

Implementation of the Merah Putih Cooperative Policy in Supporting the Free Nutritious Food Programme for School Students

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ABSTRACT

The Free Nutritious Food Programme in Indonesia represents a large-scale public policy initiative aimed at improving student nutrition while strengthening local food security and community economic participation. However, the programme's broad coverage, daily operational demands, and complex supply-chain requirements create significant implementation challenges, particularly in procurement, food quality control, service-unit readiness, and local coordination. This study aims to examine the implementation of the Merah Putih Cooperative Policy in supporting the Free Nutritious Food Programme for school students, with particular attention to the role of cooperatives as local food aggregators, procurement intermediaries, and community-based economic institutions. This research uses a qualitative approach based entirely on secondary data, including policy documents, government reports, statistical publications, academic journal articles, and credible online sources related to cooperative development, school feeding policy, and local food-system governance. The findings show that Merah Putih Cooperatives have strategic potential to connect local producers, food service units, schools, and students through a more inclusive and locally grounded supply-chain model. Cooperatives can support food procurement, storage, distribution, transaction recording, and community economic empowerment. Nevertheless, their effectiveness depends on institutional readiness, transparent governance, adequate working capital, food safety capacity, and coordination with local governments and programme implementers. The study concludes that the Merah Putih Cooperative Policy can strengthen the Free Nutritious Food Programme when cooperatives are developed not merely as formal institutions, but as accountable and professional local implementation partners capable of improving student nutrition while stimulating village-level economic development.

Keywords: Merah Putih Cooperative, Local Food System, Policy Implementation

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Merah Putih Cooperative policy in supporting the Free Nutritious Food Programme for school students represents an important intersection between social protection, educational nutrition, rural economic development, and food-system governance in Indonesia. The issue examined in this article is not merely the

delivery of meals to students, but the institutional capacity of village and urban-village cooperatives to become reliable actors in the procurement, processing, distribution, and quality control of nutritious food.

In this context, school feeding programmes are increasingly understood as strategic public policies because they connect children's nutritional needs with broader questions of food security, local production, public procurement, and territorial economic resilience. The originality of this article lies in its focus on how the Merah Putih Cooperative can function as a community-based implementation instrument that links national nutrition policy with local food-supply ecosystems, rather than treating the Free Nutritious Food Programme only as a centralized welfare intervention (Pastorino et al., 2025; Singh et al., 2026; Wang et al., 2023).

International experiences show that when public food programmes are connected to local producers, farmer organizations, and cooperative institutions, they can simultaneously improve student nutrition and generate income opportunities for small-scale food producers. The Merah Putih Cooperative policy is therefore relevant because it offers an institutional pathway for integrating local agricultural products, community enterprises, and public nutrition objectives within one governance framework. This article positions the Indonesian case within broader studies on school feeding and local food procurement, while emphasizing the distinctive role of cooperatives as both economic and social institutions in supporting programme implementation (Martinez et al., 2023; Melo da Silva et al., 2023; Pandey & Khangnaba, 2025)

The Free Nutritious Food Programme has become one of Indonesia's most ambitious human-development policies because it aims to address nutritional inequality among students while also stimulating local economies through food demand. However, the scale of the programme creates significant implementation challenges, particularly in food procurement, menu standardization, kitchen operations, payment mechanisms, supervision, and supply continuity across diverse regions (Vidal et al., 2023; Westerdahl et al., 2025). In this regard, the Merah Putih Cooperative can be examined as a potential intermediary institution that bridges the central government's policy mandate with the practical realities of village-level production and distribution. Previous studies on local food systems indicate that public procurement can strengthen regional economies when it is supported by clear institutional design, producer readiness, and coordination between government, suppliers, and service units (Contractor & Lorange, 2002; Dussauge & Garrette, 1999; Krautscheid et al., 2025; Marnia et al., 2024).

The implementation problem becomes more complex because school feeding programmes involve multiple actors with different mandates, including nutrition agencies, schools, local governments, food-service units, cooperatives, farmers, micro-enterprises, and private suppliers. Without a strong coordination mechanism, the programme may face risks such as fragmented supply chains, uneven meal quality, delayed distribution, weak accountability, and limited participation of local producers.

