priviet lab.
RESEARCH & PUBLISHING

Priviet Social Sciences Journal

Volume 6
Issue 1 January, 2026

Article 43

20-01-2026

Rethinking the allocation of MBG funds: Toward justice, utility, and national benefit

Taufikin

To cite this article: Taufikin, T. (2026). Rethinking the allocation of MBG funds: Toward justice, utility, and national benefit. *Priviet Social Sciences Journal, 6*(1), 465-477. https://doi.org/10.55942/pssj.v6i1.748

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.55942/pssj.v6i1.748

Private Social Sciences Journal
E-ISSN 2798-866X
P-ISSN 2798-6314
https://doi.org/10.55942/pssj.v6i1.748

Volume 6
Issue 1
January Edition 2026

Rethinking the allocation of MBG funds: Toward justice, utility, and national benefit

Taufikin

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kudus, Jl. Conge, Ngembalrejo, Bae, Kudus, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia
e-mail: taufikin@uinsuku.ac.id

Received 20 September 2025
Revised 25 November 2025
Accepted 20 January 2026

ABSTRACT

The "Meal-Based Grant (MBG)" is an education welfare package, which is concurrently provided to all students without differentiation by their family's economic condition, and is typical. While this policy intends to promote equity, there is a risk of waste and unfair distribution if financially advantaged students can access their entitlements from the public purse based on financial means rather than need. This study critically examines the MBG scheme from the perspectives of social justice, maqāṣid al-sharīʿah, and sustainable development. Applying normative-analytical and comparative policy reflection, the study argues that the MBG must be redesigned with greater focus. From there, the model works through a school-level targeting approach to serve only poor, underprivileged, and orphaned children directly. Furthermore, the remaining funds will be transferred for strategic educational investments, such as long-term scholarships at least up to the level of undergraduate studies, school infrastructure upgrading, merit-based awards, and research and innovation funds that include funding student inventions up to patent and industrial realization. Redistribution meets both fairness and efficiency requirements and raises a country's competitive ability and overall social welfare. The transformation from short-term to long-term consumption under the reformed MBG scheme will contribute more effectively to the SDGs: quality education and innovation. Finally, this study offers a new policy direction to strengthen short-run welfare forces through long-term human capital development.

Keywords: Meal-Based Grants; Educational Equity; Sustainable Development; Social Justice; Innovation Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

For a very long time, Meal-Based Grants (MBG) to all students have been justified on educational welfare grounds, even though, for equitable reasons, they should be targeted (Hecht et al., 2021; Orta-Aleman et al., 2024). School feeding programmes are seen in many countries as a means of combating hunger, improving participation rates, and developing links between the school and community. Nevertheless, new literature suggests that universal policies do not come for free: benefits are partially diluted, fiscally costly outlays remain, and the effects of resources on learning outcomes and social mobility may not be proportionate to resource investment (Borbely et al., 2024; Spill et al., 2024). However, the pressing demand to maximize public maslahah and minimize inequality levels, as well as to increase the national level of competitiveness, justifies a more accurate and fairer allocation design, notably in cases of availability on a limited budget.

Rigorous evaluations of school feeding programs have produced various evidence over the past 10 years. A review of UFSM policies has indicated an increase in meal participation and some non-academic indicators (for example, reductions in obesity levels and suspensions), but only small – oftentimes statistically insignificant – increases in attendance and academic achievement (Borbely et al., 2024; Spill et al., 2024). Policy research and global policy reviews also point to differences in implementation, per-student costs, and ongoing challenges with targeting and integration with other social safety nets (Cohen et al., 2021; Schultz et al., 2024). Conversely, national accounts highlight the growth of school feeding programs but stress that improved policy design is necessary to ensure that benefits accrue to the poorest while contributing to broader development objectives (Alderman et al., 2024; WFP, 2025). These two background paragraphs reveal, in no uncertain terms, that the time has come to re-examine whether a universal approach represents a cost-effective and equitable means of allocating MBG funding. The central research question of the current study is distributive injustice and allocative inefficiency when MBG money is directed to all students. Neither rich nor poor students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Within the framework of social justice and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, such uniform allocation risks undermining the principle of equity—providing more for those most in need—and eroding opportunities for long-term educational investment in vulnerable groups (Nur et al., 2020; Tubastuvi & Ramadani, 2025). General solutions offered in policy literature suggest directing assistance toward targeted groups, strengthening school/community-based verification mechanisms, and combining these with value-added interventions such as sustainable scholarships, infrastructure enhancement, and incentives for achievement and innovation.

