



Volume 6	Issue 1	July (2026)	DOI: 10.47540/ijqr.v6i1.2799	Page: 145 – 155
----------	---------	-------------	------------------------------	-----------------

Negotiating power, managing nutrition: contestation of local governance Indonesia's free nutritious meal program

Dedi Epriadi¹, Mulia Jaya¹

¹Universitas Muara Bungo, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Dedi Epriadi; Email: epriadidedi@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Hybrid Governance, Negotiated Legitimacy, Symbolic Statecraft.

Received : 05 May 2026

Revised : 08 July 2026

Accepted : 10 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Public nutrition policy in the Global South increasingly operates beyond the boundaries of technocratic welfare administration. This article investigates how Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Programme (MBG) evolves into a contested arena of negotiated legitimacy, symbolic statecraft, and relational governance. Using an interpretive-constructivist approach, the study examines MBG implementation in Bungo Regency through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that welfare distribution does not function through coherent bureaucratic coordination alone, but through fragmented negotiations among local governments, schools, informal actors, and community networks. MBG operates not merely as a nutritional intervention, but as a political technology through which the state reproduces visibility, moral authority, and public legitimacy in everyday social life. The study further demonstrates that governance in the Global South is sustained less by procedural certainty than by relational bargaining, bureaucratic improvisation, and symbolic performances of welfare. The article contributes to interpretive governance scholarship by reconceptualizing nutrition policy as a relational mechanism for the production of state authority under conditions of hybrid and contested governance.

INTRODUCTION

Social policy has never fully functioned as a politically neutral instrument of welfare. The greater the capacity of the state to distribute welfare, the greater the possibility of the policy as a mechanism of production of legitimacy, regulation of social loyalty and reproduction of political authority.

In the Global South, governance problems are no longer simply about the weakness of formal institutions, but about how power works relationally through public policy that appears administrative and technocratic on its face. The state exists in the name of social protection, but welfare practices often occur in informal negotiations, political patronage, elite competition, and the improvisation of institutions that are always in flux.

In such conditions, social policy can no longer be interpreted as a mere public service practice, but as a space for managing welfare and regulating the visibility of state power (Hickey, S., Lavers, T., &

Niño-Zarazúa, 2024). Such a phenomenon can be increasingly observed in worldwide public food policy development after the pandemic. Food insecurity, the threat of stunting, increasing health disparities, and pressures on quality of human resource development have impelled several countries to scale up public nutrition interventions through school meal programmes and state-based food assistance.

However, developments in the recent literature show that the school feeding programme has never worked just as a public health instrument. In fact, public food policies rather become a medium of symbolic statecraft that strengthens the state in constructing moral authority through the distribution of welfare (Ainsworth et al., 2024). From this perspective, food is no longer merely a question of the biological needs of the community, but also a question of the production of political meanings of who is entitled to protection, who is entitled to decide what is worthy of fulfilment, and

how the state realises social legitimacy through public distribution practices.

And this is where the distribution of nutrition becomes a distribution of power. The state not only regulates the nutritional needs of its citizens but also regulates the perceptions of care, partiality, and moral authority in the public sphere. Thus, social policy is not only a welfare intervention but also a political technology that allows the state to enhance its symbolic presence through welfare acts. Administratively, what is often narrated as nutritional coordination frequently becomes an arena of contestation over authority, legitimacy, and control over the distribution of public resources.

Viewed from the perspective of the Global South, the main difficulty of welfare administration is therefore not only related to administrative incapacity, but also to the persistence of governance theory that tends to imagine the state as a coherent, impersonal, and politically neutral technocratic structure. Here the fundamental weakness of modern governance theory begins to appear. For too long, social policy has been understood as a matter of distribution management. The political life of welfare implementation takes place through informal relations, public morality, and power negotiations not fully categorised as formal administrative processes.

Much of contemporary governance scholarship continues to assume that policy implementation proceeds through coherent institutions, procedural rationality, and administratively stabilised authority. Such assumptions become increasingly inadequate in the Global South, where governance frequently unfolds through fragmented legitimacy, informal bargaining, relational patronage, and continuously negotiated authority that exceed the formal boundaries of bureaucratic institutions.

