# Original Researcher Article

# Policy Learning And Implementation Of Free School Meal Programs In Indonesia: A Systematic Literature Review On Nutritional Policies, Cross-National Knowledge Transfer, And Local Adaptations.

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### **ABSTRACT**

School feeding programmes, especially free school meal initiatives, are vital in combating food insecurity, improving health outcomes, and enhancing educational achievements, particularly in developing countries. In Indonesia, these programmes play a key role in the government's efforts to reduce malnutrition, particularly in rural and low-income communities. However, the success of these initiatives depends not only on their design but also on their implementation and the process of policy learning. Policy learning enables countries to adopt successful global practices tailored to their local contexts, thereby ensuring effectiveness and sustainability. This systematic literature review (SLR) synthesizes studies published between 2020 and 2025 on free school meal programmes in Indonesia, focusing on policy learning and knowledge transfer processes. By employing bibliometric tools and thematic analysis, this review examines current trends, challenges, the conceptualization of policy learning, and the adaptation of international practices in the Indonesian context. The review aims to provide insights for improving the design and implementation of school feeding programmes in Indonesia, supporting the country's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the areas of zero hunger and quality education.

**Keywords:** School feeding programmes, free school meal, Policy learning, Knowledge transfer, Multi-actor coordination, Nutrition policy

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

School-feeding programmes, particularly free school meal initiatives, have emerged as essential interventions in addressing food insecurity, improving health outcomes, and enhancing educational achievements in developing countries. In Indonesia, these programmes are integral to the government's strategy to reduce malnutrition among children, especially in rural and lowincome communities. According to a report by the World Bank, Indonesia has seen significant progress in reducing stunting but still faces challenges with micronutrient deficiencies in school-aged children, making school meal programmes a crucial policy instrument to combat these issues (World Bank, 2020). The success of these initiatives, however, depends not only on their design but also on effective implementation and policy learning. Policy learning refers to the process through which policymakers learn from the experiences of others, particularly through mechanisms such as policy transfer and lesson drawing, and apply this knowledge to improve their own policy outcomes (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). In the case of school-feeding programmes, policy learning allows countries like Indonesia to adapt successful global practices to local contexts, ensuring that programmes are not only effective but also sustainable.

Indonesia, as a rapidly developing nation, has witnessed increasing interest in integrating global best practices with domestic policy. This process has led to hybrid models of implementation that combine international lessons with local knowledge and adaptations (Sani & Fathurrahman, 2023; Qomarrullah, 2025). The literature suggests that this kind of knowledge transfer is vital for improving public health and education policies, particularly in school feeding, where both nutrition and education are intertwined (Alderman, Bundy, & Gelli, 2024; Sekiyama et al., 2018; Sekiyama et al., 2018; Nurwakhid, 202). However, despite the recognition of its potential, the literature examining the role of policy learning in the implementation of school feeding programmes in Indonesia remains sparse, with only a few studies focused on

the adaptation and local contextualization of global practices (LoPresto, Cassady, & Dove, 2024; Orbawati, 2025).

While much of the existing research examines nutritional outcomes or the logistical aspects of school meal programmes (Sekiyama et al., 2018), there has been limited exploration of the broader institutional dynamics and policy learning processes that shape these interventions in Indonesia. These dynamics include factors such as governance, cross-sectoral coordination, financial sustainability, and local capacity for managing large-scale nutrition programmes (Waked & Jaime, 2025). Further, the country's diverse geography, socioeconomic disparities, and regional variations implement national programmes like school feeding particularly complex, requiring a nuanced approach to policy learning that considers local conditions (Mannara, Njue, & Abong', 2025; Tanziha, 2025).

The objective of this systematic literature review (SLR) is to fill this gap by synthesizing existing research on free school meal programmes in Indonesia, with a specific focus on policy learning and knowledge transfer processes. By analysing articles published between 2020 and 2025, this review aims to answer several critical questions: (1) What are the current trends and challenges in the implementation of school feeding programmes in Indonesia? (2) How has policy learning been conceptualized and applied in the context of school feeding initiatives in Indonesia? (3) What lessons can be drawn from international experiences, and how have these been adapted to the Indonesian context? (4) What are the key barriers and enablers for scaling up these programmes in Indonesia, and how can they be addressed through effective policy learning?

