

Safer food for a better future: Lessons from the free meals program

There can be no better food without safer food, and no better future if the health of our people is compromised.

Today the world marks World Food Day, a reminder that the future we build depends on the food we produce, not only in quantity but, first and foremost, in its safety and quality. This year's theme, "Hand in Hand for Better Food and a Better Future," carries a simple but profound message: No nation can move toward a better future without first ensuring better food.

In Indonesia, this message finds powerful resonance in the government's free nutritious meal program, a nationwide effort to provide nutritious meals for schoolchildren, children under five and pregnant women. The better future Indonesia envisions is one where every child grows up healthy, active and ready to learn, able to reach their fullest potential through access to balanced, nourishing meals that support growth and development.

For Indonesia, the essence of this year's theme is clear: Collaboration among government, producers and communities is essential to ensure that the food served through the free meals program truly nourishes our people and helps build a better future.

Yet we must remember that food can only be better if it is safe. Food safety lies at the very heart of that vision, for there can be no better food without safer food, and no better future if the health of our people is compromised.

Unsafe food can derail any nutrition initiative. In the case of the free meals program, it must be recognized that only when meals are safe can they meet dietary needs and achieve their intended goals. Beyond threatening health, lapses in food safety also erode public trust in well-intentioned programs like the free meals program.

Ensuring safety is therefore not merely about preventing illness; it is about building a food system the public can rely on, one that protects, nourishes and sustains life in every community. The success of the free meals program depends on disciplined hygiene, sanitation and modern, risk-based food safety management.

The global community, through the Food Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Health Organization's (WHO) Codex Alimentarius Commission, promotes a science-based, risk-management approach founded on one essential principle: Effective food safety begins with prevention.

From kitchen design and food-handler training to ingredient sourcing, preparation in nutritional fulfillment service unit (SPPG) kitchens, and meal distribution to schools, every step must anticipate and control potential hazards before they cause harm.

This approach also recognizes a simple truth: Zero risk does not exist. The goal is not to promise “perfect safety”, but to manage hazards so that food remains safe to eat. That means preventing problems before they occur, monitoring continuously and responding quickly and transparently when something goes wrong. Only then can trust follow, because public confidence in the free meals program begins with safe food.

Recent food poisoning incidents linked to school meals should serve as a lesson, a reminder of how vital it is to uphold safety at every step. They show why safety must always come first, and why swift, transparent action is essential whenever something goes wrong.

Modern food safety management must be rooted in science, and science, in turn, must be grounded in data. Every outbreak, no matter how small, provides valuable evidence. Each must be investigated thoroughly to uncover the real causes, understand the science behind the failure and ensure such incidents do not happen again.

When foodborne illness occurs, the question should not be who is to blame, but what failed. Was it a contaminated ingredient, poor temperature control or unsafe handling? Finding those answers requires scientific investigation, cross-agency collaboration and above all transparency.

Indonesia already has a strong legal foundation through Health Ministry Regulation No. 2/2013 on food poisoning outbreaks, which sets out how incidents should be reported, investigated and coordinated across agencies. Yet in practice, implementation remains uneven, reports are often incomplete, coordination weak and findings seldom shared openly.

To make the system truly effective, this regulation must not only be implemented but also strengthened to ensure that every investigation leads to a clear understanding of the root cause. The goal is not merely to document what happened, but to uncover what caused the illness and why it happened, whether due to contamination, process failure or human error, and to translate those findings into effective prevention.

This requires well-trained field teams, access to accredited laboratories and real-time data systems that enable prompt, evidence-based action. Equally important, the results and lessons learned must be communicated openly, not only to the public but also to the academic community, so that science can inform better policies and safer practices.

Transparency is where trust begins. People understand that mistakes can happen, what matters is honesty, accountability and the courage to learn from them. When the government speaks openly, even in difficult times, it earns respect and trust that endure.

This is where science and transparency meet. The FAO/WHO Codex guidelines emphasize that open and honest communication is an integral part of food safety management. In other words, public trust grows when science leads the process and when decisions are communicated clearly.

Each time authorities respond quickly, investigate thoroughly and share lessons learned, citizens gain confidence that their government is both competent and sincere. Every incident, managed transparently, becomes not a scandal but a lesson, strengthening the system and preventing future harm.

For Indonesia's free meals program, this trust is vital. Parents will send their children to school with peace of mind only when they believe that the meals provided are not just free, but safe; meals prepared with discipline, inspected with integrity and served with care.

World Food Day 2025 calls us to work hand in hand, across sectors, disciplines and communities, for better food and a better future. In Indonesia, that collaboration must begin with safer food systems.

When scientists, policymakers, educators and community leaders unite behind the same principle, that every citizen deserves safe and nutritious food, the result is not only fewer outbreaks but stronger trust, healthier children and a better future.

* The writer is a professor of food processing and engineering at the Department of Food Science and Technology, Bogor Agriculture University (IPB), member of the Indonesian Academy of Sciences and former vice president of Codex Alimentarius Commission, FAO/WHO (2017-2021).

Purwiyatno Hariyadi,

Guru Besar Dept of Food Science and Technology, Faculty of Agricultural Engineering and Technology, IPB University, and Senior Scientist, SEAFast Center, IPB University

Tulisan ini pertama kali terbit di The Jakarta Post 16 October 2025.