In developing countries, however, where decentralization is poorly defined, bureaucratic capacity is uneven, informal networks are pervasive, and local political patronage is entrenched, these incapacities are magnified. As we argue here, governance does not always work

through linear and rational bureaucratic coordination, but through fragmented relational bargaining where national policies are continuously re-translated through political compromises, local interests and situational institutional adaptations.

In practice, the state does not emerge as a coherent structure but rather as a set of actors that are constantly negotiating authority and control over the distribution of welfare. Even the co-creation governance perspective indicates that contemporary public governance increasingly depends on multi-party negotiation, collaborative arenas and the production of legitimacy through social participation (Ansell et al., n.d.).

Indonesia is an essential locus for reading the dynamics. The Free Nutritious Meal Programme (MBG) is not only a programme of fighting stunting or developing human resources, but a political welfare symbol that is born in the framework of a competitive electoral democracy. This programme is provided as a kind of state attention to the future of the younger generation and a moral representation of the government in establishing an image of alignment with society.

Yet MBG also establishes a large distribution arena of public resources, enlarges the state's contractual network, brings in new implementing actors, and opens up the space for political legitimacy reproduction at all levels of government (Rassanjani et al., 2025).

Comparative experiences in school feeding governance demonstrate that nutritional intervention programs are never institutionally neutral. Governance arrangements differ substantially between centralized state-led systems and localized community-based models, each producing distinct implications for accountability, legitimacy, participation, and implementation effectiveness. These tensions become particularly important in understanding the governance dynamics of Indonesia's MBG programme, where welfare distribution increasingly operates through hybrid and negotiated institutional arrangements.

Table 1. Comparison of Governance Models in School Feeding Programs

Adapted from Better Governance for Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG).

Dimension	Centralized Governance	Localized Governance
Main Characteristics	Program management is concentrated at the national government level	Program management involves local governments, schools, and communities
Primary Orientation	National standardization and rapid expansion	Local adaptation and community participation
Main Advantages	Stronger national control; economies of scale; centralized monitoring and coordination	Stronger social accountability; contextual flexibility; enhanced local legitimacy
Main Weaknesses	Limited sensitivity to local contexts; weak implementation monitoring; higher corruption risks during expansion	Uneven implementation quality; varying local institutional capacities
Governance Relations	Top-down bureaucratic coordination	Collaborative and community-based governance
Distribution Mechanism	National contractors, central kitchens, centralized agencies	Schools, local communities, and regional governments
Governance Risks	Implementation fragmentation; weak local supervision	Interregional disparities in institutional capacity
Country Examples	Botswana, Cape Verde, China	Brazil, India, Japan, Philippines, South Africa

Source: (Berlianto et al., 2026). *Better Governance for Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG)*, Policy Brief No. 36. Centre for Indonesian Policy Studies (CIPS).

As illustrated in Table 1, centralized governance prioritizes bureaucratic control, rapid expansion, and national standardization, whereas localized governance emphasizes contextual adaptation, relational accountability, and community participation. However, the governance of MBG in Indonesia increasingly reflects a hybrid configuration in which centralized policy direction coexists with fragmented local negotiations, informal coordination, and situational institutional improvisation. This tension becomes analytically important because the implementation of welfare policy in the Global South rarely follows a purely technocratic administrative logic.

METHODS

Philosophical and epistemological perspective

The present analysis is informed by a critique of the dominance of technocratic governance, which for too long has considered social policy as a matter of administrative coordination, organizational capacity and the effectiveness of programme distribution. In this epistemological framework, governance is reduced to a managerial mechanism, to be described in terms of formal indicators,

bureaucratic procedures and impersonal institutional rationality. In fact, as has been argued in the introduction section, the implementation of the Free Nutritious Food Programme (MBG) actually shows that the distribution of welfare functions through negotiated legitimacy, symbolic authority, and relational bargaining that is never present in the formal administrative category.

Thus, this paper frames governance not as a finished, stable and politically neutral institution, but as a social practice that is constantly formed through power relations, negotiation and interactor legitimacy struggles. The governance reality in the execution of MBG is understood as socially created (Lim, 2025), morally disputed and contextually negotiated. The state is thus not a coherent, singular administrative organization, but a system of links which works through informal networks, symbols of welfare and techniques of distributing social legitimacy.