To achieve these objectives, this review will employ bibliometric tools and thematic analysis to identify trends, gaps, and emerging themes within the literature. The review will also explore how Indonesia has integrated international best practices into its school feeding policies, the challenges of transferring these practices, and the strategies that have been employed to overcome these challenges (LoPresto, Cassady, & Dove, 2024; Basit, 2025). By mapping the evolution of this field, this review will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of policy learning in school nutrition interventions in Indonesia, providing valuable insights for future policy development and implementation.

The importance of this review is further underscored by Indonesia's commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to zero hunger and quality education. School feeding programmes are a critical mechanism in this regard, and a better understanding of how policy learning can enhance their implementation is essential for achieving long-term improvements in child health and education outcomes (United Nations, 2020; Nida & Puspita Sari, 2023). The findings of this review will provide policymakers, academics, and practitioners with evidence-based recommendations to improve the design and implementation of school feeding programmes in Indonesia, ensuring that they are both effective and contextually relevant (Khatimah, 2025; Setyaningtyas, & Arimbi, 2025).

### 2. METHOD

This research follows a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, which aims to provide a comprehensive and unbiased synthesis of existing studies on free nutritious school meal programs in the context of policy learning and multi-actor coordination. The SLR methodology was chosen for its ability to aggregate findings from multiple sources, providing a clearer and more comprehensive picture of existing evidence, identifying research gaps, and offering insights into the effectiveness of policies, governance frameworks, and multi-actor interactions involved in the management of these programs (Higgins & Green, 2011). The purpose of the SLR is to address key research questions related to the effectiveness of school meal policies, the role of coordination among stakeholders, and the barriers to successful implementation, particularly in the context of Indonesia.

Literature Search Strategy

The review process began with an extensive search for relevant literature across multiple academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Key search terms such as "free school meals," "school feeding programs," "policy learning," "policy transfer," "nutrition policy," "multi-actor coordination," "governance," and "Indonesia" were used to capture studies directly related to the research questions. The following inclusion criteria were applied to the literature: Inclusion Criteria:

Publication Date: Studies published between 2020 and 2025 were considered, ensuring the relevance of findings to contemporary issues in school meal programs and nutrition policy.

Language: Only studies available in English or Indonesian were included.

Relevance: Articles that specifically address free school meals, school feeding programs, governance models, policy learning, or multi-actor coordination in the context of school meal programs in Indonesia were included.

Study Type: Empirical studies, reviews, and program evaluations focusing on the implementation, evaluation, or effectiveness of free school meal programs were included.

Exclusion Criteria:

Studies that lacked empirical evidence or focused solely on theoretical models without practical application were excluded.

Studies not directly addressing free school meals or multiactor coordination within the context of Indonesia were excluded.

Studies unrelated to policy learning or governance in the implementation of free school meal programs were excluded.

The initial search resulted in 302 documents from 149 sources and included a wide range of international and local studies. Following the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 157 studies were selected for full review.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

For the selected studies, data were systematically extracted using a data extraction form that included the following information:

Study characteristics (authors, year of publication,

methodology)

Key findings

Details on the effectiveness of free school meal programs, policy learning, multi-actor coordination, and governance frameworks

The extraction process focused on identifying:

Effectiveness of Free School Meal Programs: How do these programs affect child nutrition, school attendance, and educational outcomes in Indonesia?

Role of Multi-Actor Coordination: How do various actors (government, private sector, NGOs, local communities) collaborate and coordinate to implement and sustain school feeding programs?

Barriers to Implementation: What are the challenges in policy implementation and coordination, and how can these barriers be addressed to improve the effectiveness of the programs?

Once the data were extracted, the studies were categorized into themes such as policy effectiveness, governance models, multi-actor coordination, and implementation barriers.

Thematic Analysis

A thematic synthesis approach was employed to group findings into key themes and patterns. This analysis allowed for the identification of trends and relationships between policy learning and multi-actor coordination in managing free school meal programs. The synthesis specifically aimed to answer the following research questions:

How effective are the current free nutritious school meal programs in Indonesia, and what factors influence their success?

To what extent does multi-actor coordination (government, private sector, local communities) contribute to the success or failure of these programs in Indonesia?

What are the barriers to effective coordination and policy implementation, and how can these be overcome to improve the effectiveness of free school meal programs? *Quality Assessment* 

The quality of the included studies was assessed based on the following criteria:

Methodological Rigor: The study design, sample size, and data collection methods were evaluated to ensure robustness.

