

Free Nutritious Food (FNF) Policy: A Political Economy Analysis and Its Impact on Community Welfare

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Abstract

This study analyzes the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy from a political economy perspective and evaluates its impact on community welfare, using a case study at Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon. Grounded in Grindle's (2017) theory of resource distribution, the study conceptualizes public policy not merely as a technical solution but as a product of negotiation among actors with differing interests and power dynamics. Employing a qualitative approach through literature review and field observation, the research investigates the formulation and implementation of the FNF policy in a rural context characterized by logistical constraints and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The findings reveal that the program contributes to improved student attendance, enhanced nutritional status, and reduced household food-related expenditures. However, persistent challenges include limited institutional coordination, inadequate cultural adaptation, and fiscal sustainability concerns. The study recommends an inclusive and participatory policy design, gender-sensitive evaluation frameworks, and robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure effective and equitable long-term implementation of school feeding initiatives. These findings provide critical insights for enhancing policy responsiveness and advancing social welfare in underserved regions.

Keywords: political economy, public policy, school feeding, rural education, welfare impact

INTRODUCTION

The welfare of society is highly dependent on the quality of human resources, which are shaped from an early age-one of the critical aspects being adequate nutrition. In Indonesia, nutritional deficiency remains a major challenge, particularly among school-aged children. According to the Basic Health Research (Riskesdas) data in

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2018, the prevalence of stunting in children aged 5-12 years reached 30.8%, indicating a significant public health concern (Kemenristekdikti, 2018). This situation underscores the urgent need for systemic and sustainable public policy interventions, such as the provision of free nutritious meals in schools. The policy of providing free nutritious meals in schools serves as a strategic response to address the inequality of access to quality nutrition while improving children's health and nutritional status. From a political economy perspective, this policy reflects the state's commitment to health and education issues and implicates budget allocations, human development priorities, and the reinforcement of the state's role in social protection (Andreas, K., 2025). Several international studies affirm that school-based nutrition interventions significantly reduce malnutrition rates, improve student attendance, and support optimal cognitive and academic development (WFP, 2023).

This study is grounded in the political economy approach to public policy as articulated by Grindle (2017), who emphasizes that policy outcomes are shaped by the interaction of actors with diverse interests and unequal access to power and resources. In the case of Free Nutritious Food (FNF), this perspective allows for a critical examination of how political will, bureaucratic capacity, and community dynamics influence the implementation process. The approach also highlights the role of contestation and negotiation in determining whose interests are prioritized during policy execution, particularly in settings with limited administrative and financial resources.

Moreover, lessons from countries such as India and Brazil-where large-scale school feeding programs have been implemented-highlight both the potential and the challenges of such initiatives. Research by Mehta & Shah (2021) notes that inadequate logistics, inconsistent food quality, and poor monitoring often hinder effectiveness, emphasizing the importance of local adaptability and robust oversight systems. In the Indonesian context, these concerns are echoed by Wibowo & Iskandar (2021), who emphasize that implementation success often hinges on infrastructure readiness and community participation, especially in underdeveloped and remote regions.

In the local context of Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon, which is situated in a border area facing economic limitations and a high stunting rate, the implementation of this policy provides a crucial case study for evaluating its effectiveness and impact on

student well-being and the surrounding community. The Indonesian Health Survey (SSGI., 2022) also notes that remote areas continue to experience serious obstacles in the distribution of healthy food and nutrition education, making this program highly relevant for further investigation.

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the free nutritious food policy through a political economy lens and to examine its tangible impact on the well-being of students at Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon. The uniqueness of this research lies in its focus on a border-region public school, which remains underrepresented in previous studies, and its attempt to integrate macro-policy analysis with grassroots-level evidence. Furthermore, this research adopts a multidimensional perspective-combining health, education, equity, and economic development-s advocated by FAO (2023) and UNICEF (2024), to assess how school feeding programs can serve not only as nutritional interventions but also as instruments of social justice, local empowerment, and sustainable development.

Several countries have demonstrated the effectiveness of free school meal programs. In Brazil, the Brazilian National School Feeding Programme (PNAE) is able to meet up to 30-70% of students' daily nutritional needs (Arpan & Sophian, 2024). In Europe, Finland guarantees free meals at all levels of schooling as a reflection of the state's commitment to inclusive education (Yustiani et al., 2024). Other countries, such as India, the United States, and Japan, also have school lunch programs that have proven to reduce dropout rates and increase student attendance (Shrivastava et al., 2015; Beleson, 2021).

