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Cross-Sectoral Collaboration in the Free Nutritional Meal Program in Indonesia

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Abstract - Malnutrition, particularly stunting, remains a critical public health challenge in Indonesia, prompting the government to launch the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) as a strategic intervention. However, the program encounters significant implementation obstacles, including bureaucratic fragmentation and suboptimal inter-agency coordination. This study aims to analyze the mechanisms of cross-sectoral collaboration, identify supporting and inhibiting factors, and evaluate their impact on the program's effectiveness and sustainability. Utilizing an interpretive qualitative paradigm and a case study approach, data were collected through participatory observation and in-depth interviews with key strategic informants from the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) and crisis communication practitioners. The research applies the frameworks of Collaborative Governance and the Agency Network/Cluster Model to interpret the findings. The results indicate that the MBG program successfully integrates collaborative elements, such as a conducive policy context and active stakeholder engagement with a horizontal network architecture. This structure connects central actors to local clusters, enabling adaptive responses to crises and logistical challenges in remote areas. The study concludes that combining collaborative processes with a flexible network structure creates a resilient communication model that relies on horizontal synergy rather than vertical hierarchy to ensure sustainable nutrition enhancement.

Keywords: Malnutrition and stunting; Bureaucratic fragmentation; Crisis communication; Strategic intervention; Free Nutritious Meals Program

Introduction

Malnutrition, particularly stunting, remains a major public health concern in Indonesia. According to data from the National Population and Family Planning Agency (BKKBN) and the Ministry of Health, the national stunting prevalence in 2022 reached 21.6%, far below the World Health Organization's (WHO) ideal target of 14% (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022). This condition not only hinders children's physical growth but also negatively impacts cognitive development and future human resource productivity (World Bank, 2022).

As a strategic step to address this issue, the Indonesian government launched the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG), which aims to improve the nutritional intake of school-aged children by providing free nutritious meals in schools. Successful implementation of this program requires active

collaboration between various parties, including the central and regional governments, implementing units in schools, community organizations, the private sector, and local communities (Soma et al., 2024).9

Recent research shows that cross-sectoral collaboration is crucial for addressing the complexities of implementing social programs such as the MBG. This collaboration can encourage resource integration, strengthen coordination, and enhance accountability among relevant institutions and stakeholders (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). However, various obstacles remain in the field, such as bureaucratic fragmentation, capacity differences between actors, and a lack of trust, which hinder optimal synergy (Rakhmani & Sari, 2023).

Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Social Affairs (2024) notes that although the MBG program has been running for several years, only around 60% of target areas have been able to implement the program consistently and effectively. The most frequently encountered obstacles include suboptimal inter-agency coordination, uneven logistics distribution, and minimal active participation of local communities in implementation at the regional level. This situation emphasizes the need for a deep understanding of effective cross-sectoral collaboration mechanisms to support more optimal and sustainable program implementation (Katmawanti, 2023).

Given these challenges and potential, this research is crucial to examine the cross-sectoral collaboration process, identify supporting and inhibiting factors, and evaluate the impact of collaboration on the effectiveness and sustainability of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. The study's findings are expected to provide data-based recommendations for policymakers and program implementers to further improve the quality of life for Indonesian children through sustainable nutrition enhancement.

Based on the existing background and phenomena, this study formulates the following main problems: How can the mechanisms and processes of cross-sectoral collaboration in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program run effectively? What supporting and inhibiting factors influence this collaboration? Furthermore, how does this cross-sectoral collaboration impact the effectiveness and sustainability of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in various regions in Indonesia?

By understanding these issues, this study aims to describe in depth the cross-sectoral collaboration process that occurred in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. This study also aims to identify factors that support and hinder this collaboration, thereby providing a clear picture of the dynamics of cooperation between institutions and stakeholders. Furthermore, this study seeks to evaluate the impact of the successes and obstacles of collaboration on the effectiveness and sustainability of the program, and provides applicable strategic recommendations for increasing cross-sectoral synergy in the implementation of similar social programs in the future.