The literature highlights two major policy routes. First, food assistance for poor, impoverished, and orphaned students should be refined through context-sensitive means testing based on school-level data. Schools' micro-level knowledge of family conditions, attendance, and nutritional needs enables more accurate beneficiary selection while managing administrative costs. This approach aligns with *social protection plus*—not merely addressing consumption gaps but linking assistance with measurable educational goals (IFPRI, 2025; WFP, 2025). Second, it strengthens *home-grown school feeding* (HGSF) as a model that connects school kitchens with local suppliers and smallholder farmers, thereby distributing economic impacts locally and enhancing regional food security (Alderman et al., 2024). Nevertheless, meta-evaluations stress that the success of both routes is highly dependent on governance quality, targeting accuracy, and consistent monitoring and evaluation (Schultz et al., 2024).

In addition, education policy research emphasizes the importance of shifting a portion of MBG funds from short-term consumption to long-term investment in social mobility. Sustainable scholarship schemes up to the undergraduate level, particularly for economically vulnerable groups, have been shown to improve educational continuity and reduce dropout rates in multiple contexts, including Indonesia, when supported by transparent and accountable governance (Kurniawan & Shafira, 2022; Ninghardjanti et al., 2022). At the institutional level, investments in school infrastructure, such as science laboratories, libraries, and digital learning centers, correlate with improvements in the learning environment and opportunities. At the individual level, merit-based awards for top-ranking students (1st–3rd place) foster a healthy achievement climate and encourage positive peer interactions. In addition, funding for research,

technology downstreaming, and patent/incubation facilitation—including the potential establishment of small- and medium-scale industries for graduate innovations—provides an essential bridge from *human capital* to *innovation capital*, strengthening industrial competitiveness and export potential.

The literature also highlights the paradox of stigma reduction versus economic rationality. Universal approaches are frequently lauded for eliminating stigma. Because all children eat together, there is no visible separation between aid recipients and non-beneficiaries, and some studies have documented health benefits and attendance effects (Spill et al., 2024). However, in the context of limited resources, the opportunity cost of feeding wealthier students can be astronomical: every dollar spent on immediate consumption for non-poor population groups is a missed dollar that could otherwise have been allocated to close 'learning poverty gaps' – as currently defined and measured – accelerate transitions to higher education, or foster research and innovation ecosystems. In this perspective, the policy literature supports progressive universalism: high levels of coverage (by making benefit intensity for higher-status groups rise steeply), with lower and diverse forms of fueling targeted toward very needy populations—a working out that could be interpreted as narrowly targeted school feeding to build a long-term investment pathway in education.

At the global level, the World State of School Feeding has disclosed a rapid expansion in coverage in recent years, with national government leadership and alignment to the SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) agendas (WFP, 2025). However, coverage at scale does not equal quality or value for money. Without policy blueprints mindful of equity considerations, cost-effectiveness, and local economic co-benefits, these programs could become bloated fiscal drains with minimal impact on learning (Alderman et al., 2024). Alternatively, the scalability of financing should be matched by smart scalability: targeted fine-tuning, liaisons with scholarships and infrastructure, and a gateway to innovation and industrialization.

Against this background, the study is motivated by three research gaps. First, there has not been a rigorous comparison of UFSM benefits (or narrative dominance) vis-à-vis fiscal tradeoffs for higher-value education interventions (e.g., long-term scholarships, infrastructure, innovation) in middle-income country contexts. Second, evidence on hybrid models that tie tightly targeted School Feeding to cross-level Scholarships and Innovation "downstreaming" support are absent from the literature. Finally, policy ethics frameworks that are anchored around maqāsid al-sharī' ah-based lenses for analyzing equity–efficiency tradeoffs in MBG allocations are wanting.

This study aims to generate evidence-based policy advocacy for reforming MBG financing from a universal (ring-fenced) system to a targeted and context-sensitive one linked with future educational investment. The guiding research questions are as follows: (1) To what extent does recent empirical evidence support or challenge the effectiveness claims of UFSM on key educational indicators compared to alternative allocations? (2) How can accurate school-based targeting designs reduce benefit leakage while mitigating the stigma? (3) How can a reallocation configuration—targeted school meals, scholarships up to the undergraduate level, infrastructure enhancement, merit-based awards, and innovation downstreaming funds—maximize public *maslahah* in the medium- to long-term? The novelty of this study lies in proposing a hybrid policy model that synergizes social protection (nutrition for vulnerable students), *human capital* development (scholarships and infrastructure), and *innovation capital* acceleration (funding patents and industrialization of graduate technologies) within the framework of distributive justice and maqāṣid al-sharī 'ah. Its theoretical contribution lies in refining the *progressive universalism* evaluation framework adapted to middle-income contexts, while its practical contribution is a policy roadmap for education policymakers to ensure that every MBG dollar yields dual benefits: eliminating learning hunger today while unlocking social mobility and economic competitiveness tomorrow.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a normative-comparative analytical strategy to examine meal-based grant (MBG) policies in the context of universal distribution and targeted alternatives.

