



Implementing DSWD's Supplemental Feeding Program in Urban Daycare Centers: A Qualitative Case Study of Barangay Zone 42, City of Manila

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Abstract

Child malnutrition in the Philippines is not simply a nutrition problem—it is, at its core, a governance problem. The country has invested heavily in feeding programs for decades, yet children in many low-income urban communities still go without adequate nutrition. This paper examines the Department of Social Welfare and Development's Supplemental Feeding Program (SFP) as it operates on the ground in daycare centers of Barangay Zone 42, Manila. The central research question is: How does inter-agency governance shape the quality of SFP implementation at the daycare center level in an urban poor community? Through a qualitative case study—fifteen stakeholder interviews and systematic documentary review—the research uncovered a program that delivers perceived nutritional and social benefits to enrolled children, while being hampered at nearly every turn by coordination failures between agencies, a food budget frozen in time while prices rose, and a parent education component that exists almost entirely on paper. The researchers argue that incremental fixes will not be enough; what the program requires is a fundamental rethinking of how DSWD and Manila City work together as genuine partners rather than as a compliance hierarchy.

Keywords: *Supplemental Feeding Program, Qualitative Case Study, Policy Implementation, Inter-Agency Collaboration, Community Nutrition Governance, Urban Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

There is something worth pausing to notice when you walk through Barangay Zone 42 early on a weekday morning. The daycare centers are easy to find—small, usually packed rooms where the smell of cooking drifts out into the narrow lanes. Many of the children inside will receive, through the DSWD's Supplemental Feeding Program, the most nutritious meal of their day. That single observation says a great deal about why this program matters and why understanding it properly is worth the effort.

Child malnutrition has proven stubbornly difficult to address in low- and middle-income countries, where the conditions that produce it—poverty, inadequate health systems, fragmented governance—tend to reinforce one another (Christian et al., 2021). Philippine surveillance data from 2019 found that 13.2 percent of roughly 12.7 million school-age children were stunted or wasted—figures that reflect not only what families eat but also how well the state delivers support to those who need it most (Kavle et al., 2021). In cities like Manila, the problem takes on additional layers. Dense populations, overlapping bureaucracies, and entrenched urban poverty complicate program delivery in ways that rural-focused policy frameworks rarely anticipate.

The scientific case for nutritional interventions is solid. Integrated programs that pair food supplementation with caregiver education and health linkages have produced measurable reductions in stunting across a range of settings (Ochieng et al., 2021). Micronutrient supplementation and therapeutic feeding for severely wasted children also work, provided they consistently reach the right people (Kumar et al., 2021). The gap between what these interventions

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can achieve and what communities actually experience is rarely due to program design alone—evidence consistently points to the quality of governance as a primary differentiating factor (Castro et al., 2025; Quilapio et al., 2024).

The Philippine state has invested real resources to address this problem. The DSWD has expanded the SFP to serve approximately 1.5 million children through a PHP 5.182 billion commitment (DSWD, 2023). However, large budgets and ambitious policy documents do not, by themselves, guarantee quality implementation at the barangay level. That translation—from policy to practice—is what this study investigates.

Urban poor communities pose a particular challenge for food-based programs. Recent evidence has flagged a real risk: in places undergoing rapid nutritional transition, where overweight and undernutrition increasingly coexist, a poorly designed program can inadvertently worsen the very outcomes it aims to improve (Pradeilles et al., 2024). Daycare and school-based feeding initiatives have a well-established track record of improving attendance, enrollment, and early development (Kristjansson et al., 2021; Francis et al., 2020), but that track record depends heavily on how programs are run at the local level (Bundy et al., 2022).

This study focuses on four operational dimensions of SFP implementation in Barangay Zone 42: how beneficiaries are identified and enrolled, how the daily feeding cycle unfolds, what happens to the parent education component, and how program finances flow and are managed. The purpose is practical as much as academic—to generate honest field-level evidence that can inform governance reform.

