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## **Free School Meal, Islamic Education, and Human Capital Development Among Indonesian Muslim Generation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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The quality of the Muslim generation in Indonesia remains a pressing concern, particularly due to persistent issues such as malnutrition and stunting, which adversely affect cognitive development, educational achievement, and long-term human capital. In response, the Free School Meal (*Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG*) has been introduced as a strategic policy to improve children's nutritional status and support learning outcomes. This study examines the MBG program through the lens of Islamic education and explores its contribution to enhancing the quality of the Muslim generation. Employing a qualitative, normative, and library-based research design, data were drawn from policy documents, academic literature, and relevant sources, and analyzed using content analysis. The findings indicate that adequate nutrition significantly enhances cognitive function, physical health, and academic performance. From an Islamic educational perspective, the notion of a high-quality generation aligns with the concept of *insan kamil*, emphasizing holistic development across spiritual, intellectual, moral, and physical dimensions. The MBG program reflects key Islamic values, including *halal* and *tayyib*, social responsibility, and public welfare (*masalah 'ammah*). Its effectiveness, however, depends on sustained implementation and integration with educational frameworks.

**Keywords:** *Free School Meal, Islamic Education, Human Capital Development.*



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## **Introduction**

The quality of a nation's future generation constitutes a fundamental indicator of its overall development trajectory and long-term sustainability. In the Indonesian context, however, substantial challenges remain in strengthening human capital, particularly in the interconnected domains of nutrition and education. Among these, the persistently high prevalence of stunting and child malnutrition stands out as a critical concern, with far-reaching implications for cognitive development, educational attainment, and the nation's future productivity (Dewey & Begum, 2011). Stunting, as a form of chronic malnutrition, not only affects physical growth but also has significant implications for cognitive development and individuals' educational attainment in the future. Studies show that children who experience stunting tend to have lower cognitive abilities, reduced educational achievement, and a higher risk of dropping out of school compared to those who are not stunted (Lestari et al., 2024).

Furthermore, nutritional deficiencies in early life, particularly during the first 1,000 days, can lead to permanent impairments in brain development, thereby affecting intellectual quality and long-term human productivity (Prendergast & Humphrey, 2014; WHO et al., 2023). This indicates that fulfilling nutritional needs is not merely a health issue, but also a strategic investment in educational development and the overall quality of a nation's future generation.

In response to these challenges, the Indonesian government has initiated various intervention policies, one of which is the Free School Meal (MBG), aimed at improving the nutritional status of the population, particularly school children, toddlers, and other vulnerable groups. This program is expected to serve as a strategic instrument in enhancing the quality of human resources through the provision of adequate nutrition. By directly addressing nutritional needs, the MBG program has the potential to improve students' learning concentration, physical endurance, and cognitive development.

From the perspective of Islamic education, the fulfillment of nutritional needs is closely related to the holistic goals of education. Islamic education does not merely emphasize intellectual development, but also encompasses physical, spiritual, and moral dimensions in shaping *insan kāmīl* (the complete or perfected human being). This concept underscores that the quality of a generation cannot be separated from the balance between physical and spiritual needs. Islam also emphasizes the importance of consuming food that is *halal*

and *tayyib* (lawful and wholesome), as well as the responsibility of both parents and the state in safeguarding the health of future generations (Humairah et al., 2025).

Thus, the MBG program can be analyzed not only as a public policy initiative but also as part of the implementation of Islamic educational values in fostering a high-quality Muslim generation. Therefore, examining the relationship between the MBG program and the improvement of the quality of Muslim generations from the perspective of Islamic education is both relevant and necessary.

Based on the background outlined above, this study focuses on examining the concept of generational quality from the perspective of Islamic education, the role of the Free School Meal in improving the quality of Muslim generations, and the relevance of the program when viewed through the values and objectives of Islamic education. Accordingly, this study seeks to address how Islamic education perceives the importance of nurturing a high-quality generation through the fulfillment of adequate nutritional needs as part of a holistic educational process.