The Merah Putih Cooperative policy is therefore important to study because cooperatives may serve as off-takers of local agricultural products, suppliers of raw materials, and community-based economic platforms that support both food availability and rural income. The relevance of this article is strengthened by international evidence showing that cooperative-based or locally organized food-supply models can improve policy reach, although their success depends on governance quality, financial

sustainability, and operational discipline (Beesley & Ballard, 2013; Sandberg et al., 2026; Whitehouse et al., 2025)

Table 1. Selected Quantitative Indicators of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Food Programme and Merah Putih Cooperative Policy

No.	Indicator	Reported Figure	Time/Period	Relevance to the Study
1	Initial national MBG budget	Rp71 trillion	2025 initial stage	Shows the fiscal scale of the first implementation phase
2	Initial intended recipients	Up to 15 million people	2025 first stage	Indicates early programme coverage target
3	Opening-day recipients	Around 570,000 people	January 2025	Shows the starting scale of implementation
4	Mid-2025 budget allocation after expansion	Rp171 trillion	2025	Reflects increased fiscal commitment for programme acceleration
5	Budget disbursed by 12 June 2025	Rp4.4 trillion, or 2.6% of Rp171 trillion	12 June 2025	Indicates early absorption challenges
6	Recipients reached by 12 June 2025	Around 4.9 million recipients	12 June 2025	Shows early implementation output
7	Catering/SPPG units by 12 June 2025	1,716 units	12 June 2025	Shows service infrastructure during early rollout
8	Reported programme reach	61,239,037 total beneficiaries; 49,057,682 school students	3 March 2026	Demonstrates programme expansion and student coverage
9	SPPG coverage	24,368 SPPG across 38 provinces	27 February 2026	Indicates national distribution capacity
10	Merah Putih Cooperatives formation target	80,000 village/urban-village cooperatives	2025 policy mandate	Shows the institutional scale expected to support local economic and food-supply functions

Sources: compiled from Reuters, BGN, Ministry of Finance media, Cabinet Secretariat, ANTARA, and Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2025.

The data above indicate that the Free Nutritious Food Programme is not a small-scale welfare activity, but a large national intervention requiring a durable implementation architecture. The rapid growth in beneficiaries, SPPG units, and fiscal allocation demonstrates the need for supporting institutions capable of ensuring supply

reliability, price stability, local participation, and food safety. In this context, Merah Putih Cooperatives may contribute to implementation by organizing local producers, aggregating food commodities, improving distribution efficiency, and reducing excessive dependence on distant suppliers. Nevertheless, the cooperative model cannot be assumed to work automatically; it requires managerial competence, transparent procurement, financial discipline, and strong integration with public nutrition standards. This article therefore treats the cooperative as a policy instrument whose effectiveness depends on the quality of institutional design and implementation governance (Coakley et al., 2026; Pinto et al., 2025; Wineman et al., 2025).

The scientific contribution of this article is found in its effort to connect three fields of study that are often discussed separately: cooperative policy, school nutrition policy, and local food-system governance. Studies on food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture have shown that nutrition programmes can become more transformative when they are connected to local food systems, community institutions, and producer empowerment. At the same time, studies on territorial food governance emphasize that food policy requires coordination across administrative levels and economic actors, especially when public demand is used to shape more inclusive supply chains. By examining the Merah Putih Cooperative in relation to the Free Nutritious Food Programme, this article contributes to the discussion on how national social policy can be implemented through local economic institutions that support both student welfare and community-based development (Affonso et al., 2025; Hiywotu, 2025; Yap & Treuherz, 2025).

The author's approach in discussing this issue is policy-implementation analysis, with attention to institutional roles, actor coordination, resource mobilization, and implementation risks. The discussion does not only assess whether the programme reaches students, but also how the cooperative mechanism can support the continuity, accountability, and local economic impact of the programme. This approach is important because large-scale nutrition policies often face a gap between policy design and field implementation, especially when the programme depends on daily logistics, food safety, menu consistency, and multi-actor coordination. Therefore, the article examines the Merah Putih Cooperative as a possible institutional bridge between public nutrition objectives and local supply-chain governance (Gelli et al., 2020; Hecht et al., 2024; Tolesa et al., 2025).

