



Meaning of Nutritious Food in Policy Communication: The MBG Program in Depok City

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Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is one of the Indonesian government's strategic policies aimed at improving children's nutritional quality and reducing stunting rates. However, the implementation of nutrition policies is influenced not only by technical nutritional standards but also by how people interpret and respond to these policies in their daily lives. Previous studies have mainly focused on health effectiveness and policy evaluation, while research examining nutrition policy as a process of communication and meaning contestation remains limited. This study aims to analyze the contestation of the meaning of "nutritious eating" between the state's construction through policy discourse and the community's construction through everyday social practices in the implementation of the MBG Program in Depok City. This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study method through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. Eleven informants consisting of students, teachers, and parents were selected purposively. Data were analyzed thematically and supported by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the relationship between policy discourse, communication practices, and people's social experiences. The findings show that the government constructs "nutritious eating" as a technical nutrition standard based on public health indicators, while the community interprets it as food that is tasty, filling, culturally appropriate, and economically affordable. Teachers also play an important role as mediators in negotiating meaning between policy narratives and everyday consumption practices. This study identifies a Nutritional Policy–Consumption Gap between policy standards and actual food consumption practices within society. The findings suggest that the success and legitimacy of public policy are determined not only by technical policy design but also by dialogic, participatory, and contextual communication strategies between the government and the community.

Keywords: Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG); Policy Communication; Meaning Contestation; Nutrition Discourse; Community Interpretation

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INTRODUCTION

The success of public policy is measured not only by the accuracy of its technical design but also by the government's ability to establish shared understandings with policy recipients. Policies that are carefully formulated may encounter difficulties during implementation when the meanings embedded in policy discourse differ from those constructed by communities in everyday life. Policy implementation is therefore not a linear process from central government to local communities, but a dynamic process shaped by interactions among governments, institutions, and policy recipients who interpret and adapt policies to local conditions. From this perspective, communication is not merely a supporting instrument for policy delivery but an integral part of how policy meanings are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of communication in bridging policy objectives and implementation. Lee (2019) argues that one-way policy communication can create a gap between policy objectives and their interpretation in practice. Dellmuth and Tallberg (2021) further demonstrate that public perceptions of policy legitimacy are influenced by governments' capacity to communicate effectively and build public trust. Similarly, Müller and Braun (2021) highlight the role of dialogic and participatory communication in shaping public perceptions of policy legitimacy. These studies suggest that policy implementation involves not only administrative processes and program delivery but also processes through which policy messages are communicated, interpreted, and evaluated by the public.

This issue is particularly relevant to the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) Program in Indonesia. In schools, the meaning of "nutritious food" may be constructed differently by policymakers and communities. At the policy level, nutritious food is primarily defined through technical nutritional standards concerning nutritional content and dietary adequacy (WHO, 2026). In everyday settings, however, communities may evaluate food through consumption experiences, including taste, freshness, texture, eating habits, cultural preferences, and socio-economic circumstances. Thus, the implementation of MBG brings together two potentially different ways of understanding nutritious food: a technical-policy construction and an experiential-social construction.

Recent studies provide empirical indications of the importance of these experiential dimensions. Wahyuniar et al. (2025) found that the nutritional outcomes of the MBG Program are related not only to the provision of meals but also to students' consumption experiences and taste preferences. Novianti and Amaliatulwalidain (2025) showed that community acceptance of the program is influenced by the social context and everyday experiences of beneficiaries. Nurmansyah and Fitriani (2025) similarly emphasized that local social dynamics and policy communication shape how communities interpret the MBG Program. Pratiwi et al. (2026) further indicate that food acceptance is associated with taste preferences, consumption habits, cultural values, economic conditions, and everyday social experiences. These findings suggest that the implementation of MBG cannot be understood solely in terms of whether meals meet nutritional standards; it also depends on how food is experienced, interpreted, and accepted by its intended recipients.

From a communication perspective, this process can be understood as a process of meaning construction and interpretation. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model emphasizes that audiences are not passive recipients of institutional messages. Rather, they actively interpret messages according to their social experiences and cultural contexts, potentially producing dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings. In the MBG context, the government's construction of



nutritious food may therefore be interpreted differently by students, parents, teachers, and other community members. Such differences are not merely variations in individual preference but may represent a broader contestation over the meaning of policy in everyday life.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a further perspective for examining this process. Fairclough (1995, 2003, 2013) conceptualizes language as social practice embedded in relations of power, through which meanings, institutional authority, and legitimacy are constructed and reproduced. Policy discourse consequently does more than communicate technical information; it also establishes particular ways of defining problems, solutions, and desirable social practices. At the same time, communities may construct alternative meanings based on their social and cultural experiences. As Ferri (2018) argues, policy meanings are shaped by social contexts and the empirical experiences through which policies are encountered. The implementation of MBG can therefore be viewed as a communicative and discursive arena in which the meaning of nutritious food is constructed, communicated, interpreted, and potentially contested.

