

Public Nutrition Policy and Social Welfare in Indonesia through an Islamic Economic Lens

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A B S T R A C T

Public nutrition programs have gained increasing attention as instruments for addressing human capital development and social welfare. However, existing studies tend to evaluate such programs from technocratic and policy perspectives, with limited engagement with normative economic frameworks that emphasize ethical distribution and social justice. This study examines Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) through an Islamic economic lens to assess its role in advancing social welfare and community resilience. This research employs a qualitative library approach, drawing on policy documents, regulatory frameworks, official reports, and scholarly literature. Data were analyzed using content analysis grounded in the normative principles of Islamic economics. The findings indicate that the program operates not only as a nutritional intervention but also as a socio-economic instrument linking human development with local economic participation. The involvement of micro and small enterprises and the use of local food resources contribute to broader economic circulation and community-level empowerment. From the perspective of *maqasid al-shariah*, the program aligns with the protection of life, intellect, and wealth, while also reflecting distributive justice when implemented transparently and accountably. The integration of ethical governance principles further reinforces institutional legitimacy and supports equitable benefit distribution. This study contributes by positioning public nutrition policy as a value-oriented welfare mechanism that connects state intervention, market participation, and ethical economic principles. The findings highlight the importance of integrating normative economic frameworks into policy evaluation to strengthen inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

Keywords: free nutritious meal program, islamic economics, *maqasid al-shariah*, economic welfare



Introduction

Nutritional problems continue to pose a serious challenge to human resource development in Indonesia. The high prevalence of stunting (21.6%) and wasting (7.1%) among children not only undermines health conditions but also adversely affects cognitive development and long term productivity. The economic losses resulting from these conditions are estimated to reach 2–3% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annually (Mumtaza et al., 2025). Data from UNICEF indicate that although the prevalence of stunting among children under five has significantly declined from 37.6% in 2013 to 19.8% in 2024, nutritional problems among school age children have not been fully resolved (Sulistiani et al., 2026). This situation has encouraged the establishment of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) as a more systematic and integrated effort to reach a broader population of school age children (Monalisa, 2026).

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) constitutes one of the strategic policy initiatives of the Government of Indonesia aimed at improving the nutritional quality of the population, particularly school children. Nutrition plays an essential role in child development, especially in supporting learning processes at the elementary school level (Maulidya, 2025). Although the program reflects a noble objective, its extensive scale covering more than 80 million beneficiaries, including students, Islamic boarding school students (*santri*), and pregnant women entails substantial fiscal consequences for the State Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBN) (Basuki et al., 2026).

The school based free lunch program is designed as an intervention to address these challenges, aiming to improve children's dietary habits and nutritional status (Ernita et al., 2025). The provision of nutritious meals in schools is associated with improvements in various learning indicators, both directly and indirectly (Amalia et al., 2025). The school free lunch program has been shown to effectively enhance children's eating habits and nutritional status, while also exerting a positive impact on their academic performance. This underscores the importance of school based nutritional interventions in supporting children's academic development and overall health.

Beyond nutritional enrichment, diversification based on local food resources is economically more sustainable, as it supports local farmers and fishers while reducing dependence on imported food commodities (Syamsu et al., 2025). Local food plays a crucial role in enhancing sustainability. Strengthening local food systems can stimulate local economic growth, preserve cultural heritage, and promote social sustainability (Sadeli et al., 2024). Consequently, the program not only focuses on meeting nutritional needs but also possesses significant potential to support local economic empowerment through the involvement of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) as food suppliers. With nationwide coverage,

MBG serves as an important instrument for strengthening community economic resilience and promoting equitable social welfare.

The MBG Program also holds potential as an instrument of economic empowerment. By involving local MSMEs in the food supply chain, MBG not only fulfills community nutritional needs but also generates economic benefits for local producers. From an economic perspective, local food diversification functions as a catalyst for strengthening community economies by activating local markets, developing farmers' cooperatives, and leveraging agro tourism potential based on endogenous resources (Fiza et al., 2025). In this way, it contributes to enhancing community economic resilience. This concept aligns with the principles of Islamic economics, which promote equitable wealth distribution, community empowerment, and the creation of social value.

Islam places strong emphasis on both physical and spiritual well being. Accordingly, Islam obligates individuals to consume wholesome and healthy food (Wahyudi et al., 2021). From the perspective of Islamic economics, the MBG Program may be analyzed through sharia principles that emphasize justice, sustainability, and public welfare (*maslahah*). Justice constitutes a fundamental pillar of Islamic economics, designed to alleviate poverty, promote social equity, and ensure access to basic needs (Rofiq & Khusnudin, 2025).

