

Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) and the Enhancement of Human Development in the Perspective of Islamic Economics

Ahmad Khoirudin¹, M. Robby Kaharudin², Elce Purwandari³

¹ Universitas Islam Nusantara Al-Azhaar Lubuklinggau, Indonesia; ahmadkhoirudin@uin-al-azhaar.ac.id

² STEI Al Furqon Prabumulih, Indonesia; muhrobbykaharudin@gmail.com

³ Universitas Islam Nusantara Al-Azhaar Lubuklinggau, Indonesia; elce.tp@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program is one of the strategic policies of the Indonesian government aimed at improving the quality of human resources through health and education interventions. This study examines MBG from the perspective of Islamic economics, focusing on its relevance to the principles of justice, welfare distribution, and social equity. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach by analyzing government policy documents, statistical data, and relevant literature, supported by the Islamic economic framework. The findings reveal that MBG not only provides direct benefits in improving students' nutritional intake but also contributes significantly to the Human Development Index (HDI) through increased school attendance, learning productivity, and reduced inequality in access to basic needs. In the perspective of Islamic economics, MBG reflects the values of *maslahah* (public benefit) and *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), thereby aligning with the objectives of *maqasid al-shariah* in preserving life (*hifz al-nafs*) and intellect (*hifz al-'aql*). The novelty of this research lies in integrating the analysis of a national nutrition-based welfare program with the conceptual framework of Islamic economics, offering an alternative lens for evaluating social policies. This study emphasizes that MBG has the potential to serve not only as a public welfare policy but also as a realization of Islamic economic principles in fostering inclusive and sustainable human development.

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Corresponding Author:

Elce Purwandari

Universitas Islam Nusantara Al-Azhaar; elce.tp@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Human development is one of the key indicators for assessing the success of a nation's development. The Human Development Index (HDI), which encompasses the dimensions of health, education, and a decent standard of living, serves as a benchmark for the quality of human resources. However, Indonesia continues to face serious challenges, particularly regarding nutrition, which directly affects public health and productivity. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024) the national prevalence of stunting remained at 21.5%, despite the government's target of reducing it to 14% by 2024. This highlights that nutritional problems remain a strategic issue in Indonesia's human development.

The issue of nutrition security, especially stunting, continues to persist. Based on the Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI) conducted by the Ministry of Health, the prevalence of stunting in 2023 stood at 21.5%, showing a slight decrease from the previous year yet still far from the 14% national target (Karmini & Alangkara, 2025; Pristiandaru, 2024). More promising results were reported, with stunting declining to 19.8% (BKPK, 2025; Negara RI, 2025). Nonetheless, disparities remain stark, with 23 provinces recording stunting rates above the national average (Pristiandaru, 2024). These figures demonstrate that low-income groups are more vulnerable to malnutrition, which in turn hampers the long-term quality and productivity of human resources. Stunting not only affects physical growth but also impairs learning ability and immunity against diseases (Lakshmi & Mariska, 2025).

The Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program was introduced as a government intervention to reduce stunting and improve the nutritional quality of school children. The program provides nutritious meals including rice, vegetables, meat, and milk to millions of students and pregnant women starting in 2025 (Karmini & Alangkara, 2025). A pilot project in West Java demonstrated positive outcomes, including higher school attendance, improved child nutrition, and increased local income through the use of locally sourced food products (Lakshmi & Mariska, 2025). Reported in *Jurnal Kiprah Pendidikan* that MBG effectively improved learning concentration, school attendance, and child nutrition, while simultaneously supporting the local economy through food procurement. However, challenges remain, such as ensuring standardized nutrition, equitable distribution, and stronger coordination among stakeholders (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025).

This study is crucial for several reasons: although progress has been made with stunting reduction to 19.8%, the target of 14% remains unmet and regional disparities persist. MBG holds strong potential as more than just a social intervention it is also a human development strategy that, if implemented effectively, can accelerate stunting reduction and enhance educational quality. Existing literature, however, is limited in addressing MBG from the perspective of Islamic economics. Most studies focus only on policy evaluation or macro-social impacts, without connecting the program to Islamic values such as *maqasid al-shariah* and distributive justice. This research aims to fill that gap by providing insights for a more equitable, effective, and sustainable design of MBG to ensure a healthier and more productive generation.