Transparency: Studies were assessed for clarity in how they reported findings, particularly in terms of policy implications and practical recommendations.

Bias Risk: The potential for publication bias and conflicts of interest was considered.

Each study was rated for methodological quality to ensure only high-quality studies contributed to the synthesis. *Data Analysis* 

Thematic analysis was conducted manually, supplemented with R software to visualize trends and thematic connections. Word frequency analysis and conceptual mapping techniques were used to identify recurring themes across the studies. The R software helped create visual representations of the relationship between policy frameworks and multi-actor coordination mechanisms (R Core Team, 2020).

Bibliometric Insights

The bibliometric analysis of the selected studies revealed

the following trends and characteristics:

Timespan: The studies were published between 2020 and 2025.

Sources: The studies were published across 149 journals, with a total of 302 documents reviewed.

Authors: A total of 1,092 authors contributed to these studies, with 38 single-authored documents and an average of 3.98 co-authors per document.

International Collaboration: Approximately 25.5% of publications involved international co-authorship, indicating strong global collaboration in the field.

Keywords: The analysis identified 1,014 unique keywords, highlighting the diverse approaches, theories, and contexts explored in the literature.

References: The studies referenced 14,392 sources, showing the depth of literature reviewed and the robustness of the academic discussions.

Document Age: The average age of the documents is 2.66 years, suggesting the use of up-to-date sources.

Citations: On average, each document had 9,096 citations, indicating the influence of the studies in the academic community.

Ethical Considerations

As this study involves reviewing existing literature and does not involve primary data collection from human participants, there were no ethical concerns related to data collection. However, ethical guidelines regarding proper citation and referencing were strictly followed throughout the review process. All studies included in this review were appropriately acknowledged.

Limitations

This SLR has several limitations:

Data Availability Bias: Some relevant studies may have been excluded due to language barriers or limited access to local journals, particularly non-English or non-Indonesian sources.

Geographical Limitations: The focus on Indonesia may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different policy contexts or governance structures. Exclusion of Grey Literature: Government reports, non-

peer-reviewed documents, and policy briefs were excluded from this review. These materials may have provided additional valuable insights into the practical aspects of policy implementation.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To gain a deeper and more systematic understanding of the development of literature related to free nutritious school meal programs, particularly within the framework of policy learning and policy implementation, a bibliometric analysis was conducted on academic publications indexed in the Scopus database. The search terms used in the search were a combination of the concepts "policy learning," "lesson drawing," and "policy transfer", combined with terms such as "school feeding program," "free school meals," "nutrition policy," and "policy implementation." This analysis covers publications from 2020 to 2025 and was carried out with the help of Biblioshiny software on R Studio to obtain a visual and quantitative representation of the data found.



**Figure 1.** Summary of Bibliometric Statistics (2020–2025 Period)

The results of the analysis show that during these five years, 302 relevant documents were found, spread across 149 journal sources. These documents were written by 1,092 authors, reflecting a high level of academic engagement with the issue. Among these, 38 documents were written by single authors, while the rest were collaborative, with an average of 3.98 authors per document. This indicates that the issue of free nutritious meals and its related policy learning is an emerging area of study in a collaborative and multidisciplinary academic network.

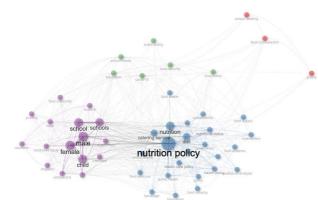
In terms of international collaboration, it was found that 25.5% of the publications were the result of international co-authorship, indicating a high level of knowledge transfer and cross-country policy learning. Additionally, there were 1,014 unique keywords used by the authors, reflecting the diversity of approaches, theories, contexts, and aspects studied in the literature. A total of 14,392 references were cited, also reflecting the depth of literature reviewed by the researchers in constructing their academic arguments.

However, it was found that the annual growth rate of publications had decreased by -10.69%, which may indicate theme saturation, or conversely, open up space for new approaches such as integrating policy learning and policy implementation evaluation within the context of free nutritious school meal programs. The average age of the documents was 2.66 years, indicating that the sources used are still highly relevant and up-to-date. With an average of 9,096 citations per document, these articles are also considered to be quite influential in the academic community.

