

National Branding through Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals Program: Towards a Greener, Smarter Nation

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Abstract

The research investigates Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (FNM) program (2025–2029) as a policy-based nation branding initiative which promotes sustainability and inclusivity and innovation through its communication efforts. The research uses qualitative methods to analyze policy documents and media content and conduct stakeholder interviews to study the FNM program's dual role as welfare support and strategic communication tool. The research applies nation branding theories and green communication and innovative governance frameworks to identify four core brand identity elements of the program which include ecological (local sourcing and environmental education), social (community participation and empowerment), economic (local multiplier effects and digital transparency), and cultural-symbolic (values of gotong royong and national unity). The research compares Indonesia's FNM program to international models from Finland, Japan, India and Brazil to show its position in the worldwide initiative that connects welfare services with sustainability and soft power development. The program faces reputational threats because operational problems and food contamination incidents create doubts about its ability to deliver care and demonstrate competence. The FNM program will boost Indonesia's global reputation as a nation that cares and looks toward the future when the program receives proper management and maintains authentic communication and shows both transparency and performance consistency. This study has succeeded in providing an overview of how to convince international parties that the values contained in Indonesian culture can also be incorporated into government programs to provide welfare for its people.

Keyword: National Branding; Free Nutritious Meals (FNM); Greener; Smarter Nation

1. Introduction

Government policies on sustainable development have created a global push. Leaders strive to ensure that policies are based on ancestral heritage. Nation branding is a strategy that makes a nation known for its symbols, narratives, and policies, ultimately attracting tourism and promoting investment by promoting social welfare and maintaining a sustainable environment (Anholt, 2023; Dineri et al., 2024).

Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (FNM) Program (2025–2029) seeks to prevent malnutrition among Indonesian children and youth. This program was created as a government initiative to provide nutritious meals to public schools at no cost during lunchtime.

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The ingredients used are sourced from the surrounding community to support sustainability. This program has two objectives: one is to combat malnutrition among Indonesian youth, and the other is to brand the government as one that cares about the nation's progress and environmental sustainability.

In other words, FNM is taking advantage of the moment where public policy can also be a platform and tell about the Government's concern for the nation and its environment and become a symbol as well as a form of moral that strengthens national identity (Lundberg & Sataøen, 2025; Tan, 2025). In fact, the values of how society moves collectively in the form of mutual cooperation to improve, utilize natural potential for sustainability and empower local communities such as farmers or marine products, will become national branding based on policy programs. This program is in line with the campaign to keep the earth green and become smart governance, as well as the vision of Indonesia Emas 2045.

Several countries have implemented free meal programs for their children as a means of instilling a sense of nationhood and a legacy for future generations. Social justice and sustainable environmental management have become a brand for Finland, thanks to the free school meal program (Janhonen et al., 2022). The Japanese school lunch program teaches students about food preparation and service while developing their sense of discipline and national pride (Hopson, 2025). The Indian Mid-Day Meal scheme shows the extensive reach of welfare programs but shows weaknesses in maintaining hygiene standards and controlling food quality and administrative management (Job, 2024). The Brazilian Zero Hunger (Fome Zero) campaign united agricultural production with welfare programs and diplomatic efforts to present Brazil as a leader in food security worldwide (Afifi, 2024; de Carvalho Costa, 2024; Di Blase & Marchisio, 2024). The FNM program in Indonesia should be viewed as part of a worldwide initiative which unites social welfare with environmental protection and national identity development.

Research on nation branding and sustainable governance has expanded but this study investigates how welfare programs including school feeding initiatives create national images through their symbolic value. Research on nation branding mainly focuses on tourism promotion and investment attraction and cultural diplomacy (Long et al., 2024; Maksymova et al., 2025; Papaioannou, 2022) while social policy evaluations concentrate on developmental results instead of symbolic aspects. The brand meaning of government welfare initiatives in Southeast Asia remains understudied because researchers have not investigated how communication practices and media narratives and public participation influence their perception.

The current research fails to answer three essential questions.

1. Through which mechanisms can welfare programs at home such as the FNM create strategic communication channels to showcase national values?
2. Which combination of ecological elements and social aspects and economic factors and cultural elements produces branding effects?
3. How can risks—such as media crises and operational failures—affect national credibility and trust?

Through these questions, the theoretical and practical answers regarding nation branding through FNM at the international level will be provided, with Indonesia having a sustainable reputation and positive governance.