Social entrepreneurship theory offered useful framing. When public agencies channel state resources toward creating social value for vulnerable populations, they engage in institutional social entrepreneurship (El Halaissi et al., 2024). Whether they create that value depends on how well they collaborate (Wijaya & Senen, 2024) and how authentically they engage the communities they serve (Sutantri et al., 2024). The barangay-to-barangay variation in program outcomes becomes much easier to understand through this lens.

One more point is worth noting at the outset: most rigorous research on daycare and school feeding programs has been conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America (Kristjansson et al., 2021; Bundy et al., 2022). Within the Philippines, existing studies on the SFP have focused primarily on national-level program monitoring data or provincial settings, leaving Manila's dense urban poor communities—where overlapping bureaucracies and entrenched poverty create distinct implementation challenges—as a comparative blind spot in the literature. This study addresses that gap by examining SFP implementation at the daycare center level in an urban community in Manila. It is guided by three explicit research objectives: (1) to document how interagency coordination between DSWD and Manila City shapes day-to-day SFP operations; (2) to identify structural barriers—including budget constraints, enrollment limitations, and parent education gaps—that impede program quality; and (3) to derive governance reform recommendations grounded in field-level evidence from Barangay Zone 42.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evidence base for school- and community-based feeding programs is now quite extensive. Researchers across regions and income levels have consistently documented improvements in dietary intake, school enrollment and attendance, and physical and cognitive development when structured meal programs are in place (Kristjansson et al., 2021; Francis et al., 2020; Wall et al., 2022). The cleaner empirical question—one the literature has not yet fully answered—is why programs with near-identical designs can yield such different results across similar communities. Implementation quality and institutional governance quality turn out, again and again, to be the differentiating variables.

Program sustainability has become a pressing concern in recent scholarship. Feeding initiatives that anchor themselves in local agricultural networks, draw on reliable, inflation-indexed government funding, and build genuine community investment tend to survive and improve over time. Those premised on top-down delivery, without grassroots buy-in, tend to plateau or decay (Abay et al., 2024). This finding resonates sharply in the Philippine context, where SFP cycles operate amid tight budgets and frequently shifting administrative priorities—conditions that make continuity anything but automatic.

From a nutritional science standpoint, the case for community-based supplemental feeding is well supported. Combining food provision with structured nutritional counseling has demonstrably improved anthropometric outcomes among malnourished children across heterogeneous settings (Salarkia et al., 2022). The sobering counterpoint is the 2023 Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates, which found that fewer than one in three countries are currently on track to meet the 2025 WHA stunting reduction targets (UNICEF/WHO/World Bank, 2023). The evidence for effective program models exists. What is missing, in many places, is the governance architecture to put those models into consistent practice.

Inter-agency collaboration theory helps explain the gap. This study adopts the inter-agency collaboration framework developed by the California Department of Education (2007) as its primary analytical lens. Although this framework originated in the context of early childhood special education program governance, its four core constructs—jointly developed goals, coordinated planning, cross-organizational service delivery, and bidirectional accountability—are functionally analogous to the coordination demands placed on DSWD and local government units implementing the SFP. The framework has been applied in comparable multi-level public service delivery contexts in developing country settings (Castro et al., 2025), supporting its transferability to the Philippine nutrition governance context. For this study, the four constructs are operationalized as follows: “jointly developed goals” is assessed through stakeholder accounts of how program targets are set; “coordinated planning” is examined through documentary evidence on memoranda of agreement and submission timelines; “cross-organizational service delivery” is traced through the roles of daycare teachers, parent volunteers, and barangay officials in daily feeding operations; and “bidirectional accountability” is evaluated by whether feedback from local implementers shapes national program adjustments. When these features are absent, programs fragment along institutional fault lines. A particular vulnerability is hierarchical delegation, as Alejandro and Zhao (2023) call it: national authorities retain decision-making and funding while pushing implementation responsibilities downward without the resources or support to match.