The distinct contribution of this study lies in applying the perspective of Islamic economics. Unlike previous studies, it integrates human development analysis with the principles of *maqasid al-shariah*, particularly *hifz al-nafs* (protection of life) and *hifz al-'aql* (protection of intellect). Using a literature review method, the study synthesizes findings from official reports, academic journals, and Islamic references to provide an interdisciplinary approach. Rather than only evaluating MBG's effectiveness, the study advocates for inclusive policies and explores how MBG can reinforce social justice and food security within the framework of Sharia. Moreover, it addresses implementation challenges identified in earlier studies (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025) and enriches

them with Islamic values of justice and collective responsibility, thus strengthening the program's sustainability.

The objectives of this research are to analyze the contribution of MBG to human development (HDI, health, education) from the perspective of Islamic economics, identify the application of *maqasid al-shariah* specifically *hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-'aql* in the program's design and implementation, and provide Islamic value-based recommendations to enhance program effectiveness and fairness. The research gap addressed here is that no existing studies have linked MBG with Islamic economics. Most literature assesses MBG from policy or macro-social perspectives, without considering moral and spiritual dimensions or integrating Islamic values into distribution, nutritional standards, and program sustainability.

The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary nature and Islamic value orientation. It goes beyond conventional policy evaluation by embedding spiritual and ethical dimensions into the analysis. By mapping *maqasid al-shariah* onto real policies, this study demonstrates the practical application of *hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-'aql* in strengthening MBG. Furthermore, it synthesizes modern statistical data (BPS, SSGI), contemporary academic studies (Agustini & Mulyani, 2025), and classical as well as modern Islamic economic thought an approach rarely undertaken. Finally, the study contributes to value-based public policy design, offering an ideal model for welfare programs such as MBG, PKH, or BPNT. With recommendations for equitable distribution, transparent budgeting, and nutritional quality assurance, the study emphasizes that MBG can serve not only as a technical intervention but also as a morally and epistemically legitimate policy within the framework of Islamic economics.

2. METHODS

This study employs a literature review method with a descriptive qualitative approach. The literature review was chosen because the research focuses on conceptual and theoretical analyses of the *Free Nutritious Meals (MBG)* program and its relevance to human development within the perspective of Islamic economics. The data sources were obtained from both primary and secondary literature, including publications from the Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik/BPS), the Indonesian Ministry of Health, the Ministry of National Development Planning (Bappenas), reputable national and international journals, as well as books addressing Islamic economics, *maqashid sharia*, and human development. The inclusion criteria for the literature were as follows: published within the last ten years (2014–2024), relevant to issues of nutrition, human development, and Islamic economics, and accessible through official journal databases, repositories, or government websites. Data analysis was conducted through three stages as proposed by Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2020): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This process involved identifying significant findings across the literature, categorizing themes according to the research focus (nutrition, human development, and Islamic economics), and synthesizing arguments to generate a comprehensive understanding of MBG's contribution to human development. The validity of the data was ensured through source triangulation, by comparing findings from scientific journals, official government reports, and other academic works. Thus, the results of this study are expected to demonstrate strong validity and provide novel contributions to the body of knowledge in Islamic economics and human development policy in Indonesia.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The fulfillment of nutritional needs occupies a highly strategic position in the process of human development. The availability and adequacy of proper nutrition from an early age not only

affect individual physical health but also significantly determine the quality of human resources that drive national development. However, disparities in access to nutritious food remain a persistent challenge. Factors such as poverty, limited nutrition education, and unequal food distribution exacerbate the situation. In this regard, the state bears both a moral and *shar'i* responsibility to ensure sufficient nutrition for its people. Indonesia continues to face serious challenges related to malnutrition and stunting. According to data from the National Population and Family Planning Board (BKKBN), more than 20% of Indonesian children under five were still stunted in 2023. This condition is alarming, as high-quality human development is heavily influenced by adequate nutritional intake from early childhood.

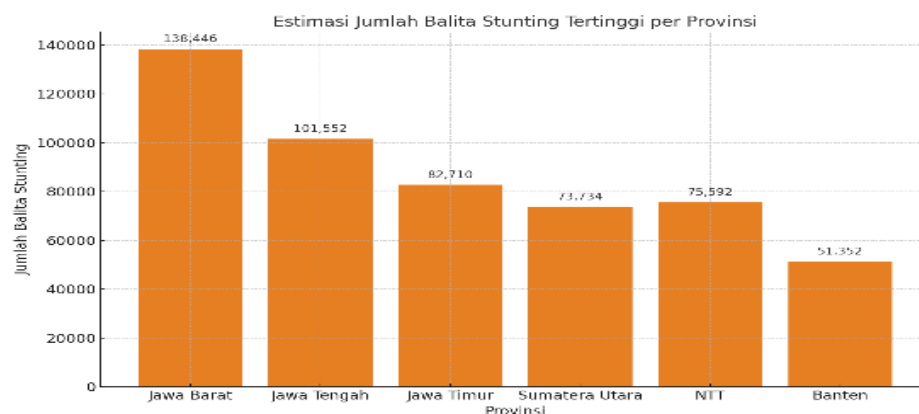
Table 1. Stunting Prevalence Trend 2022–2024

