

## Analysis of Canteen Vendors' Perceptions and Challenges In The Implementation of The Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program at SMP Negeri 7 Medan

Himalaya Kaiya Dinnata\*<sup>1</sup>, Ahmad Rifqi Muzakki<sup>1</sup>, Syakira Wiranda<sup>1</sup>, Pagit Rimah Maulia<sup>1</sup>, Reviza Putra Syarif<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author: [himalayadinnata@gmail.com](mailto:himalayadinnata@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) is a strategic social policy addressing malnutrition, stunting, and food access disparities among Indonesian students. While framed as a public health and educational intervention, its implementation carries significant socio-economic consequences for school canteen vendors, an actor group often overlooked in policy evaluations. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with purposive sampling, in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, this study examines canteen vendors' perceptions and challenges following MBG implementation at SMP Negeri 7 Medan. Data were analyzed through interactive reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing, with validity ensured via triangulation. Findings reveal polarized vendor perceptions, ranging from critical-negative to adaptive, with some reporting income declines of roughly 50% due to shifting student consumption patterns. Although designed as an economically neutral intervention, MBG functions as a disruptor of local micro-markets, prompting menu diversification and efficiency strategies. Uneven policy socialization further reflects limited stakeholder inclusivity, underscoring the need for more participatory communication

### How to cite:

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of human resources is one of Indonesia's strategic national development priorities, particularly in efforts to create a healthy, intelligent, and productive generation (Hadinata, 2026). One of the key indicators of human resource development is the fulfillment of optimal nutritional needs from school age onward (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025). In this context, the Indonesian government introduced the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) as a social policy intervention aimed at addressing stunting, malnutrition, and disparities in food access among students across different levels of education (Priyono et al., 2025).

The MBG Program should not be understood solely as a public health policy, but also as an instrument of social and economic transformation with broad implications for various actors within the school environment, including canteen vendors (Hermawati et al., 2025). The implementation of this program directly alters students' consumption patterns at school, which previously relied heavily on canteen purchases but are now partly accommodated through meals provided under the government

program. This shift has generated new dynamics within the microeconomic ecosystem of educational institutions.

In its implementation, the MBG policy is expected to improve students' nutritional status while simultaneously supporting the learning process by enhancing concentration and school attendance (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025). Previous studies have shown that school-based nutritious meal interventions can positively affect children's academic performance and health. Nevertheless, the implementation of such policies is also accompanied by structural challenges, including limitations in distribution, infrastructure readiness, and coordination among stakeholders.

At the same time, MBG implementation has created significant economic consequences for school canteen vendors. Vendors who previously served as the primary food providers for students now face substantial changes in levels of demand (Basit & Ramadani, 2025). This situation may lead to declining income, changes in business strategies, and the need to adapt business models in order to survive within a changing school economic environment.

This phenomenon indicates a potential tension between the social welfare objectives of public policy and the economic sustainability of local small-scale business actors operating within schools. From the perspectives of communication studies and public policy, this situation can be understood as a form of policy communication dynamics that may not yet be fully inclusive of all affected stakeholders, particularly canteen vendors as microeconomic actors (Pujiyanto & Solihat, 2026).

In addition, canteen vendors' perceptions of the MBG Program constitute an important aspect of evaluating policy implementation at the micro level. Such perceptions reflect how government policies are received, understood, and interpreted by groups directly affected by them. Negative perceptions may generate resistance, whereas positive perceptions may encourage adaptation and collaboration in program implementation.

SMP Negeri 7 Medan, as one of the educational institutions targeted by the MBG Program, provides a relevant empirical context for examining this phenomenon. Schools function not only as spaces for educational activities but also as socio-economic arenas in which various interests interact, including those of government policy actors, school administrators, students, and canteen vendors (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025).

Within this context, canteen vendors at SMP Negeri 7 Medan have experienced significant changes in their economic activities since the implementation of the MBG Program (Hermawati et al., 2025). These changes are not limited to income-related issues but also include adaptation to the new policy, business survival strategies, and perceptions regarding the program's future sustainability.

Nevertheless, studies examining the impact of MBG implementation from the perspective of canteen vendors remain relatively limited, particularly within the context of policy communication at the school level (Hadinata, 2026). Most previous studies have focused primarily on nutritional, health, and student-related program effectiveness, while the socio-economic dimensions experienced by canteen vendors have received considerably less attention.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the perceptions and challenges faced by canteen vendors in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at SMP Negeri 7 Medan. The study is expected to contribute academically to communication studies, particularly in the area of public policy communication, while also providing practical input for government institutions and schools in formulating policies that are more inclusive and equitable for all affected stakeholders (Priyono et al., 2025).