The interpretative-constructivist paradigm was chosen because it allows for the implementation of MBG to be perceived not only as a linear administrative process, but as a contested space with institutional improvisation, relational

patronage, political compromise and ever-changing social meanings. Governance in this sense is not an objective entity entrenched in formal institutions or policy texts but rather formed via daily practices, experiences of actors, language of policy and social interactions that determine programme execution on the ground. The goal of this research is not to formulate general laws of governance efficacy, but rather to comprehend the negotiation of legitimacy, the production of welfare as a political language, and the functioning of power via the practice of public nourishment distribution.

Research method and design

The study employed qualitative interpretative enquiry with critical case study orientation (Sasfiani & Adelia, 2024). Such methodological choices are not just technical decisions about the use of qualitative methodologies, but also epistemological repercussions of the article's theoretical perspective that understands MBG as an arena of politics of nutritional regulation. In other words, the method is chosen because the classical governance process based on administrative indicators is not sufficient to describe how the distribution of welfare also functions as a mechanism of establishing legitimacy, regulating moral authority, and replicating local political power.

The research intends to explain governance as a contextual, ambiguous, and contested social practice (Qi, 2025). Hence, a case study design is utilized. Bungo Regency is not merely the site of the project but a theoretical place for viewing the state as a functioning entity through the interplay of formal bureaucracy, relational networks, local patronage and symbolic welfare politics. In this context, the case study functions as an interpretative technique to track the ways in which power is exerted in the distribution of benefits, and how the implementation of policy becomes a site of struggle for social legitimacy.

This research is interpretative in its approach, seeking to make apparent the invisible features of governance in the official administrative narrative. The execution of MBG is not considered as a linear process from policy design to programme implementation, but as a governance spectacle defined by compromise, situational adaptability, institutional improvisation and relational bargaining between players. In this sense, the research is not concerned with the administrative effectiveness of

the programme, but with the politicisation of welfare, with the development of symbolic power, and with the way in which the state obtains legitimacy through the practice of public nourishment distribution.

Participants and setting of the study

This research was carried out in Bungo Regency which was purposefully chosen because it is a local government setting where official bureaucracy, informal coordination networks and local political patronage meet in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Programme (MBG). The regency is a key empirical site because the initial implementation of MBG encompassed a range of cross-institutional players, including local government authorities, technical agencies, schools, security apparatuses, nutrition service providers and local elites.

Participants were purposively sampled, and through snowball, depending upon their direct involvement in the implementation and governance of MBG. Informants included local government officials, sectoral agency representatives, schools' principals, field level implementers, MBG kitchen managers, community leaders and local players in project coordination and delivery. Informant recruitment was iterative until interpretive sufficiency was reached, that is, when the data obtained told about recurring relational patterns, legitimizing narratives, and governance dynamics around MBG implementation (Lim, 2025; (Baker et al., 2018). The emphasis on recurring interpretative patterns and relational meanings aligns with contemporary qualitative enquiry that positions qualitative research as a contextually rich and interpretive process to make sense of complex governance interactions, rather than simply yielding descriptive accounts (Lim, 2025; Sirwan Khalid Ahmed, 2025).

Data gathering

Data were acquired using semi-structured in-depth interviews, field observations and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews were performed in a flexible manner to allow participants to voice their experiences, interpretations and positional understandings of the execution of the Free Nutritious Meal Programme (MBG). Rather than rigid interview procedures, the interviews allowed informants to explain how legitimacy was generated, authority negotiated and national policy

directives translated into local governance practice. This interpretative method enabled the study to capture relational meanings, contested narratives and governance dynamics embedded in everyday policy implementation (Polat, 2025; Liebenberg et al., 2026).

Field observations were conducted to investigate how governance was enacted in practice such as coordination activities, distribution processes of the programme, relationships between the actors and dynamics of implementation in the field. The researcher noted informal coordination techniques, relational negotiations and adaptive governance frameworks that emerged during the implementation of the programme. Further, document analysis was applied to improve contextual interpretation of the policy documents, reports from regional government, coverage from local media, and administrative records related to the implementation of MBG. These letters were studied as institutional texts, embodying governance rationalities, political representations and conflicting narratives around the plan (Katz et al., 2026) and not only as administrative evidence.

Data gathering was iterative throughout the research procedure. Data obtained in the early stage are utilized to guide further study, strengthening particular topics and identification of relational dynamics that occur during the implementation of the programme.

