

The Effect of Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) on Economic Growth of South Sumatera

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Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program is one of Indonesia's flagship government initiatives aimed at improving nutritional status, strengthening human capital, and promoting inclusive economic development. Beyond its social objectives, the program is expected to stimulate regional economic activity through increased demand for locally produced food commodities, employment creation, and multiplier effects across agricultural and food supply chains. However, empirical evidence regarding its contribution to regional economic growth remains limited. This study examines the impact of the MBG program on economic growth in South Sumatra Province by comparing regional economic performance before (2023–2024) and after (2025) the implementation of the program. A quantitative comparative research design was employed using a before-and-after approach. The study focuses on six districts and municipalities representing the highest and lowest Human Development Index (HDI) categories. Data were obtained from official publications of the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of South Sumatra Province. The analysis applies descriptive statistics, paired-samples *t*-tests, and simple linear regression to evaluate the program's economic impact. The findings reveal a statistically significant increase in regional economic growth following the implementation of the MBG program. The regression results further indicate that the program exerts a positive and significant influence on economic growth, suggesting that government expenditure on nutrition programs functions as an effective fiscal stimulus capable of generating local economic multiplier effects. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that the program produces stronger economic impacts in regions with lower HDI, implying that less-developed areas derive greater benefits from public investments in nutrition and human capital. These findings support Keynesian fiscal theory and human capital theory, highlighting the dual role of nutrition programs as instruments for improving social welfare and promoting regional economic development. The study recommends prioritizing MBG implementation in disadvantaged regions while strengthening local agricultural supply chains to maximize its long-term economic benefits.

Keywords: Free Nutritious Meals (MBG), Economic Growth, South Sumatera

JEL Codes: O47, R11, I18

1. Introduction

The Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program is one of the Indonesian government's flagship social protection and human capital development initiatives designed to improve nutritional intake while simultaneously promoting educational attainment, public health, and inclusive economic growth. School feeding programs have long been recognized as strategic public investments because they generate multidimensional benefits that extend beyond improving children's nutritional status. Such programs increase school attendance, enhance cognitive development, improve learning outcomes, stimulate local food production, and strengthen regional economies through greater demand for agricultural products ([Bundy, 2013](#)). Consequently, public expenditure on school feeding should be viewed not merely as a social assistance program but also as an investment in long-term human capital formation and sustainable economic development.

Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that adequate nutritional intake during childhood significantly influences cognitive development, learning capacity, and educational achievement. [Aurino et al. \(2020\)](#) found that school feeding interventions improve students' concentration, classroom participation, and academic performance, particularly among children from low-income households. Likewise, [Bundy, 2013](#) argues that school feeding programs generate long-term socioeconomic returns by improving educational outcomes, labor productivity, and future earning potential. Beyond their educational benefits, these programs also contribute to better health outcomes by reducing malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies among school-aged children, thereby enhancing overall human capital quality.

In Indonesia, the MBG program has been implemented progressively since May 2024 and represents one of the largest government expenditure programs targeting nutrition and food security. The government allocated approximately Rp71 trillion for the program in 2025, reflecting its strategic importance in achieving national development objectives. Initial evaluations suggest that the program generates substantial macroeconomic benefits. Research conducted by the Institute for Development of Economics and Finance ([INDEF, 2024](#)) estimates that the 2025 MBG budget could increase Indonesia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by approximately 0.06%, equivalent to Rp14.61 trillion at current prices. Furthermore, the program is projected to increase employment by 0.19% and wages by 0.39%, primarily through increased demand for food production, logistics, distribution services, and labor-intensive activities within local economies. These findings indicate that the MBG program functions not only as a nutritional intervention but also as a fiscal stimulus capable of generating multiplier effects throughout the economy.

