

STREET-LEVEL GOVERNANCE DYNAMICS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FREE NUTRITIOUS MEAL (MBG) IN INDONESIA: DISCRETION, COPING, AND SERVICE QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how a populist-designed national school feeding program is translated into practice through complex bureaucratic structures and street-level governance processes. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis within a specific school setting. This study applied street-level bureaucracy theory to explain how frontline actors mediate between formal policy mandates and situational realities. The findings indicated that performance-driven administrative pressures and fragmented inter-organizational coordination shift operational burdened onto schools, expanding the scope of discretion for teachers and school administrators. Frontline actors employed coping practices such as procedural simplification and task prioritization to maintain service delivery under constraints. While these adaptive mechanisms stabilized implementation in the short term, they also reshaped the substance of policies and contribute to variations in service quality, food safety risks, and disruptions to educational processes. This study demonstrated that implementation outcomes are co-produced through the interaction of structural conditions, professional norms, and local judgments. Theoretically, this study incorporates street-level discretion, governance fragmentation, and populist policy formulation into a mediated governance framework. While in practically sense, this study emphasizes the necessity of coordinating policy goals with institutional support for frontline actors, qualitative safeguards, and coordination ability.

Keywords: *Populist policy implementation; street-level bureaucracy; bureaucratic discretion; coping mechanisms; public service performance*

INTRODUCTION

A national intervention to combat malnutrition and stunting in Indonesia, the Free Nutritious Meals Program (abbreviated as MBG) is a landmark social policy project based on political commitments. The initiative, which was formally introduced in January 2025, aims to assist a wide spectrum of people, such as school-age and early childhood students, expectant moms, and nursing mothers. Normatively speaking, MBG is presented as an investment strategy for human capital that aims to improve long-term socioeconomic productivity and lessen nutritional inequities. Presidential Regulation No. 115/2025 on the governance framework for the implementation of the MBG serves as the foundation for the program's execution from the standpoint of regulatory governance. In addition to defining beneficiary criteria, standardizing distribution methods, and establishing food quality control processes, this legislation offers legal certainty. The creation of the National Nutrition Agency (abbreviated as BGN) under Presidential Regulation No. 83/2024, which acts as the coordinating authority for national nutrition policy, including the execution of MBG, has further consolidated institutional duties. This regulatory instrument signifies an effort to transform politically driven campaign promises into a formal administrative system.

The results of the initial implementation reveal a dual nature. The program has achieved broad coverage, reached millions of beneficiaries and expanded the state's welfare presence in the education and maternal health sectors. On the other hand, challenges at the field level highlight governance vulnerabilities, particularly in food safety monitoring, logistics control, and inter-agency coordination. Reported food poisoning incidents in several regions underscore the risks inherent in large-scale daily food provision and expose the gap between regulatory design and operational capacity. This adopts a qualitative case study approach focused on the implementation of MBG in Sidoarjo Regency, specifically in the sub-districts of Waru, Sedati, and Taman. The case study design is suitable to examine complex governance processes within real-world institutional settings where policy implementation is shaped by contextual, organizational, and social dynamics (Robert K. Yin, 2018). These three subdistricts represent densely populated suburban areas with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, making them relevant sites for observing how national welfare programs are operationalized in school settings.

Field observations indicate that the implementation of MBG in these subdistricts reflects the unique challenges of delivering large-scale welfare through a multi-layered administrative system. Schools serve as frontline implementation arenas where national directives intersect with local resource constraints, institutional routines, and professional norms. Consistent with street-level bureaucracy theory, teachers and school administrators exercise discretion in managing food distribution, documentation, and coordination with vendors under time pressures and accountability demands (Michael Lipsky, 2010). The case context also reveals the complexity of coordination between education offices, nutrition authorities, and private food providers which illustrate the challenges of inter-organizational policy delivery governance (Virtanen et al., 2018). Variations in school capacity, infrastructure, and community expectations further shape implementation practices, underscoring the importance of local context in policy outcomes (Peter Pirnejad,

2017). In this case, Sidoarjo provides an empirically grounded framework for analyzing how political welfare commitments are mediated through organizational structures and frontline discretionary practices in the delivery of education-based services.

These dynamics illustrate a broader implementation paradox often associated with populist social programs: rapid policy expansion supported by strong political legitimacy but mediated through an administrative system that may lack commensurate oversight and quality control capabilities. Consequently, MBG serves as an empirical case to examine how political mandates are translated into bureaucratic practice, and how regulatory formalization interacts with organizational capacity, risk management, and service quality in the delivery of large-scale welfare. The implementation of the MBG at the field level illustrates the characteristic paradox of populist policy delivery within a complex bureaucratic system. Although the program is normatively framed as a response to malnutrition and inequalities in food access, its operationalization reveals implementation distortions that affect educational processes and school governance. Reported cases of food poisoning in several regions directly disrupted teaching and learning activities, forcing schools to suspend classes while teachers managed affected students. Consequently, institutional priorities shifted from pedagogical functions to emergency response. This situation exemplifies what Michael Lipsky, (2010) conceptualized as situational pressures that drive street-level bureaucrats to operate outside their professional-formal mandates.