Theoretical Framework

Collaborative governance is an approach to public policy management that emphasizes collaborative processes among various actors across sectors, namely government, civil society, local communities, and the private sector, to jointly design, implement, and evaluate solutions to complex issues (Ansell & Gash, 2008). This concept developed in response to the limitations of traditional bureaucratic models that often fail to accommodate diverse interests and address problems that require sustained multi-stakeholder involvement.

According to Ansell and Gash (2008), the success of collaborative governance depends heavily on conducive relationships between stakeholders. A supportive external environment, such as a shared need or crisis, can motivate actors to open up to collaboration. In the initial stages, regular face-to-face dialogue is crucial to building trust among all actors. Open and participatory communication helps all parties understand their respective roles, interests, and responsibilities equally.

Full participation and commitment from participants is the next element that determines the success of collaboration. All parties must be confident that their contributions are recognized and have an impact on the final decision. Furthermore, trust and strong interpersonal relationships facilitate genuine collaboration, avoiding the potential for destructive conflict that often arises in multi-actor program management. In practice, collaborative governance processes are often characterized by intermediate outcomes, such as the creation of a joint work structure or a collaborative evaluation model that strengthens commitment and ensures sustainability until the primary goal is achieved.

Further literature confirms that collaborative governance can improve governance effectiveness, expand innovation, and strengthen policy legitimacy. Studies in health, food, and the environment demonstrate the model's success in encouraging public participation and leveraging diverse resources and knowledge for innovative and effective solutions (Emerson et al., 2012; Provan & Kenis, 2008; Soma et al., 2024; Thomson & Perry, 2006). Research in the Indonesian context also highlights unique challenges, such as bureaucratic fragmentation, resource gaps, and resistance to change, which can be overcome through inclusive leadership, the use of multi-stakeholder forums, and participatory monitoring (Rakhmani & Sari, 2023; Katmawanti, 2023).

Overall, collaborative governance requires synergy, commitment, openness, and a willingness among implementing actors to pursue collective goals, with robust communication mechanisms and effective conflict management as the foundation for success. This approach is increasingly relevant in complex social programs like the Free Nutritional Meals program in Indonesia, where cross-sector synergy is a key determinant of program effectiveness and sustainability.

Agency Network

The Agency Network or Cluster Model is a conceptual framework that emphasizes the importance of cooperation and interconnectedness among various organizations and actors participating in a collaborative system. This concept developed from the study of network theory in organizational management and public governance, which emphasizes that the successful implementation of a program or policy cannot depend solely on a single entity, but rather on a complex network of interconnected and contributing parties.

This model illustrates how various organizations and stakeholders form an interacting cluster or network, each with distinct but complementary roles, functions, and resources. The primary value of this model is to increase flexibility, adaptive capacity, and effectiveness of program implementation in addressing multidimensional social challenges. Thus, decentralization of responsibility and coordination between actors are central to managing successful collaboration.

This concept is theoretically closely linked to the thinking of Provan and Kenis (2008), who discussed various modes of network governance, and Powell (1990), who examined forms of network organization that are neither market nor hierarchical. They explained that network organizational modes can increase effectiveness and innovation by connecting actors horizontally, enabling a smoother flow of information and resources, and optimizing outcomes through collective synergy.

In the context of the Free Nutritional Meals Program (MBG) in Indonesia, the Agency Network/Cluster Model is highly relevant as a framework for understanding how various parties, from the central government, local governments, educational institutions, health facilities, village-owned enterprises (BUMDes), and local communities, must work together systematically and support each other. This model emphasizes that the program's success depends on the functional integration and commitment of the entire network of actors involved, where communication, coordination, and relationship management between actors are key to overcoming obstacles and maximizing impact.

With this approach, the MBG program can also overcome challenges such as bureaucratic fragmentation, differences in resource capacity between institutions, and the need for rapid and adaptive responses to local conditions, so that the achievement of the goal of equitable and sustainable nutrition services can be realized more effectively.

Material and Methodology

This research uses an interpretive qualitative paradigm that aims to deeply understand social phenomena through the perspectives of actors in real-world contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm allows researchers to capture the complexity and dynamics of cross-sectoral collaboration in the implementation of the Free Nutritional Meals Program (MBG) from the perspectives of the actors involved. This approach is highly relevant because the research focuses on the processes, interactions, and supporting and inhibiting factors of collaboration, which are contextual and subjective.

