



Challenges in Implementing the Free Nutritious Meals Policy: A Case Study of State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi, Bandung Regency

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Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meals Policy is a key initiative on the part of the central government to support the fulfillment of nutritional quality and education for students. The objective of this study is to assess the extent of the challenges encountered in implementing the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) policy at Sekolah Menengah Pertama Negeri 5 Cileunyi, Bandung Regency, employing the policy implementation model developed by Van Meter and Van Horn (1975). The present study employs a case study method with a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis as primary data sources from various stakeholders, including the school principal, teachers, students, and parents. The findings of this study suggest that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals policy is confronted with numerous challenges, including the absence of technical guidelines, inadequate human resources, and inadequate coordination among institutions. Teachers are performing an increasing number of tasks without adequate training, and their high workloads are beginning to affect the quality of the teaching and learning process. The exchange of information among institutions is characterized by inefficiency and a tendency towards unilateral communication. Despite the optimistic outlook of the implementers, the operational pressures they face have the potential to diminish their long-term motivation. The Free Nutritious Meals policy has been shown to have positive effects on student attendance and breakfast habits; however, its impact on family spending remains to be seen. The findings of this study suggest the necessity for enhancements in the implementation system, augmented communication, training for implementers, and routine evaluations to ensure the policy operates at its optimal capacity. This study underscores the importance of local adaptation in the implementation of public policies based on real needs.

Keywords: Public Policy, Free Nutritious Meals, State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of human resources is one of the important aspects in national character building. One of the measures implemented to support this is by ensuring adequate and balanced nutrition for students. As a concrete implementation of government policy, the Free Nutritious Meal Program was officially launched. This initiative is one of the flagship programs of President Prabowo Subianto Joyohadikusumo's leadership, designed to address malnutrition issues while improving human resource quality in Indonesia, particularly for students and children of school age (Kiftiyah et al., 2025). The Free



Nutritious Meal Program was officially implemented in 26 provinces on January 6, 2025. In the initial phase of this policy, it provided benefits to 3 million recipients, including kindergarten students, elementary school students, junior high school students, senior high school students, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers. It is planned that by July next year, the free nutritious meal policy will reach 17.5 million beneficiaries across 38 provinces (CISDI, 2025).

Table 1. Target Beneficiaries of the Free Nutritious Meal Program 2025

Implementation Period	Estimated Number of Beneficiaries	Number of Nutrition Service Delivery Points
Januari – Februari 2025	± 3.000.000 people	937 location
April 2025	± 6.000.000 people	2000 location
Juli 2025	± 17.500.000 people	5000 location

Source: (National Nutrition Agency, 2025)

The current situation highlights the urgency of a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the free nutritious meals policy in schools to achieve the desired objectives. Despite its noble goals, the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program in Indonesia continues to face various challenges (Fatimah et al., 2024). However, it is important to note that there will always be major challenges in implementing the Free Nutritious Meals policy.

Previous research findings according to (Hasibuan et al., 2025) indicate that the Free Nutritious Meals program plays a positive role in enhancing motivation and focus in learning among students at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi. Providing nutritious meals twice a day is confirmed to support students' cognitive abilities and attendance, as well as create an optimal learning environment. However, the implementation of this program still faces several challenges, such as food management, what students receive in the provided menu, and the lack of structured evaluation. This finding underscores the importance of continuous evaluation, stakeholder participation, and improved management as key factors for the success of the Free Nutritious Meal Program, particularly in its implementation at the junior high school level at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi. Based on the background outlined, the researcher assesses that the implementation of public policy, particularly the Free Nutritious Meal Program, requires a responsive approach to social issues and institutional readiness in education. This program is not only focused on food provision but also serves as a policy tool to improve the quality of education and health of students. In this context, schools play a central role as intermediaries in bridging policy objectives with the actual needs of students on the ground.