This was chosen because it combines empirical aspects and normative frameworks, such as an assessment of distributive justice and fiscal efficiency, developed based on theoretically derived principles. As (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2017) highlight, qualitative design affords the experiential immersion of a policy phenomenon and data triangulation from an interpretative perspective. Hence, this approach is appropriate for comprehending the barriers and facilitators of MBG implementation and developing evidence-based recommendations.

2.2. Data Sources

This study was based on two types of data. Secondary data were first gathered from international and national policy reports, including documents published by the World Food Programme (2025) and current systematic reviews and meta-evaluations of school feeding programmes (Schultz et al., 2024; Spill et al., 2024). Second, academic literature comes from established journals justifying the sustainability of scholarships, educational infrastructure, and technology innovations as a potential alternative use of MBG funds (Kurniawan & Shafira, 2022; Ninghardjanti et al., 2022). The screening of secondary data was purposive to retain relevance through directness to the research question, in line with evidence-based policy-making (Nutley et al., 2021).

2.3. Analytical Techniques

The analysis was conducted using inductive content analysis, focusing on thematic interpretation. This process included four steps: gathering literature, initial reading/coding, thematic classification, and argumentative synthesis. This analysis was then conducted inductively, focusing on the central patterns that emerged from the empirical material and thereafter compared with normative frameworks of social justice and maqāṣid al-sharīʿah. This is in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) assertion that thematic analysis can be used when researchers wish to identify patterns of meaning, contradictions, and gaps within policy studies. Triangulation was used to improve validity by comparing the results from different literature sources and policy reports.

3. RESULT

3.1. Effectiveness of Universal MBG Programs on Educational Outcomes

The literature review suggests that the efficacy of MBG provided within a universal approach to benefit education outcomes is still disputed. Spill et al. (2024) indicated that UFSM has a positive effect on improving students' nutrition and health, but not on academic achievement. For example, the achievement indicators, test scores and attendance, are modestly positive, although these often do not reach traditional levels of statistical significance. The same results were reported by Borbely et al. (2024), highlighting that the potential gains of universal programs are related to children's physical health rather than the quality of learning. This emphasizes an incongruence between the budget invested in ISSUP and the achieved results, thus demanding a strong reflection on UFSM's effectiveness in an educational dimension.

Moreover, the World Bank states that there are significant differences in outcomes across countries. In schools with functioning educational systems, this is evident in the results of school attendance, although the evidence for developing countries remains equivocal (Murphy & Ono, 2025; Parnham et al., 2024; Toossi, 2024). These differences are caused by variations in governance capacity, infrastructure (availability), and integration with other educational activities. Therefore, there is an argument for universality, if nothing else, as a mask. However, there is also reason to question whether universal programs are particularly efficient in improving student performance.

3.2. Distributive Gaps and Fiscal Inefficiency

Additional analyses demonstrate disparities in the distributional consequences of universal MBG programs. However, state subsidies to all students without regard to their economic needs mean that rich kids get as much help as poor ones. According to Schultz et al. (2024), this results in the waste of public funds, while benefiting groups are reluctant to reform because they wish to avoid losing the transfer.

Parnham et.al. The study by Nicaise et al. (2024) reinforces this argument, showing that allocating funds to economically advantaged students yields a negligible impact on their well-being or educational performance, thus reducing the marginal benefits of public spending (BenDavid-Hadar, 2018; Cook, 2021; Nicaise et al., 2024).

Distributive injustice is also evident in the Indonesian context. Although national data indicate an increase in school meal program coverage, local evaluations reveal that disadvantaged groups continue to face barriers to education due to other non-academic expenses such as transportation and learning materials (Ninghardjanti et al., 2022). Therefore, the universal provision of MBG benefits does not automatically address the root causes of educational inequity. This underscores the need for policy redesign, focusing on *progressive universalism*, in which assistance intensity is increased for the poorest and most vulnerable groups.

3.3. Potential of Targeted Schemes for Enhancing Efficiency

Evidence from the literature supports the notion that targeted schemes are more efficient than universal ones in achieving their goals. School-based targeting mechanisms are deemed effective in identifying poor, extremely poor, and orphaned students with high accuracy (WFP, 2025). Schools with intimate data on family background, student attendance, and detailed information might play a pivotal role in the selection. A recent WFP (2025) assessment of home-grown school feeding (HGSF) also demonstrates that targeted approaches are cost-effective and have positive effects on local economies through the engagement of smallholder farmers in purchasing food supply chains (Asogwa et al., 2025; Gupta et al., 2025).

However, studies underscore the governance concerns associated with these schemes. The risks of mistargeting and misappropriating funds remain high without robust monitoring and evaluation (Schultz et al., 2024). Hence, the success of targeted models is a function of school-level administrative capacity and precise distribution mechanisms. When properly fielded, they are expected to allocate public resources more efficiently and deliver higher benefits to the most vulnerable.