Data Analysis

The data was interpreted by thematic–abductive analysis. The analytical process began with transcribing the interviews, systematically reviewing the field notes and repeatedly immersing in the entire data set to identify interactional patterns, narrative tensions and relational dynamics that emerged throughout the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Programme (MBG). The iterative engagement with the data enabled the study to proceed beyond procedural description and to bring to light the socially negotiated features of governance practice (Sirwan Khalid Ahmed, 2025; Qi, 2025).

The next step was open coding, where first categories were inductively formed from the experiences, language and interpretive statements of players in the field. Codes of relational similarity were then clustered into broader interpretive themes of patronage networks, negotiated legitimacy,

bureaucratic improvisation, welfare symbolism, and relational contestation. These themes were subsequently investigated abductively in an ongoing conversation between empirical data and theoretical conceptions generated throughout the investigation. In this sense abductive reasoning enabled theory and empirical realities to engage in a reflexive manner instead of seeing theory as a static analytical framework that is applied to the facts (Qi, 2025; Timans et al., 2019).

We opted for the abductive approach because it allows a thoughtful engagement between empirical experiences and theoretical problematization. From this perspective, theory is not seen as a static explanatory paradigm but as an interpretive tool that is constantly tested, contested and recreated in the lived experiences of actors and the contextual realities of governance practice. Such an analytical viewpoint is especially applicable to the study of governance structures that are defined by ambiguity, relational negotiation and symbolic contestation in welfare policy implementation (Lim, 2025).

So the research was not only about uncovering empirical themes, but also about explaining how the distribution of social payments became a site of contested legitimacy, symbolic representation and political contestation. The study consequently goes beyond a purely administrative description of policy execution and instead reveals how governance is continuously generated through relational interactions, symbolic performances and everyday political practices among actors participating in MBG implementation.

Positionality, reflexivity and trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of this research was established using the concepts typically used in interpretive qualitative enquiry. In this study, validity was not regarded as an attempt to attain absolute objectivity but as the capacity of the research to generate credibility, contextual richness, reflexive transparency, and consistent links between empirical experiences, interpretative processes, and theoretical reasoning (Lim, 2025; Tracy, 2010). In interpretive governance research, the quality of enquiry is not a function of statistical generalization, but rather of the amount to which the analysis is able to capture the complexity, ambiguity and socially negotiated character of governance practice.

To enhance credibility, we employed prolonged involvement, triangulation of data sources, extensive description and ongoing reflexive interpretation throughout the research process (Irwan Khalid Ahmed, 2025; Liebenberg et al., 2026). The researcher's long-term field engagement resulted in an understanding that governance does not only operate through formal administrative structures but also through relational bargaining, personal proximity, informal negotiations, and socially embedded interactions that become visible only through repeated engagement with field actors. Such protracted contact turned out to be necessary in order to determine how legitimacy and authority were constantly negotiated in the administration of the Free Nutritious Meal Programme (MBG).

Reflexivity was important in this study because the researcher realized that interpretive enquiry cannot completely separate the observer from the social reality that is being studied. Inevitably, the generation of data and meaning was shaped by access to certain actors, social proximity, position in the local context and the dynamics of interaction that occurred during fieldwork (Qi, 2025). In situations of contested legitimacy and unequal power relations, the interview process itself was often a performative space in which actors sought to build favourable images, maintain institutional positions and manage public perceptions in relation to MBG implementation. Interpretation thus requires ongoing reflexive knowledge of the social production, strategic articulation and political positioning of narratives.

Analytical progress was meticulously documented to guarantee reliability, including alterations in interpretation, refinement of coding, and shifting theoretical engagement throughout the research process (Polat, 2025). Confirmability was achieved through preserving transparent links between empirical experience, field interpretations and conceptual justifications generated in the analysis. The credibility of this study therefore did not come from assertions of detached neutrality, but from reflective openness, interpretive consistency, and sensitivity to the relational complexity that shapes governance practices in the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nutritional governance as a political legitimacy production space

The most distinctive aspect of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Programme (MBG) in Bungo Regency is not merely the distribution of food to students, but the transformation of nutritional policy into a mechanism for producing state legitimacy at the local level.

