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Implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Policy: An Analysis Using George C. Edwards III's Model

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) programme, launched in January 2025, is one of the largest school-feeding undertakings ever attempted by a single government, and it is expected to ease the country's persistent burden of child undernutrition. Its scale, however, has exposed the programme to implementation strains that early evaluations treat in fragments. This article examines how the MBG policy is being carried out and which conditions shape its performance, using the four variables proposed by George C. Edwards III: communication, resources, disposition and bureaucratic structure. The study adopts a qualitative design based on an integrative literature review. Peer-reviewed articles, official regulations and programme reports published between 2017 and 2026 were identified, screened against relevance and quality criteria, and synthesised through thematic analysis organised around the four Edwards III variables. The synthesis shows that communication between the national agency, regional governments, meal-preparation units and schools remains uneven, so that menu standards, food-safety rules and reporting duties are understood differently across regions. Resource gaps, particularly in trained food handlers, kitchen infrastructure and stable funding flows, constrain service quality, while the repeated food-poisoning incidents reveal weak control over preparation and distribution. Implementer commitment is generally high, yet it is undermined by unclear incentives and limited accountability. The bureaucratic structure, built on a newly created central agency and a network of partner kitchens, still lacks clear standard operating procedures and coordination with regional health and education offices. The article concludes that MBG's success depends less on expanding coverage than on consolidating its implementation architecture, especially food-safety governance, workforce capacity, and multilevel coordination.

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INTRODUCTION

The nutritional condition of children is widely regarded as a foundation of human capital, because early deficits persist into weaker learning and lower productivity in adulthood. School feeding has consequently become one of the most widely adopted social policy instruments in the world. A systematic review and meta-analysis of programmes in low- and middle-income countries found that school meals are associated with gains in enrolment, attendance and several anthropometric outcomes, although the size of these effects depends heavily on programme design and delivery (Wang et al., 2021). Indonesia has compelling reasons to adopt such an instrument. Child stunting in the country results from an interlocking set of determinants, including poor dietary diversity, inadequate sanitation,

maternal factors and unequal access to health services (Beal et al., 2018). Earlier local interventions frequently failed to reverse this trend because they were fragmented, short-lived and weakly coordinated (Meher et al., 2023).

The constitutional basis for state action is explicit. The 1945 Constitution guarantees every child the right to survive, grow and develop (Article 28B(2)), recognises the right of every person to health services (Article 28H(1)) and makes the state responsible for providing adequate health and public service facilities (Article 34(3)). On the basis of these mandates, the government launched the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) programme in January 2025 and entrusted its management to the National Nutrition Agency, established under Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024. The programme serves schoolchildren, young children, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers, and it depends on a network of meal-preparation units that cook and distribute food every school day. Its ambition distinguishes it from earlier nutrition schemes: it seeks near-universal coverage within a few years, which places an unprecedented operational load on a newly formed agency.

That load soon became visible. An analysis in The Lancet Regional Health – Southeast Asia reported that, by the end of 2025, the programme had been linked to 177 food-poisoning outbreaks affecting more than 20,000 schoolchildren in 33 provinces, and it called for stronger hazard control, surveillance and outbreak investigation (Surendra et al., 2026). Such incidents signal that the chain connecting central policy design to the classroom plate is not yet firmly governed. International evidence points in the same direction. A mixed-methods review of publicly procured school meals in sub-Saharan Africa identified dozens of implementation challenges, concentrated in food preparation, distribution to students and supporting infrastructure such as funding, monitoring and coordination (Liguori et al., 2024). A separate review of African programmes showed that long-term sustainability rests on stable financing, local procurement and institutional ownership rather than on initial political enthusiasm (Mainje et al., 2024).

Research on MBG is expanding but remains fragmented. A bibliometric and critical review of global free school lunch studies proposed a framework for Indonesia built on stakeholder collaboration, culturally adaptive menus and sustainable sourcing, yet it did not examine how these elements function inside the Indonesian bureaucracy (Abadi et al., 2025). Nurmansyah and Fitriani (2025) argued that MBG should be analysed through an implementation research lens, since the distance between policy intent and field practice is likely to determine its outcomes. Evidence from Indonesia's earlier stunting convergence policy supports this argument: results were better where central regulation, supervision and budgets were adequate, but shallow understanding among local actors shifted responsibility back to the health sector (Herawati & Sunjaya, 2022). District performance likewise depended on leadership commitment, cross-sector coordination and the quality of data (Syafrawati et al., 2023).

