meeting nutritional standards and the breadth of food distribution. The program must also consider community experiences, local food culture, service quality, and build public trust through consistent, hygienic, and transparent service.

Recommendations from this study include the government's need to improve the quality of food distribution to ensure that students receive the food safely. Monitoring of the hygiene of food processing, storage, and distribution also needs to be strengthened to maintain public trust in the MBG program. Furthermore, the government needs to adapt the menu to local preferences and eating habits to make the food more accessible to students. More participatory public communication is also crucial through the involvement of parents, schools, and the community in the program evaluation process.

Schools are expected to conduct regular evaluations of the quality of food received by students, including in terms of taste, hygiene, and suitability for consumption. Schools should also provide a feedback platform for students and parents so that complaints and suggestions regarding the MBG program can be openly expressed and used as input for collective improvement. Finally, further research is recommended to examine the phenomenon of food waste in school food programs in greater depth as a form of social response to public food policy. Furthermore, research on media framing of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is also important to understand how the media shapes public opinion about the program. Studies on health communication related to national food policy can also be developed to understand the effectiveness of government communication in building public nutrition awareness.

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