The predominance of quantitative performance criteria is the primary implementation challenge. Instead of focusing on nutritional adequacy, food safety, or service quality, policy effectiveness is primarily evaluated in terms of numerical indicators, such as the amount of food provided. According to Bashir & Shakil, (2021), this type of output-oriented administrative logic is indicative of a traditional implementation bias in which quantifiable goals take precedence over significant results. Standards of hygiene, menu diversity, and quality control run the risk of being sacrificed to speed and volume under the demands of large-scale daily distribution. The expanded program's bureaucratic chain which encompasses central ministries, specialized nutrition agencies, local governments, schools, and private catering providers, results in institutional fragmentation. Fragmentation disperses responsibility and creates ambiguity regarding accountability when failures occur, weakening both vertical and horizontal coordination (Goodman, 2019). As the terminal nodes of delivery, schools become the convergence point for systemic weaknesses.

As a result, teachers function as de facto street-level bureaucrats despite their primary identity as educators. They manage food distribution, record beneficiaries, process orders, and handle parent complaints. This expansion of roles creates a professional dilemma between maintaining instructional quality and ensuring policy compliance. Under resource constraints and time pressures, frontline actors develop coping mechanisms such as procedural simplification or expedited service delivery (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022). In the context of MBG, this may manifest as rapid food distribution with minimal inspection to protect class time. In this point, policy implementation becomes a contested space of governance. Teachers may delay distribution when food quality is in question, using professional judgment to safeguard students' well-being. However, this action can be

interpreted as administrative non-compliance which illustrate the perennial tension between rule-following and professional responsibility (Anasti, 2020). Furthermore, the intensification of teachers' workloads reduces preparation time and pedagogical interaction, potentially undermining educational outcomes. This reflects the broader phenomenon of frontline policy overload, in which schools absorb various state agendas beyond their core mission (Skerritt, 2023).

In addition, teachers' workloads have increased. Administrative and logistical tasks encroach on lesson preparation and student engagement, potentially undermining educational outcomes. This reflects "frontline policy overload", to which schools absorb various state agendas beyond their core mission (Quilabert et al., 2024). The implementation of MBG demonstrates how the expansion of populist policies, bureaucratic fragmentation, and performance-driven governance structures interact to reshape discretionary practices at the street level, ultimately affecting the quality of services and institutional functioning in education. Also, its implementation reveals the classic tension between the ambitions of populist policies and the capacity of frontline administration. Although designed to address malnutrition and human resource inequalities, field-level practices expose structural and organizational vulnerabilities that reshape how policies function in schools. Incidents of food poisoning, which disrupted teaching and learning activities, demonstrate how the risks of policy delivery are shifted to frontline institutions. Schools were forced to suspend instruction while teachers managed the health emergency, shifting the institutional focus from pedagogy to crisis response. This situation exemplifies the situational pressures on street-level bureaucrats, where professionals must operate beyond the expectations of their formal roles (Michael Lipsky, 2010).

The case of MBG illustrates a broader theoretical pattern: the expansion of populist policies + bureaucratic fragmentation → intensive frontline discretion → coping-driven service adaptation → variable service quality outcomes. Teachers become the mediating actors through whom policy designs are translated, negotiated, and sometimes altered. Consequently, the effectiveness of implementation depends not only on political commitment but on how organizational structures shape discretionary space at the street level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that combines policy implementation theory, street-level bureaucracy, governance theory, performance management, coping behavior, and populist policy studies. Rather than conceptualizing implementation as a linear administrative sequence, this research views implementation as a dynamic governance process in which political commitments, organizational arrangements, and frontline actors interact to shape public service outcomes. This integrated perspective is particularly appropriate for analyzing the implementation of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG), a large-scale welfare policy involving multiple governmental levels and diverse implementing actors.

Policy Implementation Theory

Policy implementation refers to the process through which government decisions are translated into operational activities and public services. Classical implementation theory emphasizes that successful implementation depends not only on policy formulation but also on institutional coordination, organizational capacity, communication, and administrative commitment (Oliver Kasdan, 2020). Every additional organizational layer creates new decision points, increasing the probability of implementation slippage and coordination failure. Brandenberger et al., (2022) extend this perspective by arguing that implementation should be understood as operational governance rather than administrative execution. Public policies are implemented through interactions among multiple organizations operating under different institutional constraints. Consequently, implementation outcomes emerge from governance processes rather than from policy design alone. In the MBG program, implementation involves central ministries, the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), district governments, education offices, schools, and private catering providers, making implementation highly dependent on inter-organizational coordination.

