

Research Article

Parents' Expectations on the Emerging Free Nutritious Meal Program in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at how parents perceive Indonesia's newly introduced school feeding program initiative, *Makan Bergizi Gratis* (MBG), or the Free Nutritious Meal Program, with particular attention to how they expect the program to be implemented in practice. Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms to a nationwide sample of parents (n=1,014) between June 25 and July 25, 2024. Parents were asked an open-ended question regarding their expectations of the MBG program, and responses were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Overall, parents placed strong importance on integrating food and nutrition education into school curricula, alongside regular monitoring of central kitchens and the implementation of anti-corruption measures through transparent reporting systems. Another point raised by parents was the need for an accessible monitoring and evaluation mechanism, including public documentation of local ingredient sourcing, annual financial reporting, oversight of hygiene and food safety, routine satisfaction surveys involving students and parents, and regular performance assessments of central kitchen personnel. Overall, the MBG program is viewed with both optimism and caution. Taken together, these findings point to the importance of transparent governance and active collaboration among parents, schools, and program implementers in supporting long-term sustainability, accountability, and improved nutritional outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

School Feeding Programs (SFPs) are widely regarded as strategic interventions for addressing child malnutrition, improving educational outcomes, and supporting long-term human capital development. Existing evidence shows that school meals can reduce short-term hunger, improve dietary intake, and support cognitive performance (Duan *et al.* 2024). Beyond nutritional benefits, well-designed SFPs can support local agriculture, strengthen food systems, and promote food literacy, particularly when integrated with nutrition education (Burkhart *et al.* 2023). In practice, increasing access to nutritious foods in school settings may also influence children's dietary habits over time, especially in large-scale interventions such as *Makan Bergizi Gratis* (MBG).

Indonesia continues to face a triple burden of malnutrition, where undernutrition coexists with rising levels of overweight, obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies (Ayunigtyas *et al.* 2022). These challenges are unevenly distributed, with higher rates of undernutrition in rural and marginalized regions such as Papua, Maluku, and Nusa Tenggara (Yunitasari *et al.* 2020). There is growing evidence that shows the link of stunting with lower academic performance (Dessie *et al.* 2025), further supporting the need for early and sustained nutrition interventions. In response, the Indonesian government launched the MBG program (Free Nutritious Meal Program) in January 2025 under the National Nutrition Agency (*Badan Gizi Nasional* (BGN)). Although this study was conducted prior to the program's implementation, the program has since been rolled out through centralized kitchens (*Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi* (SPPG)),

representing one of the largest recent national investments aimed not only at improving dietary intake but also at reshaping the school food environment.

Existing literature on SFPs has largely concentrated on the nutritional and educational impacts of SFPs, whereas the expectations of stakeholders have received considerably less attention. Parents, as primary caregivers, play an important role in shaping children's dietary practices and can influence trust, acceptability, and long-term sustainability of school feeding initiatives (Accad 2017; de Vries Mecheva *et al.* 2023).

Gaining insight into stakeholder expectations is especially important during the early implementation phase, when public perception can influence program legitimacy and governance accountability. Identifying what parents prioritize may help policymakers align program design with societal concerns, thereby strengthening perceived legitimacy and social sustainability.

This study therefore examines parental expectations regarding the implementation of the MBG program, with a specific focus on its school meal component. By capturing parents' perspectives, this study offers early-stage insights that can inform program design, strengthen alignment with community expectations, and support a sustainable scale-up of MBG within Indonesia's diverse food environment context.

METHODS

Design, location, and time

In order to conduct this study, the method used was a cross-sectional qualitative survey design to explore parental expectations of the emerging program MBG. The data were collected over a one-month period, from June 25 to July 25, 2024, to efficiently capture perspectives within a limited timeframe. At the time of this study, the MBG program had not yet been implemented nationwide, and data were collected from parents prior to program rollout.

This study was done in accordance with established ethical research standards. Ethical approval was obtained from Tokyo University of Agriculture Association for the Promotion of Research Integrity (Approval No. JH0001481913).

Sampling

A non-probability convenience sampling approach was used. A total of 1,014 parents voluntarily completed the online survey. The questionnaire collected information about their children, including grade level. The resulting dataset represents parents of students aged 4 to 18 years, spanning early childhood education through grade 12. The sample includes students enrolled in four types of school: public schools, private schools, public Islamic schools, and private Islamic schools. This diversity allows for comparison of parental expectations across different types of educational settings.