3.4. Sustainable Scholarships as Long-Term Educational Investment

Alongside school feeding programmes, sustainable scholarships have been documented to substantially affect the educational persistence of people experiencing poverty (see literature). Research by Ninghardjanti et al. (2022) on Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP) beneficiaries shows that the recipients of scholarships are more likely to reach higher levels in education than do non-beneficiaries. These results are supported by (Alexe et al., 2015; Berlanga & Corti, 2025), prioritizing the impact on social mobility and disparities in access to higher education scholarships.

The Economic Cost of Long-Ad Hoc Investment in Scholarships. The state enhances its human capital by providing education to the underprivileged up to university level and encourages innovation, which leads to national progress. Policy-wise, it may be more cost-effective to redirect some of the MBG budget into a cross-level scholarship programme than in short-term consumptive initiatives that include universal provision of free school meals.

3.5. Strengthening Educational Infrastructure

Moreover, the analysis indicates that strengthening educational systems is another alternative from a strategic perspective for taking over MBG resources. Comparison Studies by the World Bank proved that investment in disciplines such as the laboratories of science, library, and DLMS center significantly influence the quality of the learning climate (Balqis et al., 2023; Belmonte et al., 2020). Through increased infrastructure, more students would be exposed to a wide range of learning resources, which could motivate them to achieve higher academic performance.

Even today, educational disparities remain a significant issue in Indonesia, particularly in rural and remote areas. Therefore, transferring MBG resources to support educational structures could reduce regional differences and be an optimal strategy for quality improvement. This is consistent with SDG 4, which emphasizes the need for equitable and quality learning environments for all students.

3.6. Merit-Based Recognition and a Healthy Competitive Climate

Incentives, grants, and infrastructure are also viable approaches to promote academic motivation. We have discovered that prizes (1st—3rd) for students motivate the children, fostering a competitive spirit amongst them and encouraging peer aspiration. Research in education by Ryan and Deci on self-determination theory supports this view; they maintain that consideration of one person's achievement improves intrinsic motivation and academic performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Their application of price discrimination could be considered an academic "culture policy tool" based on merit in particular. This is why the transfer of MBG funds to excellence-based recognition not only generates private good but, in fact, develops a quality-oriented education ecosystem.

3.7. Funding Innovation and Technology Downstreaming

Finally, the importance of funding for research, patents and technology downstreaming in stimulating student and graduate creativity is highlighted. From an innovation policy literature point of view, investment in innovation capital permanently influences a country's competitiveness (Sezer, 2018; Yilmaz, 2024). The application of public funding for student research, from a patentable product to an industrialized application, can propel the production of technology products with high added value, which can be exported.

In Indonesia, this approach is highly relevant, competing breathlessly. In using MBG money for innovation, the government immediately gives these students what they need — new ways to learn — and ensures that they are working on practical technological innovations that will benefit the country.

3.8. Synthesis of Findings

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that while universal MBG programs are associated with some positive health and nutritional access outcomes, their potential contribution to improved educational outcomes and distributive justice is relatively small. In contrast, a more targeted use of MBG money and alternative investments, such as infrastructure projects, sustainability scholarships, merit-based acknowledgements, or innovation funds, will likely yield results over the longer term. Hence, the findings increase the evidence that MBG policies should move away from universalism toward hybrids of social protection and human capital formation with acceleration for innovation capital.

From a combination of empirical and normative perspectives, this article argues that revenue diversions to MBGs are not so much about fiscal expedience as a development subterfuge framed in terms of principles informed by notions of social justice and maqāṣid al-sharī'ah. Therefore, this study provides valuable perspectives for policymakers to create justifiable, effective, and lasting interventions.

4. DISCUSSION

The above discussion entails an extensive inquiry into the research findings on meal-based grant policies. Notably, the discussion establishes aspects such as effectiveness, distributive justice, fiscal efficiency, and alternative allocations in the form of scholarships, educational infrastructure, merit-based recognition, and innovation funding. Additionally, an argumentative approach is taken by comparing this study's findings with the central theories applied and previous research, simultaneously providing the presented novelty.

4.1. Effectiveness of Universal MBG in Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

The discovery that cross-the-board MBG programs have positive effects on health. However, minimal effects on academic performance align with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which asserts that physiological needs (like food) are antecedents of self-actualization (Carducci, 2020; Maslow, 1943). What the literature here fails to suggest, however, is that it will not be enough to meet basic needs if we are hoping for a qualitative improvement in learning without other structural interventions (Borbely et al., 2024; Spill et al., 2024). This supports the idea that, though universal MBG created an inclusive

environment, FAUSD still has weak effects on educational achievement. This incongruence highlights the need to connect policies addressing nutritional inadequacy with general educational quality strategies.