Street-Level Bureaucracy

Michael Lipsky, (2010) argues that frontline public servants become de facto policymakers because they exercise discretion while working under conditions of limited resources, ambiguous regulations, high workloads, and conflicting organizational demands. Therefore, actual policy outcomes are determined largely by how frontline actors interpret and apply formal regulations in everyday practice. Within the MBG program, teachers, school principals, and local administrators perform responsibilities extending beyond their formal educational roles. They supervise food distribution, verify beneficiaries, monitor food quality, coordinate with vendors, and respond to complaints from parents. These responsibilities require continuous discretionary judgments balancing administrative compliance with educational responsibilities and student safety. Thus, policy implementation becomes a socially constructed process mediated through professional judgment.

Professional Discretion and Ethical Judgment

Contemporary developments in street-level bureaucracy emphasize that discretion is influenced not only by organizational constraints but also by professional ethics and moral reasoning. Larrison & Edlins, (2020) argue that frontline workers frequently rely on professional values and situational judgments when formal regulations provide insufficient guidance. Similarly, Borrelli, (2021) conceptualizes discretion as professional autonomy exercised through ethical reasoning rather than arbitrary decision-making. In the context of MBG implementation, teachers may postpone food distribution when meal quality or hygiene is questioned, despite pressure to meet distribution targets. Such decisions represent ethical accountability intended to protect students' welfare rather than administrative non-compliance. Consequently, discretion functions simultaneously as a governance mechanism and a form of professional responsibility.

Governance and Inter-organizational Coordination

Governance theory explains that contemporary public policies are implemented through collaborative institutional arrangements rather than hierarchical government structures. Hand, (2018) argue that governance involves networks of public organizations, private actors, and civil society working together to achieve collective objectives. Xie, (2016) emphasizes that policy implementation increasingly depends on coordination among organizations rather than the capacity of individual institutions. Emerson et al., (2012) further argue that collaborative governance requires communication, trust, shared responsibility, and institutional integration. Fragmented governance structures often weaken accountability and generate coordination failures.

The MBG program exemplifies such governance complexity. Ministries, nutrition agencies, local governments, schools, and catering providers operate simultaneously within one implementation system. The effectiveness of policy therefore depends not only on formal regulations but also on the quality of coordination among implementing organizations.

Performance Management and Output-Oriented Governance

Performance management literature explains how public organizations increasingly emphasize measurable outputs and accountability indicators. Jan-Erik Lane, (2000) identifies this trend as a defining characteristic of New Public Management, where efficiency and quantifiable performance become dominant administrative objectives. Keuffer & Mabillard, (2020) demonstrate that target-oriented governance may unintentionally distort organizational priorities by encouraging actors to prioritize measurable achievements over qualitative service outcomes. In MBG implementation, success is frequently evaluated through beneficiary coverage and the number of meals distributed. Such performance pressures may reduce attention to food quality, nutritional adequacy, hygiene, and educational continuity, thereby shaping frontline discretionary behavior.

Coping Theory

Street-level actors frequently face implementation demands that exceed available organizational resources. Under these conditions, coping mechanisms emerge as adaptive responses enabling organizations to maintain service continuity. Hastings & Gannon, (2022) define coping as behavioral strategies such as procedural simplification, task prioritization, selective implementation, and informal adjustments developed to manage workload pressures. Within MBG implementation, coping behaviors may include simplifying administrative procedures, prioritizing meal distribution over detailed inspection, adjusting classroom schedules, or reallocating responsibilities among school staff. These practices help maintain implementation continuity but may also reshape policy substance and influence service quality.

Populist Welfare Policy

The expansion of populist welfare policies provides an important political context for this study. Populist governments frequently prioritize highly visible social programs intended to demonstrate responsiveness toward citizens (Xi Tang & Kex Zena Fillip, 2025). According to Cain et al., (2021), populist policymaking emphasizes rapid implementation, broad coverage, and symbolic political benefits. The MBG program reflects these characteristics through its ambitious national coverage and immediate implementation. While politically significant, rapid policy expansion may exceed administrative readiness, thereby creating implementation pressures throughout the governance system. This study therefore connects populist policy literature with implementation theory by demonstrating how political ambitions shape organizational conditions at the frontline.

