

# The bright side of a “Free Nutritious Meal Program”

The Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program was rolled out on January 6, 2025. Unfortunately, some regions have been noted to be postponing program implementation. The MBG program is intended not only for school students but also expectant and lactating mothers. This program is one of the flagship programs of President Prabowo Subianto and Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka, targeted to commence during the first 100 days of the new administration.

MBG is a small component in the Government’s policy programs, meant to improve the quality of education for the 2045 Golden Generation. Education is one of the crucial aspects to benefit from demographic dividends economically. Demographic dividend or demographic bonus is a concept that refers to a condition when a country has a larger proportion of productive age population compared to non-productive age population (children and the elderly). This condition opens up immense opportunities for economic growth, because of the increasing number of workers who can contribute to development.

According to Adioetomo, S. M. and Pardede, E. L (2018), preparing a quality and economically profitable generation requires four major components: education, health, economic policies to absorb the workforce and governance of public institutions. In terms of education, the free nutritious meal program is seen as the Government’s intervention to enhance nutrition for Indonesian students, improving their ability to grasp lessons effectively.

Nutrition improvement through free nutritious meal programs is not

exclusive to Indonesia. Several countries, including Japan, have successfully implemented such programs. Introduced in 2024, the school meal program in Japanese schools is called *kyushoku*. The program targets 99% of elementary school students and 82% of junior high school students. In practice, the students not only receive lunch, but are also empowered to serve lunch to other students. This assignment helps teach responsibility and respect to students, including the awareness of tidying up the surrounding environment.

In Indonesia, the implementation of the MBG program also engages many parties. As directed by President Prabowo Subianto, the MBG program implementation should involve many elements that drive the economy. One of the highlights is the tender procurement through third-party service providers (vendors). Tender procurement in a partnership cooperation tends to pose more risks and is vulnerable to such irregularities as corruption. Chairman of the Business Competition Supervisory Commission (KPPU) M. Fanshurullah Asa mentioned three main sectors that must be supervised: the digital market, energy security and food security. He stated that MBG operates under the supervision of the food security sector, which requires greater attention, as it involves various businesses.

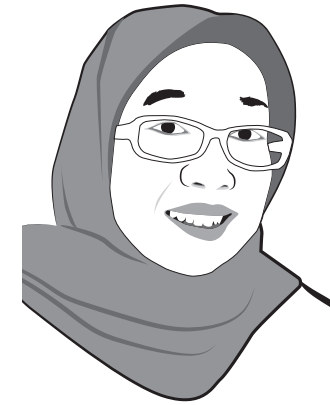
One of the most intensely involved parties in the MBG program is catering services. While the use of catering services can ensure the program effectiveness, some aspects in the implementation must be carefully scrutinized, such as food quality standards, nutritionists’ involve-

ment, kitchen hygiene level, the distance between locations and waste management.

Using catering services for the MBG program certainly has its pluses and minuses. On the positive side, the organizers of the MBG program can increase the economic growth of catering service providers and food suppliers (both directly and indirectly). However, on the negative side, if the catering providers experience problems (such as a lack of standard food containers, delays or operational issues), the program implementation can be disrupted. Therefore, the Government should involve school canteens to ensure the success of the program.

Such cooperation can be a more feasible alternative partnership because it can eliminate such potential problems as transportation. Because the food preparation is conducted by school canteens, the MBG meal packages do not have to be transported from a faraway kitchen to the school. The school canteen involvement is also expected to maintain the nutrition, quality and freshness of the food. Thus, involving school canteens can be a practical solution to address the MBG program challenges, such as food delays, which may result in cold, stale fare.

The MBG program is understood to deliver many positive impacts, particularly for the program recipients and other involved parties. However, the Government as a policy maker must consider alternatives to improve program implementation more effectively and efficiently, as the program is not only aimed at school students, but also at pregnant and breastfeeding mothers.



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The type nutrition needed by the two groups will definitely differ. Therefore, the Government needs to create an effective and comprehensive scheme through the operational level to ensure program effectiveness.

Policy executors must prioritize principles of transparency and accountability, by ensuring that partners (including school canteens to be appointed) have food quality standards and nutritious food menus upon which the Government has agreed. By prioritizing these principles, it is hoped that the quality of the Indonesian 2045 Golden Generation can be upgraded.