On the other hand, human capital theory (Becker, 1993; Kirova, 2011; Psacharopoulos, 1994) also claim that investing in education is more profitable than consuming it. Overtime. From this angle, the evidence that universal MBG has few returns reinforces the argument for policies prioritizing long-term investments rather than short-term needs.

4.2. Distributive Justice and Fiscal Inefficiency

The unfair allocation of universal MBG gains could be examined from the perspective of a concept called distributive justice, according to John Rawls (de Haro, 2025; Rawls, 1971). According to the universalistic difference principle, Rawls's differences of inequalities are permissible only if they improve the lot in the least advantaged (Cvijanović, 2023; de Haro, 2025; Rawls, 1971). Universal MBG, on the other hand, gives money to wealthy students who do not need help and should not be getting this unjust allocation. This is consistent with Schultz et al. (2024), who emphasize the fiscal wastage of subsidies even for non-vulnerable individuals.

This conclusion is also supported by the maqāṣid al-sharīʿa framework that, as highlighted earlier, advocates upholding protection of all subjects to threats (al-daruriyyāt) (Nur et al., 2020). The public purse needs to be spent wisely when promoting social justice; we need to target real needs. As a result, common secular and religious theories agree that universal MBG is not justice itself.

4.3. Targeted Schemes as an Efficient Alternative

The effectiveness of targeted schemes is supported by the public policy concept of progressive universalism. This principle highlights that while program coverage may be broad, benefit intensity should be greater for vulnerable groups. The study's findings are consistent with this approach and extend it by showing that schools can play a key role as verifiers of beneficiaries.

Prior research by the WFP (2025) on home-grown school feeding (HGSF) also supports the effectiveness of targeted interventions, offering dual benefits: meeting students' nutritional needs and strengthening local economies. However, this study's novelty lies in integrating targeted schemes with complementary programs such as scholarships and innovation funding, creating a more comprehensive hybrid policy model.

4.4. Scholarships and Human Capital Development

The findings emphasizing the importance of sustainable scholarships are consistent with Amartya Sen's capability approach, which highlights expanding individual freedoms and opportunities as the accurate measure of development (Sen, 2024). Scholarships allow disadvantaged students to access higher education, expanding their capabilities to shape their futures. Studies by Ninghardjanti et al. (2022) support this argument by demonstrating that scholarships effectively reduce dropout rates and enhance social mobility.

This study's novelty lies in its argument that scholarships are not merely educational tools but also high-value strategies for reallocating MBG funds. Thus, this research extends the debate by positioning scholarships as integral to school meal policy reformulation.

4.5. Educational Infrastructure and Learning Environments

The proposed strengthening of educational infrastructure resonates with Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) ecological systems theory, which stresses the importance of learning environments in child development. Facilities such as laboratories and libraries create ecosystems that support academic achievement. The World Bank also affirms that investment in educational facilities has a greater impact on learning quality than short-term consumption interventions. The novelty of this study is linking the MBG fund reallocation systematically with educational infrastructure development, ensuring that public resources create long-term legacies rather than addressing only immediate needs.

4.6. Merit-Based Recognition and Academic Motivation

Merit-based recognition is linked to Ryan and Deci's (2020) self-determination theory. Recognition of achievement strengthens intrinsic motivation and fosters a healthy competitive climate. This study finds that merit-based recognition can be part of MBG reallocation strategies, an area previously underexplored in school meal policy literature. The novelty lies in integrating motivational dimensions into MBG policy discourse.

4.7. Innovation, Technology Downstreaming, and Innovation Capital

The findings underscoring the importance of innovation funding and technology downstreaming align with Schumpeter's theory of innovation, emphasizing its role in driving economic development (Girón & Beltrán, 2025; Katukov et al., 2019; Śledzik, 2013). Dai & Qiao (2025) and Elguera et al. (2024) further affirm that investments in innovation capital significantly impact global competitiveness. However, this study advances the discourse by proposing the reallocation of MBG funds to support student research up to patenting and industrialization. This contribution is novel because it positions MBG as a catalyst for transforming human capital into innovation capital.

4.8. Synthesis and Novelty of the Study

The synthesis of this discussion shows that while universal MBG has limitations, this research expands the discourse by introducing a hybrid model integrating targeted schemes, scholarships, infrastructure, merit-based recognition, and innovation funding. The main novelty of the study can be summarised in Table 1

