

Research Article

Policy Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program Through Collaborative Governance: A Study of the National Nutrition Agency in Kendal Regency

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program through a collaborative governance framework in Kendal Regency using a mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design. Quantitative data collected from 34 respondents were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis, while qualitative data obtained from five key informants were analyzed thematically. The results reveal very strong and statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.001$) among cross-sectoral coordination, stakeholder roles, community participation, and accountability–transparency, indicating that collaborative synergy is a decisive factor in successful policy implementation. The Kruskal–Wallis test indicates consensus across professional groups ($p > 0.05$). However, qualitative findings uncover a paradox of coordination without communication: implementers internalize coordination as a functional operational reality, while beneficiaries experience informational alienation. The resulting collaborative configuration can be characterized as technocratic–instrumentalist—technically effective yet weak in terms of social legitimacy. This study underscores that implementing social policy requires collaborative governance that is not only coordinative but also communicative and deliberative. Policy implications include strengthening dialogic public communication, transforming consultative participation into deliberative engagement, and promoting participatory transparency to foster shared understanding between bureaucratic systems and program beneficiaries.

Keywords: Collaborative Governance; Community Participation; Cross-Sectoral Coordination; Policy Implementation; Public Accountability.

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1. Introduction

Ensuring adequate nutrition for the population is one of Indonesia's strategic national agendas in human resource development. The government positions nutritional improvement as a fundamental pillar for enhancing human quality and competitiveness, in line with the national long-term development vision. Nutritional problems—particularly stunting, undernutrition, and food insecurity—remain serious challenges despite various policy interventions that have been implemented. National data indicate that nutrition-related issues are not solely associated with health outcomes. However, they are also closely intertwined with poverty, education, food security, and the effectiveness of public policy governance (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). Within this context, the government introduced the Free Nutritious Meal Program as a strategic policy instrument to ensure access to nutritious food for vulnerable groups while simultaneously strengthening long-term investment in human capital quality.



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Implementing the Free Nutritious Meal Program at the local level requires the involvement of multiple actors and effective cross-sectoral coordination. Kendal Regency, a region characterized by diverse socio-economic conditions, faces distinctive challenges in implementing nutrition policy. The regency encompasses coastal areas, rural communities, and industrial zones, each with distinct nutrition-related issues. Although various nutrition programs have been implemented, including those coordinated by the National Nutrition Agency (Badan Gizi Nasional/BNG) at the regency level, program outcomes have not yet been fully optimal. This condition suggests that policy success is determined not only by the availability of programs but also by the quality of governance and coordination mechanisms, and by the capacity of implementing actors at the local level (O'Toole, 2000).

The phenomenon of an implementation gap is clearly evident in Kendal Regency. On the one hand, the Free Nutritious Meal Program is designed with clearly articulated objectives, regulatory support, and relatively adequate resource allocation. On the other hand, its implementation on the ground continues to encounter obstacles, including inter-agency misalignment, limited human resource capacity, and varying levels of community participation. Discrepancies persist between policy intent and outcomes, particularly regarding equitable beneficiary distribution, program sustainability, and consistency in nutritional standards. This gap indicates that the primary challenge lies not merely in policy substance but in the implementation process and the collaborative governance mechanisms that have yet to function optimally.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in public policy implementation theory and collaborative governance theory. Policy implementation theory emphasizes that policy success is influenced by factors such as communication, resources, implementer disposition, and bureaucratic structure (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). Meanwhile, collaborative governance theory conceptualizes public policy as the product of interaction and cooperation between governmental and non-governmental actors within collective and deliberative forums (Ansell & Gash, 2008). In the context of the Free Nutritious Meal Program, these two theoretical perspectives are closely interconnected, as implementing nutrition policy requires cross-sectoral coordination, clarity of stakeholder roles, and active community participation. Relationships among key concepts—such as coordination, participation, and accountability—are therefore central to explaining the dynamics of policy implementation at the local level.