This study analyzes the government's free nutritional meal program as a branding strategy. It explores how ecologically, socially, economically, and culturally the FNM policy can be a strategy in managing communication as green communication and competent governance (Mishra, 2024; Setyadi et al., 2025; Mahalakshmi et al., 2025). This study also compares similar policy models in other countries such as Finland, Japan, India, and Brazil as a comparative study in public engagement, implementation, and narration.

This research is based on three approaches: communication, symbols, and the role of the media. Communication encompasses reputation, transparency, and public engagement (Cortés-Cediel et al., 2021). Symbols relate to slogans, visual identity, and image (Harun et al., 2025). The role of the media is diplomacy and the creation of news, both nationally and internationally (Latif et al., 2025). This research also evaluates the risks of branding, which can create the opposite.

The proper alignment of narrative and visual elements for international access and sustainable transparency has been explored by previous researchers (Miao & Nduneseokwu, 2024). However, this study investigates how government policy, in its narrative, can serve as a communication strategy and form the basis for establishing an identity as a developing nation, embracing citizen well-being as a powerful innovation linked to global sustainability in the greening process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Nation Branding and Policy Communication

Nation branding is currently widely implemented through various innovations, ranging from communicating government governance and policies to previously focusing more on tourism promotion and investment, to the values that shape the public's perception of a nation (Anholt, 2023; Tan, 2025). Nation branding can also be conceptualized as a set of symbols of national identity. Meanwhile, Kaneva (2018) and Papaioannou (2022) emphasize the sociopolitical nature, stating that branding is not only for marketing but also a nation's political actions through the achievements of its human resources.

Research now views nation branding as a policy-driven process which uses welfare programs and environmental initiatives and digital reforms to build states' symbolic value (Cotton & Sebastião, 2021; Marzyska, 2021). Governments now use policy achievements to show their ability to govern while demonstrating their moral values and their commitment to worldwide responsibility. Nation branding now merges with public diplomacy because governments use their domestic governance systems to showcase their national character (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2021).

Welfare policies function as stories which demonstrate state care and establish legitimacy according to Cheah and Low (2022). State policies which focus on equity and inclusion create emotional bonds between citizens and their government which leads to domestic unity and foreign confidence. The FNM program of Indonesia functions as a policy-based nation branding initiative

because it uses sustainable food practices to share national values through regular government operations (Cassinger et al., 2016).

2.2 Sustainable Development, Green Communication, and Smart Governance

The strategic use of messaging for environmental awareness and behavioral change and institutional responsibility has emerged as green communication through the convergence of sustainability and communication (Gherheş et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025). Green communication functions at three different levels which include message framing for eco-literacy campaigns and participatory practices and institutional transparency through open data systems.

Smart governance enhances this framework through digital system implementation for policy execution and performance tracking (Hong et al., 2025). The combination of real-time dashboards with citizen reporting platforms and data-sharing systems enhances both stakeholder involvement and institutional transparency (Almulhim & Yigitcanlar, 2025). The implementation of these tools enables governments to establish communicative legitimacy through data conversion into stories about operational excellence and institutional trustworthiness (Grigoryan, 2025).

FNM has utilized digital systems to ensure the distribution and provision of food to school children in accordance with policy targets, including supporting the environment and ultimately building public trust. Smart governance systems together with green and inclusive approaches establish the fundamental structure for modern nation branding which uses sustainability as an active communication method for accountability (Fatorachian et al., 2025).

2.3 The Social and Cultural Dimensions of Nation Branding

Through its cultural performance nation branding enables states to showcase their shared values and national identity to the world (Volcic et al., 2023). The combination of language and traditional food and social customs and religious practices creates authentic experiences that evoke deep emotions in people. The practice of culinary diplomacy has become a leading method for countries to develop their soft power capabilities (Matwick & Matwick, 2022; Mellor, 2024). Through their shokuiku food education program Japan and South Korea have established their national cuisine as a diplomatic tool for international perception.

Welfare programs function as cultural artifacts which demonstrate national values through their design. The FNM program in Indonesia is a way to foster a sense of community togetherness and empathy by collectively providing food for the local community, fostering mutual cooperation, in accordance with one of the tenets of Pancasila. (Kaneva, 2018) discusses this empathetic sense of community, citing the emotional connection among communities that legitimizes government and state policies.