Overall, the results indicate that the literature related to policy learning in free nutritious school meal programs is a developing field, open to comparative cross-country approaches, and highly potential for further investigation through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on policy learning, best practice transfer, and implementation effectiveness. With a strong bibliometric profile, this research provides a solid foundation to map the literature, identify gaps, and offer significant conceptual and practical contributions.

# Co-occurrence Network

As part of the bibliometric analysis to understand the dynamics of the literature on free nutritious school meal programs within the framework of policy learning, a co-occurrence keyword analysis was performed using the Scopus publication dataset from 2020 to 2025. The analysis revealed that the term "nutrition policy" dominated the center of the keyword network, reflecting the intensity of literature that highlights nutrition policy as a form of sustainable public policy intervention (Alderman, Bundy, & Gelli, 2024; LoPresto, Cassady, & Dove, 2024; Mannara, Njue, & Abong', 2025; Waked & Jaime, 2025). This dominance indicates that nutrition policy has evolved into an integral part of the broader systems of health, education, and social protection.



**Figure 2.** Visualization of the Keyword Network Map (Co-Occurrence Network) related to "Nutrition Policy"

The visualization of the keyword network formed several thematic clusters. The blue cluster shows a strong relationship between nutrition, diet, health care policy, and public health. Articles such as those by Sanchez et al. (2025) highlight how school garden education can strengthen the implementation of nutrition policies through active student involvement. Meanwhile, Alderman et al. (2024) show that while school meal systems have evolved, they often lag behind in terms of the evidence base needed to support the sustainability of the program. LoPresto et al. (2024) evaluated healthy eating policies in low-income communities in the United States and found that implementation disparities hinder the achievement of desired nutritional goals.

The purple cluster focuses on social and demographic aspects such as children, school, poverty, and student. This is evident in studies like Mannara et al. (2025) in Kenya, which reveal the quality of food in school meal programs and its relationship with social inequalities. Similarly, Sanchez et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of school-based policy adaptation to meet the needs of vulnerable groups locally. Waked and Jaime (2025) underscore the importance of historical and local learning to support the implementation of food-based policies during crises and disasters.

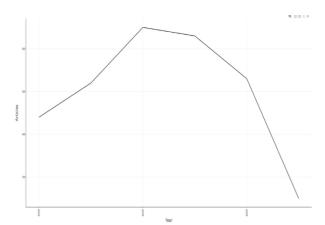
The green cluster addresses issues such as food security, policy implementation, and COVID-19, highlighting the importance of nutritious meal programs as a critical component of policy responses during the pandemic. Several articles discuss policy adjustments during crises, particularly related to school food security and the sustainability of nutrition-based intervention systems (Alderman et al., 2024; Waked & Jaime, 2025; Mannara

et al., 2025). This context emphasizes that policy implementation is not only technical but highly dependent on the system capacity and flexibility of interventions during social disruptions.

The red cluster presents case studies from specific countries such as Ghana and Kenya. Mannara et al. (2025) explicitly discuss the logistics and maize supply in school meal programs, which serve as important indicators in understanding the implementation barriers in developing countries. These countries are often used as starting points in policy learning across nations, based on best practices and contextual adaptations.

### **Annual Scientific Production**

To understand the development of scientific studies on the topic of policy learning in free nutritious school meal programs, a trend analysis of annual publication data from the Scopus database was conducted. The annual scientific production chart shows that between 2020 and 2025, there was a significant fluctuation in the number of articles published.



**Figure 3.** Visualization of Annual Publication Data related to "Nutrition Policy"

In 2020, the number of publications was relatively low, with around 44 articles, but it showed a significant increase in 2021 and peaked in 2022 with a total of around 64 articles. This increase is likely associated with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many countries began rethinking their social protection systems, including school meal schemes as a form of nutrition intervention and public policy (Alderman, Bundy, & Gelli, 2024; Sanchez et al., 2025).