The legal basis for the Free Nutritious Meals Program includes Law No. 17 of 2023 on health, which aims to achieve optimal nutritional quality for both individuals and communities throughout the entire life cycle. In the framework of developing high-value human potential, the President has issued Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024 on the National Nutrition Agency. The establishment of the National Nutrition Agency is a government initiative to address malnutrition at the national level, prioritizing vulnerable populations prone to illness. Based on this, it is necessary to assess the extent to which the challenges of implementing the Free Nutritious Meal Program at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi have been addressed. Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) formulated one of the classic theories in the study of public policy implementation. They emphasized that implementation is not an automatic process but rather the result of dynamic interactions between policy, implementers, and external context. In the model they developed, there are six interrelated main components:

1. Policy Standards and Objectives. Refers to the clarity and accuracy of policy objectives, and the extent to which implementers understand and support these objectives.
2. Resources. Includes the budget, manpower, equipment, and time needed to ensure that policy implementation can run optimally.
3. Characteristics of the Implementing Organization. Related to the capabilities, internal structure, work systems of the implementing organization, and patterns of relationships between individuals



or units within it.

4. Inter-Organizational Communication. Emphasizing the importance of open, accurate, and timely information exchange among various stakeholders involved in implementing the policy.
5. Disposition or Attitude of Implementers. Refers to the views, motivations, and level of commitment of implementers to the policies they carry out.
6. Social, Economic, and Political Environment. Covers external conditions that can influence the implementation process, such as cultural values, pressure from interested parties, and the socio-economic situation of the surrounding community.

Therefore, to explore the obstacles in the implementation of the free nutritious meal program at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi, this article adapts Van Meter and Van Horn's (1975) theoretical approach to evaluate the extent to which the six main components of the policy implementation model play their roles. Given that the Free Nutritious Meal initiative is a crucial government initiative to improve the nutritional status and quality of education for students, this study is relevant for identifying various operational-level barriers, enabling similar policies to be implemented more effectively and consistently in other regions. The purpose of this study is to examine the extent of the challenges in implementing the Free Nutritious Meals policy at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi, Bandung Regency.

2. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals policy at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi, particularly in identifying the various challenges that arise during the implementation process. This approach was chosen because it can describe social phenomena naturally, contextually, and comprehensively through the actual situation at the location (Matthew et al., 2014). This type of research is a case study, which is a method that focuses on an intensive analysis of a specific case that is considered to represent real public policy issues. In this case, State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi was selected as the case unit because it was one of the schools that directly received the Nutritious Meal Program at the initial stage of implementation. The case study allows researchers to gather data from various perspectives, including from policy implementers (school principals and teachers), beneficiaries (students), and other relevant parties (parents).

The research was conducted at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi, Bandung Regency, West Java. The research subjects included:

1. The principal as the main person responsible for policy implementation at the school.
2. Teachers appointed as the daily technical managers of the Free Nutritious Meals program.
3. Students as the direct beneficiaries of the policy.
4. Parents of students to obtain perspectives from the household side.

The researcher applied the following data collection techniques:

1. In-depth Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with flexible guiding questions to allow informants to openly share their experiences, opinions, and concerns. Interviews were conducted with the school principal, responsible teachers, several students from various economic backgrounds, and parents. This technique was useful for exploring subjective meanings and social dynamics that emerged during policy implementation.
2. Participatory Observation. Researchers conducted direct observations at the location of the Free Nutritious Meal program at the school, from the arrival of the food, the distribution process, the students' meal sessions, to the reporting process by teachers. This observation aimed to observe how the policy was implemented in practice, as well as to document any obstacles or improvisations made by field implementers.
3. Documentation Study. Documentary data such as implementation circulars, daily reports sent to the



implementation group, and visual documentation (photos and videos) were obtained and analyzed to complement the results of interviews and observations.

The data analysis techniques obtained were examined by applying the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2019), which consists of three main steps:

1. **Data Reduction.** Selecting, summarizing, and simplifying raw data into key components aligned with the research focus, particularly the implementation challenges within the seven variables of the Van Meter and Van Horn model.
2. **Data Presentation.** The reduced data is then organized into narrative and table formats for easier reading and understanding. This presentation is tailored to the seven implementation indicators.
3. **Drawing Conclusions and Verification.** The researcher explains the data that has been presented, compiles preliminary findings, and then verifies them again with field data to ensure their validity.

According to John W. Creswell (2018), at the data validation stage, researchers use source and method triangulation. This triangulation is done by comparing information from various types of informants and data collection techniques, such as comparing teachers' statements with direct observations, or matching interview results with available documents. Additionally, member checks are conducted by confirming initial interpretations with several key informants.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi is part of a national policy aimed at improving the nutritional quality of students, particularly those from low-income families. However, the implementation of this policy at the school level reveals various challenges that cannot be ignored. Although the program is generally well-received by schools and the community, the reality on the ground is far from ideal and leaves several issues unresolved, both from a technical, managerial, and resource perspective.