Symbolic storytelling can act as a glue for creating a cultural brand image that will support the delivery of a product or service (Anholt, 2023). Consistency between symbolic representation and operational implementation will create pride and identity for its citizens, as is the case with this free meal policy. Conversely, inconsistent delivery will damage the policy's reputation. This

research also examines the cultural aspects of the Indonesian nation as part of this nutritious meal program, which touches on the emotional aspects of the program.

2.4 Comparative Insights from Global School Meal Programs

International examples provide helpful references for the FNM in Indonesia. Finland has been praised for over two decades for the integration of social equity and environmental education through universal school meals. It illustrates the developmental and branding dual functions of public policy (Lundberg & Sataøen, 2025). The shokuiku system of Japan promotes nutrition, discipline, and national identity through participatory school lunches and encourages students to appreciate and value the food and culture (Hopson, 2025).

In India, the midday meal program for children has its own risks, considering that it is the largest and most widespread area for the distribution of free lunches, but it is also the largest welfare program for citizens in the world. It has encouraged school attendance and improved nutrition, but issues remain with hygiene, governance transparency, and the stability of supply chains (Assefa, 2025) (FAO, 2024). Creativity and international advocacy associated with food security have enabled Brazil to position itself as a global player on food justice, and for Brazil to advocate for the integration of agricultural innovation with the Zero Hunger (Fome Zero) campaign (Marcondes & De Bruyn, 2015).

The communication of food delivery and accountability in its provision is underscored in these examples. They suggest that the outcomes associated with the image of the program can be more important than the scale of the program, and that there needs to be consistency between a symbolic promise and the reality of delivery.

2.5 Branding Risks, Media Narratives, and Trust

When a country's reputation is on the line, people pay close attention. We know from crisis communication studies that public trust in the government is fragile and easily broken by ethical mistakes, poor service, or safety issues [4]. Nowadays, any news has the potential to go viral given the existence of digital platforms that spread messages widely in real time (Fannes & Claeys, 2024).

There is a big risk when the FNM program is not successful in its implementation, especially if it does not match what the public wants, for example if the food consumed by students is considered to cause illness because it is poisonous. This will damage the symbols of goodness that have been built (Ballagh, 2006). Public policy and communication experts state that if that happens, it is necessary to honestly admit mistakes, show empathy and take real action to improve the situation (Dziedzic & Sułkowski, 2025). Thus, the strength of a brand's reputation depends on real actions, not just on managing the spread of messages.

Putting this all together, the FNM's communicative sustainability depends on its ability to balance aspiration and accountability.. The promise it makes—to feed the nation's future—needs to be

backed up by excellent operations and constant communication with everyone involved. That's the only way it can survive a reputational hit.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature outlined above, this investigation approaches policy-based nation branding as integrating four dimensions:

1. Ecological sustainability, which describes the environmental commitment and local sourcing;
2. Social inclusion, which describes participation and empowerment;
3. Economic rationality, showing the efficient and accountable governance; and
4. Cultural-symbolic identity, giving values and solidarity

Each dimension enhances the communicative power of the FNM and, in sum, these dimensions form the analytical approach for investigating the domestic welfare policies as instruments for branding the nation. This offers a basis for considering the dimensions integrated as a model for evaluating Indonesia's FNM program against global best practice and understanding the program's value and, potential drawback, as a vehicle for national identity and credibility.

Alignment and integration of social policy with branding the nation. Building a nation's image, as described in branding theory, is rooted in cultural symbols, policy narratives, and public diplomacy. Directing social welfare policy toward children is especially powerful because, as a symbolic tool, it positions the nation as empathetic, responsible, and future-oriented. Competitive national identity arises, according to (Anholt, 2023), when the citizen experience and government policy embed a nation brand image. The FNM, in this view, serves as a "living advertisement" of Indonesia's brand promise – an ongoing commitment to social equity and innovation.

Communicating in regards to a sustainable smart society. In order to build a greener, smarter society, the public must be involved in the everyday practices of sustainability. Hadjichambis et al. (2022) advocates for "green citizenship", which aims for communications strategies that combine public health, education, and ecology to encourage public involvement in sustainable development. In these communication strategies, effective governance, such as the use of technology for monitoring purposes, and communication transparency are foundational. The Current FNM program designed with local food sourcing and waste reduction education fits this approach by combining environmental and social messaging.