In Islam, food serves as a fundamental determinant influencing various forms of human behavior (Isnadjodi & Ulfah, 2022). Within Islamic economics, consumption is regarded as an essential means that cannot be neglected by a Muslim in realizing the divine objectives underlying human creation (Tamimah, 2025). Food that is *tayyib* is inherently halal and safe for consumption, causing no harm after being consumed (Maheran et al., 2022). The food provided under the program must therefore meet halal and *tayyib* (wholesome and fit for consumption) standards, in accordance with the objectives of *maqasid al-shariah* in safeguarding life (*hifz al-nafs*) and societal welfare (*hifz al-ma'ash*). Furthermore, transparency, accountability, and justice in the management of the MBG Program reflect the principles of *amanah* (trustworthiness) and fairness that form the foundation of Islamic economics.

Although the MBG Program has been implemented with support from the State Budget (APBN), an Islamic economic perspective offers strategic opportunities to optimize the program through the integration of sharia principles in governance, budget transparency, resource allocation, and community empowerment mechanisms. Such an approach is expected not only to strengthen the effectiveness of MBG in improving students' nutritional status and welfare, but also to promote family economic empowerment, reinforce local MSMEs, and enhance national economic resilience in a sustainable manner. Consequently, the

program may function as a holistic and justice oriented socio economic development instrument.

This research is essential because the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) not only plays a role in improving the nutritional status of school children but also has significant implications for community economic welfare. Given the high prevalence of stunting and wasting that adversely affect long term productivity, evaluating the program from an Islamic economic perspective is crucial to ensure equitable distribution of benefits, food sustainability, and local economic empowerment. This approach enables the integration of the principles of justice, *amanah*, and public welfare in the governance of MBG, thereby providing strategic recommendations to enhance program effectiveness while simultaneously strengthening sustainable community economic welfare.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze the MBG Program from an Islamic economic perspective as a strategy to enhance community welfare and economic resilience in Indonesia, with particular emphasis on program governance, the involvement of local MSMEs, and the potential integration of sharia principles in its implementation.

However, most previous studies have focused more on the impact of the MBG program from the perspectives of nutrition and education, while studies that integrate this program with Islamic economic principles as well as its implications for community economic welfare remain limited. This research gap indicates the need for a more comprehensive analysis of the MBG Program from the perspective of Islamic economics and maqasid al-shariah.

Previous studies have generally highlighted the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) from the aspects of health, nutrition, as well as its impact on education and microeconomics, particularly the role of MSMEs. However, studies that comprehensively integrate the MBG program with Islamic economic perspectives and maqasid al-shariah in relation to community economic welfare remain relatively limited. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive analysis by examining the MBG program from the perspective of Islamic economics and its contribution to improving community welfare.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive analytical library research design. According to Bogdan and Taylor as cited in Suprayitno et al., qualitative research produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words derived from observed individuals (Suprayitno et al., 2024). Creswell and Poth further explain that a literature review in qualitative research constitutes a systematic process of examining concepts, theories, previous research findings, and scholarly perspectives relevant to the phenomenon under investigation

(Lumbu et al., 2026). This approach was selected because the study aims to analyze the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) from the perspective of Islamic economics through a conceptual and normative examination of relevant policies and sharia principles.

The data utilized in this study consist of secondary data, including statutory regulations, government policy documents related to MBG, official reports, national statistical data, and scholarly literature such as books, accredited journal articles, and previous research addressing nutrition, local economic empowerment, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and Islamic economics. According to Silalahi data are the result of empirical observation and measurement that reveal factual characteristics of a particular phenomenon (Kusumastuti & Khoiron., 2019).

Data collection was conducted through documentation study, involving the systematic tracing, identification, inventorying, and examination of various written sources relevant to the research focus. Documentation study was chosen because this research is library based, and thus the analyzed data are derived from documents directly related to the research theme. Gottschalk defines documents as any evidentiary process based on any type of source, whether written, oral, visual, or archaeological (Fitrah & Luthfiyah., 2017) The documents examined include: (1) primary sources, such as statutory regulations concerning the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), government policies, official ministerial or institutional reports, and fatwas or halal regulatory documents issued by relevant authorities; (2) secondary sources, including books on Islamic economics, accredited scientific journals, conference proceedings, previous research findings, and literature discussing *maqasid al-shariah*, the concepts of halal and *tayyib*, and welfare from the perspective of Islamic economics; and (3) supporting sources, such as national statistical reports, data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), and official publications relevant to issues of nutrition and community welfare. (Nurhayati et al., 2024)

Subsequently, data were analyzed using content analysis and a normative Islamic economic approach by identifying, classifying, and interpreting data based on Islamic economic principles such as justice (*al-'adl*), public welfare (*maslahah*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), and *maqasid al-shariah* (particularly *hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-mal/ma'ash*). Content analysis is defined as an in depth examination of the content of written or printed information in mass media (Hidayat et al., 2025). Berelson (1952) describes it as a research technique used to objectively, systematically, and quantitatively analyze communication content (Putri., 2020). The analysis was conducted systematically to assess the extent to which the implementation of MBG aligns with these principles and its potential to enhance community economic welfare.