Tahun	Prevalensi Stunting
2022	21,6% (turun dari 24,4% pada 2021)
2023	21,5%
2024	19,8%

Source: *Indonesian Nutrition Status Survey (SSGI), Ministry of Health, 2024*

Data from the Ministry of Health indicate a promising downward trend. Stunting prevalence declined from 24.4% in 2020 to 21.5% in 2021, and further to 19.8% in 2024 exceeding the government's target of 20%. Despite this achievement, reducing stunting prevalence remains a key priority in the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN). At 19.8%, the rate is still considered high, with the government aiming to lower it to 14% by 2029. This improvement is expected to serve as a foundation for achieving Indonesia Emas 2045, as articulated in the Presidential Vision 2025–2029: "Together Towards an Advanced Indonesia, Realizing Golden Indonesia 2045" (RPJMN, 2025–2029). Nevertheless, reaching the 14% target is not without challenges. As Minister of Health Budi Gunadi Sadikin emphasized during the 2024 SSGI announcement at the Ministry of Health Auditorium (May 26, 2025), achieving this goal will require stronger collaboration, particularly in six provinces with the highest number of stunted children: West Java (638,000), Central Java (485,893), East Java (430,780), North Sumatra (316,456), East Nusa Tenggara (214,143), and Banten (209,600) (BKPK, 2025).

Table 2. Estimated number of stunted toddlers by province with the highest prevalence



Source: *Health Development Policy Agency (BKPK), Ministry of Health of Indonesia (2025)*

The Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program is one of the government's flagship policies to address nutritional deficiencies in Indonesia. It also represents the implementation of Article 33 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which mandates that the economy be organized based on the principles of kinship (Paragraph 1) and economic democracy, with fairness, sustainability, independence, and national economic unity (Paragraph 3). From an Islamic perspective, nutrition also holds fundamental significance within the objectives of *maqashid syariah*, particularly the protection of life (*hifz al-nafs*) and the protection of intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), underscoring the spiritual and ethical imperatives of ensuring adequate nutrition for all citizens.

3.1.1. Nutrition as the Foundation of Human Capital Development

Optimal nutritional status during the early stages of life, particularly within the first 1,000 days (from conception to the child's second birthday), plays a crucial role in both physical growth and brain development. Empirical evidence demonstrates that malnutrition especially stunting significantly hampers children's cognitive abilities, motor skills, and social interactions. A case study in West Java revealed that stunted children scored lower in tests measuring language acquisition, fine motor skills, and social interaction compared to their non-stunted peers (Putri, 2025). Furthermore, the long-term effects of stunting have been strongly associated with diminished learning capacity, lower academic achievement, and reduced economic productivity in adulthood. A longitudinal study conducted in Guatemala found that early-life nutritional interventions had a measurable impact on years of schooling, reading ability, and wage levels, particularly among adult men (Dewey & Begum, 2011). Other global studies also confirm that childhood stunting can lead to long-term declines in cognitive performance and economic productivity (Dewey & Begum, 2011). In the public health context, the concept of the "first 1,000 days of life" emphasizes that this period constitutes a critical window for nutritional intervention. Adequate intake of both macro- and micronutrients during this phase determines neurological function and physical growth trajectories. Nutritional deficiencies occurring during this window may cause lasting consequences, many of which are only partially reversible. Overall, achieving optimal nutritional status during this critical growth period not only supports children's physical and cognitive development but also represents a long-term investment in human capital. The implications are directly tied to the quality of education, labor productivity, and broader economic contributions in the future.