Schools, as the primary implementers, face a situation where policies from above are not accompanied by comprehensive technical guidelines or adequate resource support (Herawati et al. 2024). Teachers must take on the role of technical implementers without specialized training, minimal supporting facilities, and inter-institutional coordination that has not yet been optimized. This results in additional burdens for teachers and the potential disruption of the teaching and learning process. Additionally, food distribution that does not always meet expectations, lack of information regarding menu standards, and unstructured communication pose further obstacles in the implementation of this program.

To gain a deeper understanding of how this policy is implemented and the factors influencing its success, the analysis in this section employs the policy implementation model developed by Van Meter and Van Horn. This model emphasizes that policy implementation is influenced by six key variables: policy standards and objectives, resources, characteristics of the implementing organization, inter-organizational communication, the disposition or attitude of implementers, and the social, economic, and political environment.

Using this model as an analytical tool, the following discussion will outline how each of these variables emerged in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals program at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi, based on in-depth interviews with the school principal, teachers, students, and parents. Through this approach, the challenges faced by the school can be mapped more systematically.



1. Policy Standards and Objectives

The objective of the Free Nutritious Meals program at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi is fundamentally understood by implementers as an effort to improve students' nutritional quality. The principal stated:

"In my opinion, the primary objective of the free nutritious meal program is to support children's growth and health, particularly through the provision of meals that meet their nutritional needs."

However, the implementation standards for this policy have not been fully adopted by the school. The principal revealed that the policy was not directly communicated by the Education Office:

"We first learned about this program through media reports, not directly from the Education Office. Later, there were visits from the Military District Command and the Police Station to record the number of students."

Technical implementation standards such as meal schedules, types of food, distribution processes, and reporting procedures were also not explained in detail from the outset. The responsible teacher stated:

"I was suddenly appointed as the responsible party and asked to collect student data, including allergies. There was no prior training or technical explanation."

This indicates that, in addition to a clear objective, operational standards for policy implementation have not been systematically developed and disseminated, forcing field implementers to adapt through improvisation.

2. Resources

The availability of resources is one of the main challenges in implementing the Free Nutritious Meals policy. The principal said that the food supply is always sufficient for the number of students:

"Thank God, so far the food has always been sufficient for the number of students, and often even more."

However, implementers need not only food, but also human resources and supporting facilities. The teacher in charge explained:

"We are not given additional staff. Teachers have to distribute food, manage queues, and report daily. Not to mention technical issues like failed journal uploads."

"Ideally, there should be a dedicated staff member from the Nutrition Supply Unit (SPPG). This is already like a full-time additional job."

In addition to staff, devices for documentation such as cameras, gadgets, or internet quotas are also not provided:

"For photos, videos, and implementation journals, we all use our personal phones. We even have to edit and upload them daily to the Nutrition Service Unit (SPPG) and Koramil group."

The lack of resources makes the implementation of the policy at the school burdensome and risks disrupting teachers' primary duties in the teaching-learning process.

3. Characteristics of the Implementing Organization

The organizational structure for implementing the Free Nutritious Meals Policy at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi is entirely internal, with no field staff from the Nutrition Service Unit (SPPG). The school principal stated:



"The implementing structure consists entirely of teachers. The Nutrition Service Unit (SPPG) only delivers the food. Teachers collect, record, distribute, and report."

The responsible teacher outlined the daily activity flow:

"Every day, the food arrives at 8:00 AM, divided into two meal sessions, then the utensils are collected again at 2:00 PM. We also taste the food before the students eat it, as a precaution."

"If there is excess food, we return it. If there are complaints from students, we immediately contact the Nutrition Service Unit (SPPG) or the Military District Command (Koramil)."

The lack of training, unclear task distribution, and insufficient technical personnel from external parties indicate the weak organizational characteristics of the policy implementation body.

4. Inter-Organizational Communication

Inter-institutional communication in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program takes place, but it is one-sided, unsystematic, and often leads to miscommunication. Teachers report:

"Sometimes milk is scheduled for Monday and Friday, then changed to Wednesday and Friday. There is no official notification. We have to adjust quickly."

