

## Optimizing Competency-Based Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program through Universal and Poverty-Based Approaches

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to optimize the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program based on human resource competencies to improve efficiency and targeting accuracy through universal and poverty-based approaches. A mixed methods design with a sequential explanatory approach was employed, involving 50 beneficiary respondents and 8 program implementers in West Java. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The results indicate that human resource competency significantly affects efficiency and distribution accuracy, while a combined approach is more adaptive than a single approach. This study contributes to the development of a more effective and context-sensitive public policy implementation model

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The implementation of free nutritious meal programs has emerged as a strategic public policy instrument to address malnutrition and social inequality at both global and national levels. International organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization emphasize that school feeding programs play a critical role in improving human capital and educational outcomes (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023). In Indonesia, however, the implementation of such programs continues to face significant challenges, particularly in terms of efficiency and targeting accuracy. These challenges are exacerbated by socio-economic disparities across regions, especially in provinces such as West Java, where urban and rural conditions differ substantially. Consequently, optimizing program implementation has become an urgent issue within the field of public management.

Empirical evidence suggests that the success of social programs is highly dependent on the quality of implementation, particularly the competency of human resources involved. A study by Putra and Handayani (2022) found that limited managerial and technical capacity among program implementers contributes significantly to inefficiencies in public service delivery. Similarly, research by Arifin et al. (2023) indicates that weak institutional capacity often leads to mistargeting in social assistance programs. These findings highlight the importance of adopting a competency-based approach in program implementation. Therefore, human resource competency must be considered a central factor in improving program performance.

In addition to implementation issues, the choice of targeting approach remains a critical debate in social policy. The universal approach ensures inclusivity but often leads to higher fiscal burdens, whereas the poverty-based approach is more cost-efficient but prone to exclusion errors. According to Gentilini et al. (2021), hybrid targeting mechanisms can enhance both efficiency and inclusiveness in social protection systems. In the Indonesian context, studies by Priebe and Howell (2021) demonstrate that combining targeting strategies can reduce leakage and improve program reach among vulnerable populations. Thus, a more integrative approach is required to balance efficiency and equity in program delivery.

Despite the growing body of literature, there remains a significant research gap in examining the interaction between human resource competency, program efficiency, and targeting accuracy within a unified framework. Previous studies tend to analyze these aspects in isolation, without considering their interdependence. For instance, research by Kusuma (2022) primarily focuses on budget efficiency without incorporating implementation capacity variables. Meanwhile, Wibowo and Sari (2024) examine targeting mechanisms but do not integrate human resource competency into their analysis. This fragmentation indicates the need for a more comprehensive and integrative research model.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to optimize a competency-based implementation model for the Free Nutritious Meal Program to improve efficiency and targeting accuracy through the integration of universal and poverty-based approaches. Specifically, the study analyzes the influence of

implementer competency on program performance and evaluates the effectiveness of hybrid targeting strategies in the context of West Java. Additionally, the study seeks to identify key factors influencing implementation outcomes at the operational level. Through this approach, the research provides a more holistic understanding of public program implementation.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the development of an integrative public management model that links human resource competency with policy targeting strategies. This research advances the literature on policy implementation by offering a more comprehensive analytical framework. Furthermore, it contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice in public administration. From a practical perspective, the findings are expected to inform policymakers and local governments in designing more effective and efficient implementation strategies. This aligns with recent findings by the World Bank (2022), which emphasize the importance of institutional capacity in improving social program outcomes.

Moreover, this study has important policy implications for the reform of social protection programs in Indonesia. By integrating competency-based management with hybrid targeting approaches, the study offers an adaptive solution to the complexities of socio-economic disparities. The findings are expected to assist policymakers in reducing targeting errors and improving the efficiency of public expenditure. In addition, the study provides empirical evidence to support capacity-building initiatives for program implementers. Therefore, this research not only contributes academically but also offers practical value for policy improvement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Policy Implementation Theory and Competency-Based Public Management*

Policy implementation represents a critical stage in determining the success of public programs, as emphasized in Edwards III's framework, which highlights communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure. In contemporary public management, this perspective has evolved into a competency-based approach that positions human resource capability as a central determinant of policy effectiveness. A study by Kim and Lee (2021) demonstrates that public sector competencies significantly influence the performance of social service delivery systems. This finding is supported in the Indonesian context by Rahayu and Setiawan (2022), who found that inadequate competency among local government officials leads to suboptimal program outcomes. Furthermore, Berman et al. (2022) argue that strengthening human resource capacity reduces implementation failures in developing countries. Compared to previous studies that focus mainly on structural aspects, this research integrates competency as a key driver of efficiency and targeting accuracy, making it more holistic and context-sensitive.

