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From farms to school meals: Linking local agriculture to Indonesia's free nutritious meals program

Dari ladang ke meja makan sekolah: Menghubungkan pertanian lokal dengan program makan bergizi gratis di Indonesia

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Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program represents one of the most ambitious public nutrition initiatives ever implemented in Indonesia. Designed to provide daily nutritious meals for millions of school children, the program has the potential to improve child nutrition, learning outcomes, and long-term human development. Beyond its nutritional objectives, however, the program also raises a broader question: can a large-scale national nutrition policy simultaneously strengthen local agricultural systems?

School meal programs are not only social welfare interventions; they are also major drivers of food demand within national food systems (HLPE, 2017). Every meal served in schools represents agricultural products that must be produced, supplied, and distributed through food supply chains. Vegetables, fruits, grains, eggs, and other protein sources on students' plates ultimately originate from farms and rural landscapes. The key opportunity therefore lies not only in feeding students but also in designing procurement systems that reconnect school meals with local agricultural production. The conceptual relationship between school feeding programs, local agriculture, and food system outcomes is illustrated in Figure 1.

In principle, the scale of the MBG Program offers a powerful opportunity to strengthen local agriculture. Stable institutional demand for food can create predictable markets for farmers, particularly smallholders who often face unstable prices and limited market access. When structured effectively, school feeding programs can establish direct linkages between farms and school kitchens, turning public nutrition initiatives into instruments for rural development.

However, observations from several regions suggest that this opportunity has not yet been fully realized. In some areas, food procurement for school meals relies heavily on centralized suppliers operating far from the locations where the meals are served. While such arrangements may simplify logistics, they also risk reinforcing long supply chains that bypass nearby farming communities. When food for school meals travels long distances despite being produced within surrounding agricultural landscapes, the economic benefits of large public food programs may fail to reach the farmers who could benefit most from them.

International experience suggests alternative approaches. Many countries have adopted farm-to-school or home-grown school feeding models that prioritize sourcing food from local farmers or nearby producer groups (FAO, 2018; HLPE,

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2017). These approaches shorten supply chains and strengthen connections between agricultural production and institutional food consumption.

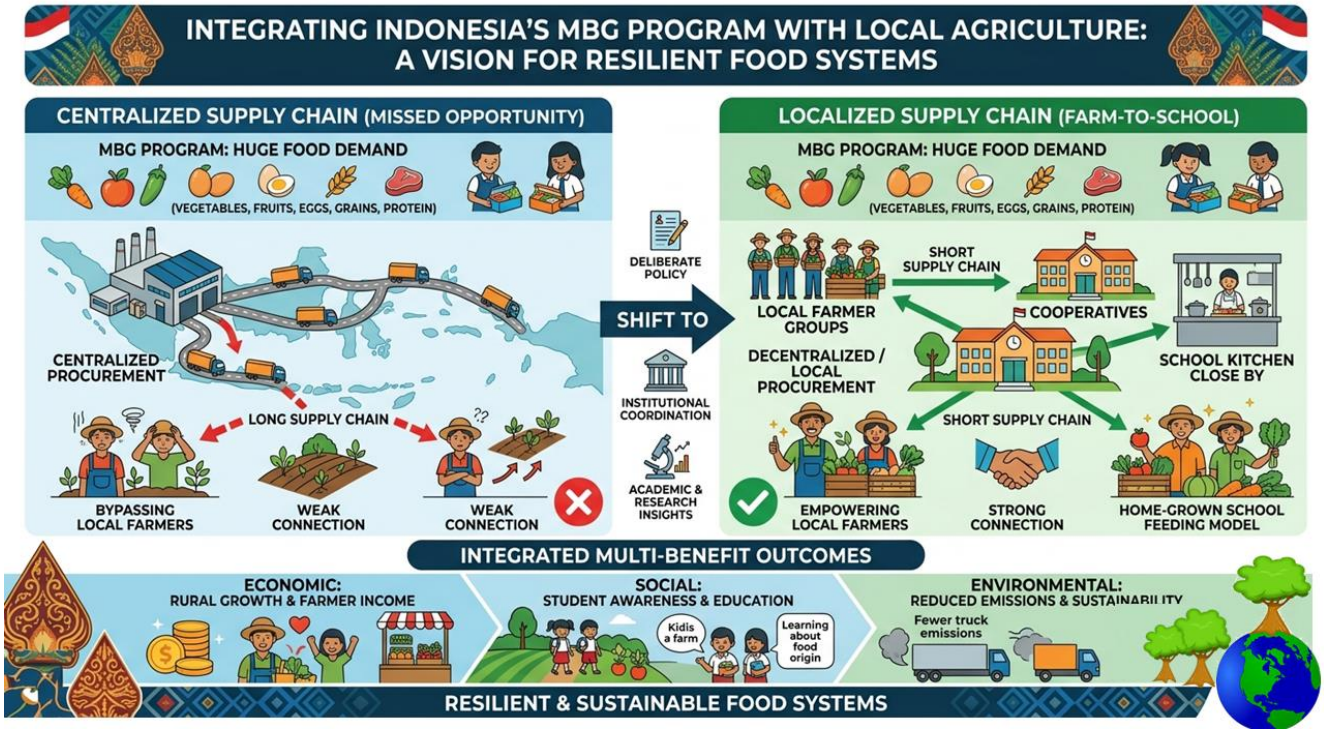

Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the integration of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program with local agricultural systems through decentralized procurement and farm-to-school supply chains.

Applying similar principles within Indonesia's MBG Program could generate broader benefits beyond improved nutrition. Prioritizing locally sourced food could create stable markets for farmers, stimulate rural economies, and reduce transportation-related environmental impacts. Achieving this integration requires procurement systems that allow participation from farmer groups, cooperatives, and local producers.

Ultimately, the long-term success of the MBG Program should not be measured solely by improvements in child nutrition indicators. The program also presents an opportunity to reconnect food consumption with local agricultural production, transforming a national nutrition policy into a strategy for strengthening resilient local food systems.

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