"We send reports to the Nutrition Service Unit (SPPG) and the Military District Command (Koramil) every day, but there is rarely any feedback. If there are problems such as spoiled food, only then do they respond."

The school principal also emphasized:

"The Education Office never directly intervenes or coordinates technically. Only the Nutrition Service Unit (SPPG) and the Military District Command (Koramil) do so regularly."

Evaluations of implementation are only conducted when problems arise, not on a regular basis. This hinders the process of continuous improvement.

5. Disposition or Attitude of Implementers

Policy implementers at schools generally support the program in principle, but face pressure and fatigue due to technical burdens. The responsible teacher stated:

"I strongly support this program because many students need it. But our tasks are too numerous. Imagine, we have to manage 730 students eating, then report daily."

"We have to remind students to bring their eating utensils, ensure they eat, check for allergies, report, and continue teaching. This is extremely exhausting."

Although their attitude is positive, this support is not balanced with a proportional system and workload, risking a decline in motivation over the long term.

6. Social, Economic, and Political Environment

The socio-economic conditions of the students provide strong justification for the importance of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. The school principal explained:

"Many students from low-income families are greatly helped. Some ask for extra food for their younger siblings."



However, parents stated that:

"The children are still given pocket money because they are still hungry after school. So, expenses haven't changed much."

From a political perspective, although there is no direct pressure, implementers are aware that this program has a political dimension as a flagship policy of the central government:

"Since this is a presidential program, we feel we must implement it well. But the technical burden is all on the school."

Social acceptance of the program is quite high, but it has not yet fully impacted families economically.

Challenges and Impact

Based on the interview results, there are several major challenges in implementing the Free Nutritious Meals program, including:

- Lack of external implementation staff
- Doubled workload for teachers
- Insufficient documentation facilities
- Disruption to students' learning hours
- Unclear standards for menu items and portion sizes
- Miscommunication in distribution schedules
- Lack of technical training
- Lack of evaluation and feedback from organizers

The teacher in charge described:

"The program can take up to two class hours. Students are divided into two sessions, but it still disrupts lessons. Sometimes students eat in class using plastic mats."

"If there is stale food or rotten fruit, we have to report it immediately and keep it as evidence. But still, sometimes it happens again."

Despite this, positive impacts are still felt. The Student Council President stated:

"I've gotten used to having breakfast at school. This boosts my motivation to study."

Parents also shared:

"We see that the children are happy. However, the quality of the food is sometimes inconsistent. We hope the food becomes more practical and better suited to the children's tastes."

Overall, the program brings benefits, but it still faces various technical and structural challenges that need to be addressed to improve its effectiveness and efficiency.

A total of 730 students from grades 7 to 9 at SMPN Cileunyi have been designated as beneficiaries of this free nutritious meal program. The inaugural implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program at SMPN 5 Cileunyi in February 2025, as explained by Endin Muslihin, S.Pd., M.Pd, the school principal at SMPN 5 Cileunyi, stated that the primary objective of the Free Nutritious Meal Policy is to support students' development and health by providing meals that meet their nutritional needs. Although this program has many benefits, its implementation is not without challenges. The Free Nutritious Meal Program implementation committee revealed that there are several significant challenges associated with the policy. It can be explained that in implementing this policy, the school did not receive direct technical information from the policy implementers, and the absence of official guidelines and



systematization created obstacles for the school, particularly the teachers, in implementing the policy. The lack of training or technical guidance indicates weak planning in terms of information dissemination. Additionally, the limited number of staff members has burdened teachers who serve as program implementers, as they must fulfill both educational and technical roles at the State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi. Inter-institutional communication often leads to misunderstandings, particularly regarding meal schedules. Additionally, the implementation process disrupts class hours, and inconsistent food quality makes the policy's implementation a significant challenge. Although the program continues to show positive attitudes among students, who feel direct benefits such as increased motivation to learn and better budgeting, these challenges highlight the need for improvements to ensure the policy runs smoothly.