H1: Human resource competency has a positive effect on program implementation efficiency.

### ***Program Efficiency in Public Management Perspective***

Program efficiency is closely associated with the optimal use of resources to achieve maximum outcomes, as emphasized in New Public Management theory through the concept of value for money. Andrews and Van de Walle (2020) argue that efficiency is influenced by managerial quality and institutional capacity. In line with this, Margetts and Dunleavy (2021) highlight that inefficiencies often arise from weak coordination and limited technical capability among implementers. In Indonesia, research by Hidayat and Prakoso (2023) shows that inefficiency in social assistance programs is caused by misalignment between policy design and implementation capacity. Similarly, Siregar (2022) found that operational inefficiencies in government programs are often linked to weak human resource management systems. This study differs by integrating efficiency analysis with competency and targeting approaches, offering a more comprehensive framework for evaluating program performance.

H2: Human resource competency has a positive effect on the efficient use of program resources.

### ***Targeting Accuracy in Social Policy***

Targeting accuracy is a key indicator of success in social assistance programs, particularly in ensuring that benefits reach intended recipients. According to targeting theory, inclusion and exclusion errors remain major challenges in policy implementation (Coady et al., 2021). Hanna and Olken (2020) demonstrate that data-driven targeting systems alone are insufficient without strong implementation capacity. In Indonesia, Alatas et al. (2021) find that targeting errors remain prevalent due to weak verification systems. Additionally, research by Purnamasari (2023) indicates that inaccuracies in beneficiary selection are often influenced by the limited capacity of field officers. Unlike prior studies, this research connects targeting accuracy with human resource competency, emphasizing the role of implementers in ensuring program precision. This integrative perspective addresses the gap between policy design and field execution.

H3: Human resource competency has a positive effect on targeting accuracy.

### ***Universal and Poverty-Based Approaches in Social Policy***

Universal and poverty-based approaches represent two fundamental paradigms in social policy distribution. The universal approach promotes inclusiveness, while the poverty-based approach focuses on efficiency by targeting vulnerable groups. Ortiz et al. (2020) state that universal programs provide broad coverage but require higher fiscal capacity. In contrast, Bastagli et al. (2021) find that poverty-targeted programs are more efficient but risk excluding eligible beneficiaries. In Indonesia, research by Suryahadi and Sumarto (2022) shows that combining both approaches improves program effectiveness in reaching vulnerable populations. Similarly, Widodo (2023) highlights that hybrid targeting can reduce both leakage and exclusion errors in social programs. This study extends previous research by integrating both approaches within a competency-based implementation model, which has not been widely explored.

H4: The integration of universal and poverty-based approaches positively affects program efficiency and targeting accuracy.

### ***Integrative Model of Competency-Based Program Implementation***

Modern public management increasingly emphasizes integrative approaches to address the complexity of policy implementation. Governance theory highlights the importance of aligning institutional capacity, human resource competency, and policy design (Pierre & Peters, 2020). Lodge and Wegrich (2021) argue that integrated models significantly enhance public program performance. In the Indonesian context, research by Santoso (2024) shows that fragmented implementation frameworks often lead to policy inefficiencies. Meanwhile, Cheema and Rondinelli (2022) emphasize that lack of synergy between human resources and policy design contributes to program failure. This study offers novelty by developing an integrative model combining competency-based implementation and hybrid targeting approaches in a unified framework. This contribution is significant as it bridges theoretical and practical gaps in public policy implementation.

H5: A competency-based and hybrid targeting implementation model has a positive effect on overall program performance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Design and Approach***

This study employs a mixed methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a structured sequence to achieve comprehensive results. This approach is selected because the study not only aims to examine relationships between variables statistically but also to provide an in-depth explanation of program implementation phenomena. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that mixed methods research is particularly effective in public policy studies as it integrates numerical and narrative data systematically. In the Indonesian context, this approach is also relevant for examining the complexity of social program implementation involving multiple actors and socio-economic conditions (Sugiyono, 2022). Therefore, this method aligns with the objective of optimizing competency-based program implementation.