Nevertheless, empirical studies reveal a research gap in nutrition policy. Previous research has primarily focused on the impact of nutrition programs on public health outcomes, with limited attention to governance processes and inter-actor collaboration. Ramesh and Howlett (2016) argue that failures in social policy often stem from weak coordination of implementation rather than flawed policy design. Similarly, Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh (2012) emphasize that collaborative governance requires strong institutional preconditions and actor capacity to generate practical policy outcomes. At the local level in Indonesia, studies on nutrition policy implementation remain relatively limited, particularly those examining the role of specialized institutions such as the National Nutrition Agency within a collaborative governance framework.

Kendal Regency was selected as the research site because it represents a region with high complexity in implementing nutrition policies. The presence of the National Nutrition Agency at the regency level as a key actor makes this area particularly relevant for in-depth analysis. BNG functions not only as a technical implementer, but also as a cross-sectoral coordinator that bridges the interests of local government, health facilities, educational institutions, and the community. Furthermore, the social and geographical dynamics of Kendal Regency provide a rich empirical context for understanding how national policies are translated and adapted at the local level. Based on the foregoing discussion, the central research question of this study is: How is the Free Nutritious Meal Program implemented through collaborative governance by the National Nutrition Agency in Kendal Regency? This question serves as the foundation for examining the implementation process, patterns of inter-actor collaboration, and the factors influencing both the success and constraints of policy implementation. Accordingly, this study is entitled "Policy Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program through Collaborative Governance: A Study of the National Nutrition Agency in Kendal Regency."

2. Literature Review

Policy Implementation Theory

Public policy implementation theory explains the process through which policy decisions or regulatory frameworks are translated into concrete actions by implementing actors in the field. Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) define implementation as the actions individuals or groups take to achieve the objectives established in policy decisions. They argue that successful implementation is influenced by six key variables: policy standards and goals, resources, inter-organizational communication, characteristics of implementing agencies, the disposition or attitudes of implementers, and the social, economic, and political conditions surrounding the policy environment.

This theoretical perspective emphasizes that public policies do not automatically generate outcomes aligned with their normative goals; instead, policy effectiveness is highly contingent upon the implementation process. Hill and Hupe (2014) further contend that implementation is a complex arena of interaction among actors, bureaucratic structures, and competing interests, often resulting in discrepancies between policy objectives and actual outcomes. In the context of social policies such as the Free Nutritious Meal Program, implementation represents a critical stage because it involves multiple organizations and levels of government. Accordingly, public policy implementation theory is highly relevant for analyzing the extent to which such policies are executed effectively, consistently, and adaptively at the local level, including the roles of coordination mechanisms and the capacity of implementing actors.

Collaborative Governance Theory

Collaborative governance theory emerged in response to the limitations of hierarchical approaches in addressing complex public issues. Ansell and Gash (2008) define collaborative governance as an arrangement in which one or more public agencies directly engage non-governmental actors in formal, collective, and consensus-oriented policy decision-making processes. This approach positions collaboration as a central mechanism for enhancing both the effectiveness and legitimacy of public policy.

Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh (2012) further developed an integrative framework of collaborative governance encompassing initial conditions, collaborative dynamics, and the capacity for joint action. According to this framework, the success of collaboration is shaped by factors such as trust, facilitative leadership, shared commitment, and institutional capacity. In public policies that involve multiple sectors, collaborative governance enables a more adaptive distribution of roles and responsibilities among participating actors. In the context of the Free Nutritious Meal Program, this theory is particularly relevant because policy implementation requires cooperation among central and local governments, technical institutions such as the National Nutrition Agency, the education and health sectors, and the broader community. Accordingly, collaborative governance theory provides a robust analytical foundation for understanding how interactions among diverse actors influence the effectiveness of policy implementation.