However, global studies consistently emphasize that the success of such policies is not solely determined by their presence, but also by how well they are implemented. Critical challenges such as logistics, nutritional standards, and cross-sectoral coordination remain key concerns in many contexts (Mehta & Shah, 2021). The experiences of other nations thus provide valuable lessons, particularly for developing countries like Indonesia, where disparities in institutional capacity and infrastructure persist.

Inspired by these international practices, the Government of Indonesia enacted Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024 concerning the establishment of the National

Nutrition Agency. This agency is tasked with executing the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy—an ambitious program intended not only to meet students' daily nutritional needs but also to promote academic performance and long-term human development (Andreas, 2025). The FNF policy thus represents a strategic commitment to social protection and educational equity.

Nevertheless, the successful implementation of the FNF policy requires more than a budgetary allocation. It hinges on bureaucratic readiness, school-level infrastructure, and community engagement (Syarah, 2024). In the Indonesian context, Wibowo & Iskandar (2021) underline the importance of synergy among schools, parents, and local governments to ensure that such programs function effectively at the grassroots level.

This study contributes to the academic discourse on public policy by offering a micro-level analysis of the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy in a rural setting, viewed through a political economy lens. It advances understanding of how national welfare programs interact with local socio-economic realities and power dynamics. The contribution lies in mapping actor interactions and identifying implementation gaps influenced by local culture and resource distribution. Moreover, it enriches the literature on inclusive policy design by incorporating the perspective of marginalized rural schools.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of political economy analysis with case-specific insights from a remote school in Cikalongkulon, which has been underrepresented in previous studies. Unlike prior research that mostly focuses on nutritional or managerial aspects, this paper highlights the interplay between actors, fiscal implications, and community-level dynamics, offering a comprehensive view of policy outcomes in rural Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy is a social intervention aimed at improving nutritional status and food security, particularly in underdeveloped regions such as Eastern Indonesia. Nugroho et al. (2020) highlight that the implementation of social policies in these areas heavily depends on infrastructure capacity and the effectiveness of coordination between central and local governments. This is supported by Rahman and Hidayat (2019), who found that the success of nutrition-based programs is

significantly influenced by community participation and awareness of the importance of proper nutrition. A community-based approach, as described by Wijaya et al. (2021), is essential for ensuring that policies are contextually relevant and responsive to local needs. Furthermore, Lestari and Pranoto (2021) emphasize the importance of training and empowering local communities so that they not only become beneficiaries but also take active roles in implementing and monitoring the program. In terms of impact, Indriyani et al. (2020) and Suyadi & Ali (2021) demonstrate that improved nutrition among school-aged children correlates positively with enhanced educational outcomes and long-term productivity, as well as reductions in stunting rates. Methodologically, most previous studies have employed qualitative case studies and participatory surveys, offering contextual insights but limited generalizability. A notable gap in the literature is the lack of long-term evaluative studies on the effectiveness of the FNF policy in Eastern Indonesia, particularly those that integrate data on nutrition, community involvement, and logistical distribution. Therefore, this study seeks to expand understanding of the challenges and solutions in implementing the FNF program through a holistic approach that incorporates social, infrastructural, and participatory dimensions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach by combining a literature review with field-based observation and interviews. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth and holistic exploration of the formulation, implementation, and evaluation processes of the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy at Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon. According to Creswell (2009), a literature review is an essential step in the research process, enabling researchers to understand the broader context of their study, identify existing research gaps, and build a solid theoretical framework. It also helps determine whether a research topic is worthy of further investigation.

The literature review component of this study involves the collection and analysis of secondary data from various credible sources, including official government documents, reports from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), previous research findings, academic journal articles, current news publications, and reports from relevant institutions. The data obtained were analyzed using content analysis techniques, focusing on key themes

related to the implementation of the FNF policy and its effects on public health, education, and the local economy. Through this method, the study aims to present a comprehensive overview of the policy's effectiveness from a political economy perspective, particularly concerning the welfare of rural communities such as those in Cikalongkulon.