The research used was a qualitative case study, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of cross-sectoral collaboration in the MBG program in selected regions in Indonesia (Yin, 2018). Case studies were chosen because they provide a contextual and holistic understanding of how the collaboration process works and its impact on the program's effectiveness and sustainability.

Data was collected through several techniques, namely: In-depth interviews: with government officials, program implementers in schools, BUMDes managers, civil society organizations, and other related partners to explore experiences, perceptions, and collaboration strategies (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Participatory observation is also carried out by researchers directly following the program implementation process to understand the interactions between actors and collaborative practices in the field (Angrosino, 2014).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which included coding, theme grouping, and narrative interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach helped identify key patterns related to collaboration mechanisms, enabling factors, barriers, and outcomes seen in the context of the MBG program. This approach was also expected to strengthen data validity by applying data source triangulation validation techniques that utilize multiple data sources (interviews, observations) to obtain a comprehensive picture and reduce bias (Flick, 2020).

Result and Discussion

This section presents thematic analysis and discussion based on in-depth interviews with two key informants directly involved in the planning and implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program. The first informant is a representative of the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), which plays a role in policy formulation, cross-sector coordination, and management of the MBG program's formal communication channels. The second informant is Noudhy Valdryno, a crisis communications practitioner involved in handling sensitive MBG issues in the field, including the dry menu crisis during Ramadan and the food poisoning incident in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara.

These two speakers were selected for their strategic positions within the MBG's collaborative governance architecture. The BGN representative provided an institutional perspective on how policies, coordination structures, and communication mechanisms are designed and operationalized from the central to regional levels. Meanwhile, Noudhy Valdryno presented operational and crisis perspectives, highlighting how cross-sector collaboration is truly tested when the MBG faces public pressure, media pressure, and the need for rapid response on the ground. The combination of these two perspectives allows for a richer analysis of the dynamics of collaboration, both in routine and crisis situations.

The analysis in the following sub-chapters is structured using the five main elements of collaborative governance according to Ansell and Gash (2008): a conducive context, open face-to-face dialogue, active involvement and commitment, trust and relationships between actors, and intermediate outcomes. Each element serves as a lens through which to interpret the patterns emerging from the responses of the two informants, thus gaining a systematic understanding of how collaborative governance principles are embodied in the communication practices of the MBG Program. This approach also facilitates the drawing of theoretical and practical implications for strengthening collaborative governance in similar social programs in the future.

Both speakers identified child nutrition issues—stunting, anemia, and the need to meet daily nutritional needs—as the primary driving factors for cross-sector collaboration in MBG communications. The scale of the program, involving tens of millions of recipients and the risks of misinformation, technical misunderstandings, and even reputational crises, make end-to-end, data-driven communication a structural necessity, not an option. In addition to substantive needs, political support through regulations such as the MBG Presidential Decree and the commitment of regional heads create a relatively conducive policy environment; regions with proactive regional heads and agencies appear to be quicker to establish collaborative structures such as the SPPG and strengthen school and community coordination. This finding aligns with Ansell & Gash's notion that collaborative governance tends to succeed when there is a strongly perceived shared problem and adequate political support as the "starting conditions" for collaboration.

Open Face-to-Face Dialogue

The practice of face-to-face dialogue within the MBG occurs in two forms: cross-agency forums at the central and regional levels and field visits to MBG kitchens, schools, community health centers, village-owned enterprises (BUMDes), and communities. The National Non-Governmental Organization (BGN) holds direct meetings with relevant agencies, and on specific issues such as the distribution of MBG to schools, the central team meets with the schools for contextual verification in

the field. Furthermore, a crisis communications resource explained that weekly press briefings serve as a formal forum for aligning data and issues before going to the media, as well as an internal forum for resolving miscommunications. Although BGN has not yet initiated regular face-to-face multi-stakeholder forums in all regions, non-face-to-face channels such as the 127 call center, Tawascare, and cross-agency WhatsApp groups serve as two-way dialogue mechanisms that facilitate daily input and complaints. This illustrates the combination of face-to-face dialogue and digital mediation that strengthens the face-to-face dimension of collaborative governance.