Global perspectives from free meal programs. School feeding schemes and the perceptions of nations. For social equity and environmental education in schools, Finland's universal, healthy meal program is praised. For involving students in the discipline of serving meals, food literacy, and pride in the country's cuisine, Japan's model is recognized. The free lunch scheme for tens of millions of children has clearly had a significant impact, commensurate with its size. Another immediate concern is the hygiene of the food service and the potential for misuse of funds. Brazil's success with zero hunger has boosted the country's reputation as a policy that promotes food justice and demonstrates its responsibility to its citizens (Albuquerque, 2021; Job, 2024; Marcondes & De Bruyn, 2015). This demonstrates that the narrative surrounding public policy shapes a country's

reputation, and thus has the potential to negatively impact its implementation if it fails. Our analysis draws on these examples to contextualize Indonesia's FNM and its branding potential.

Effective risk communication is one of the facets of communication that takes the approach of one-sided explanations to incorporate collaborative and transparent communication (Hong et al., 2025). When feedback is not received from the communicating body, members of the audience are likely to view the communication of the body as opaque and possibly deceptive (Assefa, 2025). The Institutional Food Safety Risk Communication – Self-Evaluation Tool (SET) documented various dimensions of risk communication such as transparency, engagement, timeliness, and clarity that sustain communication to build and protect reputation.

In addition to the documented dimensions of prescribing the communication structure, there is the documented role of organizational culture (Garcia et al., 2022). Resilient preventive cultures in an organization can be built from strategic alignments of organizational values, communication, and leadership. Reporting cultures can stratify problems that ignite crises and result in organizational loss.

The strategic dimension to failing to ensure food safety is reputation risk (Matwick & Matwick, 2022). Claiming the food safety issue as organizational risk is in line with strategic positioning of preventive control measures. Lessons learned, improved traceability documented as organizational knowledge can ignite resilience (Frandsen et al., 2025).

(Friends et al., 2025) The authors suggest that organizations in a crisis situation may become vulnerable to the adverse effects of poor brand integrity. They argue that in situations of diminishing trust, the effects of reputation damage become proportional to the size of the incident materializing. Accordingly, the trust of the public in an organization can be restored through long-term visibility, predictable interactions, and participation in the community, which secures the trust of the public.

Overall, the literature suggests that food safety crises test both operational systems and brand credibility. To protect reputation must combine strong preventive with clear, empathetic, and transparent communication. A trusted brand is not one that never faces problems, but one that handles them openly and responsibly.

3. Method

Indonesian Free Nutritious Meals (FNM) programs are an example of inclusive green development that supports the nation's strategic reforms. Integrated multi-source qualitative case study research aimed at communicative governance and branded public value focus on an inclusive green development agenda. The combined use of public policy; media and promotional data; and academic and stakeholder materials which included 13 semi-structured interviews with educators, elected local government representatives, and community members on the location and enactment of communication, implementation and outreach layering multiple FNM programs provided the authors with contextual materials. Using NVivo 14 (Braun et al., 2023) the authors performed

Reflexive Thematic Analysis and articulated the four defining dimensions of FNM operational communication identity; which are to carry the message of programs ecologically, socially, and economically as well as in a culturally responsive manner.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals that Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals policy encompasses multiple dimensions – ecological, social, economic, and cultural– each reinforcing the nation-brand narrative:

4.1 Ecological Dimension: Sustainability and Environmental Education

The ecological aspect of Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (FNM) program is demonstrated in school practice, stakeholder views, and policy documents. In the pilot areas, teachers noted that schools taught children and measured food and environmental education as a part of school culture. Methods of waste reduction and waste composting were taught as a part of environmental education. Programs like Madrasah Hijau in East and West Java encourage students to engage in the segregation of organic and inorganic waste and composting for school gardens, showing how the FNM is integrated into environmental education and the early fostering of eco-friendly behavior (Kholiq, 2025; Riyadi & Hilmy, 2025).

Within the supply-chain framework, FNM operates under the Home Grown School Feeding (HGSF) model, as it also locally procures seasonal FNM ingredients. Partnerships between farmer cooperatives and school kitchens in Central Java and South Sulawesi decreasing food mileage and fostering local food productivity. NGO leaders acknowledged such localized and integrated procurement as innovative climate-friendly practices marrying nutrition, environmental sustainability, and social empowerment. Cooperative leaders are reported to state program-centered “dependency reduction on middlemen” fostering smallholder “income security” illustrating the socio-ecological multiplier effect of sustainable sourcing.