To complement the literature review, field observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted in March–April 2025. Informants included the school principal, three teachers, ten parents, and two local food vendors involved in the program. Observations focused on the meal distribution process, using a non-participant observation technique. Data triangulation was applied by cross-validating interview data, school records, and government policy documents. To ensure data validity and credibility, the study employed member checking with key informants and sought expert consultation during the analysis process.

Finally, this research obtained ethical clearance from the ITG Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 2025/014/REK/PA), ensuring that all research activities adhered to the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy in Indonesia has become a central topic in various political economy discussions due to its significant impact on economic growth and public welfare. This program aims to provide free nutritious meals to vulnerable groups, including pregnant women, toddlers, and students from elementary to senior high school levels. According to projections from the National Development Planning Agency (Bappenas), the implementation of this program in 2025 is expected to contribute around 0.86% to national economic growth. The government plans to allocate IDR 71 trillion to support this initiative, which is anticipated to boost demand in the agriculture, food, and logistics sectors, while also strengthening the development of self-sufficient regions in food, energy, and water (Nugroho et al., 2020).

At the local level, survey responses from 95 parents at Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon indicate that 68% have observed improvements in their children's eating

habits and concentration at school since the program was introduced. School attendance records also report a 12% increase in average attendance between January and April 2025. Nevertheless, the absence of systematic anthropometric measurements (e.g., BMI-for-age or height-for-age) underscores the need to incorporate health-monitoring indicators into future program evaluations. These findings reflect not only the social benefits of the program but also emphasize the importance of integrating measurable health outcomes into its impact assessment.

Furthermore, a report by the Institute for Development of Economics and Finance (INDEF) indicates that the budget allocation has the potential to increase the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 0.06%, equivalent to approximately IDR 14.61 trillion based on the 2025 current prices. The program is also projected to enhance employment absorption by 0.19% and wage growth by 0.39% (INDEF, 2024).



Figure 1. Students receiving free lunch

Challenges in the Implementation of the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) Policy

The findings of this study at Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon reveal that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy still faces various significant challenges in practice, spanning social, cultural, technical, and fiscal dimensions. One of the main issues is the limited support from the local community. Low levels of community participation are influenced by a lack of understanding regarding the importance of balanced nutrition and its long-term benefits for students' health and overall public well-being (Sari & Nugroho, 2022). Within the school community, some parents still strongly believe that traditional food is more appropriate for consumption than the nutritious meals provided by the government program (Tan & Setiawan, 2020). This traditional belief contributes to resistance toward the FNF program, which is intended to address nutritional deficiencies among school-aged children.

Given this situation, a culturally sensitive and sustainable approach is essential to improve community acceptance. Program outreach must incorporate local wisdom and be conducted inclusively to build collective understanding and support for the MBG initiative at the school level. Another major challenge lies in policy monitoring and evaluation. The lack of qualified supervisory personnel and limited use of information technology to track meal distribution and consumption have led to inconsistencies in program implementation. Reports from the field indicate variability in meal quality, which cannot be addressed effectively due to the absence of structured and systematic data (Wijaya & Permata, 2021).

From a political-economic perspective, the FNF policy also presents fiscal challenges, both nationally and locally. The large-scale budget allocation required demands high efficiency and transparency. This study supports findings by Waluyo et al. (2025), which emphasize a long-term correlation between government expenditure and economic growth. Therefore, the sustainability of the FNF program relies heavily on the effectiveness of public spending, including at the school level such as Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon.

To ensure accountability and long-term viability, it is crucial to strengthen oversight mechanisms, actively involve local stakeholders (teachers, parents, and students), and integrate information technology into the management system. This study shows that the

FNF policy is not merely about providing food but also about addressing the broader socio-economic and political structures that influence local community welfare.

In conclusion, this case study affirms that the FNF policy holds significant potential to enhance the well-being of students and families at Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon, provided that implementation challenges are addressed through a comprehensive, participatory, and context-sensitive approach. Thus, the policy should not only be seen as a nutritional intervention but also as a strategic instrument for sustainable socio-economic development in the region.

Political Economy Analysis of the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) Policy

The Free Nutritious Food (FNF) program is one of the Indonesian government's strategic policies, which began implementation in January 2025. The primary goal of this policy is to address the persistent issues of malnutrition and stunting, which remain significant challenges in various regions, including remote areas such as Cikalongkulon. FNF targets vulnerable groups such as school children, toddlers, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers, with the hope of helping them meet their daily nutritional needs according to the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) standards.