Based on this background, the introduction argues that the implementation of the Merah Putih Cooperative policy should be understood as a strategic component of Indonesia's broader effort to strengthen student nutrition, local food security, and village-level economic participation. The central question is not only whether cooperatives are formally involved in the Free Nutritious Food Programme, but whether they are institutionally prepared to perform the functions required by a daily, large-scale, and quality-sensitive public nutrition programme. For that reason, this article discusses the policy through three analytical concerns: the role of cooperatives in supporting food supply and local procurement, the governance challenges that may affect programme effectiveness, and the potential contribution of cooperative-based implementation to inclusive rural economic development. Through this approach, the article seeks to provide a more integrated understanding of how nutrition policy and cooperative policy can reinforce each other in supporting school students and local communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design based entirely on secondary data to examine the implementation of the Merah Putih Cooperative Policy in supporting the Free Nutritious Food Programme for school students. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study focuses on understanding policy implementation, institutional roles, coordination patterns, and governance challenges rather than measuring causal relationships through primary survey data. The secondary data approach allows the research to systematically interpret policy documents, official reports, statistical publications, government regulations, news releases, and relevant academic literature related to cooperative development, school nutrition policy, food procurement, and local economic governance. Document analysis is particularly suitable for policy studies because it enables researchers to review written materials as evidence of institutional intention, implementation design, and programme direction, while qualitative secondary analysis provides an opportunity to reinterpret existing data in relation to new research questions (Bowen, 2009; Tate & Happ, 2018).

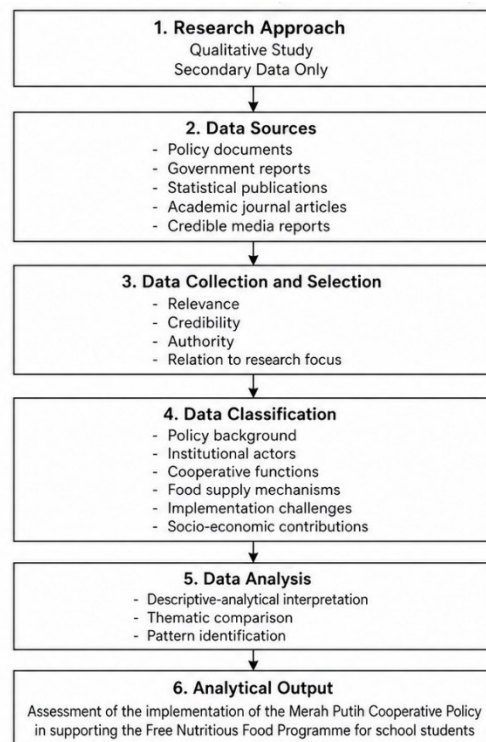


Figure 1. Methodological Framework for Secondary Data-Based
Source: Author, 2026

The data used in this study consist exclusively of secondary sources, including national policy documents, presidential instructions, ministerial regulations, official publications from government agencies, programme reports, statistical data, academic journal articles, and credible media reports related to the Free Nutritious Food Programme and the Merah Putih Cooperative policy. No interviews, surveys, field observations, or other primary data collection techniques were conducted. The use of secondary data was chosen because the research aims to analyze policy design, institutional positioning, implementation readiness, and the linkage between cooperative

governance and public nutrition policy at the macro and meso levels. Data were selected based on relevance, credibility, publication authority, and their direct relationship to the research focus, particularly materials discussing school feeding, cooperative institutions, food supply chains, public procurement, and local economic empowerment.