Conceptual Development

Cross-Sectoral Coordination

Cross-sectoral coordination is the process of aligning activities, resources, and policies across organizations or sectors to achieve shared objectives. Peters (2018) argues that coordination constitutes a key element in cross-cutting public policies, as organizational fragmentation often undermines policy effectiveness. Effective cross-sectoral coordination is essential to prevent program overlap, enhance efficiency, and ensure consistency in policy implementation.

In the Free Nutritious Meal Program, cross-sectoral coordination involves the health, education, social, and food sectors, each operating under distinct mandates and interests. This concept is closely related to stakeholder roles, as effective coordination requires clear delineation of roles and responsibilities among participating actors. Moreover, well-functioning coordination strengthens accountability and transparency by clarifying reporting and oversight mechanisms. In the absence of adequate cross-sectoral coordination, collaborative governance arrangements are prone to dysfunction and may ultimately diminish policy outcomes (O'Toole, 2000).

Stakeholder Roles

Stakeholders are individuals, groups, or organizations that have an interest in, or are affected by, a public policy. Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as parties that can influence or be influenced by the achievement of organizational objectives. In the context of public policy, stakeholders include government actors, the private sector, civil society organizations, and beneficiary communities. Stakeholder roles are critical to policy success, as they are directly involved in program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Within a collaborative governance framework, stakeholders function not only as implementers but also as strategic partners who contribute to decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008). This concept is closely linked to cross-sectoral coordination, as effective collaboration requires transparent role allocation and alignment among participating actors. Furthermore, stakeholder engagement promotes community participation and strengthens accountability, as each actor is responsible for the outcomes of the policies being implemented.

Community Participation

Community participation refers to the active involvement of citizens in public policy processes across the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. Arnstein (1969) argues that community participation reflects the distribution of power within public decision-making processes, ranging from symbolic participation to genuine citizen control. Meaningful participation enables policies to become more responsive to local needs and enhances program legitimacy. In the Free Nutritious Meal Program, community participation is manifested through the involvement of parents, health cadres, and local communities in supporting program implementation. This concept is directly related to stakeholder roles, as community members function both as policy actors and as beneficiaries. Community participation also strengthens accountability and transparency by positioning citizens as social monitors of program implementation. Accordingly, community participation constitutes a critical component in fostering inclusive and sustainable collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2012).

Program Accountability and Transparency

Accountability and transparency constitute core principles of public policy governance. Accountability refers to the obligation of policy actors to justify and take responsibility for their actions and policy outcomes before the public. At the same time, transparency relates to the openness of information and public access to policy processes (Bovens, 2007). Together, these principles function to enhance public trust and prevent the misuse of authority. In the Free Nutritious Meal Program, accountability and transparency are essential to ensure that budgets and resources are allocated and utilized appropriately. This concept is closely linked to cross-sectoral coordination, as effective mechanisms facilitate reporting and performance evaluation. Moreover, transparency encourages community participation through public oversight and feedback mechanisms. Within a collaborative governance framework, accountability and transparency serve as critical prerequisites for building trust among stakeholders and sustaining long-term collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

3. Research Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed concurrently to complement and strengthen the research findings. This design was selected because public policy implementation and collaborative governance constitute complex phenomena that require both empirical measurement and contextual understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The quantitative component examined respondents' perceptions of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program using a structured questionnaire administered to 30 respondents. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize data characteristics and correlation analysis to assess relationships among key research variables, particularly cross-sectoral coordination, stakeholder roles, community participation, and program accountability (Sugiyono, 2019).

The qualitative component was conducted through in-depth interviews with key informants, including the Regional Secretary of Kendal Regency; representatives from the Community Health Division and the Family Health and Nutrition Division of the Kendal Regency Health Office; the Education Office; the Environmental Office; the Kendal Police Department; school principals; as well as representatives of parents, mothers of toddlers, breastfeeding mothers, and pregnant women as program beneficiaries. Qualitative data were

analyzed using source triangulation and thematic analysis to identify patterns, meanings, and dynamics in policy implementation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The research locus comprised local government organizations (Organisasi Perangkat Daerah/OPD) directly involved in implementing the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Kendal Regency.