Table 1. The main novelty of the study can

Policy Aspect	Previous Literature	Findings of This Study	Novelty
UFSM Effectiveness	Focus on health; limited academic impact (Borbely et al., 2024; Spill et al., 2024)	Shows significant limitations on academic outcomes	Emphasizes that academic effectiveness requires integration with other investments
Distributive Justice	Critique of fiscal inefficiency (Schultz et al., 2024)	Strengthens injustice arguments with Rawlsian and *maqaṣid al-shari'ah* perspectives	Integration of secular and religious theories in justice analysis
Targeted Schemes	Focus on nutrition and local economy (WFP, 2025)	Expands by integrating scholarships and innovation	Proposes a more comprehensive hybrid policy model
Scholarships	Shown to reduce dropouts (Ninghardjanti et al., 2022)	Positions scholarships as a key element in MBG reallocation	Innovatively links nutrition funding with human capital development
Infrastructure	Emphasis on facility importance (WFP, 2025)	Connects MBG funds with systematic infrastructure building	Long-term, legacy-oriented strategy
Merit-Based Recognition	Focus on individual motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020)	Integrates merit-based awards into MBG policy	Novel integration of academic motivation with fiscal policy
Innovation	Innovation as an economic driver (Katukov et al., 2019; Śledzik, 2013)	Proposes MBG funds for patents and industrialization	Frames MBG as a catalyst for innovation capital

The study reinforces prior findings by synthesizing these insights and offers substantial contributions. The proposed hybrid policy model provides a pathway for MBG reform that is more equitable, efficient, and visionary.

5. CONCLUSION

This study affirms that Meal-Based Grants (MBG) policies under a universal approach have limited benefits in enhancing academic outcomes, despite contributing positively to students' nutrition and health. In-depth analysis reveals distributive injustice and fiscal inefficiency, as public funds flow to non-vulnerable groups. These results reinforce the argument that school-based targeted models are more

effective in addressing distributive justice. Alternatively, allocations—such as sustainable scholarships, strengthening educational infrastructure, merit-based recognition, and innovation funding—offer more substantial long-term impacts. The synthesis of these findings underscores the need to reformulate MBG from a short-term consumption program into a sustainable development instrument that integrates social protection, human capital development, and innovation capital acceleration.

The main findings of this study carry significant implications for public policy in middle-income countries, particularly Indonesia. First, MBG reform can enhance fiscal effectiveness by prioritizing poor, impoverished, and orphaned students, achieving social justice principles more optimally. Second, integrating MBG with other educational programs opens opportunities for dual benefits—not only eliminating learning Hunger but also strengthening social mobility, reducing learning poverty, and boosting economic competitiveness. Third, a long-term orientation through research and innovation support allows for creating high-value technological products that make tangible contributions to national development. Accordingly, the results of this study highlight the urgency of restructuring MBG policies to align with the principles of progressive universalism and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*.

This research contributes to developing a hybrid policy framework that integrates multiple dimensions of development while filling gaps in the literature on comparative evaluations between universal school meal programs and alternative funding allocations. Nevertheless, this study has limitations, as it relies on secondary data and has not empirically tested the model through field-based policy experiments. Therefore, future research should be directed toward quasi-experimental studies or pilot projects implementing hybrid MBG schemes to assess their practical effectiveness. By providing normative and empirical justification, this study contributes to the international literature on education policy, social justice, and sustainable development while offering new directions for policymakers to optimize public funds in achieving national welfare and progress.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted per the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was not required because the research was based on secondary data (policy reports, academic literature, and government documents) and did not involve direct interaction with human participants. All procedures adhered to institutional and international ethical standards for research integrity.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable. This study did not involve direct participants, interviews, or surveys. The analysis used publicly available documents and secondary data sources, ensuring no personal or confidential information was collected.

Authors' Contributions

Not applicable.

Disclosure Statement

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings are derived from secondary sources, including publicly available policy reports and peer-reviewed academic articles. All materials are cited appropriately in the reference list. The corresponding author can provide additional details upon request.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Notes on Contributors

Taufikin
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3535-0014
Taufikin is a Senior lecturer Associate Professor and researcher at Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kudus, Indonesia. His research focuses on Islamic education, social policy, and integrating local wisdom with sustainable development in pesantren and madrasah education. He has published several works on digital transformation in Islamic schools, comparative Islamic law, and the role of social justice in education policy. His current projects explore the intersections of educational equity, innovation policy, and community-based Islamic education.

REFERENCES

Alderman, H., Bundy, D., & Gelli, A. (2024). School Meals Are Evolving: Has the Evidence Kept Up? *The World Bank Research Observer*, *39*(2), 159–176. https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkad012

Alexe, D., Hâj, C. M., & Murgescu, B. (2015). Struggling with Social Polarization. Student Financial Support in Romania in the Framework of the Bologna Process. In A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi, & P. Scott (Eds.), *The European Higher Education Area: Between Critical Reflections and Future Policies* (pp. 501–519). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0_32

Asogwa, K. C., Obi, K. C., & Nwaogaidu, J. C. (2025). Public plate and socio-economic outcomes: Explaining the impact of the national home-grown school feeding programme on out-of-school children and the local economy in Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria. *IKENGA International Journal of Institute of African Studies*, *26*(1), 295–322. https://doi.org/10.53836/ijia/2025/26/1/003