The data analysis was conducted through descriptive-analytical interpretation by organizing the collected secondary data into several thematic categories: policy background, institutional actors, cooperative functions, food-supply mechanisms, implementation challenges, and expected socio-economic contributions. After classification, the data were compared across sources to identify consistency, contradiction, and patterns of policy implementation. The analysis then interpreted how the Merah Putih Cooperative can support the Free Nutritious Food Programme through local procurement, supply-chain integration, community economic participation, and accountability mechanisms. Through this method, the study seeks to provide a systematic understanding of how secondary data can be used to explain the relationship between cooperative policy and school nutrition policy without relying on primary field data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Implementation Scale of the Free Nutritious Food Programme and Its Implication for Cooperative Support

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Food Programme in Indonesia shows that school nutrition policy has become a large-scale national intervention requiring strong institutional, financial, and logistical support. The programme is not limited to food distribution in schools, but also involves budget allocation, service-unit development, food procurement, beneficiary targeting, and coordination between central and local actors. This condition makes the role of Merah Putih Cooperatives important because cooperatives can potentially support the supply side of the programme through local procurement and community-based food distribution. In policy implementation terms, the programme's scale requires institutions that are close to local producers and able to connect public demand with village-level economic capacity.

Secondary data indicate that the programme expanded from an initial launch phase into a wider implementation stage within a relatively short period. Reuters reported that the programme began in January 2025 and, by June 12, 2025, had reached around 4.9 million recipients through 1,716 catering units, while the annual budget allocation had increased to Rp171 trillion. This figure shows that the programme involves both a massive beneficiary target and a complex operational structure. The need to serve students and other beneficiaries daily creates continuous demand for rice, vegetables, eggs, fish, meat, milk, fruit, and other nutritional components. Therefore, the implementation challenge is not only how to finance the programme, but also how to ensure the availability, quality, and regularity of food supply across regions.

The programme's early implementation also shows a gap between policy ambition and operational readiness. As of March 12, 2025, the Ministry of Finance reported that Rp710.5 billion had been disbursed for the programme, benefiting more than two million people. By June 12, 2025, disbursement had reached Rp4.4 trillion, equal to only 2.6% of the Rp171 trillion annual allocation. This low absorption rate suggests that the programme requires stronger implementation mechanisms, especially in procurement, service-unit

readiness, payment systems, and institutional coordination. In this context, Merah Putih Cooperatives can become relevant if they are able to function as reliable local partners in food aggregation and supply-chain management.

The data also demonstrate that the Free Nutritious Food Programme cannot be implemented effectively through a single centralized delivery model. Indonesia's geographic diversity, including urban areas, rural districts, coastal regions, islands, and remote communities, requires adaptive implementation arrangements. A uniform supply-chain model may work in regions with strong infrastructure, but it may be less effective in areas with limited transportation access or fragmented food production. Cooperatives can help address this issue because they are designed to operate close to local communities. Their role can include identifying local producers, coordinating commodity availability, supporting food distribution, and reducing dependence on long-distance suppliers.

The implementation scale further implies that food procurement should be connected with local economic development. If programme spending is absorbed mainly by large suppliers outside the local economy, the policy may succeed in delivering meals but fail to generate wider socio-economic benefits. Conversely, when cooperatives are integrated into procurement and distribution, public expenditure can circulate within villages and urban villages. This arrangement can support farmers, fishers, livestock breeders, food processors, women's groups, and MSMEs. Thus, the programme has the potential to become a dual-purpose policy: improving student nutrition while strengthening local economic participation.

Table 2. Implementation Scale of the Free Nutritious Food Programme in Indonesia

No.	Indicator	Data / Figure	Period / Date	Source	Relevance to the Study
1	Initial programme launch coverage	Around 570,000 beneficiaries	January 2025	Reuters	Shows the early operational scale of the programme at the beginning of implementation
2	Initial national budget allocation	Rp71 trillion	2025	ANTARA / Ministry of Finance	Indicates the first fiscal commitment for programme implementation
3	Budget disbursement	Rp710.5 billion	12 March 2025	ANTARA / Ministry of Finance	Shows early budget absorption and implementation progress
4	Beneficiaries reached	More than 2 million beneficiaries	12 March 2025	ANTARA / Ministry of Finance	Reflects the programme's early expansion after initial launch
5	Expanded budget allocation	Rp171 trillion	2025	Reuters	Indicates increased fiscal commitment to accelerate programme coverage