4. Research Findings

Quantitative Findings

This study involved 34 respondents drawn from diverse educational backgrounds and professional roles within the education and nutrition ecosystem. The respondents were predominantly female (82.4%), with the majority working as teachers (35.3%) and nutritionists (23.5%), reflecting the direct involvement of program implementers at the operational level. The age distribution was concentrated within the productive age group of 20–40 years (88.2%), and most respondents held higher education qualifications (bachelor's degree: 70.6%), indicating adequate human resource capacity for policy implementation.

The diversity of stakeholders—ranging from agency heads and school principals to homemakers—demonstrates a collaborative approach that engages multiple actors in program governance. This composition is particularly relevant for examining the effectiveness of inter-agency coordination in implementing national nutrition policy at the regency level through a collaborative governance lens. These respondent characteristics provide an essential basis for understanding perceptions of program implementation. To assess the effectiveness of collaborative governance, an analysis was conducted of the relationships among key dimensions: cross-sectoral coordination, stakeholder roles, community participation, and program accountability and transparency. The subsequent correlation analysis presented in Table 1 indicates strong, statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.01$) among all dimensions of collaborative governance.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix Analysis.

Variables	Cross-Sectoral Coordination	Stakeholder Roles	Community Participation	Program Accountability and Transparency
Cross-Sectoral Coordination	1	.802**	.886**	.722**
Stakeholder Roles	.802**	1	.850**	.748**
Community Participation	.886**	.850**	1	.850**
Program Accountability and Transparency	.722**	.748**	.841**	1

Community participation shows the strongest correlation with cross-sectoral coordination ($r = 0.886$), suggesting that active community engagement is closely tied to the effectiveness of inter-agency coordination. This finding is consistent with Ansell and Gash (2008), who argue that collaborative governance requires stakeholder synergy to achieve shared objectives. Stakeholder roles are also strongly correlated with community participation ($r = 0.850$) and cross-sectoral coordination ($r = 0.802$), suggesting that clarity in actor roles facilitates effective collaboration. Emerson et al. (2012) emphasize principled engagement as a foundational element of sustainable collaborative governance.

Accountability–transparency demonstrates strong correlations with community participation ($r = 0.850$), stakeholder roles ($r = 0.748$), and cross-sectoral coordination ($r = 0.722$), thereby reinforcing Bryson et al.'s (2006) argument that information transparency strengthens multi-stakeholder trust. In the context of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Kendal Regency, these positive correlations indicate that implementing the National Nutrition Agency policy requires the systemic integration of all four dimensions. The absence of any single element weakens the collaborative system as a whole (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). Having identified the strength of relationships among the dimensions of collaborative governance, it is essential to examine whether perceptual differences exist among stakeholder groups. The diversity of respondents' professional backgrounds—ranging from nutritionists and teachers to agency heads—may generate differing perspectives on program implementation. Accordingly, a Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted to compare perceptions across professional groups regarding the four collaborative dimensions.

Table 2. Kruskal-Wallis Test Statistics^{a,b}.

	Cross-Sectoral Coordination	Stakeholder Roles	Community Participation	Program Accountability and Transparency
Kruskal-Wallis H	6.963	3.631	8.066	8.858
df	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.138	.458	.089	.065

a. Kruskal-Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Profesi

The Kruskal–Wallis test indicates that there are no statistically significant differences in perceptions across professional groups for any of the examined dimensions ($p > 0.05$). Cross-sectoral coordination ($p = 0.138$) and stakeholder roles ($p = 0.458$) exhibit the highest p -values. However, accountability–transparency ($p = 0.065$) and community participation ($p = 0.089$) approach the conventional significance threshold, suggesting marginal perceptual differences. Overall, these findings demonstrate a broad consensus among stakeholders in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Kendal Regency. Teachers, nutritionists, school principals, and other actors display relatively uniform understandings of collaborative governance. This consistency suggests adequate policy socialization and a shared vision across professional groups in the implementation of the National Nutrition Agency policy, both of which constitute key prerequisites for the success of collaborative governance.