Specifically, providing healthy meals in schools-such as at Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon is expected to improve students' concentration, engagement in learning activities, and ultimately their academic performance and overall education quality. Thus, FNF serves not only as a health intervention but also as a tool to strengthen the education sector and social welfare.

From a political economy perspective, the successful implementation of FNF depends heavily on synergy among key stakeholders: the state (central and local governments), the private sector (food providers, logistics companies), and civil society (school committees, parents, and local communities). The involvement of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) as catering service providers, along with the use of digital platforms such as online delivery services, can generate significant local economic multiplier effects. This aligns with recommendations from the Center of Reform on Economics (CORE) Indonesia, which emphasizes the importance of strengthening local

supply chains and diversifying food sources based on domestic commodities to ensure the sustainability of the FNF program.

However, from a political and fiscal standpoint, this policy has sparked debate and concern. There are fears that the \$28 billion funding allocated for FNF may come at the expense of other sectors, including higher education and research. Student protests under the movement “Indonesia Gelap” (Dark Indonesia) reflect tensions between short-term policy priorities and long-term development visions (INDEF, 2024; Financial Times, 2024). Additionally, economists have warned that large-scale funding through loans could strain national fiscal conditions, affect the country’s credit rating, and increase long-term debt burdens.

In a local context such as Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon, this political economy analysis highlights the importance of cross-sector coordination and sustainable budgeting. If implemented efficiently and with community participation, the FNF policy has the potential not only to improve student health but also to strengthen local economic resilience and foster social equity through equitable and needs-based food distribution.

The implementation of FNF policy at Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon involves multiple stakeholders with varying interests. The local education office seeks to maximize program outreach, while school administrators balance logistical constraints with nutritional guidelines. Parents, influenced by cultural food preferences, often challenge the acceptability of provided meals. Meanwhile, local food vendors view the program as both an opportunity and competition. This constellation of interests generates subtle alliances and conflicts. For instance, some local elites attempt to influence procurement processes for economic gain, revealing patronage patterns that affect program equity. These dynamics illustrate how policy implementation is shaped by more than formal structures, but also by informal power relations and local political economies.

Analysis of the Impact of Free Nutritious Foods on Community Welfare

The Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy has had a significant positive impact on community welfare, particularly in the areas of health, economy, and social well-being. In

general, beneficiaries have experienced improvements in nutritional status, marked by increased ideal body weight, better child growth, and a reduction in the prevalence of anemia-especially among pregnant women and school-aged children. This program has also helped reduce household expenses, as daily food needs are subsidized by the government. The reduction in economic burden allows families to reallocate their budgets to other sectors, such as education and healthcare, thereby directly contributing to an improved standard of living. The main objectives of this policy are to improve students' nutritional intake, reduce the rates of stunting and malnutrition among children, and enhance students' motivation and participation in learning activities (Aji, W. T. 2025). With strong support from the government and active involvement of various stakeholders, the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) program is expected to provide sustainable benefits—not only for direct beneficiaries but also for the local economy as a whole. This initiative reflects the synergy between the private sector and the government in improving community welfare, especially among children who represent the nation's future generation (Andreas et al., 2025).

Parental Occupation?