3.1.2. Nutritional Interventions to Support Human Development

Various nutritional interventions such as supplementary feeding programs (PMT), food fortification, nutrition education, and expanded access to healthcare services for vulnerable groups (pregnant women, toddlers, and adolescents) have been empirically proven effective in improving community nutritional status and supporting sustainable human development. For instance, a systematic review concluded that comprehensive programs combining maternal education, micronutrient supplementation, and hygiene promotion (WASH) reduced stunting prevalence by 5–17% among children under five, particularly through interventions implemented during the first 1,000 days of life (Mahendra, 2025). Local studies also reinforce these findings. In Bengkulu, supplementary feeding programs based on local foods combined with cooking classes improved toddlers' nutritional status and increased maternal knowledge regarding nutritious food preparation (Simbolon et al., 2023). Similarly, supplementary feeding (PMT) combined with nutrition counseling proved effective in increasing the body weight of undernourished toddlers within a few months (Fajar, Anggraini, & Husnul, 2022). In Surabaya, oral nutritional supplementation (ONS) for stunted toddlers improved their nutritional status by 25% within 90

days (Alexander et al., 2025). Nutrition education for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers also enhanced awareness and practices for stunting prevention (Mukty et al., 2025). Food fortification and supplementation, although beneficial, often demonstrate limited long-term effects when implemented in isolation without integration into educational or community-based interventions (Goudet, Bogin, Madise, & Griffiths, 2019; Juita, Huljannah, & Rochmah, 2022; Mahendra, 2025). Overall, the most effective nutritional interventions are multi-component in nature, combining education, nutritional supplementation, community participation, and sustainable policy support. Such an approach not only improves child nutrition status but also enhances learning outcomes, unlocks cognitive development potential, and establishes a solid foundation for future human development and national economic growth.

3.1.3. *Islamic Economic Perspective and Maqashid al-Shariah*

Islamic economics emphasizes distributive justice and collective welfare. According to Imam al-Ghazali, among the primary objectives of maqashid al-shariah are the protection of life (*hifz al-nafs*) and intellect (*hifz al-'aql*). These principles are closely linked to the provision of adequate and wholesome nutrition, which is essential for sustaining a healthy and productive life. To achieve this, food must not only be halal (lawful) but also tayyib (wholesome and beneficial). As explained by Sheikh Wahbah al-Zuhaili in Tafsir al-Munir, halal refers to food that is lawful in substance and permissible in the manner of its acquisition, while tayyib refers to food that is beneficial, safe, and pleasant for both body and soul.

The responsibility of the state in ensuring food availability and public welfare is grounded in the Qur'an, Surah Tāhā (20:118–119), which assures that: *"Indeed, it is guaranteed for you that therein you will not go hungry nor be unclothed. And indeed, you will not suffer from thirst therein nor be scorched by the sun."* Al-Ghazali emphasized that rulers bear responsibility for the socioeconomic conditions of their people, particularly during times of crisis such as food scarcity, drought, or other circumstances beyond their control. *Maqashid al-shariah* refers to the overarching objectives of Islamic law, which are intended to secure the well-being (*maslahah*) of humankind. According to al-Ghazali, *maslahah* is categorized into five essentials: (1) protection of religion (*hifz al-din*), (2) protection of life (*hifz al-nafs*), (3) protection of intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), (4) protection of wealth (*hifz al-mal*), and (5) protection of lineage (*hifz al-nasl*). Within this framework, the fulfillment of nutritional needs constitutes an essential component of *hifz al-nafs* (preservation of life).

The Qur'an further underscores the importance of early nutrition in Surah al-Baqarah (2:233). In detail, Islam emphasizes the fulfillment of children's nutritional needs. As stated in the Qur'an: *"Mothers shall breastfeed their children for two whole years, for those who wish to complete the term. It is the duty of the father to provide food and clothing for the mothers in a fair manner. No person shall be burdened beyond their capacity. A mother should not suffer harm because of her child, nor should a father because of his child. The same applies to the heir. If both parents decide, by mutual consent and consultation, to wean the child before two years, there is no blame upon them. And if you wish to have your child breastfed by another woman, there is no blame upon you provided you pay fairly. Fear Allah and know that Allah is All-Seeing of what you do."* (Qur'an 2:233).