The Free Nutritious Meal Program staff at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi offered several suggestions to improve the quality of the Free Nutritious Meal Program implementation. First, they emphasized the need for regular socialization to avoid misunderstandings in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Second, the provision of staff to allow educators to remain focused on their primary duty of teaching. To address the various challenges identified in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi, systematic improvements are needed. To ensure the policy's relevance to on-the-ground conditions and the consistency of implementation with established objectives.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Policy at State Junior High School 5 Cileunyi, Bandung Regency, provides a concrete illustration of the dynamics of public policy implementation at the school level. This study highlights that while the Free Nutritious Meal Policy has noble objectives to improve nutritional quality and support students' learning processes, its implementation on the ground still faces serious challenges, both from structural, resource, and inter-institutional communication perspectives. Using the Van Meter and Van Horn model approach, this research successfully identified seven key aspects in policy implementation that are critical to its success, namely: clarity of policy standards and objectives, resources, characteristics of implementing organizations, inter-institutional communication, implementers' dispositions, and the social, economic, and political environment.

First, the operational standards for the Free Nutritious Meals policy have not been adequately disseminated. Schools have not received official technical guidance from the government, and most of the initial information has been obtained through the mass media. The lack of detailed guidelines means that those implementing the program in schools, especially teachers, have to rely on improvisation in carrying out their duties. Second, limited resources are a major obstacle. Teachers are not only responsible for teaching but also for managing the entire implementation process of the Free Nutritious Meals program, from receiving, distributing, to documenting the students' meal process. The increased workload without compensation or additional assistance from outside the school has the potential to reduce the quality of learning and the motivation of implementers. Third, the organizational structure of implementers in schools does not support the efficient implementation of the program. The absence of dedicated staff from the organizers means that teachers are the only ones managing all technical aspects in the field. Food distribution activities even disrupt students' learning schedules. Fourth, communication between schools and policy organizers such as the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG) and the Military District Command (Koramil) tends to be one-way and inconsistent. Changes in schedules and menus often occur without official notification, leading to miscommunication and unpreparedness among implementers. Fifth, although policy implementers have a positive attitude toward the Free Nutritious Meals Program, they face significant operational pressures. Without proportional system support, implementers' enthusiasm may decline over the long term. Sixth, students' socioeconomic backgrounds are a strong reason why this program is needed. However, from the perspective of family expenses, the economic benefits are not yet fully felt because students still need



additional pocket money outside of school meal times. Finally, despite many challenges, the Free Nutritious Meals program continues to have positive impacts, such as increased student attendance and the development of good breakfast habits. The program is assessed as providing a more conducive learning environment and contributing to the development of students' learning motivation.

Overall, this study shows that the success of public policies, such as the Free Nutritious Meals program, does not only depend on the good intentions of the government but also on the readiness of the implementation system at the grassroots level. Without strong technical support, resources, and coordination, well-intentioned policies on paper can result in additional burdens for implementers and suboptimal outcomes. Referring to the results of this study, there are several suggestions that can be made to improve the effectiveness of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals policy. First, improving socialization and technical guidance is an urgent matter that needs attention. The central and regional governments need to compile and distribute clear and systematic technical guidelines before the program is implemented. Direct socialization to schools should be a priority to avoid confusion and improvisation in the field.

Furthermore, the provision of specialized personnel and incentives is also necessary to enable teachers to remain focused on their primary teaching duties. Assigning operational personnel from outside the school, such as through social services or support staff, is a viable solution. Additionally, providing incentives or awards for teachers implementing the program will serve as a form of appreciation that motivates them to carry out these additional tasks. Another aspect is the improvement of the inter-agency communication system, which has been perceived as lacking openness and responsiveness. Faster and more structured two-way communication must be established between schools and program organizers. This will make reporting and feedback mechanisms more efficient and enable continuous program evaluation. Regular and participatory evaluations are also important steps that need to be implemented. Evaluations should not only be conducted when problems arise, but on a regular basis, involving all parties: schools, parents, students, and program organizers. The involvement of many parties will ensure that policies remain relevant and adaptive to the dynamics in the field. Finally, improving food quality and distribution accuracy needs to be taken more seriously. Nutritional standards, hygiene, and food preferences must be aligned with students' needs. Meal schedules and menus should also be communicated in advance so that schools can prepare adequately. With these improvement measures, it is hoped that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Policy can run more optimally and have a broader impact on improving the quality of education and health for students.

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