Data collection

Data were collected using a self-administered online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, enabling broad geographic reach across Indonesia. The survey consisted of one open-ended question: "*What do you expect from the MBG program?*", and demographic questions, including child's gender, grade level, school type, and geographic location. The questionnaire was pre-tested to ensure clarity and consistent interpretation with a brief description of the MBG program prior to answering. Prior research suggests that online qualitative methods can effectively capture nuanced participant perspectives and generate meaningful themes (Opara *et al.* 2021).

Data analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted following the approach outlined by Xu and Zammit (2020). The analysis proceeded through six stages, which includes data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme refinement, theme definition, and report production. All open-ended responses were read iteratively to ensure familiarity with the dataset and to identify initial patterns. Participant quotations are identified by anonymized codes (e.g., Parent95, Bali), where the number indicates the respondent's chronological position in the Google Forms dataset and the location denotes their residence. This system ensures participant confidentiality while allowing individual voices to be distinguished.

Initial coding was conducted by the first author using Microsoft Excel to systematically organize responses and assign descriptive codes that closely reflected participants' original

wording (subthemes). These subthemes were then grouped into a broader interpretive category (themes) by identifying conceptual similarities across codes. The use of direct quotation with participant identifiers further supports transparency and traceability of interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 1,014 participants representing 63 cities across Indonesia participated in this study. The sample distribution was uneven, with most responses coming from West Java. Participants were distributed across provinces as follows: West Java (n=670), Bali (n=81), East Java (n=38), Banten (n=30), East Kalimantan (n=30), Aceh (n=26), DKI Jakarta (n=26), Riau (n=16), Bangka Belitung Islands (n=14), DI Yogyakarta (n=14), Lampung (n=14), West Kalimantan (n=13), Bengkulu (n=9), North Sulawesi (n=7), Central Sulawesi (n=5), Central Java (n=4), North Sumatra (n=4), South Kalimantan (n=4), Maluku (n=3), West Sumatra (n=2), and East Nusa Tenggara (n=1), South Sulawesi (n=1), South Sumatra (n=1), and West Nusa Tenggara (n=1). Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

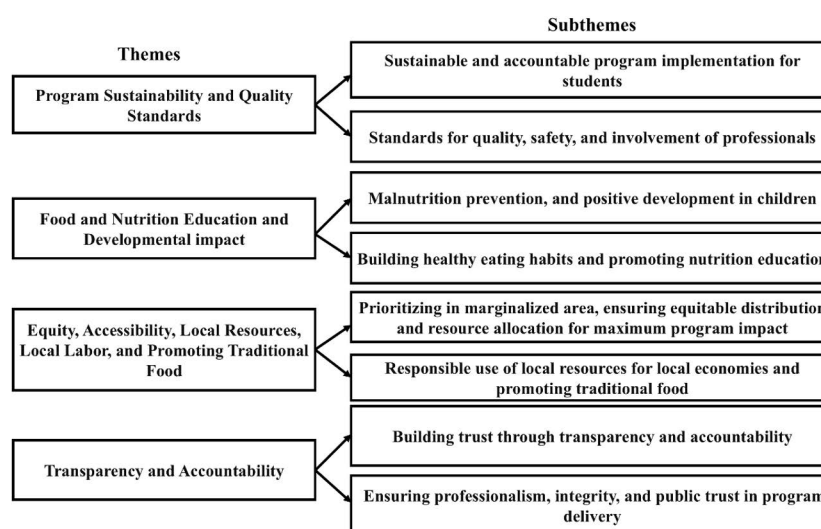
The thematic analysis produced eight subthemes, which were later grouped into four broader themes (Figure 1). Together, these themes reflect the main dimensions of parental expectations toward the MBG program.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants

Category	n=1,014 n (%)
Child Gender	
Male	548 (54.0)
Female	466 (46.0)
Child Grade level	
Kindergarten	154 (15.2)
Primary School (Grades 1–6)	731 (72.1)
Junior Secondary School (Grades 7–9)	75 (7.4)
Senior Secondary School (Grades 10–12)	54 (5.3)
School type	
Public	562 (55.4)
Private	214 (21.1)
Private Islamic	86 (8.5)
Public Islamic	152 (15.0)