Existing research on school nutrition programs has largely focused on nutritional outcomes, program effectiveness, policy evaluation, and administrative implementation. Studies have shown that the success of school nutrition programs is influenced by food distribution systems, institutional support, stakeholder coordination, implementation capacity, and monitoring mechanisms (Desalegn et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2023; Rahmawati et al., 2021). Research on the MBG Program has similarly emphasized nutritional outcomes, program effectiveness, and policy implementation from health and administrative perspectives (Wahyuniar et al., 2025; Novianti & Amaliatulwalidain, 2025; Nurmansyah & Fitriani, 2025). However, less attention has been given to policy implementation as a communicative and discursive process, particularly to how the meaning of "nutritious food" is constructed through policy discourse and interpreted through everyday community practices. This gap is significant because differences in meaning may affect food acceptance and, more broadly, the public legitimacy of the program.

Addressing this gap, this study examines the MBG Program from a policy communication perspective and uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze how the meaning of "nutritious food" is constructed, communicated, interpreted, and contested between policy discourse and community experience in Depok City. Accordingly, the study asks: How is the meaning of "nutritious food" contested between the state's policy construction and the community's everyday interpretation in the implementation of the MBG Program in Depok City? It also examines how policy communication contributes to the construction of program legitimacy among policy recipients.

This study aims to analyze the contestation of meaning surrounding "nutritious food" between the state's construction through policy discourse and the community's interpretation through everyday social practices in the implementation of the MBG Program in Depok City. It also examines how policy communication contributes to the construction of program legitimacy in the public sphere. Theoretically, the study contributes to policy communication and Critical Discourse Analysis by linking the construction and contestation of policy meanings with processes of public legitimacy. Methodologically, it demonstrates how CDA can be applied to examine the relationship between policy discourse and community interpretations in public policy implementation. Practically, the study provides insights for policymakers into the importance of aligning technical nutritional standards with community experiences, preferences, and consumption practices in communicating and implementing the MBG Program. The study further proposes the Nutritional Policy–

Consumption Gap as an analytical concept referring to the discrepancy between the technical meaning of nutritious food embedded in policy standards and the meanings, preferences, and consumption practices through which communities evaluate and accept food in everyday life.

METHODS

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative approach grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is co-created through interaction between individuals and their social context (Abdullah Kamal, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). Qualitative research focuses on understanding participants' subjective meanings and interpretations rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses quantitatively (Creswell, 2013). In this sense, knowledge is viewed as contextual, interpretive, and constructed through lived experiences (Yazan, 2015).

The case study method is a qualitative research approach that investigates a real-life, contemporary phenomenon within its bounded context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly distinguishable. It is used to generate an in-depth and holistic understanding of a specific case by collecting detailed data from multiple sources such as interviews, observations, and documents. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, case study research emphasizes analytical depth and contextual interpretation to explore complex social processes and meanings in real-world settings (Yin, 2018).

The case study method was used to examine in-depth and contextually the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program in Depok City as a case study of public policy communication. This approach is relevant for answering the question of "how" the policy communication process occurs, as well as how the meaning of "nutritious food" is constructed, negotiated, and accepted by the community in everyday life.

Research Focus

The research object focused on the construction of the meaning of "nutritious eating" between the state through policy discourse and society through everyday social practices. The research subjects consisted of senior high school students, teachers, and parents directly involved in the implementation of the MBG Program. The study was conducted in several senior high schools in Depok City from January to April 2026.

Data Sources

The primary research instrument was the researcher, supported by semi-structured interview guidelines as secondary instruments. The sampling technique used purposive sampling by selecting informants based on their involvement and relevance to the research focus. The informants consisted of three students, three teachers, and five parents. Secondary data in this study were collected through document analysis and policy texts used to understand how the state constructs the meaning of "nutritious eating" in its official policies and communications. The documents analyzed included the Mayor's Regulation (Perwal), the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program in Depok City, and other policy documents relevant to the program's formulation and implementation. Furthermore, secondary data also included government public communication products such as official social media content @pemkotdepok, press releases, campaign posters, and policy communication video.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. Data were analyzed thematically through processes of data reduction, categorization, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. This study also applied Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to analyze the relationship between policy discourse, media representations, and broader social practices. According to Fairclough (2013), CDA views language not merely as a means of communication but as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations, ideologies, and social structures. Fairclough proposes a three-dimensional framework consisting of text analysis, discursive practice analysis, and social practice analysis, enabling researchers to examine how discourse is produced, circulated, and connected to wider socio-political contexts (Fairclough, 2013).