At the regional level, the economic effects of the MBG program are expected to be even more pronounced because food procurement relies heavily on local agricultural production and regional supply chains. The program creates stable demand for food commodities such as eggs, vegetables, fish, poultry, rice, and other nutritious products supplied by local farmers, fishermen, cooperatives, and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Consequently, increased government spending through the MBG program has the potential to strengthen local production networks, increase household incomes, stimulate business activities, and create employment opportunities within regional economies.

Evidence from the Regional Office of the Directorate General of Taxes (DGT) of South Sumatra Province (2025) further supports these positive economic impacts. According to the report, the MBG program has the potential to absorb agricultural and fisheries products supplied by local

producers, with approximately 11,085 beneficiaries generating sustained demand for nutritious food ingredients. This stable demand increases income opportunities for farmers, fishermen, food suppliers, catering services, and culinary MSMEs participating in the program's supply chain. Moreover, by providing free nutritious meals, the program reduces food expenditures among low-income households by an estimated 15–20%, allowing families to redirect financial resources toward education, healthcare, savings, or productive investments. The implementation of the program also creates additional employment opportunities through food preparation, transportation, distribution, monitoring, and administrative activities, although these employment effects remain relatively limited and temporary.

Despite these anticipated economic benefits, the MBG program may also generate unintended economic consequences, particularly in regional commodity markets. Because the program requires large and continuous quantities of specific food commodities, demand for products such as eggs, vegetables, chicken, fish, and rice may increase substantially within relatively short periods. If local agricultural production cannot respond quickly to this increased demand, supply shortages may emerge, leading to upward pressure on food prices. From a basic economic perspective, when demand grows faster than supply, market equilibrium prices tend to rise, increasing inflationary pressure, especially in regions with limited production capacity or inefficient distribution systems.

The possibility of inflationary effects is particularly relevant in South Sumatra Province. Inflation data published by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) indicate that month-to-month inflation (2022 = 100) generally increased during the period from January 2024 to September 2025, with notable spikes occurring in February and March 2025, shortly after the nationwide implementation of the MBG program. Although inflation is influenced by multiple macroeconomic factors, including seasonal demand, transportation costs, weather conditions, exchange rate fluctuations, and national monetary policy, the timing of these increases raises important questions regarding whether the MBG program contributed to rising food prices through increased demand for selected commodities. This observation highlights the need for empirical investigation into the relationship between government nutrition expenditure and regional inflation dynamics.

The Directorate General of Taxes also identifies several implementation challenges that may reduce the program's effectiveness and amplify inflationary pressures. First, irregular distribution schedules and unstable procurement of raw materials create uncertainty for local producers, making production planning more difficult and increasing operational costs. Second, concentrated procurement of commodities such as eggs and vegetables in particular districts may generate localized price increases, disproportionately affecting households that are not beneficiaries of the program. Third, prolonged dependence on government assistance without corresponding improvements in local productive capacity may weaken long-term economic resilience and reduce incentives for sustainable agricultural development. These challenges suggest that while the MBG program provides substantial social and economic benefits, its implementation requires careful management to minimize unintended market distortions.

Existing studies on school feeding programs have predominantly focused on nutritional outcomes, educational achievement, poverty reduction, and economic multiplier effects. Comparatively little attention has been given to their potential inflationary consequences, particularly in developing countries where agricultural supply chains remain vulnerable to sudden increases in demand. Moreover, empirical evidence examining how large-scale nutrition

expenditure influences regional food prices remains limited, especially in the Indonesian context. Given the substantial fiscal allocation devoted to the MBG program and its dependence on locally sourced food commodities, understanding its impact on regional inflation has become an important policy issue.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine whether the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program contributes to inflationary pressure in South Sumatra Province. By investigating the relationship between government nutrition expenditure and regional inflation, this research contributes to the literature on public expenditure, food security, and regional economic stability. The findings are expected to provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers regarding procurement strategies, supply chain management, agricultural production planning, and inflation mitigation measures that can enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of the MBG program while maximizing its social and economic benefits.