### ***Research Location and Object***

This research was conducted in West Java Province, focusing on areas characterized by diverse socio-economic conditions between urban and rural settings. The selection of this location is based on its heterogeneous characteristics, which allow for a more comprehensive analysis of universal and poverty-based approaches. According to Statistics Indonesia (2023), West Java is one of the provinces with relatively high socio-economic inequality in Indonesia. This condition makes the region highly relevant for examining targeting accuracy and program efficiency. The object of this study is the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program based on human resource competencies, encompassing efficiency, targeting accuracy, and policy approaches.

### ***Population and Sampling Technique***

The population of this study consists of program beneficiaries and program implementers within the research area. The quantitative sample was determined using probability sampling (simple random sampling), involving 50 beneficiary respondents, which is considered sufficient for basic statistical analysis. Hair et al. (2019) suggest that a minimum sample size of 30–50 is adequate for descriptive and inferential analysis in social research. Meanwhile, the qualitative sample was selected using purposive sampling, consisting of 8 informants, including program implementers, school representatives, and relevant stakeholders. This technique is appropriate because informants possess direct knowledge and experience related to program implementation (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Thus, the combination of these sampling techniques ensures both representativeness and depth of data.

### ***Data Collection Techniques and Research Instruments***

Data were collected using questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The questionnaire was designed using a Likert scale (1–5) to measure variables such as human resource competency, program efficiency, and targeting accuracy. The questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies in public management and policy implementation (Podsakoff et al., 2020). To ensure instrument quality, validity testing was conducted using Pearson correlation, while reliability testing was performed using Cronbach's Alpha, with a minimum threshold of 0.70 indicating acceptable reliability (Taber, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore deeper insights into implementation challenges and strategies. Documentation was used to complement secondary data such as program reports and beneficiary data.

### ***Research Procedure***

The research procedure was conducted systematically in several stages. The first stage involved a preliminary study, including problem identification, literature review, and instrument development. The second stage was quantitative data collection through questionnaire distribution to respondents. The third stage involved initial quantitative data analysis to identify patterns and relationships among variables. The fourth stage was qualitative data collection through interviews to explain quantitative findings. The final stage was data integration, combining both quantitative and qualitative results to produce comprehensive conclusions. This approach is consistent with the sequential explanatory model widely recommended in mixed methods research (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018).

**Data Analysis Techniques**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and simple regression analysis to examine the effect of human resource competency on program efficiency and targeting accuracy. Data processing was conducted using SPSS software. Field (2018) explains that regression analysis is an effective method for identifying relationships between variables in social research. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying patterns and key themes from interview data. Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasize that thematic analysis is a flexible and systematic method for interpreting qualitative data. The results of both analyses were then integrated to provide a deeper understanding of program implementation.

**RESEARCH RESULTS**

***The Effect of Human Resource Competency on Program Efficiency***

The analysis results indicate that human resource competency has a significant effect on the efficiency of the Free Nutritious Meal Program implementation. Based on simple regression analysis, the regression coefficient is 0.68 with a significance level of < 0.05, indicating a strong positive relationship. This suggests that the higher the competency of program implementers, the more efficient the use of resources in program execution. Descriptively, 78% of respondents stated that competent implementers are able to reduce budget waste and accelerate food distribution. Furthermore, both technical and managerial competencies contribute to improved cross-sector coordination, thereby enhancing overall operational effectiveness.

Table 1. The Effect of Human Resource Competency on Program Efficiency

Variable	Regression Coefficient	Say.	R Square
HR Competency → Efficiency	0.68	0.001	0.52

Moreover: *“When the team really understands their job, distribution becomes faster and nothing goes to waste. Everyone already knows their role.”* (A-1, January 12, 2026). Then: *“Sometimes the issue isn’t the budget, it’s the people. If those managing it don’t fully understand, everything slows down.”* (B-2, January 18, 2026). On the other hand: *“Training is really important because each school has different conditions, so we need to be able to adapt.”* (C-1, January 22, 2026). The qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results, confirming that human resource competency is a key factor in program efficiency. Informants emphasized that technical skills, field experience, and understanding of operational procedures directly contribute to reducing inefficiencies. This is consistent with H1 and H2, which state that human resource competency positively affects both implementation efficiency and resource utilization. Within the sequential explanatory approach, qualitative data serve to explain statistical findings by illustrating the mechanisms through which competency influences efficiency in practice.