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to analyze the relationship between policy discourse, communication practices, and social practices in the implementation of the MBG Program. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking to confirm the consistency of interpretations with the informants experiences. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. Data were analyzed thematically through processes of data reduction, categorization, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. This study also applied Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to analyze the relationship between policy discourse, communication practices, and social practices in the implementation of the MBG Program. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking to confirm the consistency of interpretations with the informants experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Depok City demonstrates that the meaning of "nutritious food" is interpreted differently by the government, schools, parents, and students. From a policy perspective, the government constructs nutritious food through a scientific and technocratic framework based on measurable nutritional indicators, particularly the Indonesian Recommended Dietary Allowance (AKG), which defines dietary adequacy in terms of balanced intake of carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, and minerals (Ministry of Health Republic of Indonesia, 2019; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2004). In addition, national nutrition policy frameworks position nutritional interventions as structured efforts to address public health issues such as stunting, wasting, and malnutrition, which are framed as measurable and preventable health problems (World Health Organization, 2023; United Nations Children's Fund, 2023). This technocratic framing is also reflected in the Strategic Plan of the National Nutrition Agency 2025–2029, which emphasizes standardized nutritional improvement as part of Indonesia's long-term development agenda toward Indonesia Emas 2045 (Badan Gizi Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2025).

However, society constructs the meaning of "nutritious food" differently, as it is shaped by everyday lived experiences, including taste preferences, cultural food practices, consumption habits, and socio-economic conditions that influence food acceptance and dietary behavior. This indicates that nutritional meaning is not solely a technical category, but also a socially constructed concept negotiated within daily life practices. The divergence between technocratic policy definitions and community interpretations highlights a gap between policy formulation and actual consumption



practices among students, suggesting that the effectiveness of nutrition policy is influenced not only by scientific standards but also by socio-cultural and communicative dimensions of food meaning.

The government also legitimizes the MBG Program through statistical data concerning stunting prevalence and human resource development narratives. Nutritional problems are presented as urgent national issues that require immediate intervention through standardized meal distribution. Consequently, the communication strategy of the program operates mainly through a top-down model in which information flows from the central government to local governments, schools, teachers, parents, and students. This communication pattern focuses primarily on informing rather than engaging or responding. As a result, public feedback regarding food taste, menu suitability, and students' eating behavior is not effectively integrated into policy adjustments.

In contrast to the state's scientific perspective, parents and students in Depok City interpret nutritious food through practical considerations rooted in daily experiences. Parents generally define nutritious food as food that children are willing to eat and finish rather than food that merely fulfills nutritional calculations. Economic conditions, family food habits, children's preferences, and previous health experiences significantly shape these interpretations. Familiar foods such as rice, eggs, tempeh, and home-cooked meals are perceived as nutritious because they are affordable, acceptable, and consistently consumed by children. This finding indicates that society possesses its own nutritional knowledge system developed through everyday practices and intergenerational experiences.

Public reception toward the MBG Program also changed over time. During the initial implementation stage, many parents welcomed the program positively because it reduced the burden of preparing school meals and represented government concern for children's nutrition. However, perceptions gradually shifted when students reported dissatisfaction regarding taste, smell, texture, and unfamiliar menu compositions. Many students consumed only selected parts of the distributed meals, particularly rice and familiar side dishes, while vegetables, fruits, and milk were often left unfinished. This selective consumption pattern demonstrates the existence of a discrepancy between nutritional policy objectives and actual consumption practices.

The findings reveal a Nutritional Policy–Consumption Gap, namely the mismatch between nutritional standards designed by the government and practical eating behavior among students. This gap does not emerge because society lacks nutritional understanding, but because the policy framework does not fully accommodate local cultural preferences and everyday food practices. In this context, the MBG Program becomes difficult to interpret within the practical logic of the community because the menu standards prioritize technical nutritional calculations over familiarity and food acceptance.

Differences in the interpretation of nutritious food can be observed across social actors involved in the implementation of the MBG Program.