218 responses

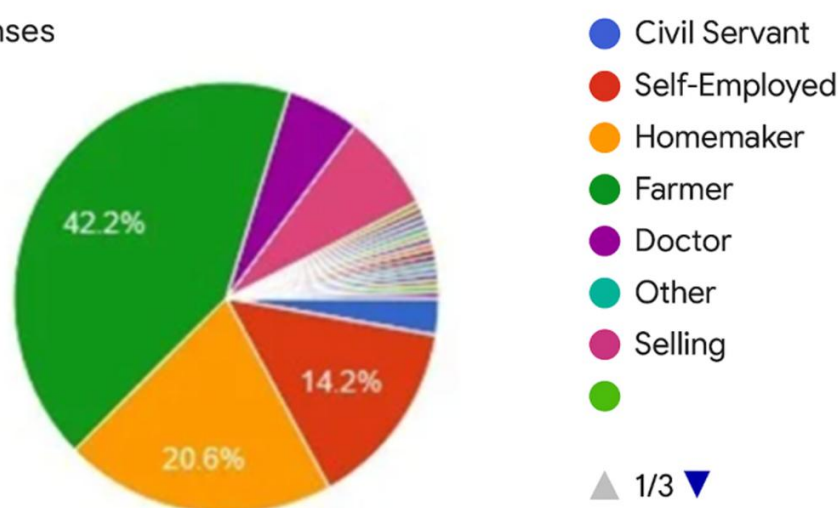


Figure 2 Results of a survey on parents' jobs at SMP Negeri 1 Cikalongkulon

Figure 2 show Survey results regarding the occupations of parents at Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon reveal that a significant proportion work as laborers (42.2%), housewives (20.6%), and small-scale entrepreneurs (14.2%), while the remainder are

engaged in informal work such as farming and trading. This demographic data highlights that most students come from lower-middle-income families, who are likely to face persistent challenges in meeting their children's daily nutritional needs. Within this socio-economic context, the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy—launched by the Indonesian government in January 2025—becomes especially relevant. The program aims to reduce malnutrition and stunting among children by providing meals that align with the national Recommended Dietary Allowances (AKG).

Although the FNF program targets all students, its impact on girls and students from female-headed households is particularly notable. Interviews revealed that several single mothers expressed relief at the reduced burden of daily food expenses, enabling them to redirect limited household income toward other essential needs such as school supplies or healthcare. Additionally, adolescent girls experienced improved dietary diversity, which is strongly associated with a reduced risk of iron-deficiency anemia. These gender-sensitive outcomes underscore the importance of incorporating gender-disaggregated data into future evaluations to ensure the policy effectively addresses existing social and economic vulnerabilities.

To better understand the dynamics between stakeholders involved in the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy, it is essential to map out their respective roles, interests, and levels of influence. The following table presents a stakeholder analysis of key actors participating in the implementation of the FNF program at Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon.

Table 1. Stakeholder Roles and Interests in FNF Implementation at Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon

No	Stakeholder	Role	Interest	Influence Level
1	School Principal	Coordinator	Smooth Implementation	High
2	Local Vendors	Food Supplier	Economic Gain	Medium
3	Parents	Beneficiaries	Child Nutrition	Medium
4	Local Government	Funder and Monitor Program Success	Program Success	High

This mapping illustrates the strategic importance of collaboration between actors with varying degrees of power and influence. The school principal and local government serve as key drivers of program coordination and oversight, while the involvement of

parents and local vendors reflects the necessity of community engagement and localized support mechanisms.

In addition to providing direct benefits such as improved concentration and student engagement in learning, the program also holds the potential for broader economic impacts. From a political economy perspective, the success of the MBG program depends on cross-sectoral synergy among the government, private sector, and civil society. The involvement of local MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) in food provision and the use of digital platforms for distribution can create economic multiplier effects and strengthen locally based food supply chains.

However, the program has also faced criticism, particularly regarding budget sustainability and national fiscal priorities. Protests from student groups, known as the "Indonesia Gelap" movement, reflect concerns over potential budget cuts in other sectors such as higher education, which could affect research quality and the future of the younger generation. The additional national debt required to fund the \$28 billion program also raises concerns about long-term economic stability. Therefore, although the MBG program has significant potential to improve welfare and education quality in areas like Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon, its implementation must be carried out carefully, transparently, and sustainably to ensure its long-term benefits are realized without compromising other vital sectors.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above explanation, it can be concluded that the Free Nutritious Food (FNF) policy is a strategic intervention aimed not only at tackling malnutrition and stunting, but also at improving the overall quality of education and social welfare. The case study at Study of Junior High School 1 Cikalongkulon highlights the relevance of this policy in regions with lower-middle-income populations, where fulfilling children's nutritional needs can be a significant burden. However, the success of the FNF program largely depends on community support, the effectiveness of its implementation, and synergy among sectors at both the national and local levels. Challenges such as cultural resistance, weak monitoring systems, and fiscal limitations must be addressed through

participatory and culturally sensitive approaches, as well as the use of information technology.

With transparent, sustainable, and inclusive implementation, the FNF program has great potential to serve as a driving force for equitable and inclusive socio-economic development-without sacrificing other strategic sectors such as higher education and research.

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