The value of effective feeding programs extends beyond nutrition. Well-run programs stimulate local food markets, generate procurement-linked income for smallholder suppliers, and foster regular caregiver interaction, thereby building community social capital (World Food Program, 2022). These secondary effects help explain a pattern the researchers observed in Barangay Zone 42: parents remained engaged and committed even when the program’s formal educational components were barely functioning. The feeding cycle had become a community anchor, regardless of whether all its components were operational.

Caregiver education is a dimension of these programs that the effectiveness literature takes particularly seriously. Structured parent nutrition education, delivered alongside supplementary feeding, consistently outperforms feeding alone in improving child health indicators (Salarkia et al., 2022). Home-based caregiver support programs have also shown meaningful weight gains among undernourished preschoolers in low-resource settings (Ansuya et al., 2023). These findings directly informed the design of the SFP’s Parent Effectiveness Session. As the findings section will document, the gap between that design and what occurs in daycare centers is significant.

Philippine-specific research on public service delivery provides essential local context. The

performance of nationally mandated programs at the community level depends on three interacting factors: the administrative capacity of local government units, the political priority assigned to the program at the city or municipal level, and the concrete technical support—training, monitoring, and feedback mechanisms—that national agencies provide to local implementers (Castro et al., 2025). When national agencies treat local government as a delivery conduit rather than a genuine partner, the predictable result is underperformance—not because frontline staff lack motivation, but because the institutional infrastructure needed to support quality implementation was never built (Quilapio et al., 2024).

Systematic reviews of intervention effectiveness across diverse geographic contexts reveal consistent positive impacts while identifying areas needing further research. Community-based nutrition-specific interventions are effective in reducing malnutrition among children under 5 years of age, though systematic reviews of their cost-effectiveness remain limited (Kavle et al., 2021). This finding underscores the importance of comprehensive economic evaluation alongside assessments of health and educational outcomes.

Recent research emphasizes the importance of contextual adaptation in the design and implementation of feeding programs. Programs operating in dense urban environments, such as Manila, face unique challenges due to infrastructure limitations, high population density, and limited access to resources. School feeding programs, as social safety nets, are frequently targeted toward food-insecure populations residing in areas with high concentrations of low-socioeconomic-status families (Bundy et al., 2022), underscoring the importance of targeted intervention strategies.

Integrating feeding programs with broader educational and social development initiatives has emerged as a critical factor in achieving sustainable impact. Contemporary research shows that successful programs address not only immediate nutritional needs but also contribute to longer-term educational, economic, and social development outcomes within communities. School feeding programs improve the physical and psychological health of children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage across diverse global contexts (Anderson et al., 2022), providing evidence for comprehensive intervention approaches.

The SFP's dependence on volunteer caregiver labor also raises equity concerns that the literature cannot ignore. Food preparation and serving at daycare centers fall almost entirely to mothers—a fact visible at both study sites. Programs that treat women's unpaid contributions as free and available resources, rather than recognizing and appropriately supporting them, tend to reinforce rather than challenge existing gender inequalities (Sutantri et al., 2024). Redesigning how the SFP engages with volunteer labor is therefore both an operational and an ethical necessity.

Synthesizing this literature, five conditions emerge as most critical for sustainable community nutrition governance: genuine partnership arrangements between agencies rather than hierarchical delegation; budgets calibrated to real and inflation-adjusted costs; community engagement that is substantive rather than performative; program designs sensitive to local conditions; and monitoring systems that generate feedback loops rather than one-way reporting. Each of these will be assessed against the evidence from Barangay Zone 42 in the findings that follow.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative case study design. The choice was not arbitrary; it followed directly from the nature of the questions being asked. The research team was not trying to count meals or measure budget utilization; those figures are captured in program monitoring systems. What the team wanted to understand was how the program functions: how coordination decisions are made, where the system breaks down, and what it feels like to run the program for the teachers,

parents, and officials directly involved. For questions like these, methods that get inside the lived reality of implementation are the right choice (Priya, 2021). The case study framework also supports multi-source triangulation, which allowed the team to compare stakeholders' statements with program documents—a comparison that proved revealing (Stake & Kerlin, 2021).

