

OPINION **ACADEMIA**

Prabowo's future with millennials and Gen Z hinges on free meals

Failure could undermine the President's credibility and weaken his political standing, particularly among the country's younger generations.

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Workers stack packaged lunches for students of SMA Muhammadiyah 2 high school in Sidoarjo, East Java, on Jan. 6, 2025, the first day of the free nutritious meals program. (Antara/Umarul Faruq)

In the opening months of his presidency, [Prabowo Subianto](#) has launched a defining initiative for his administration: the free nutritious meals program. This ambitious policy aims to tackle Indonesia's entrenched challenges of malnutrition and food insecurity, potentially reshaping the socioeconomic landscape of Southeast Asia's largest nation.

While the program's scope and intent are laudable, its delivery, cost and political ramifications pose significant challenges that will test Prabowo's leadership and define his legacy.

The program addresses a critical issue: the widespread, chronic malnutrition of children. The initiative aims to provide free, nutritious meals to schoolchildren, preschoolers and mothers during crucial stages of development.

By the end of his term, Prabowo's government plans to reach more than 80 million Indonesians, establishing it as one of the largest social welfare initiatives in the region. Beyond tackling nutritional deficits, the program seeks to strengthen local economic capacity by fostering the systems and resources needed for meal delivery.

The potential socioeconomic impact of the program is substantial. By raising nutritional standards, the initiative could enhance educational performance, boost workforce productivity and reduce long-term healthcare costs. Moreover, its focus on hygiene and waste management ensures the program does not contribute to Indonesia's environmental challenges. This holistic approach could serve as a model for future government initiatives in a nation confronting rapid urbanization and ecological strain.

However, the scale presents significant logistical and financial strains. The program's cost is estimated to reach up to half a percent of Indonesia's gross domestic product (GDP) annually and could consume as much as a sixth of the national budget at its full extent. Amid domestic economic pressures as well as international challenges, this raises serious concerns about fiscal sustainability. Delivering this while safeguarding other key priorities will further test Prabowo's leadership.

For Prabowo, the program is not merely a policy, it is a high-stakes political gambit. Its success could cement his reputation as a transformative leader who prioritized the well-being of Indonesia's most vulnerable citizens. Conversely, failure could undermine his credibility and weaken his political standing, particularly among the country's younger generations.

Millennials represent a critical demographic. Many are parents and have a vested interest in the well-being of their children. If the program delivers on its promise of quality meals and improved nutrition, it could bolster Prabowo's standing among this cohort.

Additionally, by reducing household expenses on food, the program could relieve some of the economic burden on families. Millennials' concerns about social equity and public health align closely with the

program's objectives, offering an opportunity for Prabowo to secure their support.

Gen Z, on the other hand, represents a dual-edged political consideration. The younger cohort, currently in secondary school, will directly benefit from the program, but their approval will be fickle. While they are likely to welcome the immediate personal gains, this will depend on the regular and high-quality delivery of meals to them and their peers.

The older segment of Gen Z is poised to view the program with greater skepticism. Having been leapfrogged by its benefits and receiving little direct impact, they may question its fairness and effectiveness.

Known for their critical engagement with social justice and governance, both cohorts will scrutinize the program's execution intensely. Any perception of mismanagement or superficiality could deepen their disillusionment, presenting significant risks for Prabowo's political capital among these crucial emerging voters.

Despite its potential, this program is fraught with risks. The sheer scale and complexity of the initiative make it vulnerable to mismanagement and inefficiencies. Ensuring that resources reach intended beneficiaries, maintaining quality standards and avoiding corruption will require robust oversight and transparency, qualities that have been absent in most large-scale government programs.

Financial sustainability remains a pressing concern. The program's viability hinges on balancing costs with other fiscal priorities. Middle- and upper-income voters may criticize it as an inefficient use of taxpayer money if its benefits are unclear. Prabowo must effectively manage these economic and political challenges to maintain widespread support.

The timeline for the program's benefits poses political risks. While its outcomes of reduced malnutrition and improved public health are long term, Gen Z voters may expect quicker results. A slow rollout could heighten dissatisfaction, especially among those awaiting its benefits. Failure to deliver visible results by the 2029 election could erode Prabowo's standing among younger voters who value efficiency and accountability.

While the political opposition will undoubtedly seek to capitalize on any shortcomings of the program, greater risks may lie in political opportunism within the ruling coalition or other political actors. Factions within the government are more likely to exploit the program for personal gain or political patronage rather than ensuring its effective delivery. Such actions could prioritize self-serving interests and severely undermine its credibility.

Critics may frame the initiative as an overreach of government power or a populist gesture aimed at securing votes rather than delivering substantive change. Any visible inefficiencies, corruption or mismanagement risks eroding public confidence in Prabowo's leadership, turning the program from a potential political asset into a liability while intensifying demands for accountability.

To counter this narrative, Prabowo needs to overcome deep-seated skepticism about the government's capacity to execute such an ambitious program.

While clear results are critical, achieving them often falls victim to opaque processes and weak enforcement. Reporting mechanisms frequently appear superficial rather than genuine checks on performance. Involving civil society and local communities could boost credibility, but entrenched bureaucratic inertia and political patronage systems risk turning this initiative into another emblem of state failure.

This is a pivotal moment for Prabowo's presidency. Its success could establish him as a leader who tackled Indonesia's pressing social challenges while setting the stage for long-term prosperity. By improving public health, promoting social equity and prioritizing sustainability, Prabowo has a chance to secure a lasting legacy.

However, achieving this vision requires navigating significant financial, logistical and political challenges. Prabowo must balance the program's ambitious goals with fiscal responsibility, ensure transparent implementation and manage competing interests from public, private and community stakeholders.

The free nutritious meals program is not just a test of Prabowo's political future but a litmus test for the government's capacity to deliver on ambitious promises. Success could generate goodwill for state-led initiatives, while failure would solidify doubts about institutional competence and politicians' commitment to genuine reform.

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