Theme 1 - Program sustainability and quality standards

The first subtheme is reflected in 154 responses that is related to expectations for a program that is reliable, well structured, and sustainable over time. Many parents stressed on the issue of long-term continuity, often expressing concern about whether the program would be implemented consistently. Here, sustainability was not only understood as the duration, but



Source: Adapted from Seko *et al.* (2026)

Figure 1. Data structure illustrating the themes and subthemes

also as institutional stability that would not be disrupted by political change. As one parent explained:

"It has to be sustainable, consistent, directed professionally, and continue from here and forward in Indonesia. Even if the president changes, the program still continues." (Parent95, Bali).

Similarly, another example highlighted the need for operational preparedness:

"To keep things sustainable, it's important to have regular monitoring and evaluation of how the program is being carried out. To make sure everything runs smoothly, all of the necessary elements should be well-prepared, such as proper kitchen utensils, and other supporting factors." (Parent775, DI Yogyakarta).

Lim *et al.* (2024) argued that sustainable school feeding programs require integrated governance, context-specific procurement strategies, and alignment between nutrition goals and local supply systems which aligns with these findings.

The next subtheme was standards for quality, safety, and professional involvement with a total of 49 similar response. Parents also stressed the importance of strict food quality and safety standards to prevent adverse health outcomes. Respondents highlighted the need to involve qualified professionals, such as nutritionists, food safety experts, and healthcare professionals to design, prepare, and monitor meals, ensuring the program meets high professional standards. From these responses, it appears that parents closely link child health outcomes with the consistency and quality of implementation. One response illustrates this:

"Food handlers, cook, and other staff should be properly trained and work in a professional manner. The kitchen needs to be clean and follows a clear standard operating procedure. The food provided should meet high standards in terms of nutrition, ingredient quality, and overall handling, with strong attention to hygiene at every stage. Meals should be safe to consume and do not cause any issue such as food poisoning or allergic reactions" (Parent722, Bogor).

Another example is:

"I hope that the program lives up to its name by providing meals that are nutritious and is aligned with recommendations from the dietitian and experts. The program should also be managed transparently and professionally,

with the involvement of qualified experts and regular monitoring." (Parent791, Gresik).

Similar findings have been observed in other school feeding settings, where adherence to strict hygiene and high nutritional standards contributes to building public trust and ensuring the program delivers its expected health benefits (Bigson *et al.* 2020). Parents further emphasized the importance of involving nutritionists, healthcare professionals, and quality control personnel that shows a strong desire for institutional accountability and professional competence in food preparation and delivery.

Theme 2 - Food and nutrition education and developmental impact

The subtheme emerged were promoting health, preventing malnutrition, and fostering positive child development with a total response of 198. This theme shows that parents expect the program to contribute not only to immediate nutritional needs, but also to broader aspects of child development. In addition to addressing short-term nutritional needs, parent expect the program to help prevent malnutrition and support both physical and cognitive development. This is also reflected in responses such as:

"For students that have not eaten breakfast in the morning, this program would be beneficial so that they have good nutrition intake. Also, those that come from a low-income family, this is a good program to make Indonesian children to be able to focus learning in school, smart, healthy, and have a good body immune." (Parent5, Aceh).

Parents also emphasized the integration of nutrition education alongside meal provision:

"I hope the program doesn't just provide melas, but also includes nutrition education to support children's understanding of healthy eating." (Parent99, Bali).

Another subtheme, reflected in 186 responses, relates to building healthy eating habits and strengthening nutrition education. Several parents described the program more as an opportunity to shape children's dietary habits over time, suggesting that exposure to balanced meals at school could influence eating patterns at home. As one parent noted:

"This program is very good not only for the children, but also for inspiring parents to provide nutritious food. Because when their children eat nutritious food at school, eventually parents will

also pick up these good habits and bring them into their homes.” (Parent794, Gresik).

Another example is:

“To ensure that children receive nutritious and healthy meals, the program can help parents who may be facing financial difficulties or have limited time due to busy schedules. In this way, parents can feel more at ease knowing that their children’s nutritional needs are still being properly met.” (Parent417, Bogor).