In line with this focus, the objective of this research is to analyze the Free School Meal from the perspective of Islamic education, while also assessing its contribution to improving the quality of Indonesia's Muslim generation. Through this study, it is expected that a comprehensive understanding will be achieved regarding the relationship between nutrition fulfillment policies, student development, and the formation of high-quality human resources grounded in Islamic values.

The significance of this research encompasses two main aspects. Theoretically, it is expected to contribute to the development of Islamic education studies, particularly in relation to the integration of nutrition, public policy, and the formation of the quality of Muslim generations. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to serve as recommendations for the government, educational institutions, and society in optimizing the implementation of the Free School Meal as an effort to enhance the quality of the nation's future generation in alignment with Islamic values.

### **Research Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a normative research design based on library research. The qualitative approach is chosen because

this study aims to understand and analyze phenomena in depth, particularly regarding the Free School Meal policy from the perspective of Islamic education. Normative research is used to examine concepts, values, and principles derived from scientific literature, regulations, and Islamic teachings relevant to the research topic (Creswell., 2017).

The approaches applied in this study are the Islamic education approach and the public policy approach. The Islamic education approach is used to analyze the quality of Muslim generations in light of Islamic values, such as *insan kāmīl*, the balance between physical and spiritual aspects, and the objectives of Islamic education. Meanwhile, the public policy approach is employed to understand the MBG Program as a state instrument in improving the quality of human resources through nutritional intervention. This approach enables an integrative analysis between Islamic normative aspects and modern policy implementation (Dunn, 2017).

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data include official documents and regulations related to nutrition policies and the MBG Program in Indonesia, such as national development plans, government policies, and relevant program documents. Secondary data include scientific literature such as books, national and international journal articles, and reports from international institutions related to nutrition, education, and Islamic perspectives. The use of these various sources aims to obtain a comprehensive and valid understanding of the object of study (Bowen, 2009).

The data collection technique used in this study is documentation. This technique is carried out by collecting, reviewing, and organizing various relevant documents, including written texts, policy documents, and findings from previous studies. Documentation is an effective method in qualitative library-based research, as it allows researchers to systematically and deeply trace data (Bowen, 2009).

Furthermore, the data analysis technique used is content analysis. This analysis is conducted by identifying, categorizing, and interpreting the meanings derived from various data sources that have been collected. The analysis process involves several stages, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Content analysis enables researchers to systematically and objectively reveal conceptual meanings as well as the relationship between the MBG policy and the values of Islamic education (Krippendorff, 2019).

Through this methodological approach, the study is expected to produce a comprehensive analysis of the relevance of the Free School Meal in improving the quality of Indonesia's Muslim generation from the perspective of Islamic education.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **A. Free School Meal and Generational Quality in Islamic Education**

The Free School Meal is a public policy designed to improve the nutritional status of the population, particularly school-aged children, toddlers, and other vulnerable groups. Conceptually, this program refers to the school feeding program model that has been widely implemented in various countries as both a nutritional intervention and a means of enhancing educational quality. School feeding programs have been proven effective in increasing student attendance, improving learning concentration, and enhancing academic achievement (Bundy et al., 2018).

The primary objectives of the MBG are to reduce the prevalence of malnutrition, improve balanced nutritional intake, and support the development of high-quality human resources. In the Indonesian context, this policy aligns with the national development agenda, which prioritizes the improvement of human resource quality, particularly in efforts to address stunting and poverty (Ministry of National Development Planning/Bappenas, 2023).

The policy foundation of the MBG is closely linked to the government's commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) and Goal 4 (Quality Education). The implementation of this program targets students at the basic education level through mechanisms for distributing nutritious meals that meet health standards. Furthermore, the success of its implementation largely depends on cross-sectoral synergy, including collaboration among the education, health, and social protection sectors.

From the perspective of Islamic education, the quality of a generation is not solely measured by intellectual achievement, but also encompasses spiritual, moral, and physical dimensions in an integrated manner. The concept of the ideal human being in Islam is known as *insan kāmīl*, referring to an individual who develops in a balanced way between physical and spiritual potentials (Al-Attas, 1980).