2. Literature Review

Previous studies have consistently shown that government food assistance programs improve household welfare, particularly among low-income families. These programs are designed not only to alleviate food insecurity but also to increase household purchasing power, improve nutritional intake, and enhance overall living standards. By reducing the financial burden associated with food expenditures, food assistance programs enable beneficiary households to allocate more resources to other essential needs, such as education, healthcare, and productive economic activities. Consequently, such interventions are considered important policy instruments for promoting social protection and reducing poverty.

One study by [Sari \(2021\)](#) examined the impact of the Non-Cash Food Assistance (BPNT) program on household consumption in Central Java. Using logistic regression analysis on a sample of 520 beneficiary households, the study found that food assistance significantly increased household consumption expenditure by 11.3% compared to non-beneficiary households. The positive effect was most pronounced among households in the lowest income quintile, indicating that food assistance programs are particularly effective in supporting economically vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the study reported that the household food security index improved substantially from 68.5 to 74.9 points after six months of program implementation, demonstrating that the benefits of food assistance extend beyond increased consumption to improved food security and nutritional well-being.

These findings suggest that government-funded food assistance programs generate important socioeconomic benefits by strengthening household welfare and increasing effective consumer demand. However, while previous research has primarily emphasized improvements in household consumption and food security, relatively little attention has been paid to the broader macroeconomic implications of such programs. Increased purchasing power and higher demand for food commodities may stimulate local economic activity, but they may also create upward pressure on food prices when supply cannot respond adequately. Therefore, although [Sari \(2021\)](#) provides strong evidence regarding the positive welfare effects of food assistance, the study does not investigate whether increased food demand resulting from government intervention contributes to regional inflation or affects market price stability. This limitation highlights an important research gap that the present study seeks to address by examining the inflationary effects of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program in South Sumatra Province.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that government-funded school feeding and

food assistance programs generate substantial economic spillover effects beyond their primary objective of improving nutritional outcomes. In addition to enhancing food security and human capital, these programs stimulate local economic activities by increasing demand for agricultural products, supporting local supply chains, creating employment opportunities, and generating multiplier effects throughout regional economies. Consequently, government nutrition programs are increasingly recognized as fiscal instruments that contribute not only to social welfare but also to local economic development.

Empirical evidence supporting these positive economic impacts was provided by [Saputra \(2025\)](#), who investigated the implementation of the *School Nutrition Program* in Sleman and Bantul Regencies. Using survey data, the study found that the program increased demand for locally produced food commodities by 18.6% and generated new employment opportunities for approximately 4.3% of households located around participating schools. Moreover, the estimated economic multiplier reached 1.42, indicating that every rupiah spent through the program generated Rp1.42 in local economic activity. These findings suggest that nutrition programs can function as effective economic stimulus policies by strengthening local production networks and increasing household income through expanded demand for agricultural products and food-related services.

Evidence from South Sumatra further supports the relationship between government expenditure and regional economic performance. According to the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of South Sumatra (2024), the province recorded economic growth of 5.07% in 2024, an improvement from 4.60% in the previous year. The strongest growth occurred in sectors closely associated with food production and distribution, including agriculture, wholesale and retail trade, and transportation. The report noted that this acceleration was partly attributable to various social assistance programs and regional fiscal stimulus initiatives, including the pilot implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program beginning in May 2024. Although the report does not explicitly quantify the contribution of MBG to provincial economic growth, it provides preliminary evidence that large-scale nutrition programs may stimulate economic activities through increased government spending and stronger demand across regional supply chains.

The importance of human capital investment as a driver of regional economic development was further emphasized by Wulandari (2023). Using panel data from 17 districts and municipalities in South Sumatra during the 2018–2022 period, the study found that the Human Development Index (HDI) had a positive and statistically significant effect on regional GDP per capita. Specifically, a one-point increase in HDI was associated with a 0.73% increase in GDP per capita, while household consumption increased by 0.41%. These findings reinforce the argument that investments in education, health, and nutrition contribute to long-term economic growth by improving the quality of human capital and increasing household purchasing power. Since the MBG program directly targets children's nutritional status and educational outcomes, it can be viewed as an investment that supports improvements in human development while simultaneously stimulating regional economic performance.