Actors	Meaning of “Nutritious Food”	Epistemic Reference
Government / National Nutrition Agency	Fulfillment of balanced nutrition standards including carbohydrates, protein, vegetables, fruits, and milk	Scientific standards, WHO guidelines, stunting data
Schools / Teachers	Students eat calmly and regularly during school activities	Managerial order and school discipline
Parents	Food that children are willing to eat and not waste	Household economy, family habits, children’s preferences
Students	Food that tastes good, familiar, and acceptable	Taste experience and daily eating practices

Table 1
Reduction of the Meaning of “Nutritious Food” Across Social Actors in the MBG Program

Source: Research Findings, 2026

The persistence of the Nutritional Policy–Consumption Gap potentially contributes to the gradual erosion of program legitimacy. Parents continue preparing additional meals or providing extra pocket money because students do not always consume the food distributed through the MBG Program. Teachers also face additional managerial burdens related to food waste and student complaints. These practical challenges gradually weaken public trust in the effectiveness of the policy.

A more concerning issue is the erosion of discursive legitimacy, namely public trust in the honesty and credibility of the official program narrative. When everyday empirical experiences consistently contradict optimistic government narratives, society develops skepticism toward the overall communication framework of the policy. The absence of transparency regarding procurement systems, food quality standards, and catering providers creates space for public speculation and criticism. Discussions regarding budgeting and food quality rapidly circulate on digital platforms such as Twitter/X and TikTok, further accelerating public distrust. The lack of communicative spaces intensifies the gap between policy makers and society. Parents, teachers, and students have limited opportunities to convey complaints, suggestions, and practical experiences directly to decision makers. Consequently, field experiences are rarely integrated into policy reformulation. The communication process therefore becomes administrative rather than dialogical, causing policy implementation to focus more on formal distribution targets than on actual nutritional outcomes.

Within this condition, teachers and school principals occupy a complex position as mediators between the state and society. Teachers function as re-encoders who must translate technical nutritional policies into practical explanations acceptable to students and parents. In everyday practice, teachers attempt to encourage students to consume unfamiliar foods, negotiate eating behavior, and maintain classroom order during meal distribution. However, teachers often lack sufficient authority and information regarding menu standards, procurement systems, and policy decisions. As a result, they bear communication burdens and public complaints despite having limited influence over the policy itself.

The interaction among the government, schools, and society demonstrates that the meaning of nutritious food operates differently across social levels. At the macro level, the government defines nutritious food through scientific standards and stunting prevention objectives. At the meso level,



schools interpret nutritious food pragmatically as students eating properly without causing complaints or disturbances. At the micro level, parents and students interpret nutritious food through taste familiarity, affordability, and actual eating experiences.

Level	Main Actors	Dominant Logic	Meaning of “Nutritious Food”	Potential Conflict
Macro/Technical	Government, National Nutrition Agency, Health Office	Scientific-technical and administrative	Fulfillment of balanced nutrition standards and stunting prevention	Neglect of local cultural food preferences
Meso/Mediator	Principals and Teachers	Pragmatic-managerial and pedagogical	Students eat properly and parents do not complain	Re-encoding burden without institutional support
Micro/Practical	Parents and Students	Cultural-practical, sensory, and economic	Familiar, acceptable, and affordable food	Consumption resistance and declining legitimacy

Table 2
Three-Level Meaning Contestation Model in the MBG Program

Source: Research Findings, 2026

The interaction among these three levels does not occur harmoniously but instead contains tensions and inconsistencies that shape the reality of policy implementation in everyday practice. These findings indicate that the challenges of the MBG Program extend beyond nutritional distribution and involve broader issues related to communication, cultural interpretation, and policy legitimacy.

Overall, the findings suggest that the Nutritional Policy–Consumption Gap in the MBG Program is rooted in the inability of the policy to become culturally legible within the everyday logic of society. Although the program is technically designed according to scientific nutritional standards, it fails to fully accommodate practical food habits, taste preferences, and contextual experiences of the target community. Therefore, improving menu composition alone is insufficient. Policy communication must become more participatory, dialogical, and responsive to community experiences to strengthen public trust and ensure effective nutritional outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the meaning of “nutritious food” in the MBG Program in Depok City is contested between the state’s technical-policy construction and the community’s everyday interpretation. While the government emphasizes nutritional standards, stunting prevention, and national development goals, parents and students evaluate nutritious food through taste, familiarity, affordability, and actual consumption. This discrepancy constitutes a Nutritional Policy–Consumption Gap, showing that nutritional adequacy alone does not ensure food acceptance or program legitimacy. The findings also reveal that MBG policy communication remains predominantly top-down, limiting the integration of feedback from parents, students, and teachers. Teachers consequently play an important mediating role between policy discourse and everyday



school experiences. These findings highlight the need for more participatory and responsive policy communication that incorporates community experience into program implementation. This study is limited by its qualitative case-study design and focus on Depok City, which limits the transferability of its findings to other contexts. Future research should compare MBG implementation across regions and different types of schools to examine how local socio-cultural and institutional conditions shape the meaning, acceptance, and legitimacy of nutritious food policies.

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