No.	Indicator	Data / Figure	Period / Date	Source	Relevance to the Study
6	Budget disbursement	Rp4.4 trillion, equal to 2.6% of Rp171 trillion	12 June 2025	Reuters	Shows budget absorption challenges during early implementation
7	Beneficiaries reached	Around 4.9 million recipients	12 June 2025	Reuters	Demonstrates programme expansion but also shows the gap from the national target
8	Food service/catering units	1,716 units	12 June 2025	Reuters	Indicates operational infrastructure available during the early implementation phase
9	End-year target beneficiaries	82.9 million recipients	2025 target	Reuters	Shows the large national target that requires strong supply-chain support
10	End-year target food service units	32,000 catering/SPPG units	2025 target	Reuters	Highlights the need for extensive service infrastructure and local supply integration

Sources: compiled by the author from Reuters and ANTARA online reports.

The table confirms that the Free Nutritious Food Programme requires a broad implementation ecosystem rather than a narrow food-distribution mechanism. The large number of targeted beneficiaries, the growth of service units, and the scale of public funding show that the programme needs strong supply-chain institutions at the local level. Merah Putih Cooperatives are therefore relevant as potential supporting institutions because they can connect local producers with programme demand. However, their involvement must be based on readiness, transparency, and capacity. Without these conditions, cooperative participation may not significantly improve implementation effectiveness and may even create new administrative burdens.

2. Institutional Readiness of Merah Putih Cooperatives in Supporting Programme Implementation

The Merah Putih Cooperative Policy provides an institutional foundation for strengthening village and urban-village economic participation in national development programmes. In relation to the Free Nutritious Food Programme, cooperatives can be positioned as local institutions that support food procurement, supply coordination, storage, distribution, and producer organization. This institutional role is important because the nutrition programme requires stable daily supplies, while local producers often operate in fragmented and informal markets. Through cooperatives, local production can be aggregated and linked more systematically to public demand.

The policy basis for Merah Putih Cooperatives is closely related to the government's effort to accelerate the formation and development of cooperatives at the village and urban-village levels. The BPK regulation database records Minister of Cooperatives Regulation No. 2 of 2025 on the Business Development of Village/Subdistrict Merah Putih Cooperatives, which regulates business development schemes, management information systems, guidance, reporting, monitoring, and evaluation. This shows that cooperative development is not only about establishing institutions, but also about strengthening operational systems. The regulation also refers to Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2025 as the basis for accelerating the formation of Merah Putih Cooperatives.

Institutional readiness is crucial because cooperatives will face practical demands if they are connected to the Free Nutritious Food Programme. They must be able to organize members, manage transactions, maintain financial records, coordinate supply, and comply with quality requirements. Cooperatives also need to develop business models that are adaptive to local potential, including agriculture, fisheries, livestock, food processing, and logistics. If cooperative business models are not aligned with local resources, their role in supporting school nutrition may remain formal rather than functional.

The implementation of Merah Putih Cooperatives also requires coordination between ministries, local governments, and community-level institutions. Local governments are expected to provide facilitation, guidance, supervision, and policy support so that cooperatives can grow sustainably. Several regional regulations recorded in the BPK database show that local governments have begun issuing derivative policies on Merah Putih Cooperatives, including provisions on formation, empowerment, protection, monitoring, evaluation, supervision, and funding. This indicates that cooperative policy implementation depends heavily on how national instructions are translated into local governance arrangements.

For the Free Nutritious Food Programme, cooperative readiness should be assessed through concrete indicators, not merely through the number of cooperatives formed. These indicators include legal status, active membership, management capacity, business model clarity, access to working capital, storage facilities, transport capacity, digital administration, and ability to meet food safety requirements. The stronger these capacities are, the more likely cooperatives can support the programme as food aggregators or procurement intermediaries. Conversely, weak cooperatives may only become nominal institutions without significant contribution to programme delivery.