Public Service Quality

Public service quality extends beyond policy access and service availability. Osborne, (2010) argues that public governance should focus on value creation through citizens' experiences. David Osborne & Peter Plastrik, (1996) further propose that service quality is co-produced through interactions between service providers and beneficiaries. In MBG implementation, parents and students evaluate policy effectiveness based not only on access to free meals but also on menu quality, nutritional adequacy, hygiene, food safety, and service reliability. Consequently, policy legitimacy depends upon citizens' perceptions of service quality as well as program coverage.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing upon these theoretical perspectives, this study conceptualizes MBG implementation as a mediated governance process. Structural-administrative factors—including performance pressures and fragmented coordination—create implementation challenges that are interpreted and managed through frontline discretion, ethical judgment, and coping practices. These governance mechanisms subsequently shape service quality, food safety, educational continuity, and policy effectiveness.

Accordingly, this study proposes that successful implementation of large-scale welfare programs depends on the alignment between political ambitions, governance capacity, organizational coordination, and the professional capabilities of street-level bureaucrats. Policy outcomes are therefore understood as products of continuous interaction among institutional structures, administrative processes, and frontline governance practices rather than as direct consequences of formal policy design alone.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis—MBG) through the perspective of street level governance. The qualitative design was chosen because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of policy implementation as a dynamic governance process shaped by institutional arrangements, organizational interactions, and frontline discretion. The research was conducted in Waru, Sedati, and Taman Sub-districts,

Sidoarjo Regency, East Java, which were purposively selected because they represent urban–suburban areas actively implementing the MBG program with diverse socioeconomic characteristics. The research focused on six dimensions: (1) administrative performance pressures, (2) inter-organizational coordination, (3) street-level discretion, (4) coping and adaptive practices, (5) service quality and food safety, and (6) the interaction between bureaucratic structures and frontline governance in shaping implementation outcomes.

Data consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and field notes, while secondary data comprised government regulations, implementation guidelines, official reports, school administrative documents, and relevant scholarly literature. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, including officials from the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), the Sidoarjo District Education Office, school principals, teachers, administrative staff, catering providers, and school committee representatives who were directly involved in program implementation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis to capture policy implementation from multiple perspectives. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Matthew B. Miles et al., (2018), involving data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analytical process employed open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify categories, establish relationships among themes, and construct an integrated explanation of street-level governance in MBG implementation. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentary evidence, as well as cross-checking data among different categories of informants. This triangulation enhanced the credibility of the findings by ensuring consistency, minimizing researcher bias, and validating interpretations across multiple sources and perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interviews with parents and students reveal broad support for MBG due to economic relief and improved food access, yet concerns persist regarding menu variation, hygiene, and food safety, shaping trust perceptions and affecting acceptance of state-provided school-based welfare services. Interviews with parents and students demonstrate widespread support for MBG owing to economic assistance and enhanced food access (Table 3). However, concerns remain regarding menu variation, hygiene, and food safety, which shape trust perceptions and influence acceptance of state-provided school-based welfare services.

Table 3. Parent and student perceptions of MBG implementation

Actor Group	Positive Perceptions	Main Concerns	Interpretive Implications
Parents	Reduces household food costs; supports child nutrition; seen as government care	Food safety risks, hygiene, irregular quality	Trust in the program depends on safety assurances
Students	Access to free meals; social eating experience; reduces hunger during classes	Taste, monotonous menus, fear after poisoning incidents	Service experience affects program legitimacy

Source: Author's analysis

The table above demonstrates that parents and students perceive the MBG school feeding program as providing tangible benefits, including reduction of household food costs, improved child nutrition, access to free meals, and enhanced social experiences. However, concerns over food safety, hygiene, taste, and monotonous menus persist, shaping trust perceptions and legitimacy. These findings indicate that stakeholder trust and program acceptance depend not solely on coverage and accessibility but also on service delivery quality and reliability (Table 4). Therefore, addressing safety and experience concerns is critical for sustaining program effectiveness and legitimacy at the school level.

Table 4. Street-level bureaucratic responses in MBG implementation

Actor Level	Dominant Orientation	Implementation Pressures	Discretionary Practices	Governance Implications
District Government Officials	Target achievement, mandate compliance, policy legitimacy	Limited monitoring capacity; large coverage demands	Prioritizing distribution continuity over detailed quality controls	Output-based governance risks weakening oversight depth
Sub-district Implementers	Operational coordination and mediation	Fragmented inter-agency communication; logistical disruptions	Informal problem-solving, adaptive coordination among actors	Mid-level actors absorb costs of systemic fragmentation
School Principals	Institutional order and procedural compliance	Balancing educational management with program logistics	Schedule adjustments; procedural simplification	School leadership becomes hybrid administrative-educational role