Prof. Quraish Shihab emphasizes the importance of fulfilling children's nutritional needs from an early age by parents. However, if parents are unable to do so, this responsibility should be transferred to the next accountable party. The fair distribution of resources, along with attention to vulnerable groups in society through mechanisms such as zakat, infaq, and waqf, is highly relevant to supporting nutritional interventions for equitable and sustainable human development. Thus, systematic efforts in meeting nutritional needs are not only essential for individual health but also

serve as the foundation for producing a high-quality and productive human resource base, which ultimately supports the process of national human development in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

3.1.4. Impact on National Development

Nutritional improvement plays a strategic role in national development. Better nutritional status enhances the quality of human resources (HR), reflected in both physical growth and increased cognitive capacity, which in turn improves overall labor productivity. Consequently, dependence on healthcare services is reduced, thereby decreasing the national healthcare burden and enhancing economic efficiency at the macro level. This productivity growth forms the backbone of achieving the *Indonesia Emas 2045* vision, which aims to realize inclusive and sustainable human development. The Lancet Global Health highlights that economic growth (GDP per capita) alone is insufficient to significantly reduce nutritional problems. Evidence from 121 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) across 36 countries shows that GDP growth contributes minimally to stunting reduction (<1%) (Alderman, Haddad, Headey, & Smith, 2014). These findings underscore the necessity of direct nutritional interventions alongside macroeconomic measures, since without targeted investment in nutrition, improvements in human capital will have limited long-term effects on economic growth. In the Indonesian context, nutritional transformation has been integrated into the Long-Term National Development Plan (RPJPN 2025–2045) as one of the key pillars in realizing the vision of Golden Indonesia 2045. The Ministry of National Development Planning (Bappenas) emphasizes that health and nutrition development are central to achieving these national objectives (Ameliya & Raka, 2024; Hartman, 2024). Furthermore, malnutrition imposes a significant economic burden, causing productivity losses amounting to billions of U.S. dollars annually. Addressing nutrition, therefore, not only enhances productivity but also substantially reduces economic costs as an investment that simultaneously supports both human development and sustainable economic growth.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the *Free Nutritious Meal* (MBG) program makes a significant contribution to enhancing the quality of human development, particularly in the domains of health and education. This aligns with the primary objective of the research, namely, to analyze how MBG strengthens human development through the provision of adequate nutrition. From the perspective of Islamic economics, the fulfillment of nutritional needs constitutes an essential aspect of preserving the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, especially *ḥifẓ al-nafs* (protection of life) and *ḥifẓ al-'aql* (protection of intellect). Scientifically, this can be explained by the fact that sufficient nutrition improves cognitive capacity, productivity, and the readiness of younger generations to face developmental challenges. Islamic economics further emphasizes equitable distribution and collective welfare. In this regard, MBG aligns with these principles by providing access to nutritious meals for all segments of society without economic discrimination.

These results are consistent with previous studies that highlight the importance of nutritional interventions in improving the quality of human resources. However, unlike research that focuses exclusively on health outcomes, this study contributes a novel perspective by integrating the framework of Islamic economics. Consequently, MBG is not merely a health initiative but also functions as an instrument of social and economic justice. The implications of these findings suggest that nutrition-based public policies should be integrated with Islamic values such as *zakat*, *infāq*, and *waqf*, which could support the sustainability of the MBG program. Future research may expand on this study by examining the effectiveness of Islamic philanthropic funding mechanisms and by assessing the long-term impact of MBG on the Human Development Index (HDI) across different regions.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that adequate nutrition serves as a fundamental foundation for sustainable human development and economic growth. The availability of balanced nutrition, particularly during the first 1,000 days of life, has a profound impact on the quality of human capital, influencing physical growth, cognitive development, and future work productivity. Individuals with optimal nutritional status are more likely to pursue higher education, enhance their professional competencies, and contribute positively to national economic growth. At the macro level, investment in nutrition not only reduces healthcare costs but also increases labor efficiency, strengthens national competitiveness, and helps break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. From an Islamic perspective, nutritional fulfillment is aligned with the objectives of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, particularly *ḥifẓ al-naḥs* (preservation of life) and *ḥifẓ al-'aql* (preservation of intellect), which underpin the establishment of a prosperous, just, and dignified society. Therefore, the responsibility for ensuring adequate nutrition does not rest solely on individuals but is also a mandate of the state in pursuit of collective welfare. This study acknowledges certain limitations, as it primarily relies on existing literature while empirical data on the implementation of the *Free Nutritious Meal* (MBG) program remain limited. Future research should therefore focus on field studies that directly assess the impact of MBG on health outcomes, educational attainment, and the Human Development Index (HDI). Additionally, forthcoming studies could develop an Islamic economic-based evaluation model to measure the extent to which nutrition policies align with principles of distributive justice and social responsibility. In this way, the present study aspires to provide an initial foundation for the development of public policies that are more inclusive, sustainable, and rooted in Islamic values.

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