Nonetheless, national media pointed out the challenges associated with scaling the practices. As highlighted in messaging from Reuters (2025) and the Financial Times (2025) regarding the ecological promise of the FNM, there was some reliance on temporary imported livestock, the ecological promise of the FNM, and some uneven quality control. This shows that continued investment will be required in local producer capability, food safety nets, and eco-literacy education.

In closing, the ecological dimension of the FNM incorporates the nutrition policy with policies on environmental stewardship. By addressing the link between local agriculture, the education of children and their sustainability, the initiative, in integration, serves as a demonstration on nation branding. It shows the environmental values that can be lived and communicated.

4.2 Social Dimension: Inclusion, Empowerment, and Participatory Governance

The FNM program includes a strong social dimension anchored in social inclusiveness, empowerment, and active participation. Standardized, free meals for all public school children

served to mitigate regional and economic disparities, and in so doing, promoted the ideal of national equity. Teachers noted positive shifts in school resilience, classroom participation, and the overall atmosphere as children were able to concentrate, and attendance improved. The principal stated:

“Children with full stomachs are more focused in class. This can encourage teachers to improve their teaching methods, not only in regards to the curriculum but also instilling good life habits’.

The focus on how healthy eating and hygiene can lead to long-term behavioral changes has become an element of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology [Kemendikbudristek], 2025; World Food Programme [WFP], 2024). This program also directly serves as a tool for the community to improve themselves through participation in the free nutritious meal service, such as farmers, mothers who cook, and other small businesses in distributing food to schools. This shows that the habit of mutual cooperation as a tradition of Indonesian society is increasingly alive in the implementation of this program.

A narrative prevailing among government officials is that the FNM represents a tangible manifestation of social equality for all Indonesians. This aligns with the principles of Pancasila and represents the nation's commitment to ensuring prosperity for all levels of society. However, its implementation can be flawed, particularly in remote areas. Therefore, the support of competent government institutions is essential (The Jakarta Post, 2025).

The dimensions of FNM are not only the social element of feeding all Indonesian children in schools, but also involve civil parties to realize social cohesion and become a program that makes the entire community proud and makes Indonesia a great nation in empathy for fellow human beings.

4.3 Economic Dimension: Local Multiplier Effects and Smart Governance

The FNM is a social investment and a growth strategy from the economic perspective. Improved child nutrition, at a macro level, positively impacts cognitive performance, school attendance, and productivity over the individual's lifetime (World Bank, 2023; WFP, 2024). At the micro level, the local procurement systems put local communities and the financially weak into the economic activity cycle. Farmers, women's cooperatives, and small catering enterprises receive stable incomes through school meal contracts. District officials in West Java and South Sulawesi documented increases in program-related local produce demand, while the press documented post-program improvements on rural economic activity (Kompas, 2025; Tempo.co, 2025).

In addition to improving efficiency and transparency, the program employing ICT-based monitoring systems is likely to enhance accountability and reporting integrity. For example, in the Ministry of National Development Planning's (Bappenas, 2024) pilot initiatives, officials have described online dashboards, which allow users to monitor in real time the distribution of meals, storage, and supplier performance, as systems to “cultivate a culture of openness.” These officials have also strengthened their relationship with the media by offering them data with verifiable empirical evidence.

In practice, FNM has not yet been fully implemented in Indonesia, but this program has created a new integration of technology, productivity, and, most importantly, community well-being. Thus, while this program is like a large-scale meal for a crowd, it is an investment in human resources for the Indonesian nation, but it also demonstrates the ability of mass governance as an intelligent nation.

4.4 National Identity, Sense of Community, and Branding Issues as Cultural and Symbolic Dimensions

Cultural and symbolic values are embedded in FNM activities, not just government policy programs. Traditional Indonesian values, such as mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) and caring for others experiencing economic hardship, have been positively implemented through this policy. These traditional values are implemented by volunteers, farmers, and parties involved in providing nutritious meals for students, as well as by parents. One school administrator stated:

“A sense of community has been established at this school—we all volunteer to help each other, starting with the teachers at the school and those who provide and manage the free meals for the children”.

This initiative has been well-framed by government communications officials as a program from the people, for the people. This aligns with the ideals of the nation's founders, expressed through the principles of Pancasila. Kompas (2025) depicted through its news photos the "presence of the state at the school lunch table for children." This description reinforces the emotional message of Indonesia's national branding.

The perception of this policy is promoted through the narrative "from the people, for the people." It makes Indonesian unity tangible and enables the humanity of Pancasila to be concretely realized. Kompas (2025) describes the narrative as "the state is here," especially for children in remote parts of Indonesia.