Qualitative Findings

Interviews with five informants reveal a pronounced dissonance in experience between policy implementers and program beneficiaries, reflecting a failure to construct shared meaning during program implementation. Muhamat Abdul Aziz from the Kendal Police Department stated that coordination has worked well and that the task force operates in a rapid-response manner to address emerging issues. Dony Renan, a sub-coordinator, emphasized that coordination is conducted under a single command structure and has been highly effective. Nurul Mahmudah, a family planning counselor, even characterized the Kendal District SPPG as a regency-level pilot project, citing strong coordination between the SPPG head and family planning counselors from the outset. Mitha Airina Findiyani, a nutritionist, confirmed that coordination among school teams, food providers, health teams, and nutrition education units has proceeded effectively.

In sharp contrast, Dewi—a program beneficiary from a private-sector household—consistently responded “did not know” to nearly all questions concerning coordination, program mechanisms, and implementation structures. Responses such as “do not know,” “do not understand,” and “so far, I am only a beneficiary” indicate a breakdown in the communication chain between the program’s formal organizational structure and the lived realities of beneficiaries on the ground.

This phenomenon represents not merely an information gap, but a failure of intersubjectivity in the construction of program meaning. Implementers internalize coordination as a functional operational reality, whereas beneficiaries experience the program as an unfamiliar and cognitively inaccessible entity. The constraints identified are context-specific and multifaceted. Dony pointed to limited comprehension of program objectives and the need for greater transparency in accountability for roles and responsibilities. Nurul identified a distinctive challenge: overlapping stunting-related programs implemented by multiple agencies, resulting in beneficiaries receiving duplicate assistance and complicating the evaluation of program effectiveness. She explained that at certain times, different institutions run programs with similar objectives—such as housing assistance or local supplementary feeding—necessitating strict coordination to prevent counterproductive duplication.

Community participation exhibits high levels of enthusiasm but is simultaneously constrained by the threat of disinformation and limited to specific stages of the policy process. Muhamat reported strong community enthusiasm, driven by awareness of government programs and the potential to improve children’s prospects, with community involvement extending from implementation to oversight. Nurul added that the program has been well received and has delivered tangible benefits, particularly for vulnerable target groups, and has been supported by highly committed and motivated TPK cadres. However, Dony identified serious threats stemming from social issues and the spread of hoaxes. At the same time, Nurul specifically noted social media reports of alleged food poisoning incidents related to the Free

Nutritious Meal Program in several regions of Indonesia, which have generated public concern. Notably, none of the informants mentioned community involvement in the program planning stage, indicating that participation remains largely instrumental and has not yet reached a genuinely collaborative or empowering level.

Formal transparency mechanisms are in place, including periodic monitoring and the display of financial information boards at each SPPG kitchen, as described by Muhamat, as well as quarterly reports on beneficiary growth monitoring reported by Nurul. Nevertheless, Dewi stated that she had never received any information about the program's mechanisms, and Dony acknowledged that transparency remains suboptimal, recommending broader outreach through media channels and socialization efforts. Dewi further suggested involving community members and beneficiaries in decisions such as menu planning and inviting constructive feedback as a form of meaningful participation. Overall, the Free Nutritious Meal Program faces a legitimacy crisis rooted in the misalignment between the objective structure of formal coordination and beneficiaries' subjective experiences, which leads to informational alienation. This condition underscores the need to shift from a one-way transmission model to co-construction of shared meaning, enabling beneficiaries to become active subjects who experience and interpret the program within the context of their everyday lives.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Kendal Regency operates within a relatively strong collaborative governance framework, supported by cross-sectoral coordination, stakeholder contributions, community participation, and mechanisms for program accountability and transparency. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results demonstrates consistency across methodological approaches and strengthens understanding of how governance dimensions interact in policy practice.