Balqis, A. A. A., Hariri, H., Rini, R., & Sowiyah. (2023). Preparation of educational facilities and infrastructure in improving the quality of education towards the society era 5.0. *AIP Conf. Proc.*, *2621*(1). https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0142582

Becker, G. S. (1993). *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226041223.001.0001

Belmonte, A., Bove, V., D'Inverno, G., & Modica, M. (2020). School infrastructure spending and educational outcomes: Evidence from the 2012 earthquake in Northern Italy. *Economics of Education Review*, *75*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2019.101951

BenDavid-Hadar, I. (2018). Funding education: Developing a method of allocation for improvement. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *32*(1), 2–26. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-07-2016-0161

Berlanga, V., & Corti, F. (2025). Impact of scholarships on university academic performance: A comparative analysis of students with and without scholarships. *Frontiers in Education*, *10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1554073

Borbely, D., Gehrsitz, M., McIntyre, S., & Rossi, G. (2024). Does the provision of universal free school meals improve school attendance? *Economics of Education Review*, *103*, 102597. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2024.102597

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, *11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Ecology of the Family as a Context for Human Development. Research Perspectives. *Developmental Psychology*, *22*(6), 723–742. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.22.6.723

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Evans, G. W. (2000). Developmental Science in the 21st Century: Emerging Questions, Theoretical Models, Research Designs and Empirical Findings. *Social Development*, *9*(1), 115–125. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9507.00114

Carducci, B. J. (2020). Abraham H. Maslow. In B. J. Carducci & C. S. Nave (Eds.), *The Wiley Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences, Models and Theories* (pp. 79–82). wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119547143.ch14

Cohen, J. F. W., Hecht, A. A., McLoughlin, G. M., Turner, L., & Schwartz, M. B. (2021). Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*, *13*(3), 911. https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13030911

Cook, W. (2021). Does funding targeted at improving the management of schools increase school performance over the long term? *Economics Letters*, *204*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2021.109871

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2022). *Research Design*. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/research-design/book270550

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. SAGE Publications.

Cvijanović, H. (2023). Rawls Behind the Veil of Ignorance The Gap of Inequality and the Illusions of Justice. *Filozofska Istrazivanja*, *43*(3), 481–493. https://doi.org/10.21464/fi43303

Dai, H., & Qiao, Y. (2025). How does investor attention affect corporate technology investment and innovation efficiency? *International Review of Economics and Finance*, *103*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iref.2025.104459

de Haro, M. M. (2025). Rawls's Theory of Justice and Disability. An Analysis of the Applicability of Primary Goods and Justice Principles to «Hard Cases». *Doxa. Cuadernos de Filosofía del Derecho*, *49*, 731–760. https://doi.org/10.14198/doxa.28121

Elguera, V. H. C., Rodriguez, R. V., Bendezu, C. A. G., & Camino, A. F. S. (2024). Evaluating the Impact of Innovation on National Competitiveness: Application of a Regression Technique in a Global Context. *Proc. IEEE Int. Conf. Adv. Learn. Technol. Educ. Res., ICALTER*. Proceedings of the 2024 IEEE 4th International Conference on Advanced Learning Technologies for Education and Research, ICALTER 2024. https://doi.org/10.1109/ICALTER65499.2024.10819205

Girón, A., & Beltrán, L. D. (2025). Creative destruction: The driver for innovation, financing, and the business cycle 1. In F. Ülgen & L. Klapkiv (Eds.), *Innovation in Capitalist Economies: Crises, Challenges and Opportunities* (pp. 11–23). Taylor and Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003558187-3

Gupta, A., Doan, M. K., Zhu, H., Whitney, E., Filipski, M., Gonzalez-Estrada, E., Ryckembusch, D., & Edward Taylor, J. (2025). Rural Economy-wide Impacts of Kenya's Home-Grown School Meals Program. *Food Policy*, *134*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2025.102887

Hecht, A. A., Neff, R. A., Kelley, T. L., & Porter, K. M. P. (2021). Universal free school meals through the Community Eligibility Provision: Maryland food service provider perspectives. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *10*(2), 529–550. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.033

IFPRI. (2025). *School meals in the 21st century—Emerging evidence and future directions*. https://www.ifpri.org/event/school-meals-in-the-21st-century-emerging-evidence-and-future-directions/

Katukov, D. D., Malygin, V. E., & Smorodinskaya, N. V. (2019). The factor of creative destruction in modern economic growth models and growth policy. *Voprosy Ekonomiki*, *2019*(7), 95–118. https://doi.org/10.32609/0042-8736-2019-7-95-118

Kirova, A. (2011). Evolution of the human capital doctrine. *Ikonomicheski Izsledvania*, *20*(4), 94–131.