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the perceptions and challenges faced by canteen vendors in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at SMP Negeri 7 Medan, with the aim of developing an in-depth understanding of the social phenomenon from the perspectives of the research participants (Sugiyono, 2013). The research participants consisted of canteen vendors directly affected by the implementation of the MBG Program and were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in school canteen economic activities (Subakti et al., 2020).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation to obtain a comprehensive understanding of vendors' perceptions, changes in their economic conditions, and the challenges they encountered during program implementation. Data analysis was conducted interactively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing in order to

identify thematic patterns emerging from the findings. The trustworthiness of the data was examined through source and methodological triangulation to strengthen the credibility and consistency of the research findings.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at SMP Negeri 7 Medan has generated diverse perceptions among canteen vendors, ranging from negative and neutral to positive-critical assessments. In general, most informants perceived the program as a policy that directly affected canteen economic activities, particularly through a decline in the number of students purchasing food. This finding suggests that MBG is understood not only as a nutritional intervention but also as a policy that influences the microeconomic structure of the school environment (Hermawati et al., 2025).

Negative perceptions were particularly evident among informants who experienced substantial declines in income. They considered the MBG Program to be insufficiently targeted because some students came from relatively affluent families, meaning that the meals provided were not always consumed and were sometimes wasted. This condition generated criticism regarding the effectiveness of the program and its relevance to local school needs (Rahmah et al., 2025). Some informants also expressed the view that the policy should be more strongly prioritized in areas where food assistance is genuinely needed.

From an economic perspective, the findings reveal a considerable decline in canteen vendors' income. One informant reported that income had decreased by approximately 50% following the implementation of the MBG Program. This decline occurred because students already received free meals through the program, resulting in reduced food purchases from the canteen, particularly during regular meal periods. This condition reinforces the assumption that the MBG policy has direct consequences for the sustainability of school canteen businesses, as has also been reported among micro, small, and medium enterprises operating around other school environments (Maryam et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, not all canteen vendors experienced predominantly negative effects. Some informants reported that buying and selling activities remained relatively stable due to differences in MBG distribution times and variations in students' consumption habits. Some students continued to purchase snacks or beverages from the canteen, particularly those who did not like the MBG menu or chose not to consume it because of personal preferences or parental guidance. This finding indicates the presence of differentiated student consumption patterns that partially sustain canteen economic activities. It is consistent with findings suggesting that the effectiveness of MBG in improving nutrition does not necessarily result in a complete transformation of students' consumption behavior within the school environment (Wiranata et al., 2025).

From the perspective of policy communication, the findings show that the dissemination of information concerning the MBG Program was not conducted uniformly. Some canteen vendors received information through cooperative managers or school administrators, while others first became aware of the program directly from students or through observation when meal distribution began. This inconsistency in communication patterns resulted in varying levels of understanding and preparedness among vendors, which subsequently influenced their ability to adapt to the changes brought about by the program (Pujiyanto & Solihat, 2026).

In response to these changes, canteen vendors adopted several adaptation strategies. These included reducing food inventory, adjusting menus to avoid direct competition with MBG meals, accelerating food preparation in the morning, and strengthening beverage sales as an alternative source of income. These strategies demonstrate the capacity of local actors to respond pragmatically to policy changes in order to maintain business sustainability, as also emphasized in studies examining MBG implementation in relation to nutritional resilience and the sustainability of school-based student ecosystems (Wibisono & Santosa, 2026).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that MBG implementation at SMP Negeri 7 Medan has created complex socio-economic dynamics between the nutritional objectives of the policy and the economic sustainability of canteen vendors. A tension emerges between the benefits of the program for students and its consequences for local business actors. This is consistent with findings indicating that the effectiveness of the MBG policy is strongly influenced by the quality of governance, cross-sectoral coordination, and the program's fiscal sustainability (Hadinata, 2026). From a policy communication perspective, this condition suggests that program implementation has not yet fully incorporated all affected stakeholders. A more participatory approach is therefore needed to achieve a more balanced

and sustainable implementation, particularly in maintaining the program's long-term impacts on health, education, and the local economy simultaneously (Qomarrullah et al., 2025).