Barangay Zone 42 in Manila was the research site. It was selected purposively: the barangay has a sustained record of SFP implementation, its program staff were willing to participate, and the research team had an established working relationship with community actors in the area. This prior relationship facilitated access but also introduced a potential access bias that readers should bear in mind—participants who agree to participate with familiar researchers may present more favorable accounts than those who do not. To address this, the team maintained a reflexivity statement throughout data collection, documenting how prior relationships were managed and where they may have shaped participant openness. The case boundary is defined as the SFP implementation cycle operating in two daycare centers within the barangay during 2023–2024; the unit of analysis is the inter-agency coordination mechanism as experienced by frontline implementers and beneficiaries. Within the barangay, two daycare centers served as primary field sites. One sits near the main market; the other is at some distance from commercial activity. This geographical contrast, which was not the primary selection criterion, proved analytically significant. Differences in procurement efficiency between the two sites illustrated something the program guidelines never acknowledge: where you are located shapes what you can do with the budget you have.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between early 2024 and early 2025. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow the research team to follow the analytical framework while remaining open to what participants raise, where the most revealing material often surfaces (Lim, 2025). Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria required direct involvement with SFP implementation or beneficiary enrollment in Barangay Zone 42 during the 2023–2024 feeding cycle; individuals without an SFP-related role were excluded. Fifteen people participated: two DSWD program focal persons (both female; combined 14 years of SFP experience), three Manila City government officials from the Barangay Operations Office (two male, one female; roles spanning budget monitoring and inter-agency liaison), four daycare center teachers (all female; teaching experience ranging from 3 to 12 years), and six parent beneficiaries (all mothers; children aged 2–5 years enrolled in the SFP). The interview guide was structured around four thematic areas aligned with the CDE (2007) collaboration framework: beneficiary enrollment and joint goal-setting, daily feeding operations and coordinated service delivery, parent education implementation, and budget management and accountability. Participants chose whether to speak in Filipino or English. Sessions averaged about 50 minutes and were audio-recorded with written consent. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher; Filipino-language segments were translated into English by a bilingual research assistant fluent in both languages, with back-translation checks conducted on a 20 percent sample to ensure accuracy.

Documentary evidence complemented the interviews. The team reviewed 23 documents: DSWD implementation guidelines and program circulars (n=5), inter-agency memoranda of agreement (n=4), financial liquidation submissions (n=7), budget utilization summaries spanning 2020 to 2024 (n=4), and barangay-level attendance and growth monitoring records (n=3). Documents were selected if they were directly related to SFP operations in Barangay Zone 42 or to the DSWD–Manila City partnership governing the program. Documents outside this institutional scope were excluded. Each document was assessed for authenticity, credibility, and contextual meaning using the criteria described by Priya (2021). Triangulation across interview data and documentary sources was achieved by systematically comparing stakeholder accounts with

corresponding official records for each of the four thematic areas. When the documentary record diverged from participants' accounts—and it sometimes did—the team treat the gap as a finding rather than a problem and investigated further rather than forcing resolution. Thematic saturation was determined iteratively: coding ceased when new interviews produced no additional codes relevant to the four framework dimensions.

Thematic analysis provided the analytical structure, following the reflexive thematic analysis approach described by [Braun and Clarke \(2019\)](#) and the step-by-step sequence operationalized by [Naeem et al. \(2023\)](#): extended familiarization with the data; initial coding; grouping codes into candidate themes; reviewing themes against the full corpus; refining theme names; and writing up. The coding process combined deductive codes drawn from the inter-agency collaboration framework with inductive codes that emerged from the data. NVivo 12 was used for data organization and code management. To assess coding consistency, a second researcher independently coded approximately one-fifth of the transcripts. The two coders achieved a Cohen's kappa of 0.85; following [Kuckartz et al. \(2020\)](#), this is interpreted as indicating strong inter-rater agreement. It should be noted that Cohen's kappa is more commonly applied in content analysis traditions; within reflexive thematic analysis, its use here is best understood as a transparency check on coding convergence rather than a claim of positivist reliability.