Quantitatively, the correlations among variables are robust and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), particularly between cross-sectoral coordination and community participation ($r = 0.886$) and between community participation and accountability–transparency ($r = 0.841$). This pattern suggests that program success depends on collaborative interactions among actors and on the active involvement of communities as beneficiaries. The Kruskal–Wallis test reveals consensus among stakeholders ($p > 0.05$), indicating adequate cross-professional policy socialization. However, qualitative findings uncover a dissonance of experience between policy implementers and beneficiaries: implementers internalize coordination as a functional operational reality, whereas beneficiaries experience the program as cognitively inaccessible.

The strong associations between stakeholder roles and community participation ($r = 0.850$) and between stakeholder roles and program transparency ($r = 0.748$) indicate that clarity and actors' contributions serve a legitimizing function in social policy. These findings are consistent with the theoretical perspectives of Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh (2012), who argue that collaborative governance requires a balance between coordination structures and public participation to generate optimal policy value. Accordingly, the integration of mixed-methods findings confirms that the success of the Free Nutritious Meal Program does not rely on a single dimension, but rather on an adaptive and mutually reinforcing configuration of collaboration among actors.

Thematic Analysis

Cross-Sectoral Coordination as a Driver of Collaboration

A coordination paradox emerges in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Kendal Regency. Quantitatively, cross-sectoral coordination is strongly associated with community participation ($r = 0.886$; $p < 0.001$) and stakeholder roles ($r = 0.802$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that coordination catalyzes collaboration. The Kruskal–Wallis test further reveals no statistically significant differences in perceptions across professional groups ($p = 0.138$), reflecting structural consensus among implementers.

However, qualitative findings reveal a sharp dissonance. Implementers such as Muhamat Abdul Aziz and Dony Renan consistently emphasized that coordination “functions well” and operates in a “rapid-response” manner. In contrast, Dewi, a program beneficiary, repeatedly responded “did not know” to nearly all questions regarding program mechanisms. This contrast confirms Ansell and Gash’s (2008) assertion that coordination is not merely administrative in nature, but must also generate shared understanding among actors.

Cross-sectoral coordination within the Free Nutritious Meal Program is institutionally regulated through Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024 on the National Nutrition Agency, which designates the Agency as the principal coordinator with authority to synchronize national-to-local nutrition policies. Article 3 of this regulation explicitly mandates coordination across ministries/agencies and local governments in the implementation of nutrition programs, including the Free Nutritious Meal Program. At the operational level, the Ministry of Home Affairs Regulation No. 86 of 2017 on Regional Development Planning, Control, and Evaluation requires cross-departmental coordination for national priority programs through sectoral working forums and development planning deliberations (Musrenbang). These findings are consistent with O'Toole's (2000) argument that coordination enhances policy implementation by reducing organizational conflict; however, they also underscore the necessity of effective public communication to ensure that coordination does not remain confined within bureaucratic structures.

Stakeholder Roles and the Dynamics of Inter-Actor Contributions

Triangulation reveals participatory imbalances in the distribution of stakeholder roles. The strong correlations between stakeholder roles and community participation ($r = 0.850$; $p < 0.001$) and between stakeholder roles and accountability–transparency ($r = 0.748$; $p < 0.001$) statistically indicate that clarity in actor roles serves to legitimize the program. Consensus in perceptions across professional groups ($p = 0.458$) further suggests role clarity at the level of technical implementers.

However, qualitative data reveal a participatory hierarchy: government actors—such as the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), the Kendal Police Department, family planning counselors, and nutritionists—play active roles in implementation and monitoring, while beneficiaries such as Dewi remain excluded from planning and evaluation processes. Nurul Mahmudah identified a distinctive challenge: overlapping stunting-related programs implemented by multiple agencies, leading beneficiaries to receive duplicate assistance. This condition indicates that vertical coordination remains suboptimal. These findings confirm the model proposed by Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh (2012), which emphasizes that collaborative governance requires principled engagement among actors, rather than merely a technocratic distribution of tasks.