Active Involvement and Commitment

Efforts to ensure active partner engagement are evident through repeated cross-sector coordination, clear role allocation, field mentoring, and two-way feedback channels. The Education Office coordinates schools and reporting flows, community health centers monitor nutrition and education quality, village-owned enterprises (BUMDes) and communities support distribution and local kitchens, while schools manage documentation and routine beneficiary reporting. On the crisis communications side, the PCO prepares the official narrative and media liaison, the National Non-Governmental Organization (BGN) serves as the technical spokesperson, while local governments and schools are responsible for local communications and rapid reporting, as highlighted in the handling of the poisoning case in Kupang.

The decline in participation was addressed through re-briefings, field mentoring, simplified reporting flows, and intensive follow-up via WhatsApp and a call center, demonstrating active, rather than passive, commitment management. This demonstrates that MBG collaborative governance relies not only on structure but also on the design of mechanisms that facilitate actors' feeling of support and not simply being "asked to report."

Trust and Relationships Between Actors

Trust is built through a combination of clear policies, open principles, and personal relationships with local champions. BGN develops mutually understandable guidelines and decisions, opens partner registration inclusively, and provides channels for aspirations, challenges, and input, helping to reduce suspicion between parties. Crisis informants emphasized data transparency and consistent responses as the foundation of trust: each issue is discussed by reviewing shared raw data and field verification, thus minimizing sectoral egos when there are differences in data or interpretations of standard operating procedures (SOPs).

Personal relationships with local figures—tribal chiefs in Papua, school principals, and kitchen owners in Kupang—are also recognized as key to program acceptance in the 3T (frontier and remote) regions and easing tensions during the crisis. These dimensions underscore the importance of social capital and interpersonal trust in operationalizing collaborative governance in challenging geographical and social contexts.

Intermediate Outcomes

Both interviews revealed a number of “small wins” that served as interim outcomes and strengthened collaboration. At the operational level, there was increased understanding among schools, SPPGs, and facilitators of the MBG communication flow, standardization of daily menu report templates, and more structured reporting channels via WhatsApp, circulars, and SPPG social media. At the crisis level, the success of consistent weekly press briefings, rapid revisions to *Ramadan* menus, and the subsequent national adoption of post-Kupang poisoning kitchen SOPs increased media and local government confidence in the government’s communication capacity. These achievements directly impacted collaboration motivation: local governments felt heard, SPPGs and partners felt valued, and participation from the community and local farmers increased as they saw the program’s economic and social benefits. Similarly, regular evaluation processes through monitoring web reports, call centers, field visits, and weekly briefings ensured that interim results did not remain as outputs but were translated into improvements to MBG communication policies and governance going forward.

Overall, all five elements of collaborative governance appear to be present in MBG communication practices, albeit with varying strengths within each element. A conducive context and crisis coordination demonstrated strong performance, while regular multi-actor face-to-face forums in the regions still have potential for strengthening. These findings can form the basis for

recommendations for strengthening local dialogue structures and institutionalizing good practices that have proven effective in handling crises and maintaining cross-sectoral collaboration within the MBG program.

Agency Network Integration in MBG Communications

In addition to Ansell & Gash's collaborative governance framework, interview findings also illustrate the application of the Agency Network/Cluster Model, which emphasizes organizational network structures and actor clusters as the operational foundation of collaboration. This model is clearly visible in how MBG communication does not operate in a vertical hierarchy, but rather through a horizontal network that connects central actors (BGN, PCO, Ministry of Health) with local clusters (local governments, schools, SPPG, community health centers, BUMDes, communities), each of which has specific, complementary functions and resources.

A clear division of functions within this network is key to its success: BGN, as the central node, manages nutrition data, technical SOPs, and provides spokespersons; PCOs, as communication nodes, prepare official narratives and press briefings; local governments and schools, as implementing clusters, manage local reporting and communications; and BUMDes/*Puskesmas*, as logistics-health clusters, support nutrition distribution and monitoring. During the Kupang crisis, this network was tested when the central node (BGN-PCO) directly connected with local clusters (schools and kitchen owners) for field verification and rapid response, demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of the network that characterizes this model.