A draft of the findings was circulated among a subset of participants. Two clarifications and one substantial new detail emerged from that process and were incorporated into the final analysis. Analytical decisions, coding rationales, and interpretive moves were documented throughout a methodological memo, creating an audit trail for external review ([Alejandro & Zhao, 2023](#)). All participants were informed and provided written consent; data were stored securely and anonymized in accordance with the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the implementation of the Supplemental Feeding Program in daycare centers in Barangay Zone 42, Manila, reveals complex dynamics of interagency collaboration between the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Manila City government. Contemporary research emphasizes that effective implementation of nutrition programs requires sophisticated coordination among multiple stakeholders ([Kristjansson et al., 2021](#)), while systematic evaluation of collaborative frameworks remains essential for understanding program effectiveness ([Abay et al., 2024](#)).

Malnutrition remains a significant public health challenge in the Philippines, with recent data indicating that 13.2 percent of the 12.7 million school-aged children assessed nationally show stunting or wasting ([UNICEF/WHO/World Bank, 2023](#)). In Manila's urban context, where population density and socioeconomic constraints intersect, targeted nutrition interventions are especially critical for addressing developmental vulnerabilities among preschool populations.

The implementation analysis used the interagency collaboration theoretical framework developed by the [California Department of Education \(2007\)](#), which emphasizes that successful program delivery requires coordination across multiple organizational levels, shared goal setting, and systematic resource allocation. Recent research shows that school feeding programs are consistently associated with higher energy intake, improved micronutrient status, and increased school enrollment and attendance, though results on growth, cognition, and academic achievement require careful evaluation ([Francis et al., 2020](#)).

The findings that follow are organized around five themes. They draw on both interview testimony and documentary analysis, and the picture they paint is neither a story of program failure nor of unqualified success. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics. Quotations are labeled by participant role (e.g., DSWD Focal Person 1 = DFP1; Daycare Teacher = DCT; Parent Beneficiary

= PB; City Official = CO) to maintain anonymity while enabling traceability. The SFP delivers perceived nutritional and social benefits to enrolled children, yet it operates under structural constraints that better governance arrangements would not impose.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics (N = 15)

Participant Group	n	Gender	Code Label	Experience / Role
DSWD Program Focal Persons	2	Female (n=2)	DFP1, DFP2	Combined 14 years SFP experience
Manila City Government Officials	3	Male (n=2), Female (n=1)	CO1, CO2, CO3	Budget monitoring and inter-agency liaison
Daycare Center Teachers	4	Female (n=4)	DCT1, DCT2, DCT3, DCT4	3–12 years teaching experience
Parent Beneficiaries	6	Female (n=6)	PB1–PB6	Mothers; children aged 2–5 enrolled in SFP
Total	15	Male (n=2), Female (n=13)		

Note. DFP = DSWD Focal Person; CO = City Official; DCT = Daycare Center Teacher; PB = Parent Beneficiary. Interviews were conducted between early 2024 and early 2025. All participants provided written informed consent.

Institutional Roles and the Reality of Coordination

On paper, the SFP is a joint effort between a national agency and a city government. In practice, power is heavily skewed. DSWD controls the program's design, operational standards, and funding. Manila City's Barangay Operations Office is responsible for local execution, submitting project proposals, signing memoranda of agreement, maintaining beneficiary lists, and filing monthly financial liquidation reports. None of these tasks is simple, and completing them all on time is the non-negotiable precondition for receiving any program funding.

Among the 16 National Capital Region local government units expected to participate in the SFP during the study period, only 12 met all documentary submission deadlines. Four fell short, resulting in delayed funding. The more accurate diagnosis is not local failure but systems failure: DSWD imposed heavy compliance demands on units that were never given the tools, training, or staffing required for compliance. As [Stake and Kerlin \(2021\)](#) have observed in comparable multi-level delivery systems, documentation requirements often function as filters that disadvantage the least-resourced implementers, which is precisely what happened here.