Table 3. Merah Putih Cooperatives and Their Relevance to the Free Nutritious Food Programme

No.	Data / Figure	Policy Basis / Date	Relevance to Programme Implementation
1	80,000 village/urban-village cooperatives	Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2025	Shows the large institutional scale prepared to support village-level economic activities
2	Establishment, development, and revitalization of cooperatives	2025	Indicates that the policy is not only about creating

No.	Data / Figure	Policy Basis / Date	Relevance to Programme Implementation
			new cooperatives, but also strengthening existing ones
3	Business development of Village/Subdistrict Merah Putih Cooperatives	Minister of Cooperatives Regulation No. 2 of 2025	Shows that business model development is formally regulated
4	Regulation includes cooperative management information system	2025	Supports transparency, reporting, and digital monitoring of cooperative activities
5	Regulation includes guidance, reporting, monitoring, and evaluation	2025	Indicates that cooperative readiness requires mentoring and institutional supervision
6	Local regulations include formation, empowerment, protection, supervision, and funding	2025	Shows that local government support is needed for implementation
7	Cooperative development is directed toward people-based economic growth and local potential	2025	Connects cooperative policy with local food production and community economic development
8	Cooperatives may support local food procurement, supply aggregation, and distribution	2025 policy interpretation	Indicates the potential role of cooperatives in connecting local producers with school meal provision

Sources: compiled by the author from BPK Regulation Database and related online government policy records.

The table shows that Merah Putih Cooperatives have a formal policy foundation that can support their involvement in the Free Nutritious Food Programme. However, the table also implies that policy existence is not the same as implementation capacity. Cooperatives must be strengthened through business planning, financial governance, information systems, supervision, and local government support. Their role in the nutrition programme will be effective only if they can function as operational institutions rather than administrative symbols. Therefore, institutional readiness should become a central concern in integrating cooperative policy with school nutrition policy.

3. Governance Challenges in Integrating Cooperative Policy with School Nutrition Delivery

The integration of Merah Putih Cooperatives into the Free Nutritious Food Programme faces governance challenges because the programme involves multiple actors with different mandates. Central government agencies design the policy and allocate the budget, local governments coordinate implementation, service units prepare

meals, schools distribute meals to students, and cooperatives may support food supply. This multi-actor arrangement requires clear institutional boundaries. Without a clear division of tasks, implementation may face overlapping authority, delayed decision-making, inconsistent supervision, and weak accountability (Adams et al., 1994; Arifin et al., 2025).

One of the most important governance challenges is procurement accountability. The Free Nutritious Food Programme involves large public expenditure, which means procurement must be transparent, efficient, and resistant to manipulation. Cooperatives can support inclusive procurement by involving local producers, but they may also face governance risks if internal management is weak. These risks include elite capture, unequal access among members, poor financial reporting, and informal pricing practices. Therefore, cooperative involvement must be supported by clear procurement standards, digital financial records, routine audits, and open member participation.

Food safety and nutritional quality are also critical challenges. The programme is designed to improve nutrition, but its implementation depends on the quality of ingredients, meal preparation, storage, and distribution. Reuters reported that the programme has faced food poisoning concerns, including official recognition that weak oversight contributed to poisoning incidents in 2025. This indicates that rapid expansion without adequate quality control can create serious implementation risks. Cooperatives that supply food ingredients must therefore be integrated into food safety systems, including product inspection, freshness standards, packaging requirements, and traceability mechanisms.

Another governance problem concerns coordination between supply capacity and menu planning. Food service units need predictable quantities of food ingredients, while local producers may face seasonal fluctuations, price changes, and production uncertainty. If cooperatives are expected to supply ingredients, they must receive timely information about menu requirements, delivery schedules, and quality specifications. This requires a planning system that connects nutrition planners, service units, cooperatives, and producer groups. Without such coordination, cooperatives may be unable to meet demand even when local production exists.

Financial sustainability also affects cooperative participation. Cooperatives may need working capital to purchase commodities from farmers, fishers, or MSMEs before receiving payment from programme implementers. If payment is delayed, cooperatives may experience cash-flow pressure and lose the ability to continue supplying food. This problem is particularly relevant for newly established cooperatives that have limited capital reserves. To prevent this, the policy needs mechanisms such as advance-payment systems, revolving funds, credit access, simplified claims procedures, or payment guarantees.

Overall, the governance challenges show that cooperative involvement should be designed as part of a structured implementation framework. Merah Putih Cooperatives can strengthen the Free Nutritious Food Programme only if their functions are supported by rules, capacity, infrastructure, finance, and supervision. The programme's success depends not merely on the number of cooperatives formed, but on whether they are capable of performing reliable supply-chain roles. Thus, the cooperative model must be implemented gradually, beginning with capacity mapping and pilot integration before being expanded into broader procurement and distribution functions.