In practice, MBG is not a technocratic device that proceeds in a linear fashion from policy design to administrative implementation. In fact, the programme even became a governance arena of contestation, as many actors sought to build authority, extend influence, and manage public perception of the state's presence. The phenomenon demonstrates that healthy eating policy is not only a public health instrument, but also a technology of welfare politics producing new power relations between state and society (Mifsud et al., 2025).

This is visible in the way the initial implementation of MBG in Bungo was carried out through a very intense symbolic mobilisation. Local governments propose programmes not only as public service agenda but also as moral representation about the concern of the state towards the future of society. School food distribution is seen as a performative practice of governance to demonstrate the presence of the state in the daily lives of citizens.

In this context, food is not just a nutritional object, but a political symbol linking welfare to the power of the government. This finding strengthens the claim of Hanifa et al. (2026) that MBG in Indonesia was developed as a welfare policy that brought fiscal, political, and governance dimensions simultaneously.

One of the informants from the local bureaucracy reflected on this situation by "It's not just the food being built. It's the belief of the society that the government is there." The statement indicates that the implementation of MBG operates through symbolic state presence. The material experience of the presence of the state is not primarily produced by abstract administrative capacity but by something that is visible, tangible and felt by people in a direct way. The distribution of food is a far more visible means of displaying a

state's power than the language of official bureaucracy.

From interpretive governance, this kind of policy symbolism matters because in the Global South, state legitimacy is built more by the people's material proximity and everyday experiences than formal institutional compliance. This finding is also consistent with the research by Suprpto et al. (2025) which indicates that the early success of MBG is greatly affected by the country's capacity to develop social perceptions on bias in favor of human development and public welfare (Suprpto et al., 2025).

This phenomenon extends the debate on the symbolism of welfare in contemporary social policy. But in the Indonesian context, welfare symbolism is not only a moral representation. Empirical data show that welfare symbolism also serves as a relational device for legitimacy that operates through social proximity, public visibility, and local political performance.

In essence, legitimacy of the state is not primarily constituted through strong institutional trust as suggested in the majority of the governance literature in the Global North, but by welfare practices that are ever-present and contested in the everyday social arena. It reveals that the governance of social policy in Indonesia is particularly relational, fluid, and contextual.

This study also alludes to the limitations of a technocratic approach to governance that has long seen social policy as a matter of institutional coordination and implementation capacity. Governance in MBG is a moral-political performance, where the distribution of nutrients becomes a distribution of symbolic authority. This perspective helps to critique the standard administrative model which prioritizes procedural logic over the performative dimension of power in the implementation of public policy (Mifsud et al., 2025).

The finding also confirms, in a broader context, that global school feeding programs often develop not only as health interventions, but also as instruments of social protection and the construction of a social contract between the state and its citizens. Bundy et al. (2024) revealed that the school meal program is one of the largest social protection interventions in the world, covering approximately 420 million children and possessing

a powerful political dimension in strengthening state legitimacy and human development (Bundy et al., 2012).

More importantly, experiences from different countries demonstrate that the success of school feeding programs depends not only on nutritional design but also on governance systems capable of sustaining coordination, institutional trust, and adaptive implementation. Nugroho et al. (2025) argue that free nutritious meal policies require collaborative governance arrangements involving interagency cooperation, multi-stakeholder participation, and flexible institutional coordination to accommodate diverse local contexts and implementation challenges (Nugroho et al., 2025).

In the context of Bungo, this becomes very real when the community understands the MBG not just as a food aid but also as one of the real images of the state "coming down directly" to the living spaces of its citizens. Therefore, the success of the implementation of MBG is not determined just by the effectiveness of the distribution or administrative accuracy but by the program's ability to construct perceptions of the state's bias towards the lower class. Hence, the nutrition in MBG has morphed into a production medium of political legitimacy.

Fragmentation of authority and hybrid governance arrangement

At the implementation stage, there is no single coherent bureaucratic structure governing the MBG program. Rather, the program reflects a hybrid governance arrangement involving local governments, schools, security institutions, healthy kitchen providers, political actors, and informal community networks operating through overlapping institutional domains. Relations among these actors are not always coordinated through formal administrative procedures, but frequently emerge through negotiated authority, institutional improvisation, and adaptive responses to local implementation challenges. These findings suggest that MBG governance functions more as a relational and flexible governance network than as a rigid Weberian bureaucratic system grounded solely in hierarchical control and procedural uniformity (Torfing et al., 2025).