At the global level, this narrative has made Indonesia's reputation soar. The FNM program is considered to have integrated Indonesian cultural values, particularly into the food system, similar to *shoikuiku* (*food education*) in Japan and to diplomacy through food, like Finland (UNESCO, 2024). As with any brand, the greater the fame, the greater the risk. Negligence can lead to being perceived as a nation incapable of managing malnutrition, low sustainability, and a loss of public trust (Reuters, 2025).

In the communication model described in this study, three layers are defined:

1. Narrative Level: Disseminate narratives that explain the importance of human rights in Indonesia.
2. Operational Level: Conduct digital monitoring and track citizen conversations during the program's implementation, including program accountability.
3. Symbol Level: A combination of local food and symbols within the program.

These three layers simultaneously spread environmental sustainability, empathy for others, and open communication so that FNM is able to become a nation brand and build the credibility of the Indonesian nation.

The FNM is not a one-way program; it must simultaneously involve ecological, social, economic, and cultural elements. Stakeholder information, such as interviews, is needed to assess values such as sustainability, transparency, and participation. Through the FNM, Indonesia asserts itself as a nation striving to improve the well-being of its people. Nutritional improvements are implemented through policies that symbolize a nation that cares about a green, intelligent, and inclusive environment. This would be ideally implemented optimally, but negative news coverage emerged in the media and on social media, particularly from August to October 2025, when chaos erupted during the implementation. A case of poisoning went viral on social media, depicting the failure of the FNM. Several NGOs called for the postponement of the FNM implementation due to alleged misuse of funds by certain individuals.

The FNM policy narrative reinforces Indonesia's brand on the global stage. Its governance appears to be influenced by Indonesian culture. The FNM program demonstrates a tendency toward cultural diplomacy and national identity, similar to free lunch programs in other countries. In Finland, the lunch program has been recognized for fostering social equality, as students learn to preserve the planet's sustainability. In Japan, the lunch program teaches discipline and food management, a key component of Japanese culture. In India, the mass-meal lunch program serves as a tool to address social inequality, although issues regarding food hygiene and corruption in its implementation persist. Brazil, for example, packages its lunch program with a narrative that the country has a global responsibility for equitable food sharing (FAO, 2024; UNESCO, 2024; WFP, 2024).

FNM Indonesia is a comprehensive program for human and environmental development that presents a narrative about the integration of local cuisine, social justice, and nutritional improvement, thus serving as a diplomatic tool that positions Indonesia as a green nation and moving towards equitable intelligence.

This study has been conducted previously as a way to communicate that Indonesia cares about sustainability and has a government that is preparing an intelligent generation. FNM has the potential to build the nation's reputation. Nation branding, as described by (Anholt, 2023) and (Kaneva, 2018), emerges when policies of the state, through public welfare, communicate identity and moral legitimacy. The FNM captures this by integrating communication into social welfare and casting Indonesia as a compassionate and equitable country concerned about the environment.

The ecology aspect is the results and is in line with the principles of 'green communication' and 'smart governance' by Wang (2024) and Wies et al. (2023). The integration of waste reduction and composting by the school is a practical example of teaching sustainability, and the concept of *green citizenship* by Buell (2016) becomes evident as sustainability is learned through practice.

The social aspect also aligns with the concept of welfare communication as emotional governance by Lee and Yang (2022). The FNM community participation of teachers, parents, and local communities is a demonstration of inclusivity, which embodies *gotong royong*. It parallels with the equitable meal system in Finland and the *shokuiku* culture in Japan (UNESCO, 2024).

The economic governance of the FNM is proficient and transparent, as seen in the digital dashboards and local procurement, which is a practical realization of (Hong et al., 2025) theory on the communicative legitimacy of data transparency. Local multiplier effects as discussed in the results rest on the premise that welfare can serve as a productive investment rather than a mere expenditure (Lundberg and Sataøen, 2025) and (World Bank, 2023), which is a positive contribution to the literature.

It is clear that the symbols and culture promoted can become branding for the Indonesian nation, as discussed by previous researchers (Anholt, 2023; Volcic et al., 2023). This is evident in the element of togetherness in eating the same things for children at school and caring for each other, ultimately becoming a powerful soft power for this nation. In line with (Frandsen et al., 2025), there is always a risk of promoting culture as branding. The potential for a failed program will greatly damage the nation's reputation beyond the reputation that has been built previously.