The dimensions of generational quality in Islamic education include: (1) the spiritual dimension, which relates to faith (*īmān*) and piety (*taqwā*); (2) the intellectual dimension, which includes critical thinking skills and mastery of knowledge; (3) the physical dimension, which is associated with health and physical strength; and (4) the moral dimension, which reflects noble character (*akhlak*) (Al Abrosyi, 1970). These four dimensions form the foundation for developing a high-quality and competitive Muslim generation.

Education in Islam plays a strategic role in shaping this generational quality. The objective of Islamic education is not merely the transfer of knowledge, but also the formation of character and personality in accordance with the values of *sharī'ah*. Therefore, Islamic education emphasizes a balance between cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects within the learning process.

### **B. Nutrition and Child Development from a Scientific Perspective**

Scientific studies show that nutrition plays a fundamental role in child development, particularly in cognitive aspects and learning abilities. Adequate nutritional intake contributes to the development of brain structure and function, which ultimately influences intelligence, memory, and learning concentration (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). Conversely, malnutrition, including stunting and micronutrient deficiencies, can lead to long-term impairments in brain development.

Children who experience malnutrition tend to have lower academic performance and limitations in thinking and problem-solving abilities (Black et al., 2013). In addition, malnutrition also affects physical health and increases the risk of disease, which in turn hampers the educational process. Therefore, optimal nutritional fulfillment is an essential prerequisite for improving educational quality and overall human development.

In Islamic teachings, the fulfillment of nutritional needs has a strong normative foundation. Islam promotes the principle of consuming food that is *halal* and *ṭayyib*, meaning food that is not only permissible according to *sharī'ah*, but also wholesome and beneficial for the body. This principle demonstrates that Islam places great emphasis on the quality of consumption as part of maintaining human health (Qur'an, Al-Baqarah: 168).

Furthermore, Islam emphasizes collective responsibility in fulfilling basic needs, including nutrition. Parents bear the primary responsibility for meeting their children's needs, while the state is obligated to ensure the welfare of

society, particularly vulnerable groups. From this perspective, policies such as the MBG program can be understood as a form of the state's responsibility in promoting public welfare (*maṣlahah 'āmmah*) (Chapra, 2000).

The value of balance (*tawāzun*) is also a key principle in Islam, emphasizing the importance of maintaining harmony between physical and spiritual needs. Adequate nutritional fulfillment not only supports physical health but also serves as a means to enhance the quality of worship and the holistic development of human potential.

Several studies have examined the relationship between feeding programs, nutritional status, and educational quality. Bundy et al., (2018) demonstrate that school feeding programs have a positive impact on student attendance and academic achievement. Another study by Black et al., (2013) emphasizes that nutritional interventions in children can enhance cognitive development and future productivity.

In the Indonesian context, studies on stunting and education indicate that children with poor nutritional status tend to have lower educational attainment compared to well-nourished children (Lestari et al., 2024). Meanwhile, research from the perspective of Islamic education has largely highlighted the importance of nutritional fulfillment as part of fostering a generation that is balanced both spiritually and intellectually (Humairah et al., 2025).

However, studies that specifically examine the Free School Meal from the perspective of Islamic education remain limited. Most existing research is still sectoral in nature, focusing either on health or education, without comprehensively integrating an Islamic perspective. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the MBG as a public policy through the lens of Islamic education.