Such conditions were evident in the early phase of implementation when the national mechanism was still in the consolidation phase,

while the local government had started to carry out field coordination, identification of targeted schools and establishment of local distribution networks. In practice, many operational decisions do not arise from the certainty of formal regulation, but from situational compromises between actors. The condition reflects that the implementation of policies in Indonesia often goes through bureaucratic improvisation rather than stable administrative certainty.

A field implementer explains “Sometimes the central guidance is not clear, but the region still has to move because the community is already waiting.” The statement indicates that the policy implementation is motivated by the local actors' interpretative flexibility in order to preserve the program's sustainability as well as to avoid political delegitimization in the eyes of the public. This finding further strengthens the criticism expressed by Berlianto et al. (2026) regarding the MBG governance model, which is deemed too centralized and has not fully provided space for local capacity in program management (Berlianto et al., 2026).

Other interview data illustrates the layered and fluid structure of the program's own coordination “If it is at the level of the coordinator. “There are facilitators and teams from the local government entities at the team coordination level.” This quote implies that the governance of MBG does not operate through a fully rigid administrative chain of command. Rather, what emerges is a multi-layered structure of coordination in which authority is continuously negotiated and reproduced through interactions among actors rather than solely through formal institutional arrangements. Contemporary governance scholarship increasingly views the state not as a singular actor monopolizing authority, but as part of a broader constellation of interdependent actors linked through flexible and adaptive governance relationships (Jungblut et al., n.d.).

This finding shows that the implementation of the MBG program in Bungo follows a hybrid governance pattern that combines the logic of state bureaucracy with informal coordination practices at the local level. Although the central government continues to maintain symbolic and administrative control, the success of implementation depends heavily on the ability of local actors to build social relations, informal coordination, and societal legitimacy. This finding is consistent with Trondal

(2026), who argues that contemporary public administration increasingly operates through multi-level and hybrid governance arrangements in which policy effectiveness depends not only on centralized authority, but also on the capacity of local actors to negotiate coordination, legitimacy, and institutional adaptation within complex governance environments (Trondal, 2025).

In this context, collaborative governance does not take place in a fully equal deliberative forum as assumed by Ansell and Gash (2008). In fact, collaboration in MBG is conducted in situations of asymmetrical relations with local actors involved but with uneven distribution of influence. The central government continues to steer policy and regulatory design, leaving local actors to navigate a narrow space of improvisation. Therefore, MBG governance is better understood as a negotiated governance arrangement rather than harmonious collaborative governance (Ainsworth et al., 2024).

Apart from that, governance fragmentation is also determined by the absence of truly mature implementation standards. Busey et al. (2024) shows that globally, there are still very few countries that have strong regulations regarding nutritional standards, restrictions on food ingredients, and mechanisms of oversight in school meals policy (Busey et al., 2024). This indicates that the governance difficulty in the school feeding program is not only Indonesia's concern but also a worldwide challenge related to cross-sector coordination, implementation monitoring, and sustainability of policy.

Furthermore, Monalisa (2026) found that universal school feeding programs do have positive impacts on health, social inclusion, student behavior, and stigma reduction, but that effectiveness is highly influenced by governance design, distribution patterns, and local implementation capacity. These findings enhance the idea that the success of MBG is not merely a matter of food distribution but a matter of governance capability in managing the relationship between actors, building social legitimacy and maintaining the political sustainability of policy.

CONCLUSION

The research shows that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in Bungo Regency cannot be understood only as a nutrition

policy or a technocratic intervention in the health and education sectors. The empirical findings reveal that MBG evolves as a governance battleground that produces and negotiates the state's political legitimacy at the local level. The distribution of food is not only functioning to meet the nutritional needs of students but also functions as a symbolic medium that represents the concrete presence of the state in the lives of the community. In such a context, nutrition also becomes an instrument of welfare politics that strengthens the relations of the state, society and local actors.

MBG governance in Bungo Regency, the research also identified, occurs via a hybrid governance arrangement configuration which includes the state bureaucracy, school, local government, informal community networks, and local political actors in a fluid and continuously negotiated relationship. Programs are not implemented in a fully linear and stable bureaucratic structure but through administrative improvisation, situational compromise and informal inter-actor coordination. The authority of implementation is not only determined by written regulations but also by the capacity of local actors to build social legitimacy, maintain relational ties, and translate national policy into the practices of everyday life.