**Table 1. Interview Analysis Results**

| No. | Aspect                                  | Main Findings                                                                                                                       | Form of Impact                                                                                 | Tendency                        |
|-----|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1   | Perceptions of the MBG Program          | Perceptions varied: some vendors considered the program beneficial for students, while others viewed it as insufficiently targeted. | The program is perceived as helping students but as less effective in certain school contexts. | Predominantly negative-critical |
| 2   | Economic impact                         | Vendors experienced declining income due to reduced student purchases at the canteen.                                               | Income decreased by up to approximately 50% among some vendors.                                | Negative                        |
| 3   | Changes in student consumption behavior | Students tended to choose meals provided through MBG rather than purchasing food from the canteen.                                  | Purchases of main meals declined, although beverages continued to be purchased.                | Moderate                        |
| 4   | Main challenges                         | Vendors had to compete with free meals provided through the MBG Program.                                                            | Menu adaptation, stock reduction, and product innovation.                                      | High                            |
| 5   | Policy communication                    | Program dissemination was uneven; some vendors learned about MBG only through the school cooperative or students.                   | This resulted in limited initial preparedness among vendors in responding to the changes.      | Moderate                        |
| 6   | Adaptation strategies                   | Vendors adjusted their business practices by changing menus and reducing production.                                                | Business survival efforts through diversification and operational efficiency.                  | Adaptive                        |

The tabulation above demonstrates that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) has generated a range of perceptions among canteen vendors rather than a single uniform response, extending from negative-critical assessments to adaptive responses (Hermawati et al., 2025). In terms of perceptions of the program, an ambivalent assessment is evident. On the one hand, the program is acknowledged as providing nutritional benefits for students; on the other hand, it is perceived as insufficiently targeted because it does not fully account for the specific socio-economic conditions of each school. This ambivalence extends directly to the economic dimension, where income declines of up to approximately 50 percent constitute the most concrete indication that redistributive policies at the macro level may generate significant negative externalities for microeconomic actors operating within the school environment (Maryam et al., 2025). Accordingly, the table highlights a causal relationship between changes in school food policy and the sustainability of informal business units that have long supported the school canteen economy.

In the dimension of changes in student consumption behavior, the "moderate" tendency indicates that substitution resulting from the MBG Program is not total but partial. Students tend to shift their consumption of main meals toward the government-provided program while continuing to purchase beverages and light snacks from the canteen (Wiranata et al., 2025). This pattern helps explain empirically why the economic impact varies across vendors, since the degree to which each business depends on main meals rather than beverages or snacks influences the magnitude of the losses experienced (Basit & Ramadani, 2025). Meanwhile, the main challenge categorized as "high" reflects the fact that competition with state-subsidized free meals creates structural pressure that forces vendors to rapidly reorient their business models rather than merely make incidental adjustments. This condition indicates that MBG, although designed primarily as a nutritional intervention, also functions in practice as a disruptor of the local micro-level market.

The dimensions of policy communication and adaptation strategies presented in the final part of the table also reveal an important relationship within the framework of public policy communication

analysis (Pujiyanto & Solihat, 2026). Uneven dissemination of information, represented by the “moderate” category, appears to have weakened vendors’ preparedness to anticipate changes, causing their adaptation strategies to be more reactive than anticipatory. Nevertheless, the “adaptive” tendency in business adjustment strategies demonstrates the resilience of microeconomic actors in responding to policy disruption through product diversification and operational efficiency. Overall, the six dimensions presented in the table form an interconnected analytical sequence, beginning with initial perceptions, followed by tangible economic impacts, changes in consumer behavior, competitive challenges, weaknesses in policy communication, and adaptive responses. Taken together, these findings indicate that the success of the MBG policy cannot be assessed solely on the basis of students’ nutritional outcomes, but must also take into account the sustainability of the microeconomic ecosystem within schools as an integral component of inclusive policy implementation (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at SMP Negeri 7 Medan has proven to be a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond nutritional and educational concerns, generating tangible socio-economic consequences for canteen vendors as microeconomic actors within the school environment. The polarization of vendors’ perceptions, ranging from negative-critical to adaptive, reflects a structural tension between macro-level redistributive policy and the sustainability of informal businesses that have long supported the school’s economic ecosystem. This tension is indicated by income declines of up to approximately 50 percent as a result of partial shifts in students’ consumption patterns. These findings demonstrate that MBG, although designed primarily as a nutritional intervention, functions in practice as a disruptor of the local market, compelling vendors to reorient their businesses through menu diversification, production efficiency, and the strengthening of alternative product offerings. This situation is further complicated by weaknesses in policy communication, including uneven socialization and limited involvement of canteen vendors, indicating that implementation has not yet been fully inclusive or participatory. Accordingly, the success of MBG should not be assessed solely on the basis of students’ nutritional and academic outcomes, but should also consider the sustainability of the school’s microeconomic ecosystem. A more participatory, transparent, and responsive policy communication model is therefore required to harmonize social welfare objectives with economic fairness for all affected stakeholders.

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