Teachers (Street-Level Bureaucrats)	Student welfare and instructional responsibility	Increased workload; time pressures; food safety uncertainties	Situational decisions on distribution; coping through task prioritization	Discretion mediates between policy intent and student protection
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Source: Author's analysis

The findings suggest that MBG implementation is shaped by layered discretionary adaptations across administrative levels. As proximity to service delivery increases, pressures shift from compliance with performance targets toward ethical and professional judgments, illustrating how frontline mediation transforms formal policy into direct practice. Beneficiary acceptance of MBG reflects trade-offs between material benefits, such as food access and cost relief, and perceived service quality, including safety, taste, and hygiene. Parents focus on risks and reliability, while students emphasize experiential aspects, highlighting that legitimacy depends on both welfare value and delivery quality. District level officials frame the program in terms of mandate compliance and coverage achievement, reflecting performance-driven logic, yet they acknowledge gaps in food quality monitoring and cross-sectoral oversight. Sub-district implementers act as coordinative intermediaries, managing communication breakdowns between schools, catering providers, and agencies, absorbing transaction costs caused by fragmented governance. At the school level, principals and teachers face policy displacement effects, assuming beneficiary verification, distribution oversight, and parent communication, intensifying workload pressures. Ethical dilemmas emerge when meal quality is questioned, illustrating discretion as both professional responsibility and a source of potential vulnerability.

MBG outcomes are determined less by formal rules than by frontline adaptation processes. Street-level actors function as governance mediators, reconciling political mandates with situational realities. Service delivery emerges from negotiated practices across administrative layers, affirming that effective implementation depends on aligning policy design with coordination capacity, professional judgment, and operational conditions in the field.

Axial coding results and street-level governance dynamics

In order to better understand how MBG implementation is socially and organizationally formed at the frontline, axial coding makes it possible to integrate fragmented interview data into structured explanatory categories (Table 5). The research shows systematic linkages between administrative structures and the day-to-day activities of actors involved in service delivery, as opposed to exposing isolated operational issues.

The first dominant category—*Administrative performance pressures*, reflects a governance environment shaped by output-oriented accountability. Interview codes such as "coverage targets", "daily distribution quotas", and "reporting deadlines" indicate that success is institutionally defined through numerical performance indicators. This

performance logic redirects actor attention toward measurable compliance, often constraining the time and procedural space necessary for thorough food safety inspections and quality controls.

The second category—*Fragmented coordination structures*, captures systemic complexity in the inter-organizational delivery chain. Codes including "unclear responsibilities", "multi-agency instructions", and "communication delays" illustrate how overlapping authority structures produce coordination gaps. These gaps do not halt implementation but displace problem-solving burdens downward, increasing transaction costs for frontline institutions such as schools.

The third category—*Frontline discretionary mediation*, reveals how teachers and school leaders operate as policy translators. Codes such as "situational assessment", "protecting students", and "rule interpretation" indicate that discretion functions as a mediating bridge between rigid procedural expectations and context-specific service realities. Decisions regarding whether to distribute, postpone, or adjust procedures reflect professional ethics intertwined with administrative responsibilities.

The fourth category—*Coping and adaptive practices*, describes how players preserve operational continuity in the face of coordination and workload demands. Codes like "procedural simplification," "task prioritization," and "schedule adjustments" imply that coping is not resistance but rather functional adaptation. By loosely interpreting quality standards and control, these techniques steady service delivery while potentially changing the substance of policy. The aforementioned categories show how MBG implementation occurs through multi-level governance mediation, where structural forces increase adaptive behaviors and discretionary space. As a result, policy outcomes result from negotiated frontline procedures, confirming that organizational design and actor judgments, rather than just formal regulations, co-produce service quality and safety.

Table 5. Axial coding structure

Axial Category	Representative Codes	Analytical Meaning	Governance Effect
Administrative Performance Pressures	Coverage targets, distribution quotas, reporting demands	Output-based accountability shapes actor priorities	Emphasis on quantity may constrain quality protections
Fragmented Coordination Structures	Unclear responsibilities, multi-agency involvement, communication delays	Institutional fragmentation in delivery chain	Coordination gaps displace burdens onto frontline institutions
Frontline Discretionary Mediation	Situational assessments, safety rule decisions, interpretation	Professional judgment bridges policy and reality	Discretion becomes central governance mechanism