The findings show the limitations of the technocratic governance approach and some assumptions of the collaborative governance overemphasizing the policy implementation as a matter of formal administrative coordination. In practice, MBG governance is a relational process full of negotiations of power, symbols of well-being, and state political performance. Thus, the success of MBG implementation is not just measured by food distribution indicators or bureaucratic efficiency but also by the program's ability to build public legitimacy, social trust and perceptions of state bias towards society.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of interpretive public administration and governance studies in the Global South by showing that nutrition-based social policy is an arena for the production of political legitimacy that is heavily influenced by local relational contexts. This research extends the understanding of social policy governance by thinking about the state not as a single administrative actor, but as a network of

relationships that is continuously produced via everyday welfare practices. In this context, MBG does not only represent the policy of human development but also represents how the state builds its authority through the distribution of welfare that is both symbolic, material and political.

The findings therefore suggest that future studies of welfare governance in the Global South must move beyond technocratic assumptions and pay greater attention to the relational, symbolic, and politically negotiated dimensions through which state authority is continuously reproduced in everyday policy practice.

REFERENCES

- Agostino, D., Saliterer, I., & Steccolini, I. (2022). Digitalization, accounting and accountability: A literature review. *Financial Accountability & Management*, 38(3), 298–320.
- Alhanatleh, H., Aboalganam, K., & Awad, H. (2022). Electronic government public value of public institutions in Jordan. *International Journal of Data and Network Science*, 6(1), 27–36.
- Alkrajji, A. I. (2020). Citizen satisfaction with mandatory e-government services: A conceptual framework and an empirical validation. *IEEE Access*, 8, 117253–117265.
- Al-Rahmi, W. M., Uddin, M., Alkhalaf, S., Al-Dhlan, K. A., Cifuentes-Faura, J., Al-Rahmi, A. M., & Al-Adwan, A. S. (2022). Validation of an integrated IS success model in the study of e-government. *Mobile Information Systems*, 2022, Article 8909724.
- Androniceanu, A., Georgescu, I., & Kinnunen, J. (2022). Public administration digitalization and corruption in the EU member states: A comparative and correlative research analysis. *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, 2022(65E), 5–22.
- Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), 543–571.
- Ansell, C., & Torfing, J. (2024). *Public governance as co-creation: A strategy for revitalizing the public sector and rejuvenating democracy*. Oxford University Press.