All empirical findings support the theoretical literature on how nation branding through policy will depend heavily on implementation that demonstrates sustainability, ecology, civil society empowerment, social equity, transparency, and the inclusion of cultural elements within the FNM. The FNM illustrates the intertwining of communication, governance, and identity, capturing Indonesia's "living brand" as a greener, smarter, and more compassionate nation. Nevertheless, when the FNM was rebranded as the 'Free Poisonous Meals' program during the months of August through October 2025, a negative case for the branding of the nation occurred. This, though, was a branding failure that, when pursued professionally, will not be branding failure decay the nation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This research has identified the elements of social policy and strategic communication in nation branding for Indonesia's *Free Nutritious Meals* (FNM) program. The study, through the analysis of documents and other research materials, considers media accounts and stakeholder interviews, and builds an integrated and values-based identity for the FNM program along four intertwined dimensions: the ecological, the social, the economic, and the cultural symbolic.

According to findings, the ecological dimension of the FNM contributes to the realization of global sustainability objectives by the incentive of local sourcing, waste management and eco-education at the school level. The social phases emphasize on inclusivity and empowerment through community involvement through thought of, more towards women, peasants and small businesses. The economic dimension supports the welfare as productive assistance through developing local multiplier, thus volume of resource utilization and utilization of digital governments in order to tackle the issue of transparency issues and performance enhancement in the FNM. The cultural and symbolic dimension analysis is more political and concerned with morals and identity of Indonesia— where FNM acts as a manifestation of *gotong royong* and *Pancasila* values through tangible policies that strengthen the nation globally.

At the same time, the research points to a key factor, which is regular and confident delivery, as a critical foundation to success of this FNM. Public breakdowns which are highlighted in the media, such as incidents involving students' intensification of the pain of hype in the time of the real. Today the FNM cannot effectively communicate not because of what seethes not only with the newscaster's claimants, but rather with what is being claimed and the "montage effect" of the game in today's idea, which is thus still global.

Thus, FNM is a new concept for branding Indonesia, with the hope that its governance will be implemented in accordance with Indonesian culture. FNM embodies Indonesia's image as a caring, just and sustainable state, depicting a nation that is concerned with feeding not only its children but its moral narrative of collective progress as well.

5.2 Recommendations

Focusing on the FNM, the study proposes consolidated governance and branding through a communication strategy titled "*Feeding the Future*," harmonizing the themes of nutrition, sustainability, and social inclusion. A cohesive visual branding identity must be created and provide a strong visual branding identity consisting of elements such as logos, taglines, and color schemes. Confidence among Integrated Cross-Sectoral Collaboration must be placed among the ministries of education and learning, agriculture, health, and communication for collaborative coherence and operational integrity. Building trust is best met with transparency and the community must be empowered via open access digital dashboards depicting procurement, nutrition, and safety data. Primarily, the goal for FNM must be depicted in international forums of UN, UNESCO, and ASEAN as anchor relevance to sustainable development and Indonesia's leadership in it. The FNM must be anchored with affirmation branding to stave off vulnerability. This is possible through the implemented crisis communication plan that arms the organization with training on meeting issues as they arise, defining the brief while managing it. Otherwise, this nation is undeclared on managing the FNM. Finally, ongoing research and academic partnerships should evaluate long-term outcomes on learning, welfare, and national reputation to sustain continuous improvement and accountability.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Future research could include the following potential pursuits:

- Comparative studies on school meal programs in Southeast Asia and the OECD in order to understand the global welfare branding context of Indonesia's FNM
- Comparative studies on school meal programs in Southeast Asia and the OECD in order to understand the global welfare branding context of Indonesia's FNM.
- Audience reception studies on citizens' perception of the FNM's storytelling, symbols, and credibility of the government as a narrator.
- Studies on public trust in the welfare narrative and the use of trust and participation in governance and communication transparency.

By connecting culture, communication, and policy performance, these studies will show how nation branding via public welfare can achieve domestic legitimization and global reputation.

5.4 Closing Reflection

From the *Free Nutritious Meals* initiative, it is clear that nation branding is much more than a logo, a slogan, or a campaign; it is also the governance value in everyday life. National policy narratives become identity when communication integrity collides with operational effectiveness. The challenge and opportunity for Indonesia is to maintain that integrity. Every plate of food served must convey the promise of a nation that is compassionate, smarter, and greener.

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