4. Cooperative-Based Local Food Systems as a Strategy for Inclusive School Nutrition Policy

The integration of Merah Putih Cooperatives into the Free Nutritious Food Programme can be understood as an effort to build a cooperative-based local food system. In this model, school nutrition policy is not only designed to improve students' dietary intake, but also to create structured demand for local food products. Cooperatives can connect local producers with food service units, allowing public spending to support village-level economic activities. This approach is important because a large nutrition programme can create significant multiplier effects when its procurement system is locally embedded.

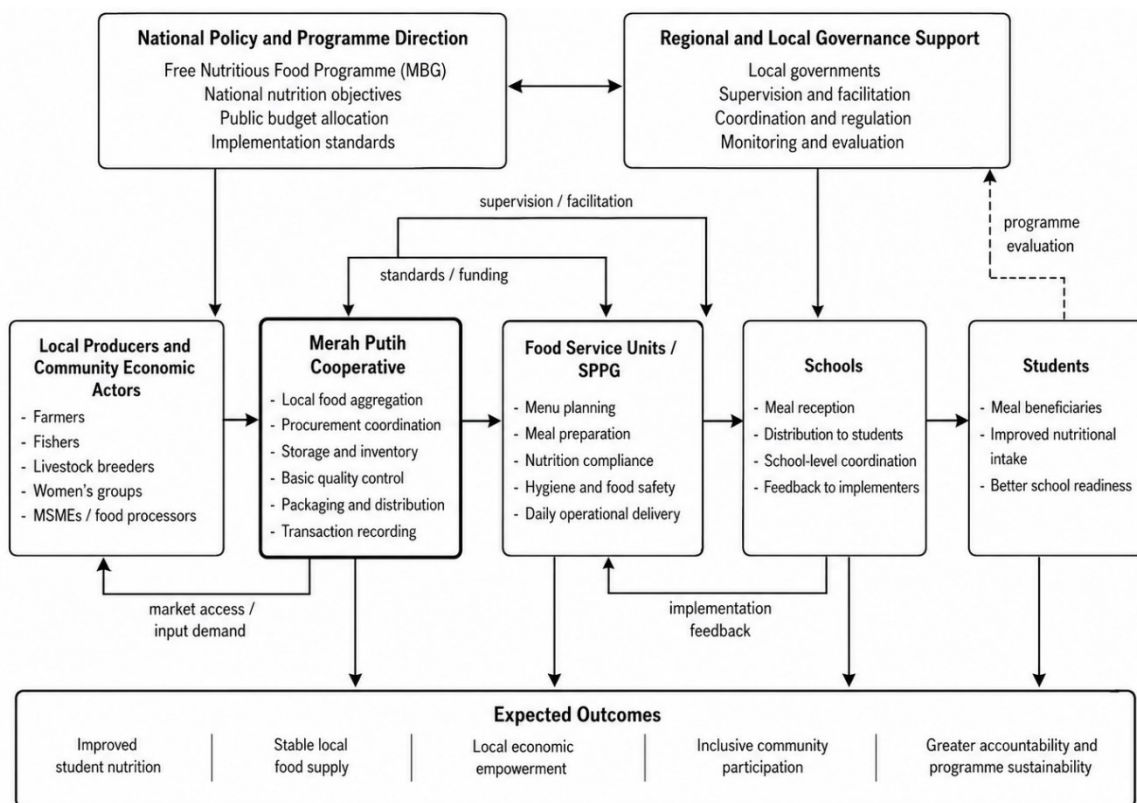


Figure 2. Cooperative-Based Local Food System Model for Supporting the Free Nutritious Food Programme

Source: Development Author, 2025

The socio-economic contribution of cooperatives can occur through several channels. First, cooperatives can provide market certainty for farmers, fishers, livestock breeders, and MSMEs by linking them to regular food demand. Second, cooperatives can improve producer bargaining power because products are sold collectively rather than individually (Afridi, 2010; Gaitán-Cremaschi & Valbuena, 2024). Third, cooperatives can support value addition through sorting, packaging, storage, and basic processing. Fourth, cooperatives can create local employment in administration, transport, warehousing, kitchen support, and distribution. These contributions show that cooperative involvement can transform the programme from a consumption-based intervention into a local economic development strategy.