### ***The Effect of Human Resource Competency on Targeting Accuracy***

The results show that human resource competency also has a significant effect on program targeting accuracy. The regression coefficient of 0.72 with a significance level of 0.000 indicates a very strong relationship between implementer competency and the accuracy of aid distribution. A total of 82% of respondents stated that targeting errors are more likely to occur among implementers with limited data comprehension. Competency in beneficiary data verification and social analysis skills are key factors in improving program accuracy. Therefore, strengthening human resource capacity is a strategic step to minimize both inclusion and exclusion errors.

Table 2. The Effect of Human Resource Competency on Targeting Accuracy

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Regression Coefficient</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>R Square</b>
HR Competency → Targeting Accuracy	0.72	0.000	0.57

Furthermore: *“Sometimes the data isn’t updated, but if the staff are careful, they can double-check it to avoid mistakes.”* (A-2, January 14, 2026). Then: *“Those who understand students’ conditions usually select recipients more accurately, so it’s not just random.”* (B-1, January 20, 2026). In addition: *“If you just rely on the data without verification, often those who should receive it end up missing out.”* (C-2, January 25, 2026). The qualitative data indicate that human resource competency, particularly in data verification and understanding social conditions, plays a critical role in determining targeting accuracy. This supports H3, which states that human resource competency positively affects targeting accuracy. In the mixed methods framework, these findings highlight that accurate targeting depends not only on data systems but also on the implementers’ ability to interpret and validate the data effectively.

### ***The Effectiveness of Universal and Poverty-Based Approaches***

The findings indicate that a combination of universal and poverty-based approaches is more effective than a single approach. Approximately 76% of respondents stated that the combined approach is more capable of reaching beneficiaries who genuinely need assistance. The analysis shows that the universal approach enhances inclusiveness, while the poverty-based approach improves budget efficiency. The integration of both approaches creates a balance between equity and targeting accuracy. This demonstrates that the hybrid approach is more adaptive to the heterogeneous socio-economic conditions in West Java.

Table 3. Comparison of Program Approach Effectiveness

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Efficiency (%)</b>	<b>Targeting Accuracy (%)</b>
Universal	65	70
Poverty-Based	80	75

Approach	Efficiency (%)	Targeting Accuracy (%)
Hybrid (Combined)	85	88

On the other hand: *“If everyone receives it, it feels fair, but sometimes it becomes wasteful.”* (B-3, January 16, 2026). Furthermore: *“If it’s only for the poor, sometimes some people are missed, which is also unfair.”* (A-3, January 21, 2026). Then: *“Combining both approaches works best, so no one is left out but it’s still efficient.”* (C-3, January 27, 2026). These findings support H4, indicating that integrating universal and poverty-based approaches improves both efficiency and targeting accuracy. Methodologically, qualitative data explain how the hybrid approach overcomes the limitations of each single approach. This highlights the importance of policy flexibility in implementing social programs.

**Competency-Based and Hybrid Targeting Implementation Model**

The integrated analysis shows that a competency-based implementation model combined with a hybrid targeting approach provides the most optimal impact on overall program performance. The coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>) of 0.63 indicates that this model explains a substantial portion of program performance variation. Programs applying this combination demonstrate significant improvements in operational efficiency and distribution accuracy. Additionally, coordination among implementers becomes more effective due to shared understanding and capabilities. Therefore, this model can be considered the most adaptive and context-sensitive approach.

Table 4. Integrative Model Analysis Results

Integrative Model Variable	Coefficient	Say.	R Square
Competency + Hybrid Model	0.79	0.000	0.63

Moreover: *“If the team is competent and the system is flexible, the program runs much more smoothly.”* (A-4, January 11, 2026). Then: *“What matters is not just the rules, but whether the people implementing them truly understand.”* (B-4, January 23, 2026). Furthermore: *“When both approaches are combined and the people are ready, the results are clearly better.”* (C-4, January 29, 2026). These findings confirm H5, showing that a competency-based and hybrid targeting implementation model positively affects overall program performance. From a methodological perspective, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data demonstrates that program success is determined not only by policy design but also by implementer capacity and approach flexibility. This model represents a key contribution of the study in developing more adaptive public policy implementation frameworks.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study show that human resource competence has a very significant role in improving the efficiency of the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Theoretically, these findings are in line with the concept of institutional capacity which emphasizes that the quality of human resources is a major factor in the successful implementation of public policies (Domorenok et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2024). In this perspective, competence includes not only technical ability, but also managerial skills and adaptation to field dynamics. The results of this study strengthen the argument that effective policy implementation is highly dependent on the capacity of implementing actors to manage resources optimally. Thus, the higher the competence of the implementer, the more efficient the operational process of the program will be.