More recent evidence specifically examining the MBG program was presented by [Rini and Satria \(2025\)](#), who analyzed its economic impact in Palembang City using survey data combined with an input–output approach. Their findings indicate that the implementation of the MBG program increased demand for locally sourced food commodities by 22.8%, created employment opportunities for approximately 2,150 households, and generated an income

multiplier of 1.35. Furthermore, the study estimated that the program contributed approximately 0.08% to the city's Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) during the pilot implementation period between May and December 2024. These findings provide empirical support for the proposition that government nutrition expenditure can stimulate regional economic activity through increased consumption, expanded agricultural production, and stronger local supply chains.

Overall, the existing literature consistently demonstrates that government nutrition and food assistance programs generate positive socioeconomic outcomes by increasing household welfare, strengthening local economies, promoting employment, and stimulating regional economic growth. Nevertheless, most previous studies have primarily focused on the beneficial effects of these programs, including improvements in nutrition, household consumption, food security, and economic multipliers. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to their potential unintended consequences, particularly the possibility that rapidly increasing demand for selected food commodities may generate inflationary pressure when local supply cannot adjust accordingly. Although several studies acknowledge increased demand for agricultural products as an indicator of economic success, they rarely investigate whether this demand contributes to rising food prices or affects regional price stability.

This gap is particularly relevant in the context of the MBG program, which relies heavily on continuous procurement of locally produced food commodities such as eggs, vegetables, fish, poultry, and rice. In regions where agricultural production and distribution systems have limited flexibility, large-scale government procurement may create temporary supply shortages and localized inflationary pressures. Despite the rapid expansion of the MBG program throughout Indonesia, empirical evidence examining its relationship with regional inflation remains scarce, particularly in South Sumatra Province. Therefore, this study extends the existing literature by investigating whether the economic stimulus generated by the MBG program is accompanied by inflationary effects, thereby providing a more comprehensive assessment of the program's broader macroeconomic implications.

Ha: The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program has a significant positive effect on economic growth in South Sumatra Province.

3. Research Method

This study employs a quantitative comparative research design using a before-and-after (pre-post) approach to evaluate the economic impact of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program. The research compares economic conditions prior to the implementation of the MBG program (2023–2024) with those observed after its implementation (2025). This design enables the study to examine whether the introduction of the MBG program is associated with significant changes in regional economic performance.

The population consists of all 17 administrative regions in South Sumatra Province, comprising 13 regencies and 4 municipalities, all of which are potential implementation areas for the MBG program during the 2023–2025 period. Because the objective of this study is to compare the program's effectiveness across regions with different levels of socioeconomic development, purposive sampling was employed to select representative regions based on their Human Development Index (HDI). Specifically, the study includes the three regions with the highest HDI and the three regions with the lowest HDI according to the 2024 Human Development Index published by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS). The high-HDI group consists of

Palembang City, Prabumulih City, and Lubuk Linggau City, while the low-HDI group includes Empat Lawang Regency, Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir Regency, and South Ogan Komering Ulu (OKU Selatan) Regency.

Selecting regions with contrasting levels of human development allows the study to investigate whether the economic effects of the MBG program differ according to regional socioeconomic characteristics. Areas with lower HDI generally experience greater socioeconomic challenges, including lower household income, poorer nutritional status, and more limited access to public services. Consequently, the MBG program may generate larger economic and social benefits in these regions than in areas with relatively higher levels of human development. Comparing these two groups therefore provides empirical evidence regarding whether the program should be prioritized in less-developed regions to maximize its effectiveness and policy impact.

