

OPINION **ACADEMIA**

Using locally produced processed foods for a safer feeding program

To end recurring food poisoning outbreaks linked to the flagship free meals program, we must rethink the kitchen: Blending freshly cooked meals with safely processed local foods is the key to scaling without sickening our children.

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Billed as the government's signature program, the free nutritious meals (MBG) rollout is ironically confronting a serious food safety challenge, evident in recurring outbreaks of suspected food poisoning among beneficiaries.

As of March 12, 2026, the Food and Drug Monitoring Agency (BPOM) had recorded 69 suspected outbreaks associated with the program, affecting 6,383 people.

However, Health Ministry surveillance data through Sept. 2 revealed that the free meals program caused 50,059 food poisoning cases in 560 incidents across 36 provinces and 245 regencies/cities, a tally closely mirrored in the 43,838 suspected cases through late August reported by the Network for Education Watch (NEW) Indonesia.

The World Health Organization defines a foodborne disease outbreak as "the occurrence of two or more cases of a similar foodborne disease resulting from the ingestion of the same food". Each outbreak therefore represents a systemic cluster rather than an isolated incident.

These recurrent events must not be allowed to become the “new normal” in a national nutrition program that aims to reach nearly 50 million students and 10 million breastfeeding and pregnant women and toddlers this year.

Against this backdrop, World Food Day 2026 offers a timely opportunity to rethink how such large-scale initiatives are engineered. This year’s theme, “Innovate today. Nourish tomorrow”, is especially pertinent. For the free meals program, innovation must extend beyond standard kitchen-level sanitation controls to include a structural redesign of the food provision system itself.

At present, nutrition fulfillment service units (SPPG), the formal name for the program's designated kitchens, essentially function as mass catering facilities. Most meals require raw ingredients to be received, stored, prepped, cooked, portioned, packed, transported and consumed within a narrow, high-stress operational window.

Operating at this volume demands uncompromising discipline in separating raw and cooked foods, facility hygiene, cold chain integrity and time/temperature control. However, operational readiness across kitchens remains uneven.

In September, 1,276 SPPG were temporarily suspended over hygiene and sanitation compliance failures. Broader program evaluations have surfaced recurring deficits in physical layout, wastewater management, kitchen infrastructure and supervisory oversight.

While these structural shortcomings demand urgent remediation, they also expose a fundamental design flaw: the more menu components that must be made simultaneously from scratch on-site, the higher the operational friction and the greater the risk of food safety failure.

Innovation therefore means shifting toward a diversified hybrid provision model. Rather than preparing, cooking and packing every single item on-site each morning, SPPG can focus exclusively on items best served fresh.

Meanwhile, selected menu components can be supplied as shelf-stable, prepacked or partially processed foods manufactured off-site under standardized, certified conditions.

Processed foods already offer proven precedents. Ultrahigh temperature (UHT) milk is a ubiquitous fixture, but the scope can readily expand to fortified grains, shelf-stable legume and cereal formulations, processed fish and pasteurized or sterilized egg, tofu and tempeh products.

Regional heritage foods, such as canned *gudeg* (stewed jackfruit) from Yogyakarta, bottled or pouched *pecel* (peanut sauce) from Madiun and retort-pouched *rendang* (stewed beef) from Padang, demonstrate how traditional culinary staples can marry modern thermal processing and packaging.

Supplying these components off-site dramatically curtails the simultaneous handling steps required in SPPG, enhances batch consistency, extends shelf life and establishes verifiable traceability.

Global school feeding initiatives show that incorporating processed foods does not mean sacrificing nutrition. Japan's Gakko Kyushoku (school lunch) program routinely pairs freshly cooked dishes with precut, pasteurized or retort-packaged ingredients to guarantee safety while meeting strict dietary targets. In the United States, the National School Lunch Program serves over 30 million children daily by relying on flash frozen, precooked and canned staples to keep meals safe and reliable at scale.

The real concern is health, but that comes down to distinguishing functional processing from junk food. Processing techniques like canning, pasteurization, drying and fortification exist to preserve freshness, prevent pathogens and lock in nutrients, not load meals with fillers.

Brazil's school feeding model proves that strict caps on sodium, sugar and additives allow processed staples to sit alongside fresh produce without increasing obesity risks. In many developing regions, fortified foods like

iron-rich rice or vitamin A-fortified milk have actively reduced anemia and childhood stunting.

What matters for a child's health isn't whether food was prepped in advance but what is in it and whether it is safe to eat.

Indonesia is well-positioned to promote this model locally. The 2025 Profile of Micro and Small Industries (MSIs) by Statistics Indonesia (BPS) recorded approximately 4.46 million MSIs nationwide, including 1.98 million, or 44.42 percent, engaged in food and beverage manufacturing.

The free meals program offers a guaranteed, institutional market that can mobilize qualified local MSIs. In doing so, the program can incentivize small producers to upgrade their processing standards, adhere to stringent nutritional and microbiological benchmarks and turn local agricultural commodities into high-value, safe rations.

Foodborne disease outbreaks linked to the free meals program cannot be dismissed as an inevitable by-product of operating at scale. Halting their normalization requires both rigorous enforcement on the ground and structural foresight in program architecture.

In the spirit of “Innovate today. Nourish tomorrow”, adopting a diversified, hybrid supply model will mitigate immediate foodborne hazards while building a resilient, decentralized ecosystem of local food enterprises for the future.

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