**Table 1.**  
**Dimensions of Generational Quality in Islamic Education**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Key Concept</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Relevance to MBG Program</b>
Spiritual	Iman & Taqwa	Worship, religious awareness	Indirect (supporting focus & discipline)
Intellectual	Knowledge & reasoning	Critical thinking, academic ability	Direct (nutrition improves cognition)
Physical	Health & strength	Growth, stamina, immunity	Core contribution (nutrition intake)
Moral	Akhlaq (character)	Ethics, social behavior	Can be integrated through food ethics (adab)



### **C. The Urgency of Nutrition in Shaping the Muslim Generation**

The provision of optimal nutrition is fundamental to shaping the quality of a generation, including the Muslim generation. Scientifically, nutrition is closely linked to children's cognitive development. Adequate nutritional intake plays a crucial role in brain development, neurotransmitter function, and memory capacity and concentration. Studies show that children with good nutritional status tend to have higher cognitive abilities, better academic performance, and higher school attendance rates compared to those experiencing malnutrition (Black et al., 2013; Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007).

Conversely, nutritional deficiencies, particularly in the form of stunting, have long-term impacts such as reduced intelligence, developmental delays, and lower productivity in adulthood. This condition is not merely a health issue, but also a significant barrier to educational quality and overall human development (Victora et al., 2008). Therefore, the fulfillment of adequate nutrition is a critical prerequisite for improving learning quality and fostering high-quality human resources.

From the perspective of Islamic education, the urgency of nutrition can be understood through its holistic educational objectives. Islamic education aims to develop individuals who are balanced in both physical and spiritual dimensions (*insan kāmīl*). Good physical health is a prerequisite for performing intellectual and spiritual activities optimally. Therefore, nutritional fulfillment serves not only as a biological necessity but also as a means to achieve the integral goals of Islamic education (Al-Attas, 1980).

The Free School Meal has significant potential to improve the quality of a generation through direct intervention in the nutritional domain. From a health perspective, this program can reduce the prevalence of malnutrition, improve children's nutritional status, and strengthen the immune system. School-based nutrition interventions have been proven effective in enhancing children's health while simultaneously supporting the learning process (Bundy et al., 2018).

From an educational perspective, meeting nutritional needs through the MBG program contributes to improved concentration, memory, and student participation in learning activities. Studies indicate that school feeding programs can significantly increase student attendance and academic

achievement (Adelman et al., 2008). This demonstrates that nutrition policies have a direct impact on the quality of education.

Furthermore, in the context of human resource development, the MBG program has the potential to enhance the overall quality of Indonesia's Muslim generation. By ensuring adequate nutritional intake, the younger generation has greater opportunities to develop optimally in intellectual, physical, and social dimensions. This aligns with human development efforts that prioritize the improvement of human resource quality as a nation's primary asset.

#### **D. Free School Meal Program in Improving Generational Quality**

From the perspective of Islamic education, the MBG program strongly aligns with fundamental Islamic values. One of the core principles in Islam is the fulfillment of basic human needs, including access to food that is *halal* and *tayyib* (lawful and wholesome). This principle highlights that Islam emphasizes not only the permissibility of food but also its quality and benefits for human health.

Moreover, Islam underscores the importance of collective responsibility in maintaining social welfare. The state holds a strategic role in ensuring the fulfillment of the people's basic needs, including nutrition and health. Within the framework of *maṣlahah 'āmmah* (public welfare), policies such as the MBG program can be understood as forms of state intervention aimed at achieving social well-being (Chapra, 2000).

The MBG program also reflects the value of social solidarity in Islam, particularly in supporting vulnerable groups such as children from underprivileged families. Thus, MBG is not merely a technocratic policy, but also embodies moral and religious dimensions as a form of social responsibility that aligns with Islamic teachings

The Free School Meal represents a strategic intervention with considerable potential to enhance the quality of a generation, particularly in the context of developing countries such as Indonesia. From a public policy perspective, this program offers several significant advantages. First, MBG constitutes a form of direct intervention targeting the root problem—nutritional deficiencies among school-aged children. Unlike indirect policies, this program provides immediate benefits to its recipients, thereby generating both short-term and long-term impacts simultaneously. Studies indicate that school-based nutrition interventions are effective in improving health status while also enhancing educational outcomes (Bundy et al., 2018).