From the responses above, parents view the program as more than food provision for their children, but the program could also provide indirect effects on household dietary practices for students and parents to better understand about nutrition. This perception aligns with previous literature that suggests school feeding initiatives could contribute to nutrition education and long-term dietary behavior change stated by Burkhart *et al.* (2023). It was also stated by Wang and Fawzi (2020) that school feeding initiatives could influence health and educational outcomes of children across low and middle-income countries.

Theme 3 - Equity, accessibility, local resources, local labor, and promoting traditional food

The subtheme emerged was prioritizing marginalized areas while ensuring equitable distribution and allocation of resources to maximize program impact, with a total of 182 responses. Many responses pointed to the importance of prioritizing underprivileged areas, particularly regions classified as 3T (frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged) to ensure that children in marginalized communities receive the program's benefits. At the same time, there was also concern about how fairly resources would be distributed across regions. Equitable access, especially in the marginalized and rural areas, emerged as a central concern. Equitable implementation called for prioritizing marginalized and 3T regions, represented by a participant response:

“Priority should be given to marginalized and 3T regions, while ensuring that all food provided through the program meets high-quality standards and ensuring that program financing does not compromise existing education sector budget.” (Parent910, Sidoarjo).

A similar response by another participant was:

“Just implement it in the 3T regions so they feel that the government cares about them.” (Parent13, Aceh).

Previous studies indicate that prioritizing underprivileged regions can enhance program effectiveness while reducing regional disparities (Bundy *et al.* 2018). Oktaviani *et al.* (2023) informed that child undernutrition in Indonesia is significantly more prevalent in rural and marginalized areas.

Parents also encouraged the use of locally sourced ingredients to support local farmers and regional economies, known as local production for local consumption, as shown in the subtheme of responsible use of local resources for local economies and in promoting traditional food, with a total of 44 similar responses. Parents also stated that it is crucial to incorporate traditional foods into the meal plans in order to foster cultural pride while also promoting sustainable practices that could benefit local communities. Similarly, another parent noted:

“I think the program should make use of local ingredients and involve local people. It could really help the economy and create jobs, especially in agriculture. But it needs to be handled carefully and by the right people so that the budget is not misused.” (Parent871, Medan).

Some respondents also encouraged incorporating traditional foods to promote local familiarity:

“The program should be implemented immediately after the president is inaugurated, so that Indonesian children can be healthy and become familiar with traditional food that is made by using local ingredients in each area.”- (Parent684, Bogor).

From Jahroh and Meliala (2021) it was stated that the use of local products can strengthen linkages between institutional demand and local producers, potentially increasing farmers' income.

Theme 4 - Transparency and accountability

This theme was generated from the subtheme of building trust through transparency and accountability, with a total of 133 responses. This theme highlights the importance of transparency in program implementation, particularly in budgeting, operations, and reporting. Many parents pointed out that without regular reporting and community involvement would be critical for building trust and ensuring accountability. As one parent put it:

“I feel sceptical about the program, even though I support the idea. I worry that there could

be corruption from the government or others involved in running it.” (Parent997, Tangerang).

Another example is:

“I still have questions about how the program will be implemented in practice, including who will handle the cooking, how food safety will be managed, and the sources of ingredients. These uncertainties make me somewhat sceptical about the program.” (Parent876, Padang).

Jamilah *et al.* (2019) emphasize the importance of clearly defined stakeholder management strategies in organizational settings. Concerns about corruption, mismanagement came up repeatedly, and unequal distribution highlight the importance of transparency and accountability for program acceptance.

With a total of 68 responses, the next subtheme centers on ensuring professionalism, integrity, and public trust in program implementation. The findings indicate that parents place considerable importance on ethical and professional standards program management. This includes employing qualified personnel, following established practices, and ensuring consistent delivery without corruption or negligence. An example of this perspective can be seen in the following response:

“I hope the program is implemented properly and achieves its intended goals, without corruption or misuse by those in charge. Those responsible should carry out their duties with integrity.” (Parent873, Medan).