The cooperative-based local food system is also relevant for improving supply-chain resilience. Indonesia's diverse geography creates different logistical conditions across regions. In areas where transportation costs are high or supply chains are long, local procurement through cooperatives may reduce delays and improve food availability. This is especially important for island, coastal, rural, and remote areas. Cooperatives can adapt procurement to local food potential, such as fish in coastal regions, vegetables in agricultural areas, eggs and poultry in livestock-producing villages, and processed products from local MSMEs. In this way, programme implementation becomes more responsive to territorial conditions.

However, local procurement must not be understood as an automatic guarantee of effectiveness. It requires measurable standards, including price fairness, product quality, delivery reliability, financial transparency, and producer inclusion. If these standards are absent, local procurement may create inefficiency or unequal benefit distribution. Therefore, the cooperative-based model should combine community participation with professional management. Cooperatives must be able to operate as accountable business entities while maintaining their social function as member-based institutions.

The findings of this study suggest that an integrated model is needed to explain how Merah Putih Cooperatives can support the Free Nutritious Food Programme. The model should place local producers as suppliers, cooperatives as aggregators and coordinators, food service units as meal processors, schools as distribution points, students as beneficiaries, and local governments as supervisors. Such a model clarifies the flow of goods, responsibilities, and accountability. It also shows that the success of the programme depends on the connection between nutrition objectives and local economic governance.

The proposed figure can illustrate a structured flow from local producers to students through cooperative-based coordination. Local producers supply food commodities to Merah Putih Cooperatives; cooperatives aggregate, standardize, and distribute ingredients to food service units; food service units process meals based on nutrition and hygiene standards; schools distribute meals to students; and local governments supervise quality, accountability, and coordination. This model strengthens the article's main argument that the Free Nutritious Food Programme can achieve broader impact when supported by local cooperative institutions. Therefore, the implementation of the Merah Putih Cooperative Policy should be directed not only toward cooperative formation, but also toward building a reliable, inclusive, and accountable local food system.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Merah Putih Cooperative Policy in supporting the Free Nutritious Food Programme for school students demonstrates that school nutrition policy should not be understood merely as a food distribution agenda, but as a broader public policy instrument that connects student welfare, local food systems, and community economic development. The findings show that the large scale of the programme, reflected in its broad beneficiary targets, substantial budget allocation, and expanding food service infrastructure, requires strong institutional support at the local level. In this context, Merah Putih Cooperatives have strategic relevance because they can function as local food aggregators, procurement intermediaries, distribution

coordinators, and community-based economic institutions that connect local producers with programme needs.

The discussion also indicates that the effectiveness of cooperative involvement depends on institutional readiness, governance quality, and operational capacity. Cooperatives cannot automatically support the Free Nutritious Food Programme only because they have been formally established or included in policy documents. They must have clear legal status, active membership, transparent financial management, adequate working capital, storage and distribution capacity, food safety awareness, and the ability to coordinate with food service units, schools, local governments, and producers. Therefore, the integration of Merah Putih Cooperatives into the programme requires phased implementation, capacity building, digital reporting systems, accountable procurement mechanisms, and continuous supervision to prevent weak coordination, low budget absorption, quality-control problems, and unequal access among local economic actors.

Overall, this study concludes that the Merah Putih Cooperative Policy has strong potential to strengthen the Free Nutritious Food Programme if it is implemented as part of an integrated local food-system governance model. Through cooperative-based procurement and distribution, the programme can generate dual benefits: improving students' nutritional intake and expanding economic opportunities for farmers, fishers, livestock breeders, women's groups, MSMEs, and other community actors. However, this potential can only be achieved when cooperatives are not treated as symbolic institutions, but as professional, accountable, and locally grounded implementation partners. Thus, strengthening Merah Putih Cooperatives should become a key strategy for building a more inclusive, sustainable, and accountable school nutrition policy in Indonesia.

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