Second, MBG is characterized as a multidimensional policy. It not only affects the health sector but also contributes to improving educational quality, reducing poverty, and fostering human resource development. Within the framework of human capital development, investment in child nutrition is one of the most effective strategies for increasing future economic productivity (Victora et al., 2008). Therefore, MBG can be positioned as a strategic policy with a high social return.

Third, from a social justice perspective, MBG has the potential to reduce disparities among different social groups. The program provides more equitable access to nutrition for children from underprivileged families, thereby helping to reduce inequalities in education and health outcomes. This aligns with the principle of distributive justice in public policy as well as the value of justice (*'adl*) in Islam.

However, despite these advantages, the implementation of MBG also faces several complex challenges. One of the primary challenges concerns financial sustainability. A nationwide program such as MBG requires substantial and consistent budget allocation. Without careful fiscal planning, there is a risk that the program may not be sustainable in the long term. In addition, efficiency in budget management is crucial to ensure that the program's benefits are optimally delivered to its target groups (Dunn, 2017).

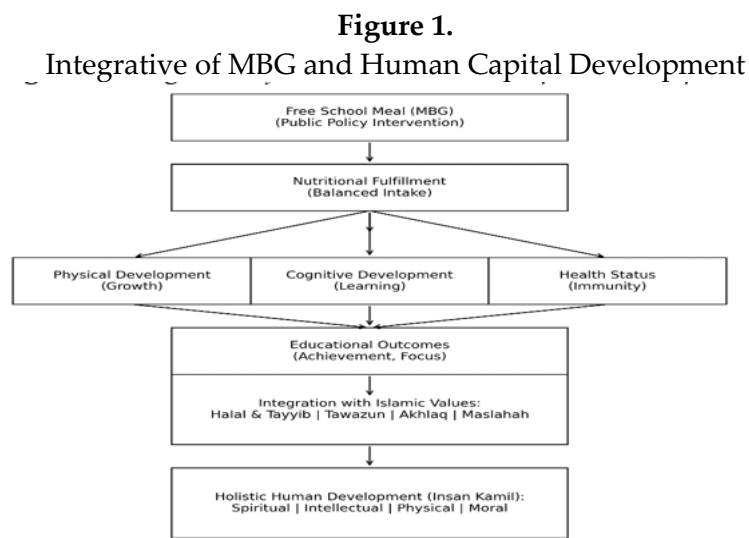
Another challenge relates to the quality and standards of the food provided. The MBG program must ensure not only the availability of food but also that its nutritional quality meets children's needs. Failure to meet proper nutritional standards may reduce the program's effectiveness in achieving its intended goals. Furthermore, unequal distribution—particularly in remote areas—poses a significant barrier to reaching all target groups fairly.

From an institutional perspective, cross-sectoral coordination is a key factor for successful implementation. The MBG program involves multiple stakeholders, including the central government, local governments, schools, and food service providers. A lack of coordination may lead to inefficiencies or even program failure. Therefore, strong governance (*good governance*) is essential to ensure effective and accountable implementation.

From the perspective of Islamic education, a critical analysis of MBG should also encompass its value and educational dimensions. The program holds strong potential to be integrated with Islamic character education. For instance, meal provision activities can be accompanied by education on the importance

of maintaining health, proper eating etiquette (*adab*), and values such as gratitude (*shukr*) and social care. Such integration would strengthen the function of MBG not merely as a health initiative, but also as a means of character formation for the Muslim generation.

Furthermore, the concept of *tawāzun* (balance) in Islam emphasizes the harmonization of physical and spiritual needs. Therefore, the success of MBG should not be measured solely by improvements in nutritional status, but also by its contribution to supporting a holistic educational process. With an integrative approach, MBG can become part of an Islamic educational system aimed at forming *insan kāmil* (the complete human being).