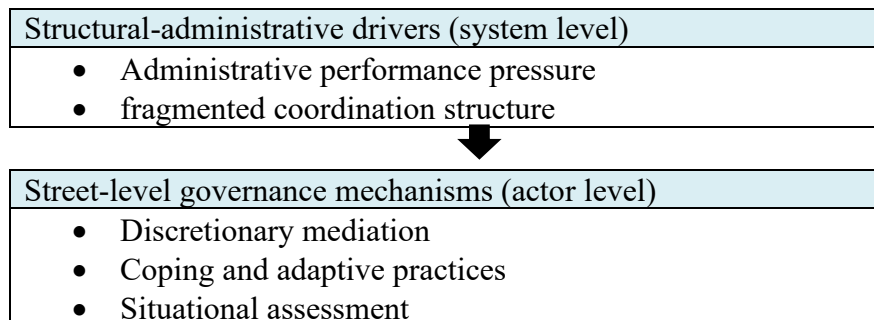
Coping and Adaptive Practices	Procedural simplification, task prioritization, schedule adjustments	Adaptive responses to workload constraints	Stabilizes delivery to but may modify policy substance
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Source: Author's analysis

The table above shows that axial coding analysis identifies four core governance dimensions in MBG implementation. Administrative performance pressures drive output-oriented accountability, emphasizing coverage and reporting while potentially sacrificing quality protections. Fragmented coordination structures across multiple agencies create gaps that displace operational burdens onto frontline actors. Street-level discretion emerges as a central governance mechanism, enabling professional judgment to bridge policy intentions and practical realities. Coping and adaptive practices stabilize service delivery under workload and institutional constraints, though they may also modify policy substance, highlighting complex trade-offs inherent in effective program governance.

Conceptual model: Street-level governance in the implementation of MBG

The findings indicate that MBG program implementation does not follow a linear trajectory but operates as a multi-layered mediation chain. At the systemic level, structural and administrative drivers, i.e., administrative performance pressures and fragmented coordination structures, create a high-pressure implementation environment characterized by ambitious quantitative targets and weak inter-agency integration. These conditions shape the operational context in which street-level actors operate. At the actor level, street-level governance mechanisms play a critical role in translating policy into practice. Teachers, principals, and local implementers engage in discretionary mediation and coping and adaptive practices, interpreting formal rules through situational judgments, ethical considerations, and procedural adjustments. These mechanisms act as filters between policy design and service delivery, mediating the effects of structural pressures while responding to practical and contextual constraints. At the outcome level, these interactions produce variations in service quality, potential risks to food safety and standards, disruptions to educational functions, and gaps between intended policy design and actual practice. This model demonstrates that policy implementation is inherently dynamic and socially embedded, with frontline actors functioning as critical mediators whose judgments and adaptive behaviors determine the effectiveness, safety, and legitimacy of public service delivery.



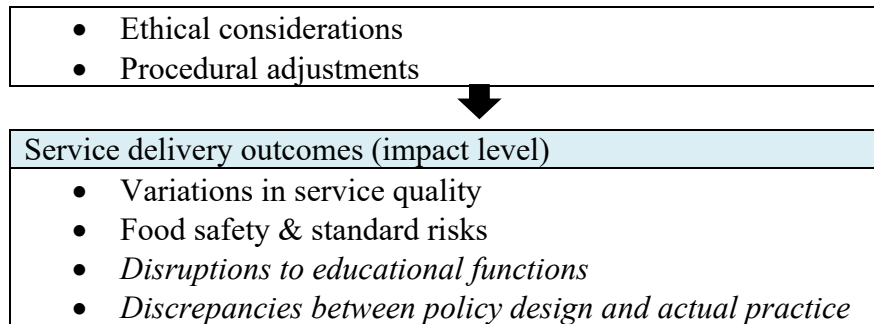
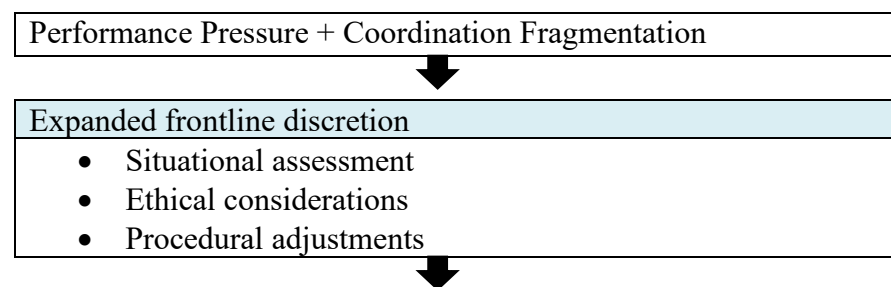


Figure 2. A causal-processual model of MBG implementation

Figure 2 illustrates MBG implementation, where structural and administrative pressures create high-demand operational contexts, while street-level governance through discretionary mediation and adaptive coping translates formal policy into practice. These interactions shape service outcomes, producing variations in quality, safety, and implementation gaps, highlighting the negotiated nature of frontline service delivery.