Article 8 of Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024 governs the organizational structure of the National Nutrition Agency, mandating the involvement of multiple stakeholders—including technical ministries, local governments, academics, and community organizations—within nutrition coordination forums. Minister of Health Regulation No. 23 of 2014 on Nutrition Improvement specifies distinct roles for each actor: health offices as technical coordinators, schools as implementers, and communities as social monitors. Furthermore, Article 12 of Law No. 23 of 2014 on Regional Government mandates community involvement in regional development planning through Musrenbang mechanisms and community forums. Bryson, Crosby, and Stone (2015) emphasize that collaboration requires role clarity to prevent task duplication or functional gaps; however, the present study demonstrates that collaboration remains largely top-down, with community involvement confined primarily to the implementation stage.

Community Participation and Program Acceptance as Catalysts of Legitimacy

Data triangulation reveals a participation paradox: high levels of enthusiasm that remain largely instrumental and vulnerable to disinformation. The strong correlation between community participation and accountability–transparency ($r = 0.841$; $p < 0.001$) indicates that communities tend to support programs implemented openly and transparently. The Kruskal–Wallis significance value, approaching the conventional threshold ($p = 0.089$), suggests marginal perceptual differences among groups in the quality of participation.

Qualitative data further confirm this complexity. Muhamat reported that communities were “highly enthusiastic,” with involvement extending “from implementation to oversight,” while Nurul noted that TPK cadres were “highly committed and enthusiastic.” However, Dony identified serious threats in the form of “social issues and hoax news,” and Nurul specifically referred to “reports of Free Nutritious Meal Program food poisoning incidents circulating on social media that triggered public concern.” Crucially, none of the informants mentioned community involvement in the program planning stage. This finding is consistent with Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, indicating that participation remains at the levels of consultation or placation, rather than reaching delegated power or citizen control.

Article 141 of Law No. 36 of 2009 on Health mandates community participation in health initiatives, including nutrition programs. Government Regulation No. 2 of 2018 on Minimum Service Standards establishes indicators for community participation in regional

priority programs. Ministry of Home Affairs Regulation No. 86 of 2017 requires community engagement through Musrenbang forums at the village-to-regency levels to ensure alignment between programs and local needs. In addition, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology Regulation No. 5 of 2020 on Hoax Mitigation provides mechanisms for digital literacy to counter disinformation related to government programs. Pretty (1995) argues that public participation enhances both implementation effectiveness and program legitimacy. The triangulated findings of this study indicate that, although participation has not yet reached a deliberative level, high program acceptance contributes to sustainability; nevertheless, this condition necessitates disinformation mitigation strategies and the expansion of spaces for meaningful participation.

Accountability and Transparency as Reinforcers of Public Trust

Data triangulation reveals gaps in access to information that threaten the program's legitimacy. Accountability–transparency demonstrates strong correlations with all examined variables, particularly community participation ($r = 0.841$; $p < 0.001$) and cross-sectoral coordination ($r = 0.722$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that transparency not only strengthens public trust but also facilitates coordination among actors. The Kruskal–Wallis value is approaching statistical significance ($p = 0.065$), suggesting marginal perceptual differences in transparency quality.

Qualitative findings confirm a structural dissonance. Muhamat reported the existence of “periodic monitoring and financial information boards at each SPPG kitchen,” while Nurul noted “quarterly reports on beneficiary growth monitoring.” In sharp contrast, Dewi stated that she had “never received any information regarding program mechanisms,” and Dony acknowledged that “transparency remains suboptimal,” recommending broader outreach through media channels and socialization efforts. Dewi further proposed “involving community members in decisions such as menu planning and soliciting constructive feedback” as a form of participatory transparency.