Noudhy Valdryno explicitly describes the dynamics of network governance through a 24/7 cross-agency WhatsApp group and weekly press briefings as a coordination hub, where information flows horizontally between actors without bureaucratic barriers. This approach mitigates the risk of information fragmentation that often occurs in traditional hierarchical structures, as Provan & Kenis explain that networks are effective when there is a central broker facilitating information flow and coordination between clusters.

On the other hand, BGN representatives highlighted the network's inclusiveness through open partner registration and feedback channels such as the 127 call center and Tawascare, which allow non-governmental actors (foundations, local MSMEs) to join as supporting nodes in distribution clusters. This reflects Powell's principle that network organizations thrive through functional interdependence, where each actor contributes its competitive advantage (BGN's nutritional competence, BUMDes's local access, schools' rapid reporting) to achieve collective goals that would be impossible to achieve individually.

These findings reinforce that the Agency Network/Cluster Model not only complements Ansell & Gash's collaborative governance model but also provides a structural explanation for MBG communications' resilience amidst crises. A decentralized yet coordinated network enables adaptive responses to contextual challenges such as remote areas (3T) or poisoning incidents, while maintaining a consistent national narrative. The combination of collaborative processes (Ansell & Gash) with network architecture (Provan & Kenis) creates a resilient and scalable social program communication model for Indonesia's heterogeneous context.

Conclusions

This study shows that the Free Nutritional Meals (MBG) program successfully implemented collaborative governance principles (Ansell & Gash, 2008) through five key elements that support each other. A conducive context was created by the urgency of child nutrition issues and the political support of the MBG Presidential Regulation, while open face-to-face dialogue was realized through field visits, weekly press briefings, and digital channels such as WhatsApp groups and the 127 call center. The active involvement of partners was evident in the clear division of roles between BGN, PCO, local governments, schools, community health centers, and BUMDes, with concrete commitments such as rapid reporting and effective response to the Kupang crisis.

Furthermore, trust between actors is strengthened through data transparency, personal relationships with local champions, and openness to input, while inter-temporal outcomes such as standardized kitchen SOPs, improved Ramadan menus, and more efficient reporting structures serve as a momentum for strengthening collaboration. The Agency Network/Cluster Model (Provan & Kenis, 2008) complements this analysis by explaining a flexible horizontal network architecture, where BGN

as a central node facilitates the flow of information between local clusters, enabling adaptive responses to contextual crises such as those in the 3T region.

Overall, the combination of Ansell & Gash's collaborative process with Provan & Kenis's network structure results in a resilient social program communications model, where success depends not on vertical hierarchies, but rather on horizontal synergies that are responsive to field challenges and public needs.

Suggestion

For the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) and the Government Communication Agency, it is recommended to institutionalize regular face-to-face multi-stakeholder forums at the district/city level to strengthen consistent local dialogue, not just responsiveness during crises. As well as developing integrated digital platforms such as the MBG dashboard that connects SPPG reporting, community health center nutrition monitoring, and real-time community feedback. Furthermore, local champion training in 3T areas through MoUs with community leaders and tribal chiefs needs to be strengthened to ensure cultural acceptance of the program. For Regional Governments (Pemda) and local partners, the establishment of an MBG Communication Task Force at the district level led by a proactive head of service will accelerate coordination between schools, BUMDes, and community health centers, along with simplifying reporting templates into a single, mobile-friendly national format to increase school and SPPG participation.

For further research, a cross-country comparative analysis is needed between the effectiveness of the MBG communication model with international free food programs such as India's PM Poshan, research on the long-term impact of collaborative networks on child nutrition outcomes and local economic sustainability (food MSMEs), and evaluation of the effectiveness of MBG digital crisis communication using social media sentiment analysis during the full implementation phase in 2026. Practically, the MBG collaborative communication model can be replicated in other national social programs such as stunting management, integrated social assistance, or vaccination campaigns, with an emphasis on horizontal networks and inter-temporal results as a strengthening momentum for collaboration.

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