From the perspective of public management, the efficiency of a program is determined not only by policy design, but also by the quality of managerial practices implemented by implementers in the field (Lapiente & Van de Walle, 2020; Andrews et al., 2020). Previous research has shown that public organizations with good management practices tend to have more efficient performance and are responsive to the needs of the community (Zubair et al., 2021). In line with that, the results of this study show that human resource competence is able to reduce waste, accelerate distribution, and improve coordination between actors. The main difference in this study compared to previous studies lies in the context of the implementation of food aid programs, where competence has an impact not only on administrative performance, but also on the effectiveness of direct distribution. Thus, this study provides empirical reinforcement that human resource competence has broader practical implications in the context of social policy.

Furthermore, the findings on the influence of human resource competence on the accuracy of the target show that the success of targeting is greatly influenced by the capacity of the implementer in understanding and verifying the data of beneficiaries. Theoretically, this is in line with the targeting literature in social policy that emphasizes the importance of integration between data systems and implementation capacity (Grosh et al., 2022; Coady et al., 2021). Previous research has also shown that targeting errors often occur due to the limited ability of officers to interpret data and social conditions of the community (Alatas et al., 2021; Hanna & Olken, 2020). The results of this study strengthen these findings by showing that the competence of implementers is a key factor in minimizing inclusion and exclusion errors. The difference is that this study emphasizes that accuracy is not only determined by the data system, but also by the interpretive and verifiable abilities of implementers in the field.

Findings related to the effectiveness of the combination approach between universal and poverty-based show that hybrid approaches are more adaptive in heterogeneous social contexts. Theoretically, the universal approach provides an advantage in terms of inclusivity, while the poverty-based approach is superior in resource allocation efficiency (Ortiz et al., 2020; Bastagli et al., 2021). Previous research has shown that the combination of these two approaches can increase the effectiveness of social programs in reaching vulnerable groups (Suryahadi & Sumarto, 2022; Widodo, 2023). The results of this study are in line with these

findings, but make an additional contribution by showing that the effectiveness of the hybrid approach is also influenced by the competence of implementers in implementing it. Thus, this study confirms that the success of a policy approach depends not only on its design, but also on its implementation capacity.

Furthermore, the results of the study show that the competency-based implementation model combined with hybrid targeting has the most optimal impact on program performance. These findings are in line with governance theory that emphasizes the importance of integration between human resource capacity, policy design, and coordination between actors in improving the performance of public programs (Pierre & Peters, 2020; Lodge & Wegrich, 2021). Previous research has also shown that an integrated implementation model is able to significantly increase policy effectiveness compared to fragmented approaches (Santoso, 2024; Cheema & Rondinelli, 2022). The main difference in this study is the integration of HR competency variables with a targeting approach in one complete model. Therefore, this research makes a theoretical contribution in developing a more comprehensive and contextual policy implementation model.

Overall, this study makes an important contribution to the development of public administration science by showing that the success of social program implementation is determined by the interaction between human resource competencies and the flexibility of policy approaches. The main supporting factor in this study is the presence of implementers who have adaptive skills, contextual understanding, and good coordination skills. However, there is potential for differential outcomes if the program is implemented in areas with low institutional capacity or inadequate data systems. This is in line with the findings that organizational capacity and adaptability greatly determine the success of policy implementation in dynamic contexts (Cedergren & Hassel, 2024; Yang et al., 2024). Thus, this research not only supports the hypothesis proposed, but also provides practical implications that improving the competence of human resources should be a priority in social policy reform.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that human resource competency has a significant effect on both efficiency and targeting accuracy in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. The enhancement of technical and managerial capacities among implementers has been proven to optimize resource utilization and minimize distribution errors. Furthermore, the combination of universal and poverty-based approaches is found to be more adaptive and effective than a single approach, as it balances inclusiveness and efficiency simultaneously. The integration of human resource competency and hybrid targeting approaches results in a more contextual and responsive implementation model, particularly in addressing heterogeneous socio-economic conditions. Therefore, this study recommends strengthening human resource capacity through continuous training, improving data verification systems, and adopting flexible and adaptive policy approaches in social programs. The implementation of these recommendations is expected to enhance public service quality and ensure sustainable program effectiveness.

## ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study has several limitations, particularly the relatively small sample size and the focus on a single region, West Java, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a larger and more diverse sample, apply more advanced analytical methods, and explore additional variables such as information technology and institutional governance to further enrich the policy implementation model.

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