Administrative studies add further insight. Public perception and participation determine whether national programmes are accepted and sustained by communities (Herman et al., 2026), while outcomes improve when implementation is anchored in coherent planning (Herman et al., 2025). The performance of frontline personnel who act as representatives of the government depends on training, motivation and clear role expectations (Idris et al., 2023). Delivery models that rely on partner organisations also carry governance risks, because market-oriented arrangements can reproduce existing local power relations and concentrate benefits among well-connected actors (Muttaqin et al., 2025).

These strands reveal a clear gap. Most MBG studies treat nutritional content, food safety or public opinion separately, and few organise the evidence through an explicit implementation model linking communication, capacity, implementer behaviour and organisational arrangements. Implementation scholarship has long shown that programme results emerge from fields of interacting actors whose resources and incentives shape what a

policy becomes in practice (Moulton & Sandfort, 2017). The top-down model formulated by George C. Edwards III provides a parsimonious way to structure such an analysis, because it identifies four variables that jointly determine whether a policy is executed as intended: communication, resources, disposition and bureaucratic structure.

This article therefore asks how the MBG policy is being implemented and which of the four Edwards III variables most strongly enable or constrain its performance. It contributes to public administration scholarship by applying a classic implementation model to one of the largest contemporary school-feeding programmes, and it offers practical guidance for strengthening the programme's governance during its expansion phase.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative design in the form of an integrative literature review, an approach suited to topics where evidence is recent, dispersed across disciplines and not yet sufficient for statistical pooling (Snyder, 2019). Unlike a narrative overview, an integrative review treats the literature as data and follows explicit procedures for identifying, selecting and interpreting sources, so that it can stand as an independent study (Kraus et al., 2022). The corpus comprised three types of material published between 2017 and 2026: peer-reviewed articles on MBG, school feeding, child nutrition and policy implementation; Indonesian regulations governing the programme, including Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024 on the National Nutrition Agency; and official programme reports. Searches were run in Scopus, supplemented by PubMed and publisher databases, using combinations of the terms “free nutritious meal”, “Makan Bergizi Gratis”, “school feeding”, “school meals”, “policy implementation” and “Indonesia”. Identification, screening and eligibility decisions were documented following the logic of the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021), with sources retained only when they reported empirical findings or authoritative analysis on programme delivery.

The retained sources were analysed thematically. Each document was read in full and coded deductively against the four Edwards III variables, with communication covering transmission, clarity and consistency of directives; resources covering staff, funds, facilities, information and authority; disposition covering implementer commitment and incentives; and bureaucratic structure covering standard operating procedures and fragmentation of responsibility. This deductive frame was complemented by inductive coding to capture conditions that the model does not name explicitly, such as food-safety control and community participation, in line with recommendations that reviews move beyond description toward a structured synthesis (Paul & Criado, 2020). Findings on MBG were then compared with evidence from Indonesia's stunting convergence policy and from school-feeding programmes abroad, so that the analysis could distinguish programme-specific problems from recurring implementation patterns (Herawati & Sunjaya, 2022; Liguori et al., 2024; Nurmansyah & Fitriani, 2025). Credibility was strengthened by cross-checking claims across at least two independent sources and by recording the limitations of each source.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis indicates that MBG's implementation problems do not stem from a single weak link. They arise from the interaction of the four Edwards III variables, with deficits in one variable amplifying those in another. Table 1 summarises the main findings, and the subsections that follow discuss each variable against the wider literature.