- Berlianto, A. (2026). Governance challenges and decentralization dilemmas in Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 19(1), 55–73.
- Brusca, I., & Martinez, J. C. (2016). Adopting International Public Sector Accounting Standards: A challenge for modernizing and harmonizing government accounting. *Accounting in Europe*, 13(2), 213–232.
- Busey, E., et al. (2024). Regulatory governance and nutritional standards in global school feeding policy. *Global Food Security*, 41, 100756.
- Chen, J. V., Hiele, T. M., & Lin, M.-T. (2022). Examining Taiwan's national health insurance website quality and customers' loyalty. *International Journal of Healthcare Technology and Management*, 19(2), 146–166.
- DeLone, W. H., & McLean, E. R. (2003). The DeLone and McLean model of information systems success: A ten-year update. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 19(4), 9–30.
- Dobrolyubova, E. (2021). Measuring outcomes of digital transformation in public administration: Literature review and possible steps forward. *NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy*, 14(1), 61–86.
- El Barqa, M., Sandrawati, A., & Tyas, A. A. W. P. (2025). Organizational culture transformation in bureaucratic reform and digitalization in government agencies. *Modern Society and Education Journal*, 6(4), 6553–6559.
- Halawi, L. A., McCarthy, R. V., & Aronson, J. E. (2007). An empirical investigation of knowledge management systems' success. *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 48(2), 121–135.
- Hickey, S., Lavers, T., & Niño-Zarazúa, M. (2024). The politics of social protection in the Global South. *World Development*, 176, 106516.
- Hooda, A., Gupta, P., Jeyaraj, A., Giannakis, M., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2022). The effects of trust on behavioral intention and use behavior within e-government contexts. *International Journal of Information Management*, 67, Article 102553.
- Katz, A., Fleming, G.C. & Main, J.B. (2026). Thematic analysis with open-source generative AI and machine learning: a new method for inductive qualitative codebook development. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 13, 209.
- Khan, A., Krishnan, S., & Dhir, A. (2021). Electronic government and corruption: Systematic literature review, framework, and agenda for future research. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 167, Article 120737.
- Liebenberg, L., Simmonds, T., Eboime, E. (2026). A participatory action research qualitative thematic analysis of young men's perspectives on well-being and flourishing. *Discov Public Health* 23, 548.
- Lim, W. M. (2025). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 33(1), 1–13.
- Locke, A., Briggs, L., & Martin, P. (2025). Universal school meals and student wellbeing: Governance implications and implementation outcomes. *Health Policy*, 139, 104934.
- Malodia, S., Dhir, A., Mishra, M., & Bhatti, Z. A. (2021). Future of e-government: An integrated conceptual framework. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 173, Article 121102.
- Manoharan, A. P., Melitski, J., & Holzer, M. (2023). Digital governance: An assessment of performance and best practices. *Public Organization Review*, 23(1), 265–283.
- Mifsud, D., & Wilkins, A. (2025). Performative governance and symbolic welfare politics in contemporary public administration. *Public Administration Review*, 85(1), 77–91.
- Mifsud, D., & Wilkins, A. (2025). Performative governance and symbolic welfare politics in contemporary public administration. *Public Administration Review*, 85(1), 77–91.
- Monalisa. (2026). Universal school feeding programs, social inclusion, and governance capacity in welfare implementation. *Social Policy and Administration*.
- Mphahlele, N. S., Kekwaletswe, R. M., & Seaba, T. R. (2025). Model to explain use of e-government service change: Use of unified theory of acceptance and use of technology and information systems

- success model to explain use of e-government service change: Emerging market case. *Telematics and Informatics Reports*, 17, Article 100190.
- Nugroho, A. (2025). Collaborative governance and adaptive coordination in Indonesia's free nutritious meal policy. *Jurnal Bina Praja*.
- Polat, A. (2025). Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Research: Common Pitfalls and Practical Insights for Academic Writing. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24.
- Qi, H., et al. (2025). Interpretive case study and contextual governance analysis in public policy research. *Qualitative Research*, 25(2), 155–173.
- Rassanjani, S., & Rahmi, A. (2025). Welfare governance and political legitimacy in Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal policy. *Jurnal Bina Praja*, 17(1), 45–61.
- Sasfiani, S. (2024). Critical qualitative inquiry and interpretive governance research in Indonesia. *Advances in Administration*, 1(1), 25–34.
- Suprpto, H., et al. (2025). Public perception and legitimacy formation in Indonesia's school nutrition policy. *Bina Praja Journal of Home Affairs Governance*, 17(2), 115–132.
- Tangi, L., Janssen, M., Benedetti, M., & Noci, G. (2021). Digital government transformation: A structural equation modelling analysis of driving and impeding factors. *International Journal of Information Management*, 60, Article 102356.
- The role of accounting information systems in improving the accuracy of budget planning and control in government agencies. *Journal of Economics and Management Studies*, 7(4), 1–18.
- Timans, R., Wouters, P., & Heilbron, J. (2019). Mixed methods research: What it is and what it could be. *Theory and Society*, 48(2), 193–216.
- Torring, J., et al. (2025). *Hybrid governance and adaptive coordination in contemporary public administration*. Governance.
- Tracy, S. J. (2024). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research revisited. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 30(1), 3–16.
- Trondal, J. (2025). The multilevel administrative state and hybrid governance dynamics in contemporary public administration. *International Journal of Public Administration*.
- Veeramootoo, N., Nunkoo, R., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2018). What determines success of an e-government service? Validation of an integrative model of e-filing continuance usage. *Government Information Quarterly*, 35(2), 161–174.
- Wibowo, W. S., Fadhil, A., Sensuse, D. I., Lusa, S., Putro, P. A.W., & Yulfitri, A. (2023).
- Zou, Q., Mao, Z., Yan, R., Liu, S., & Duan, Z. (2023). Vision and reality of e-government for governance improvement: Evidence from global cross-country panel data. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 194, Article 122667