Theoretical logic model

This model depicts the sequential causal logic connecting structural pressures, frontline discretion, and service delivery outcomes. Administrative performance pressures and coordination fragmentation constrain the capacity of formal organizational structures, creating an environment where system rules and resources alone cannot ensure effective implementation. In response, street-level actors engage in discretionary mediation, interpreting policy directives through situational judgments, ethical considerations, and contextual adjustments. This discretionary space facilitates adaptive coping practices, enabling actors to manage workload, procedural complexity, and local contingencies. Consequently, service delivery outcomes become negotiated realities shaped by the interaction between policy design, institutional constraints, and frontline decision-making rather than direct reflections of intended policy plans. Accordingly, discretion should not be understood as deviation or non-compliance, but as a *de facto* governance mechanism that sustains program continuity while potentially modifying substantive policy content. This model thus integrates structural, behavioral, and outcome-level perspectives, highlighting the mediating role of street-level governance in translating political mandates into practical service delivery, while maintaining theoretical relevance for contemporary public administration studies.



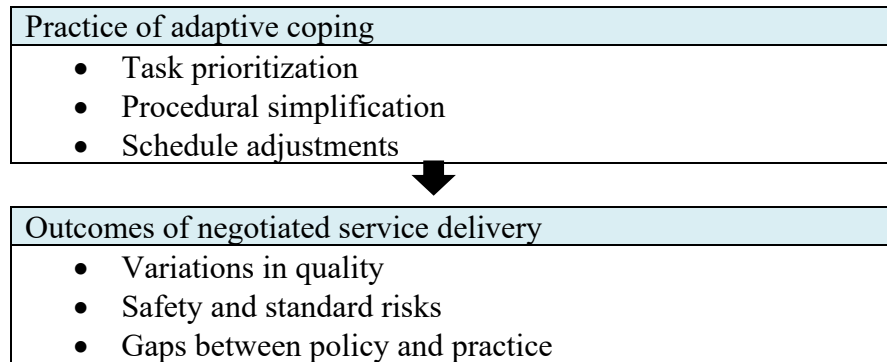


Figure 3. Theoretical logic diagram (causal flow)

Figure 3 illustrates the implementation logic of MBG: structural pressures, including administrative performance demands and fragmented coordination, constrain formal capacity, amplifying frontline discretion. This discretion enables adaptive coping, producing negotiated service outcomes that balance policy intentions and real-world constraints, functioning as a *de facto* governance mechanism that maintains program continuity while shaping policy content.

Frontline governance mediation model in populist welfare implementation

The conceptual findings model illustrates a causal-processual governance chain in which structural-administrative drivers shape frontline implementation dynamics. Performance pressures and coordination fragmentation displace operational burdens onto schools, intensifying situational demands on local actors. In this constrained environment, street-level governance mechanisms, particularly discretion and coping practices, emerge as practical mediating processes that translate formal mandates into actionable practices. These mechanisms function as adaptive responses that maintain delivery continuity but simultaneously reshape policy substance. Consequently, service delivery outcomes become variable, reflected in differences in service quality, food safety risks, classroom disruptions, and widening gaps between formal policy design and lived implementation realities.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand how populist policy design is translated into practice through complex bureaucratic structures and street-level governance processes. The findings reveal that implementation of the MBG school feeding program operates not as a linear administrative sequence but as a multi-layered governance mediation process, where structural pressures are filtered through street-level discretion and coping practices. These results confirm and extend key strands of policy implementation and public administration theory. First, the study reinforces the classic argument that policy outcomes are shaped by inter-organizational complexity rather than formal design alone (Austin et al., 2024; Sampson Thierry & Martinsen, 2018; Sementelli, 2020). The extended bureaucratic chain involved in MBG creates distance between policy formulation and operational realities. However, the findings move beyond conventional notions of

"implementation gaps". It is more than merely producing failure or non-compliance, but structural misalignment that generates new governance dynamics at the frontline, where schools become arenas of negotiation between policy logic and situational constraints. This supports a governance perspective that conceptualizes public policy as products of multi-level, multi-actor interactions rather than hierarchical commands (Grossi & Welinder, 2024; Kefi et al., 2024; Keping, 2018; Tosun, 2022)