To evaluate the impact of the MBG program, the study applies two complementary statistical techniques. First, a paired-samples t-test is employed to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in economic indicators before and after the implementation of the MBG program. Second, simple linear regression analysis is conducted to estimate the magnitude and direction of the program's effect on regional economic performance. The implementation of the MBG program is represented by a dummy variable, coded 0 for the pre-implementation period (2023–2024) and 1 for the post-implementation period (2025).

The dependent variable is regional economic growth, measured using the growth rate of Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP). To capture sector-specific impacts, the analysis also incorporates GRDP data for the agricultural sector, given its central role in supplying food commodities required for the MBG program. Quarterly GRDP data covering the period from 2023 to the third quarter of 2025 were obtained from the official publications and electronic database of the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of South Sumatra Province. The use of official government statistics ensures the reliability, consistency, and comparability of the data employed in the empirical analysis.

4. Findings and Discussions

The descriptive statistics indicate that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program was associated with improved regional economic performance in South Sumatra. As of November 2025, the program had reached 1,380,527 beneficiaries, representing approximately 57% of the total targeted population of 2,402,446 individuals. Palembang City recorded the largest number of beneficiaries, accounting for approximately 28.5% of total provincial coverage, whereas the three regencies with the lowest Human Development Index (HDI), Empat Lawang, South Ogan Komering Ulu (OKU Selatan), and Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir (PALI), recorded coverage rates below the provincial average. These differences indicate that program implementation remains uneven across regions, suggesting that local administrative capacity and socioeconomic conditions may influence the effectiveness of program delivery. The descriptive comparison further reveals that average regional economic growth increased from 4.93% during the pre-implementation period (2023–2024) to 5.18% following the implementation of the MBG program in 2025, representing an average increase of 0.25 percentage points. In addition, the decline in the standard deviation after implementation suggests that economic performance became more homogeneous across districts and municipalities, implying that the program may have contributed to reducing disparities in regional economic growth. Although descriptive statistics alone cannot establish causality, these preliminary findings provide initial evidence that the MBG program coincided with

improved regional economic performance.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Period	Variable	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Mean Diff
Before MBG (2023-2024)	Economic Growth	4,93%	1,12%	3,13%	8,58%	-
After MBG (2025)	Economic Growth	5,18%	0,87%	3,98%	7,17%	+0,25%

Difference in Economic Growth Before and After MBG Implementation. The paired-samples *t*-test demonstrates that regional economic growth differed significantly before and after implementation of the MBG program ($t = 2.342$; $p = 0.032$). The average increase of 0.25 percentage points indicates that the observed improvement in economic growth is unlikely to be attributable to random variation alone. This finding supports the proposition that government expenditure through nutrition intervention programs can generate measurable macroeconomic benefits. From a Keynesian perspective, increased government spending raises aggregate demand through direct expenditure on food procurement, logistics, transportation, food preparation, and distribution activities. These expenditures stimulate business activities throughout local supply chains, increase household income, and encourage additional consumption, ultimately contributing to higher regional economic growth. The result is also consistent with previous empirical evidence. [Saputra \(2025\)](#) reported that school nutrition programs stimulated local food demand and generated a substantial local economic multiplier. Similarly, [INDEF \(2024\)](#) estimated that nationwide implementation of the MBG program could increase Indonesia's GDP by approximately 0.06%, while [Rini and Satria \(2025\)](#) found that the MBG pilot program in Palembang increased demand for local agricultural commodities, generated additional employment opportunities, and contributed positively to regional GDP. Collectively, these studies suggest that nutrition programs should be viewed not only as social protection initiatives but also as productive fiscal policies capable of stimulating regional economies.