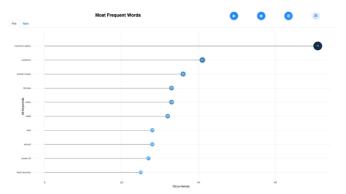
In 2023, the volume of publications remained high, indicating that the issue of free nutritious meals and policy learning continues to be an important focus in the fields of policy studies and public nutrition. One example is the study by Waked and Jaime (2025), which explores the role of local policies and responses to crises in strengthening nutritious meal programs. An article by LoPresto, Cassady, and Dove (2024) also highlights the evaluation of healthy eating policies in low-income communities in the United States, showing a growing interest in studies focused on implementation evaluation. However, in 2024, there was a significant decline in the number of publications, and 2025 saw an even sharper decline, with only about 25 articles identified so far. This decline may reflect theme saturation, or it could be that

the 2025 publication data has not yet been fully accumulated, as the year is still ongoing at the time the data was collected. Nonetheless, articles such as Mannara, Njue, and Abong' (2025), which evaluate the quality of food logistics in school meal programs in Kenya, underscore the continuation of research in the Global South.

This annual trend shows that 2022 and 2023 were the most productive years for literature development on nutrition policies and policy learning. These years can be considered the "peak discourse period," where many countries and researchers explored various best practices and policy lessons from other nations and evaluated the effectiveness of implementation in their respective local contexts.

## **Most Frequent Words**

The keyword frequency analysis is an important step in understanding the dominant themes and the direction of academic discourse in a field. Based on the visualization of data from Scopus between 2020 and 2025, it was found that the term "nutrition policy" was the most frequently used keyword, appearing 71 times, followed by "nutrition" (41 times), "school meals" (40 times), and other keywords related to target populations and implementation contexts such as "female," "male," "child," and "school".



**Figure 4.** Visualization of Most Frequent Words related to "Nutrition Policy"

The high frequency of the term "nutrition policy" emphasizes that the main focus of the literature is on the policy dimension, including aspects of design, implementation, and evaluation in efforts to meet the nutritional needs of school-aged children (Alderman, Bundy, & Gelli, 2024; LoPresto, Cassady, & Dove, 2024; Sanchez et al., 2025). This is reinforced by the appearance of the terms "nutrition" and "diet," indicating that free nutritious meal programs are not only viewed as social interventions but also as part of public health strategies. The appearance of the keywords "school meals" and "school" underscores that the school context is the primary site of policy implementation, as well as a locus for policy learning. Several articles, such as the work by Mannara, Njue, and Abong' (2025), evaluate the distribution of food for school meal programs in Kenya, which serves as an important example of logistical challenges and the quality of implementation in developing countries. Meanwhile, LoPresto, Cassady, and Dove (2024) highlight that variations in the

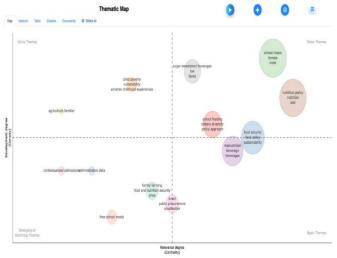
implementation of nutrition policies in U.S. schools directly impact program effectiveness.

Interestingly, terms such as "female," "male," and "child" also appeared frequently, indicating significant attention to the demographic characteristics of beneficiaries. This suggests that much of the analyzed literature explores the differential impacts based on gender and age, and highlights the importance of designing policies that are sensitive to the needs of diverse populations (Waked & Jaime, 2025; Sanchez et al., 2025).

Additionally, the presence of the term "COVID-19" (27 times) shows that the pandemic became a crucial turning point in redesigning and learning from policies related to school meals. Many studies examine how this global health crisis prompted policy reflections and adjustments to nutritious meal programs to address emergency situations (Alderman et al., 2024; Waked & Jaime, 2025). The keyword "food security" also emerged as an important element in this discourse, emphasizing that school meal programs are seen as an integral part of national food security strategies, rather than just educational or social assistance policies.

# **Thematic Map Analysis**

To obtain a conceptual map of studies discussing free nutritious meal policies in the context of policy learning, a thematic map analysis was conducted on the keywords derived from the 302 Scopus-indexed articles between 2020 and 2025. This visualization divides key themes into four quadrants based on their relevance (centrality) and internal development (density): motor themes, basic themes, niche themes, and emerging or declining themes.



**Figure 5.** Visualization of Thematic Map related to "Nutrition Policy"

In the upper-right quadrant, or motor themes, terms like school meals, female, and male emerge as central to the academic discourse. This indicates that a major focus has been on the distribution and impact of free nutritious meal programs based on the demographic characteristics of the beneficiaries. For example, Whittaker (2024) in Development Policy Review highlights the undervaluation of school meal workers, which indirectly affects service effectiveness for both female and male students. Moreover, Robb et al. (2024) in the Food and Nutrition Bulletin developed a specific tool to assess the

quality of nutritious meals for children in South Africa, stressing the importance of age and gender differences in program delivery.