Second, the dominance of performance targets and reporting demands confirms critiques of performance-oriented administrative regimes associated with New Public Management (Clarke & Newman, 2025). In MBG implementation, success is often defined in terms of numerical coverage and distribution speed. Consistent with Blok et al., (2023), such target regimes risk distorting organizational priorities, displacing attention from qualitative dimensions such as food safety, hygiene, and nutritional balance. This study extends the literature by demonstrating how performance logic permeates down to the school level, shaping teachers' and administrators' daily practices. Thus, quantification is not merely an organizational reform principle but a situational pressure that influences micro-level decision-making. Third, the findings confirm that bureaucratic fragmentation undermines coordination and blurs accountability (Warman, 2016). Multi-agency involvement in MBG creates uncertainty over responsibilities, particularly during crisis events such as food poisoning. Echoing Di Giulio & Vecchi, (2023), the study demonstrates that inter-organizational arrangements require coordination capacities that are often weakest at operational levels. Importantly, fragmentation does not merely produce inefficiency; it displaces institutional risks downward, making schools and teachers *de facto* managers of policy failures despite their limited authority in program design.

Within this structural environment, street-level discretion emerges as a central mediating mechanism. Consistent with Michael Lipsky, (2010) theory, frontline actors effectively "make policy" through daily judgments. Teachers adjust schedules, assess food safety, and balance meal provision activities with instructional responsibilities. However, these findings add an important dimension: discretion here is driven not only by resource scarcity but also by normative tensions between political mandates to deliver visible welfare benefits and professional obligations to protect student welfare and learning processes. This aligns with Fuertes, (2021) argument that discretion reflects professional ethics as much as administrative flexibility. Decisions such as postponing distribution due to safety concerns represent moral accountability rather than rule avoidance.

Coping practices further illustrate how frontline actors stabilize service delivery under pressure. Procedural simplification, task prioritization, and schedule adjustments align with established observations that street-level workers develop routines to manage workload and ambiguity (Dogga et al., 2023; Michael Lipsky, 2010). However, this research demonstrates that coping has ambivalent effects. While it sustains implementation continuity, it may also reshape policy substance, for instance when rapid distribution reduces quality controls. Coping thus functions as an adaptive governance mechanism that both enables and subtly transforms policy delivery. The populist character of the policy context is also theoretically significant. Populist policies emphasize visibility and direct benefits to broad constituencies (Loew & Faas, 2019). MBG's large-scale and rapid launch

intensifies administrative pressures, supporting Béland & Howlett, (2016) observation that ambitious policy designs often exceed implementation capacities. This study contributes by connecting populist policy dynamics with street-level bureaucracy theory, demonstrating that populist administrative logics expand discretionary space while increasing operational risks. Finally, the findings support a relational conception of public service quality. Service outcomes are not direct reflections of formal design but are co-produced through interactions between organizational structures and frontline practices (Krick, 2022; Osborne, 2010). Variations in MBG service quality, i.e., from safety risks to classroom disruptions, emerge from how structural constraints are mediated through local judgments. Thus, effectiveness in populist welfare programs depends not on regulatory strength but on the conditions under which discretion and coping are exercised.

In summary, this research integrates insights from implementation theory, governance studies, performance management, and street-level bureaucracy. It demonstrates that street-level governance constitutes a critical arena where populist policies are substantively reshaped, highlighting the need to align policy ambitions with coordination capacities and professional support at the frontline.

Research novelty

By creating a mediated governance framework that links populist policy formulation, bureaucratic chain complexity, and street-level discretion inside a single causal-processual model, this study improves the field of public administration studies. It presents the idea of frontline risk displacement, showing how performance-driven institutions and disjointed coordination shift operational and moral responsibilities to actors with little official power. Discretion and coping mechanisms are rethought in the research as adaptive governance mechanisms that sustain delivery while gently changing the content of policy. The paper clarifies how high-visibility welfare programs increase discretionary space under intense performance expectations by connecting populist policy studies with street-level bureaucrat theory. It further highlights schools as hybrid governance arenas where welfare provision, administrative control, and professional norms intersect, shaping service quality and implementation outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how a populist-designed national school feeding program is implemented through complex bureaucratic structures and street-level governance. The findings demonstrate that outcomes are shaped less by formal policy design than by how structural, institutional, and socio-cultural forces are mediated at the frontline. Populist design drives rapid expansion, high visibility, and target-oriented governance, emphasizing quantitative outputs over qualitative protections. Bureaucratic fragmentation weakens coordination, displacing operational pressures onto schools. Frontline actors, such as teachers and administrators, exercise discretion to manage food safety, instructional conflicts, and procedural uncertainties, while coping practices such as task prioritization maintain service continuity and sometimes reshape policy substance. Socio-cultural norms, professional ethics, and community expectations guide implementation decisions,

highlighting the socially embedded nature of governance. The gap between intended objectives and actual service delivery reflects the interaction of performance pressures, fragmentation, discretion, and adaptation. Therefore, effective implementation requires aligning policy ambitions with coordination capacity, professional norms, and frontline working conditions

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