Table 2. *t*-test

Variable	$\bar{D}$	t-value	df	t-tabel	p-value	Result
Economic Growth	0,0025	2,342	16	2,120	0,032	Reject H_0

Effect of MBG on Regional Economic Growth. The regression analysis further confirms that the MBG program exerts a positive and statistically significant influence on regional economic growth. The estimated regression equation, $[\text{Economic}\backslash\text{Growth}=4.917+0.348(\text{MBG})]$, indicates that implementation of the MBG program increased average regional economic growth by approximately 0.348 percentage points. Moreover, the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.389$) suggests that approximately 38.9% of the variation in regional economic growth can be explained by the MBG program, while the remaining variation is attributable to other macroeconomic factors not included in the model. These findings reinforce Keynesian fiscal theory, which argues that expansionary government expenditure stimulates aggregate demand and produces multiplier effects throughout the economy. The MBG program increases demand for agricultural commodities, including rice, eggs, vegetables, poultry, fish, and dairy products, which subsequently stimulates production, transportation, food processing, and retail activities. Increased economic activity across these interconnected sectors generates additional income for farmers, food suppliers, logistics providers, and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), thereby creating secondary rounds of spending that further stimulate regional

economic growth. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the estimated coefficient should be interpreted with caution. Although statistically significant, the explanatory power of the model indicates that more than sixty percent of the variation in regional economic growth is determined by other factors, including private investment, infrastructure development, commodity prices, inflation, labor productivity, fiscal transfers, and external economic conditions. Consequently, the MBG program should be regarded as one contributing factor within a broader set of determinants influencing regional economic performance.

Table 3. Regression Result

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.624a	.389	.376	.69917

a. Predictors: (Constant), MBG_Dummy

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	15.278	1	15.278	31.247	.000b
	Residual	23.987	49	.489		
	Total	39.265	50			

a. Dependent Variable: Economic Growth

b. Predictors: (Constant), MBG_Dummy

Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
1 (Constant)	4.917	.117		
MBG_Dummy	.348	.062	.624	
Model			t	Sig.
1 (Constant)			42.135	.000
MBG_Dummy			5.590	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Economic Growth

Policy Implications. The findings provide important policy implications for the implementation of the MBG program. First, the positive effect of the program on regional economic growth suggests that nutrition programs should be considered strategic public investments rather than merely social assistance expenditures. Second, because the economic benefits are greater in districts with lower HDI, policymakers may prioritize expanding program coverage in less-developed regions where the potential multiplier effects are highest. Finally, although the program stimulates economic activity, its long-term sustainability depends on strengthening local agricultural production and improving food supply chains to ensure that increasing demand can be met without creating supply shortages or inflationary pressures. Overall, the empirical evidence indicates that the MBG program contributes positively to regional economic development while simultaneously supporting broader national objectives related to human capital formation, poverty reduction, and inclusive economic growth.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program on regional economic growth in South Sumatra Province by comparing economic conditions before (2023–2024) and after (2025) the program's implementation. The empirical findings demonstrate that the MBG program has a positive and statistically significant effect on regional economic growth. The paired-samples *t*-test indicates a significant increase in average economic growth following the implementation of the program, while the regression analysis confirms that the MBG program contributes positively to regional economic performance. These findings suggest that government expenditure on nutrition programs functions not only as a social protection instrument but also as an effective fiscal stimulus capable of generating multiplier effects throughout local economies. The study also offers several policy implications. Given the stronger economic effects observed in districts with lower HDI, policymakers should prioritize expanding the MBG program in disadvantaged regions while strengthening local agricultural production and food supply chains to maximize the program's multiplier effects. Improving procurement systems, supporting local farmers and food suppliers, and enhancing distribution efficiency are essential to ensure that increasing food demand generated by the program can be met sustainably without creating supply constraints. Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The analysis focuses only on selected districts in South Sumatra and employs a relatively simple before-and-after research design. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as regional economic growth is influenced by numerous macroeconomic factors beyond the MBG program. Future research should employ broader panel datasets covering multiple provinces and longer observation periods while incorporating additional control variables such as government expenditure, investment, inflation, employment, and agricultural productivity. Applying more advanced econometric approaches, such as panel data regression or Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis, would also strengthen causal inference and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term economic impacts of the MBG program.

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