Kurniawan, G. I., & Shafira, A. L. (2022). The Impact of School Operational Assistance Fund and Regional Gross Domestic Product to Education. In B. S. Sergi & D. Sulistiawan (Eds.), *Modeling Economic Growth in Contemporary Indonesia* (p. 0). Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80262-431-120221002

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*(4), 370–396. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346

Murphy, M., & Ono, E. (2025). Expanded School Meal Assistance Policies and Very Low Food Sufficiency Rates in Households With Children*. *Journal of School Health*, *95*(6), 451–461. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.70015

Nicaise, I., Vandevoort, L., & Verelst, S. (2024). THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EQUITY FUNDING OF SCHOOLS: A comparative analysis of Flanders, the Netherlands, France, Ireland and England. In P. Downes, G. Li, L. Van Praag, & S. Lamb (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education* (pp. 103–124). Taylor and Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003282921-9

Ninghardjanti, P., Murtini, W., Hindrayani, A., & Sangka, K. B. (2022). *Evaluation of the Smart Indonesia Card (KIP) Program for the Vocational Schools in Surakarta City*. 217–226. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-39-8_20

Nur, I., Adam, S., & Muttaqien, M. N. (2020). Maqāṣid Al-Sharīʿat: The Main Reference and Ethical-Spiritual Foundation for the Dynamization Process of Islamic Law. *Ahkam: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah*, *20*(2), 331–360. https://doi.org/10.15408/ajis.v20i2.18333

Nutley, S. K., Falise, A. M., Henderson, R., Apostolou, V., Mathews, C. A., & Striley, C. W. (2021). Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Disordered Eating Behavior: Qualitative Analysis of Social Media Posts. *JMIR Mental Health*, *8*(1), e26011. https://doi.org/10.2196/26011

Orta-Aleman, D., Zuercher, M. D., Bacon, K. A., Chelius, C., Hecht, C. E., Hecht, K., Ritchie, L. D., Cohen, J. F. W., & Gosliner, W. (2024). Students' Perspectives on the Benefits and Challenges of Universal School Meals Related to Food Accessibility, Stigma, Participation, and Waste. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, *56*(9), 599–610. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2024.04.011

Parnham, J. C., Chang, K., Rauber, F., Levy, R. B., Laverty, A. A., Pearson-Stuttard, J., White, M., von Hinke, S., Millett, C., & Vamos, E. P. (2024). Evaluating the impact of the universal infant free school meal policy on the ultra-processed food content of children's lunches in England and Scotland: A natural experiment. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, *21*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-024-01656-w

Psacharopoulos, G. (1994). Returns to investment in education: A global update. *World Development*, *22*(9), 1325–1343. https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(94)90007-8

Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9z6v

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68–78. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *61*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860

Schultz, T. R., Sosa-Calvo, J., Kweskin, M. P., Lloyd, M. W., Dentinger, B., Kooij, P. W., Vellinga, E. C., Rehner, S. A., Rodrigues, A., Montoya, Q. V., Fernández-Marín, H., Ješovnik, A., Niskanen, T., Liimatainen, K., Leal-Dutra, C. A., Solomon, S. E., Gerardo, N. M., Currie, C. R., Bacci, M., … Doyle, V. P. (2024). The coevolution of fungus-ant agriculture. *Science*, *386*(6717), 105–110. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adn7179

Sen, A. (2024). *Sen's Capability Approach | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://iep.utm.edu/sen-cap/

Sezer, S. (2018). Impacts of R&D Expenditures on High Technology Product Exports in BRICST Countries. *The Journal of Social Sciences Research*, *4*(10), 165–175. https://doi.org/10.32861/journal.7.2018.410.165.175

Śledzik, K. (2013). *Schumpeter's View on Innovation and Entrepreneurship* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. 2257783). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2257783

Spill, M. K., Trivedi, R., Thoerig, R. C., Balalian, A. A., Schwartz, M. B., Gundersen, C., Odoms-Young, A., Racine, E. F., Foster, M. J., Davis, J. S., & MacFarlane, A. J. (2024). Universal Free School Meals and School and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review. *JAMA Network Open*, *7*(8), e2424082. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24082

Toossi, S. (2024). The effect of universal free school meals on children's food hardship. *Food Policy*, *124*, 102606. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2024.102606

Tubastuvi, N., & Ramadani, A. G. (2025). Maqasid Al Shari'ah Perspective on the Green Economy for Halal Industry Sustainability. In M. A. Salisu, L. Raimi, N. B. Bamiro, & I. O. Elegbede (Eds.), *Green and Blue Economy Frameworks for Halal Industry Sustainability* (pp. 89–99). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-1729-6_5

WFP. (2025, September 10). *The State of School Feeding Worldwide | World Food Programme*. https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-worldwide

Yilmaz, E. G. (2024). What Is the Level of Savings Needed for High-Technology Export Led Growth? *Ekonomika*, *103*(1), 127–144. https://doi.org/10.15388/Ekon.2024.103.1.8