Table 1. Synthesis of MBG implementation conditions by Edwards III variable

Variable	Enabling conditions	Constraining conditions	Key sources
Communication	Strong national political messaging: programme widely known to the public	Uneven transmission of menu, hygiene and reporting standards to regions, kitchens and schools; inconsistent guidance across levels	Nurmansyah & Fitriani (2025); Herman et al. (2026); Herawati & Sunjaya (2022)
Resources	Large central budget allocation; existing school networks	Shortage of trained food handlers and nutritionists; uneven kitchen facilities; delayed fund disbursement; weak data systems	Liguori et al. (2024); Mainje et al. (2024); Taliang et al. (2023); Syafrawati et al. (2023)
Disposition	High commitment of many frontline implementers and teachers	Unclear incentives; limited accountability for partner kitchens; risk of compliance-oriented behaviour	Idris et al. (2023); Moulton & Sandfort (2017); Meher et al. (2023)
Bureaucratic structure	Dedicated national agency with a clear mandate	Incomplete SOPs for food safety; fragmented roles among agency, regional health and education offices and partners	Surendra et al. (2026); Muttaqin et al. (2025); Abadi et al. (2025)

Communication

In the Edwards III model, communication determines whether implementers know what they are expected to do; it depends on accurate transmission, clarity of content and consistency over time. MBG benefits from high political visibility, which has made the programme widely recognised. Visibility, however, is not the same as operational clarity. Nurmansyah and Fitriani (2025) observe that the programme was scaled up before detailed technical guidance had been fully disseminated, leaving regional actors to interpret menu composition, portion standards and reporting obligations in different ways. The experience of the stunting convergence policy shows how such ambiguity plays out: where local officials understood the policy only superficially, coordination collapsed back into the health sector and multisectoral roles were neglected (Herawati & Sunjaya, 2022; Syafrawati et al., 2023). Communication with beneficiaries matters as much as communication within the bureaucracy. Public perceptions shape participation and acceptance of national programmes (Herman et al., 2026), and the critical review by Abadi et al. (2025) emphasises that culturally appropriate menus require dialogue with parents, schools and local food producers, a point echoed in African programmes where community engagement emerged as a key facilitator of implementation (Liguori et al., 2024). For MBG, this implies that communication must move from one-way announcements toward structured, two-way channels that include feedback from schools and communities, especially on food quality and safety complaints.

Resources

Resources encompass staff, funding, facilities, information and authority. MBG is backed by a substantial national budget, but financial allocation does not automatically translate into service capacity at the point of delivery. International evidence consistently identifies food preparation and infrastructure as the most vulnerable links: in sub-Saharan Africa, shortages of trained cooks, delayed payments, inadequate utensils and weak monitoring were among the most frequently reported constraints (Liguori et al., 2024), and programme sustainability depended on predictable financing and local supply arrangements (Mainje et al., 2024). Similar pressures are visible in Indonesia, where rapid expansion has required large numbers of meal-preparation units to operate within months. The productivity of such units depends heavily on the adequacy of operational equipment and working tools (Taliang et al., 2023), so variations in kitchen facilities, cold storage and transport directly affect food quality. Information resources are equally important. District experience with stunting programmes shows that unreliable data on target groups and service coverage weaken planning and monitoring (Syafrawati et al., 2023). Without an integrated information

system that tracks beneficiaries, menus, suppliers and incidents, the national agency cannot detect problems early or allocate resources where they are most needed, a gap that is especially costly given the multiple, interacting determinants of child undernutrition in Indonesia (Beal et al., 2018). The evidence also cautions against equating coverage with impact: school feeding produces educational and nutritional gains only when meals are delivered consistently and meet quality standards (Wang et al., 2021).

Disposition

Disposition refers to the attitudes and commitment of implementers, together with the incentives that sustain them. The literature suggests that many MBG implementers, including teachers, kitchen workers and local officials, are motivated by the programme's social purpose. Commitment of this kind is a recognised asset; studies of frontline government representatives show that motivation, training and clear role expectations strongly influence performance in large-scale public tasks (Idris et al., 2023). Yet commitment can erode when workloads rise without matching incentives or recognition, a pattern also observed among district implementers of stunting programmes (Syafrawati et al., 2023). MBG adds daily distribution, supervision, and reporting duties to schools that already carry heavy administrative burdens. Implementation research reminds us that outcomes are produced by actors who interpret policy through their own interests and constraints, which may diverge from central intentions (Moulton & Sandfort, 2017). In partner kitchens operated by foundations or private providers, the dominant incentive may be to meet volume and cost targets rather than quality and safety standards. Earlier Indonesian experience shows that locally driven nutrition interventions lost effectiveness when commitment was not supported by sustained accountability (Herawati & Sunjaya, 2022; Meher et al., 2023). Strengthening disposition therefore requires performance-linked incentives, transparent sanctions for negligence, and recognition for units that meet hygiene and nutrition benchmarks.