What struck the research team even more was the near absence of direct DSWD engagement at the daycare level. Teachers, parent organization leaders, and barangay officials all described their relationship with the national program agency as indirect and largely mediated through Manila City. This maps almost precisely onto what [Alejandro and Zhao \(2023\)](#) call hierarchical delegation: authority and funding remain at the top of the system, while accountability and workload are pushed down without matching resources or voice. [Castro et al. \(2025\)](#) documented the same pattern across other Philippine government agencies. It is a structural feature of how these programs are governed, not an SFP-specific anomaly.

Who Gets into the Program and Who Gets Left Out

Program eligibility covers children aged two to four enrolled in child development centers, with additional provisions for five-year-olds not yet in formal DepEd preschool. Manila City's registration for the 2023–2024 cycle totaled 8,247 children across 89 daycare centers in the study area. Those numbers sound substantial. What they conceal is that individual centers operate under enrollment caps tied to per-child funding formulas and physical space, so eligible, documented children are regularly turned away. Every person the team interviewed found this unacceptable. The children are in the system; they simply cannot be served because the funding architecture was never calibrated to include them (Pradeilles et al., 2024). That is a policy design problem, not an implementation problem.

How Feeding Actually Happens

The program mandates daily feeding over a 90- to 120-day cycle, with each meal designed to provide about one-third of the child's daily recommended energy and nutrient intake. Menus follow the FNRI Nutritional Guidelines and are issued centrally by DSWD.

At both study centers, teachers and parents reported that children ate better, had more energy, and stayed engaged longer in daycare activities during feeding cycles. These observations align with what the evidence base would predict from a well-executed supplementary feeding program (Anderson et al., 2022; Barnabas et al., 2024). The harder problem was not meal quality but operational reliability. Volunteer participation in food preparation was uneven at both sites. When fewer parents showed up, which happened with some frequency, the gap was absorbed by daycare teachers, who were simultaneously running a classroom. Nobody described this arrangement as sustainable.

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed significant variations in parent participation across daycare centers. The theme "Conduct of Feeding" emerged from stakeholder interviews, highlighting challenges in securing consistent parent volunteerism for food preparation, cooking, and cleanup. As one daycare teacher stated: "Hindi naman kasi lahat napipilit mo mag participate, so ung lang naman problem. Gaya ng duties and responsibilities nila sa anak nila, hindi sila tumutulong." This finding reflects broader challenges in implementing community-based programs that require sustained volunteer engagement.

The Parent Education Gap

The Parent Effectiveness Session component is designed to deliver nine structured, facilitated sessions per cycle, held twice monthly. The stated purpose is to build caregivers' knowledge, practices, and attitudes related to nutrition, child health, and family resource management. There is solid evidence that this kind of structured caregiver education amplifies the impact of feeding programs well beyond what food provision alone achieves (Salarkia et al., 2022). What the team found in both daycare centers was quite different.

PES activities had shifted from DSWD-facilitated training to informal discussions organized by parent chapter presidents. Sessions focused primarily on weekly cooking logistics rather than nutrition education. One daycare center coordinator explained candidly how this came about:

"Meron kaming parent president dito, so sakanya ko pinapaubaya yung session. Kasi pag ako padin, mashadong kaming busy. Minsan pinag-uusapan nila yung pagbu-budget ng mga task nila every week." (We have a parent president here, so I leave the session to her, because if I still handled it, we would be too busy. Sometimes they discuss how to budget their weekly tasks.) – Daycare Center Coordinator

It would be a mistake to read this as a failure by the individual coordinator. She was managing an enormous workload under difficult conditions. The failure is DSWD's: the agency built a

requirement for trained facilitation into the program design. Yet it made no provision—no training budget, no assigned personnel, no follow-up mechanism—to make that facilitation possible at the center level. When professional education is replaced by informal logistics discussion, the behavior changes that the program was designed to catalyze do not occur ([Sutantri et al., 2024](#)).