Law No. 14 of 2008 on Public Information Disclosure mandates transparency for government programs funded by the national or regional budgets, including the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Government Regulation No. 61 of 2010 on the Implementation of the Public Information Disclosure Law requires the provision of periodic information on budgets, implementation, and program evaluation. Article 15 of Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024 regulates the reporting and monitoring mechanisms of the National Nutrition Agency to the President and the public through an integrated nutrition information system. Furthermore, the Ministry of Finance Regulation No. 213 of 2013 on the Government Agency Performance Accountability System establishes publicly accessible outcome-based performance reporting standards. These findings align with Bovens' (2007) assertion that accountability is not limited to formal reporting, but also encompasses the accessibility of information to the public. Hood (2010) similarly emphasizes transparency as a key determinant of public trust in social policy. Overall, triangulation indicates that accountability–transparency constitutes a critical dimension that must be strengthened through digital, public-facing information systems to safeguard social legitimacy and ensure the sustainability of policy implementation.

Collaborative Configuration in Policy Implementation

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a pattern of “coordination without communication” in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Kendal Regency. Structurally, robust correlations among dimensions ($r > 0.7$; $p < 0.001$) and cross-professional consensus in perceptions ($p < 0.05$) indicate that a collaborative system has been established at the technocratic level. Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024, Ministry of Home Affairs Regulation No. 86 of 2017, and relevant sectoral regulations provide an adequate legal framework for cross-sectoral coordination, the distribution of actor roles, community participation, and program transparency.

However, qualitative findings reveal a failure of intersubjectivity. Implementers internalize coordination as a functional operational reality—described as “functioning well,” “rapid-response,” and “highly effective coordination. In contrast, beneficiaries experience informational alienation, reflected in responses such as “do not know,” “do not understand,” and “so far, only a beneficiary.” This phenomenon represents not merely an information gap but a failure to construct shared meaning in policy implementation. Ansell and Gash (2008) emphasize that collaborative governance requires shared understanding forged through dialogic communication, rather than one-way transmission.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in Kendal Regency has reached a technocratic collaborative configuration characterized by strong structural capacity but significant communicative weaknesses. The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data uncovers a fundamental implementation paradox: statistically, cross-sectoral coordination exhibits robust correlations with community participation ($r = 0.886$; $p < 0.001$), stakeholder roles, and program accountability and transparency, indicating an integrated, collaborative system. The Kruskal–Wallis test demonstrates cross-professional consensus in perceptions ($p > 0.05$), reflecting alignment in understanding among implementers. The regulatory framework—comprising Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024, Ministry of Home Affairs Regulation No. 86 of 2017, the Public Information Disclosure Law, the Health Law, and relevant sectoral regulations—provides an adequate legal foundation for cross-sectoral coordination, the distribution of roles among actors, community participation, and program transparency.

However, qualitative findings reveal a failure of intersubjectivity that threatens the program's social legitimacy. Implementers—from the National Nutrition Agency, the Kendal Police Department, and family planning counselors to nutritionists—internalize coordination as a functional reality that is “functioning well” and “rapid-response.” At the same time, beneficiaries such as Dewi experience informational alienation, responding “do not know” and “do not understand” to nearly all aspects of the program. This phenomenon represents not merely an information gap, but a failure to construct shared understanding, which Ansell and Gash (2008) identify as the essence of collaborative governance. Coordination operates within bureaucratic spaces but is not cognitively experienced by the community, creating a condition of “coordination without communication.”

The resulting collaborative configuration can thus be characterized as technocratic–instrumentalist: technically effective in operational execution, with responsive coordination structures and relatively straightforward actor roles, yet weak in constructing social legitimacy because community participation remains largely consultative—corresponding to Arnstein's “consultation” level—rather than deliberative. This model diverges from the democratic–participatory configuration envisioned in collaborative governance theory, in which beneficiaries function as active subjects throughout the entire policy process, rather than merely as objects of policy intervention.

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