This figure illustrates the integrative relationship between the Free School Meal policy, nutritional fulfillment, and Islamic education in shaping the quality of the Muslim generation. The MBG program serves as a public policy intervention that directly improves children’s nutritional intake, which in turn enhances physical health, cognitive development, and overall well-being. These improvements contribute to better educational outcomes, including academic achievement and learning participation. Furthermore, when integrated with Islamic educational values—such as halal and tayyib consumption, *tawāzun* (balance), *akhlaq* (moral character), and *maṣlahah ‘āmmah* (public welfare)—the program supports the formation of *insan kāmil*, a holistic human being characterized by balanced spiritual, intellectual, physical, and moral development.

The results of the analysis indicate a close and complementary relationship between Islamic education theory and the Free School Meal policy. Within the framework of Islamic education, the primary goal of education is to develop



individuals who are balanced in their spiritual, intellectual, and physical dimensions. This concept emphasizes that the quality of a generation is determined not only by intellectual intelligence but also by physical health and moral strength (Al-Attas, 1980). In this regard, MBG serves as an instrument that supports the fulfillment of the physical dimension, which is a prerequisite for the development of other aspects.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the argument that public policies in the field of nutrition are directly related to educational quality. Proper nutrition enables children to learn optimally, enhances concentration, and strengthens physical resilience. Thus, MBG can be understood as part of a broader educational ecosystem in which health and education interact dynamically (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007).

In the context of developing Indonesia's Muslim generation, MBG has a strategic contribution in fostering a generation that is both excellent and competitive. A high-quality Muslim generation is characterized not only by intellectual capability, but also by physical health and strong moral character. By ensuring adequate nutritional intake, children have greater opportunities to develop optimally and achieve their full potential. This aligns with the vision of human development in Islam, which emphasizes balance between worldly life and the hereafter.

However, to maximize the contribution of MBG, a more integrative approach between nutrition policy and the education system is required. One important implication of this study is the need to integrate the MBG program into educational curricula, particularly within Islamic education. This integration can be achieved through strengthening educational content on healthy lifestyles, consumption ethics, and Islamic values in daily life.

In addition, the implementation of MBG must consider the social and cultural context of society. Approaches that are sensitive to local and religious values will enhance program effectiveness and public acceptance. In this regard, Islamic educational institutions such as madrasahs and pesantren can serve as strategic partners in integrating MBG with character education.

Another implication is the importance of the state's role in ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of the program. From an Islamic perspective, the state has a responsibility to guarantee public welfare, including the fulfillment of basic needs such as food and health (Chapra, 2000). Therefore,

MBG can be viewed as a manifestation of the state's responsibility in promoting public welfare.

Overall, the synthesis between Islamic education theory and the MBG policy demonstrates that a holistic approach is essential in generational development. Policies that focus on only one aspect will not produce significant change. Conversely, the integration of nutrition, education, and Islamic values will create a strong synergy in shaping a high-quality, healthy, and morally grounded Muslim generation in Indonesia.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that the quality of a generation from the perspective of Islamic education is not solely determined by intellectual aspects, but also encompasses spiritual, moral, and physical dimensions in a holistic manner. The concept of *insan kāmīl* emphasizes that the formation of a high-quality Muslim generation requires a balance between physical and spiritual needs. In this context, the fulfillment of nutrition becomes a fundamental element that cannot be separated from the educational process.

The Free School Meal (MBG) plays a strategic role in improving the quality of the Muslim generation, particularly through the fulfillment of nutritional needs that directly impact cognitive development, physical health, and children's learning abilities. This program contributes not only to improving educational outcomes but also to the development of high-quality and competitive human resources.

From the perspective of Islamic education, MBG has strong relevance to fundamental Islamic values, such as the fulfillment of *halal* and *ṭayyib* consumption, the principle of balance (*tawāzun*), and social responsibility in promoting societal welfare. The program can be understood as a concrete implementation of the concept of *maṣlaḥah 'āmmah*, where the state plays a role in ensuring the well-being and quality of life of its people.

Thus, MBG is not merely a public policy in the field of nutrition, but also a strategic instrument in supporting the holistic goals of Islamic education. The integration of nutrition policies and Islamic educational values is key to shaping a generation of Indonesian Muslims who are healthy, knowledgeable, and of noble character.

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