In the lower-right quadrant, we find basic themes such as nutrition policy, diet, food policy, and sustainability. These themes serve as foundational topics in the literature due to their strong connection to policy issues and food systems, although they are not yet fully developed conceptually. For instance, Manson et al. (2024) in Health Promotion International explore the logistics of food distribution in school meal programs and the challenges of cross-sectoral coordination, highlighting the need for consistent and integrated nutrition policy support.

In the upper-left quadrant, representing niche themes, topics such as child poverty, vulnerability, and adverse childhood experiences appear. This theme reflects the focus on the social context that affects the acceptance and impact of nutritious meal programs. For example, McKelvie Sebileau et al. (2024) in Frontiers in Education evaluate the relationship between food poverty and educational outcomes, emphasizing that school meal programs cannot be separated from the structural issues of poverty. Similarly, Wong et al. (2024) in Educational Review explore teenagers' perceptions of social status and the need for adaptive food policies to address vulnerable childhood experiences.

Meanwhile, themes such as free school meals and contextualized data, found in the lower-left quadrant, represent emerging or declining themes. While these themes are highly relevant terminologically, their academic development and frequency remain relatively low. This is seen in the limited literature evaluating administrative data systems as tools for policymaking in free nutritious meal programs. However, this positioning indicates potential for future research in evaluating policies based on contextual data.

Overall, this thematic map shows that research is primarily focused on three main poles: food policy and systems (basic themes), target population dynamics (motor themes), and socio-psychological aspects of vulnerable groups (niche themes). The SLR framework based on this map can integrate these three areas to build a comprehensive narrative on how policy learning occurs from the design to the implementation of nutritious meal programs in different national contexts.

# **World Collaboration Map**

The world collaboration map shows that research on policy learning and free nutritious school meals in publications from Scopus (2020–2025) is heavily dominated by international cross-country collaborations. Countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada occupy central positions in the collaboration network, represented by dark blue colors and cross-continental connection lines. The strong position of the United States and United Kingdom reflects their roles as knowledge production centers and global influences in public policy and public nutrition.



**Figure 6.** Visualization of World Collaboration Map related to "Nutrition Policy"

Collaboration involving Global South countries also appears significant. For example, Australia has collaborated with countries like Ghana, Kenya, and India, often considered case study locations for school meal programs. This collaboration reflects not only the transfer of knowledge from developed to developing countries but also policy learning based on local experiences (Manson et al., 2024; Robb et al., 2024). In some cases, such as between Australia and Ghana, this collaboration resulted in evaluative studies on the effectiveness of nutritious food distribution in primary school contexts.

Additionally, collaborations between Western European countries like France, Ireland, and the United Kingdom with African countries like Kenya and Nigeria indicate a global dynamic of policy learning. This is aligned with the concept of lesson drawing, where free nutritious school meals are not only learned from developed countries to developing ones but also from the local effectiveness recognized internationally.

This pattern strengthens the position of literature in policy learning studies, where countries not only share best

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practices but also build epistemic networks to support evidence-based decision-making. Cross-country collaboration also enables the diversification of approaches, strengthens cross-context validation, and enhances the quality and generalizability of findings in nutritious meal programs.

### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This review provides a comprehensive overview of the literature on free nutritious school meal programmes in Indonesia, with a particular focus on the role of policy learning and multi-actor coordination. The findings indicate that while school feeding programmes have had positive effects on child nutrition, school attendance, and educational outcomes, several challenges persist. Key barriers include issues related to governance, financial sustainability, and the logistics of food distribution, particularly in remote areas. Additionally, the integration of global best practices through policy learning has been essential for improving the effectiveness of these programmes, although challenges remain in adapting these practices to local contexts. The review highlights the importance of cross-sectoral coordination and suggests that further research is needed to explore the long-term sustainability of these programmes and the role of local adaptations in scaling them up. The results of this review contribute valuable insights for policymakers, academics, and practitioners aiming to enhance the design and implementation of school feeding programmes, ensuring they are both effective and contextually relevant, in alignment with Indonesia's goals for zero hunger and quality education.

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