The Budget Problem Nobody Talks About Officially

The SFP allocates PHP 15.00 per child per day for food: PHP 11.00 for the main dish and PHP 4.00 for rice. One-time grants of PHP 75.00 per child cover utensils, and PHP 1,000.00 per center goes toward basic cooking equipment. Without exception, every stakeholder category—DSWD officials, city government staff, teachers, parents—described the food budget as inadequate. City officials noted that the PHP 15.00 daily rate has not changed in two to four years, a period during which food prices in Metro Manila rose measurably. One official called the figure “unrealistic under any current market scenario.”

The consequence that no official document captures: teachers and parents regularly put their own money into maintaining acceptable meal quality. The informal subsidy that keeps the program functioning is quietly being absorbed by the households it was meant to protect. Neither the fairness nor the sustainability of this arrangement is defensible.

Geography made the problem worse at one of the two sites. The center near the main market has better prices and more flexible procurement than the one farther from commercial activity. The program’s flat per-child daily rate applies uniformly across both, despite structural differences in what that money can buy. Adjusting nutrition program financing for local cost environments—rather than applying one-size-fits-all rates—is something [Salarkia et al. \(2022\)](#) have specifically argued for in comparable contexts.

What the Program Actually Achieves

None of the above should obscure the fact that the SFP delivers meaningful benefits. Children enrolled during active feeding cycles show signs of improved nutrition, based on growth monitoring records and stakeholder accounts. Growth monitoring records from both centers documented consistent weight-for-age improvements from enrollment to the 60-day assessment. However, the partial nature of these records (limited to 60 days and lacking baseline anthropometric comparisons) means the magnitude of nutritional impact cannot be quantified with clinical precision. Teachers and parents described children as alert, more energetic, and more open to eating a variety of foods. For families living with food insecurity in one of Manila’s densest poor urban communities, these are not small things.

Beyond the individual child, the program generates community-level effects worth noting. Enrolled families reported stronger ties with fellow caregivers and a sense of shared investment in children’s well-being that outlasted the feeding cycle itself. Nearby food vendors confirmed increased business activity during SFP periods. These are the ripple effects that feeding program researchers have documented elsewhere ([World Food Programme, 2022](#)), and they were clearly present in Barangay Zone 42.

The performance gap between the two study centers was analytically instructive precisely because the formal program inputs were identical: the same menus, the same allocation, the same guidelines. What differed was everything the national policy cannot specify—leadership quality, market proximity, and the depth of social cohesion among participating families. As [Naeem et al. \(2023\)](#) observe, local contextual conditions shape program outcomes in ways no centrally designed policy can fully anticipate or control. Closing that gap between the two centers is a governance task, not a question of nutritional science.

CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to understand how the DSWD's Supplemental Feeding Program operates in practice in one Manila barangay. The fieldwork revealed that the program is not a failure. It is a program under genuine stress—one that delivers real nutritional benefits while navigating institutional constraints that a better-designed governance arrangement would not impose.

The nutritional case for the program is supported by available evidence. Children who participate show signs of improved nutritional status during active feeding cycles, based on 60-day growth-monitoring records and consistent stakeholder accounts of improved child alertness and energy. The limitations of these data—noted in the limitations section—mean that definitive claims about the magnitude of nutritional impact are not warranted; what can be said is that the program produces observable positive changes for enrolled children. For families managing food insecurity in a dense, economically precarious urban setting, these improvements carry real significance. The social cohesion effects—stronger caregiver networks and a shared stake in children's well-being—are equally real, even if harder to measure. These outcomes are sufficient to justify the program's continued existence and the government's ongoing investment in it.

However, the governance picture is hard to be optimistic about. What was observed in Barangay Zone 42 was not an inter-agency partnership. It was a compliance transaction: DSWD set conditions, Manila City worked to satisfy them, and daycare teachers and parents absorbed whatever fell through the institutional gaps. The daily PHP 15.00 food allocation has not kept pace with inflation for years, shifting real financial pressure onto the people least equipped to bear it. The Parent Effectiveness Session, central to the program's theory of change, operates in a barely meaningful educational sense at both study sites.