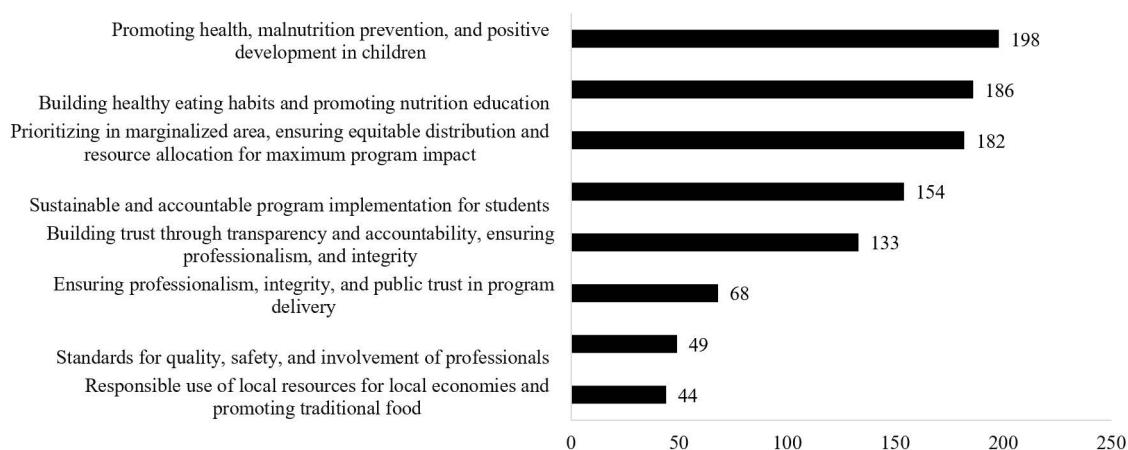
Another example is:

“Please provide a nutritionist, a pediatrician that is involved with the program. It is also necessary to pay attention to good budget management, right on target, carried out by competent people, ensuring that the food ingredients are of good quality, not just complete in terms of the menu. Processed in a clean kitchen environment and implement HACCP.”- (Parent735, Bogor).

Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) is designed to reduce the risk of foodborne illness by identifying and controlling critical points during food preparation (Suryani *et al.* 2019). Implementation of HACCP food safety practices imply a better hygiene practice that would create parents’ trust.

Collectively, these four themes reflect the varied expectations parents have for the MBG program. Taken together, the findings suggest that sustainability of the MBG program depends on quality standards, effective governance, fair and transparent program management, and the meaningful integration of food and nutrition education within the program. The thematic distribution and response frequencies are presented in Figure 2.

While this study offers useful insights into parental expectations, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on parents’ responses, which may introduce social desirability and bias. Second, the survey was conducted online and required internet access which may have excluded some rural or lower-income households. Third, the thematic analysis



X: Number of parent respondents mentioning each subtheme (n)

Figure 2. Subthemes of parents' expectation towards the MBG program

relied on survey responses rather than in-depth interviews or focus group discussions, which may lack the rich contextual understanding that qualitative research could provide regarding parental experiences. Fourth, the study employed a convenience sampling approach, with a concentration of participants from Java Island; therefore, the findings may not be fully representative of all regions of Indonesia.

Lastly, as the data were collected in 2024 prior to the launch of MBG, parents' expectations were shaped primarily by their initial impressions and information available from news reports they might have seen, and limited direct experience with the program. Despite these limitations, the study offers important baseline evidence that remains relevant and can inform ongoing program adaptation and implementation. Such insights may help strengthen community acceptance, and support the long-term sustainability of MBG during its ongoing adaptation and national scale-up.

CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that parents expect the program to go beyond meal provision. Instead, they tend to view it as part of a broader system that requires transparent governance, equitable access, and consistent oversight. Trust and stakeholder participation emerged as key considerations, with parents emphasizing the need for careful and inclusive planning. These expectations suggest that aligning program design with parental concerns may strengthen public trust and improve perceived legitimacy and social sustainability.

Considering the scale of the national investment devoted to MBG, parents highlight the need for transparent and clear monitoring systems, accessible reporting mechanisms, prioritizing and giving greater attention to disadvantaged areas, and to incorporate nutrition education into the program. They also stressed that food handlers should receive ongoing professional training to ensure that food safety, quality, hygiene, and ethical standards are consistently maintained. Future studies could explore how these expectations evolve over time as the program matures and assess the influence of governance quality and regional differences on program implementation and how it affects the outcome of the program.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or writing of the manuscript.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors did not use generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the writing, or editing of this manuscript. The authors are solely responsible for the content of this work.

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