Bureaucratic structure

Bureaucratic structure concerns standard operating procedures and the degree of fragmentation in responsibilities. MBG's institutional design is unusual: a newly created national agency directs a network of meal-preparation units, many run by partner organisations, while regional health, education and food-safety offices retain related but separate mandates. This arrangement allows rapid expansion, but it also disperses accountability across actors with different mandates and interests (Moulton & Sandfort, 2017; Nurmansyah & Fitriani, 2025). The food-poisoning outbreaks documented by Surendra et al. (2026) indicate that hazard analysis, inspection and outbreak response have not been embedded firmly in daily operating procedures, and that the division of responsibility between the agency and regional health authorities remains unclear. Reliance on partner organisations raises a further structural risk. Market-oriented delivery models associated with New Public Management can reproduce existing local power relations, allowing well-connected actors to capture contracts and resources (Muttaqin et al., 2025). If partner selection and supervision are not transparent, structural fragmentation may become a channel for rent-seeking rather than efficiency. Comparative evidence suggests that effective programmes combine strong national standards with clearly delegated local roles and community oversight (Abadi et al., 2025; Liguori et al., 2024; Mainje et al., 2024). For MBG, this means codifying food-safety SOPs, defining the supervisory role of regional governments in regulation, and integrating the programme into regional development planning (Herman et al., 2025).

Interaction among the variables

The four variables do not operate in isolation. Weak communication of standards magnifies resource gaps because kitchens do not know which facilities and practices are

mandatory; resource shortages strain implementer disposition; and fragmented structures make it difficult to correct any of these problems quickly. This interdependence explains why food-safety failures have emerged as the most visible symptom of MBG's implementation difficulties: they occur where unclear guidance, inadequate facilities, weak incentives and dispersed accountability meet. The finding is consistent with Edwards III's argument that implementation succeeds only when all four conditions are satisfied simultaneously, and with broader implementation research that treats policy outcomes as the product of interacting actors and institutions (Moulton & Sandfort, 2017; Nurmansyah & Fitriani, 2025). It also extends the model by showing that, in a programme where the core output is food, food-safety governance functions as a cross-cutting condition linking all four variables. Theoretically, this suggests that the Edwards III framework is most useful for MBG when the resource and structure variables explicitly incorporate risk-control systems, rather than treating resources only as money and staff.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals programme is shaped by the joint operation of all four variables in Edwards III's model rather than by any single factor. Communication has generated strong public awareness, but technical standards on menus, hygiene and reporting have not been transmitted clearly and consistently to regions, kitchens and schools. Resources are substantial at the national level, yet shortages of trained food handlers, uneven kitchen facilities, delayed fund flows and weak data systems limit service quality at the point of delivery. The disposition of frontline implementers is generally positive, although it is weakened by heavy workloads, unclear incentives and limited accountability for partner kitchens. The bureaucratic structure, centred on a new national agency and a dispersed network of providers, still lacks binding food-safety procedures and a clear division of supervisory roles with regional governments. The repeated food-poisoning incidents are the most visible result of these combined weaknesses. The programme's success therefore depends on consolidating its implementation architecture before further expansion, through codified safety standards, workforce training, integrated monitoring and transparent partner selection. Because this study relies on secondary sources, future research should use field data from several regions to test these findings and to measure the programme's nutritional and educational effects.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

DD: initiated the research concept, conducted the investigation, gathered empirical evidence, examined the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Policy, and prepared the initial manuscript. MIN: designed the methodological approach, developed the analytical framework based on George C. Edwards III's policy implementation model, and assessed the consistency of the research findings. HH: provided academic guidance, critically evaluated the policy implementation analysis, refined the interpretation of results, and contributed to substantive manuscript revisions. AA: identified and synthesized relevant literature, organized research materials, examined the coherence of arguments, and strengthened the manuscript through critical editing. All authors contributed to the intellectual development of the study, reviewed the completed manuscript, and approved its final version for publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

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