Theoretically, this study adds to a growing body of research showing that hierarchical governance structures—in which national agencies hold authority while local implementers carry responsibility without commensurate support—predictably lead to underperformance in community-based social programs (El Halaissi et al., 2024). The conceptual contribution is not merely to confirm that hierarchical delegation causes underperformance—that findings are already established in the literature. Rather, this study extends existing knowledge by tracing the specific pathways through which hierarchical delegation manifests in a Philippine urban nutrition program: documentation-heavy compliance burdens that disadvantage resource-poor implementers, a parent education requirement that is structurally unfunded at the point of delivery, and a flat per-child budget rate that ignores local cost variation. These mechanisms constitute the study's analytical contribution to the community nutrition governance literature. The prescription is not for DSWD to step back, but to step differently: less of a compliance monitor, more of a technical partner for the local actors doing the actual work of program delivery. Practically, this reorientation requires specific reforms: (1) annual budget indexing of the PHP 15.00 daily food allocation to Metro Manila consumer price index data; (2) designation of trained DSWD field officers responsible for direct PES facilitation at each center, with a structured curriculum and attendance monitoring; (3) a tiered enrollment cap system that accounts for real daycare center capacity rather than applying a uniform national formula; (4) a simplified documentation protocol that reduces administrative burden on local government units while maintaining fiduciary accountability; and (5) a structured quarterly feedback loop between daycare teachers, barangay officials, and DSWD program managers to enable adaptive program management.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that readers should keep in mind. Most importantly, it was conducted in a single barangay in Manila. The findings cannot be transferred, without qualification, to other urban settings, let alone to the rural and peri-urban contexts where SFP implementation

also occurs. The convenience and purposive sampling approach means participants self-selected into the research; those who agreed to be interviewed may have been more engaged with the program—in either direction—than the typical stakeholder. That possibility cannot be ruled out.

The single-cycle time horizon is a real constraint. Nutritional programs are designed to produce effects that accumulate over years of sustained exposure; a one-year snapshot, however carefully observed, captures only part of that arc. The 60-day growth monitoring data from the study sites are valuable but incomplete—they cannot tell us whether the observed improvements hold up after the feeding cycle ends. The documentary record, as any field researcher knows, tells you what organizations reported doing, not always what they actually did. Moreover, because the primary evidence comes from stakeholder accounts rather than clinical measurements, the magnitude of nutritional impact cannot be quantified with the rigor that a randomized controlled trial would afford.

Based on empirical findings and theoretical analysis, this study recommends enhancing institutional coordination through systematic DSWD field-level monitoring mechanisms, including monthly site visits, direct stakeholder engagement, and structured feedback collection. It also recommends replacing the current hierarchical model with collaborative partnership structures that facilitate regular communication between national policy designers and local implementers, consistent with contemporary research emphasizing continuous monitoring and adaptive management in nutrition program implementation (Abay et al., 2024). Resource allocation reform should incorporate annual budget adjustments based on regional cost variations and inflation indices, with transparent supplementation mechanisms during economic fluctuations. Strengthening technical assistance requires systematic implementation of Parent Effectiveness Sessions through trained personnel and standardized curricula to address current gaps in nutrition education delivery.

Future research should address these gaps. Multi-site comparative studies spanning urban, peri-urban, and rural barangays would allow systematic identification of which governance features most reliably predict SFP implementation quality across diverse contexts. Longitudinal cohort designs following enrolled children across multiple cycles would clarify whether the nutritional improvements observed here persist and deepen over time. A cost-effectiveness analysis comparing the SFP with alternative modalities—such as conditional cash transfers paired with targeted nutrition counseling—would provide policymakers with the comparative evidence they need to allocate constrained resources more strategically. Participatory action research designs, in which community members serve as co-investigators rather than research subjects, would generate reform recommendations grounded in situated knowledge and, therefore, more likely to gain genuine local traction.

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