To ensure data validity, this study employs source triangulation by comparing various relevant references and documents to obtain comprehensive and objective conclusions. According to Hidayat et al., source triangulation tests data credibility by cross checking information obtained from multiple sources (Hidayat et al., 2025). Through this method, the study is expected to generate an in depth analysis and strategic recommendations for optimizing the implementation of the MBG Program based on Islamic economic principles.

Results and Discussion

Overview and Implementation of the MBG Program

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) constitutes one of the strategic policy initiatives of the Government of Indonesia, designed as a systematic intervention to address nutritional problems, particularly among school age children. The program aims to enhance the quality of human resources through the provision of balanced and standardized daily nutritional intake. The central government allocates funding through the State Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBN), which is subsequently distributed through relevant ministries and regional governments.

The primary beneficiaries of this program are school age children, particularly students at the elementary and secondary levels, as they are in crucial phases of physical growth and cognitive development. According to Jean Piaget (1952), as cited in Yuliarsih et al., cognitive development progresses through stages: sensorimotor (0-2 years), preoperational (2-7 years), and concrete operational (7-12+ years) (Yuliarsih et al., 2024). Furthermore, Setiadi et al., as cited in Gusneti et al., emphasize that balanced nutrition is essential to support optimal physical growth in elementary school-aged children (Gusneti et al., 2025). Therefore, at the elementary level, nutritional intervention is particularly important, as this period forms the foundation for learning capacity, immune resilience, and long term intellectual development. At the secondary level, nutritional needs remain high because adolescents experience a growth spurt that requires adequate energy and protein intake.

The nutritional standards applied in the MBG Program refer to the nationally established Recommended Dietary Allowances (Angka Kecukupan Gizi/AKG) set by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, as well as the Balanced Nutrition Guidelines (Pedoman Gizi Seimbang/PGS) as the normative framework for public nutrition fulfillment. The AKG determines daily energy and nutrient requirements based on age group and sex, including energy, protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals. According to Moridu et al., findings on nutritional adequacy indicate that among the three observed macronutrients and total energy intake, only carbohydrate intake exceeded the daily AKG standard,

whereas protein, fat, and total energy intake remained below the recommended values established by the National Nutrition Agency (Meals, n.d.). The average total energy intake reached only 71% of the AKG, indicating that the portion size and composition of MBG meals need adjustment to meet the energy requirements of school children aged 10-12 years, estimated at approximately 531 kcal per meal, with similar adjustments required for protein and fat intake (Moridu et al., 2025).

In the context of school feeding programs, nutritional interventions are generally designed to meet a portion of students' daily energy requirements, with balanced menu compositions consisting of carbohydrate sources, animal and plant based proteins, vegetables, and fruits. Research by Syamsu et al. demonstrates that from a nutritional perspective, diversified menus based on local food resources help fulfill macro and micronutrient requirements, prevent dietary monotony, and ensure more balanced intake, while also enhancing food diversification in line with the balanced nutrition principles recommended by the WHO and the Indonesian Ministry of Health (Syamsu et al., 2025)

The implementation of the MBG Program in Indonesia involves several primary stages, beginning with systematic and measurable planning and budget determination. This stage includes identifying target beneficiaries, such as students at primary and secondary education levels, mapping nutritional requirements based on the AKG, and determining menu standards that comply with balanced nutrition principles. Planning also involves cross ministerial and regional government coordination to ensure alignment with national policies in health, education, and social protection. Thus, the planning phase functions not only as an administrative foundation but also as a strategic instrument to ensure program effectiveness and accurate targeting.

Budget determination in the implementation of MBG is conducted through transparent and accountable funding allocation mechanisms, both through the APBN and support from Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budgets (APBD). The budget allocation is adjusted according to the number of beneficiaries, per portion meal cost standards, logistics distribution, and program monitoring and evaluation requirements. For the full year 2025, the MBG Program requires an estimated budget of IDR 121 trillion, with 80 percent sourced from the education budget and 20 percent from the health budget. The target for that year is to operate 30,000 Nutrition Service Units (SPPG) and reach 82.9 million beneficiaries (Suprpto et al., 2025). Rough estimates indicate that program costs amount to approximately IDR 15,000-20,000 per child per day (Jati et al., 2025). Therefore, the planning and budgeting phase constitutes the principal foundation for the sustainability and national scale success of MBG implementation.

Procurement and funding distribution represent crucial factors in the execution of the Free Nutritious Meal Program. Stable financial allocation is required to ensure the continuous provision of nutritious meals for all students. The primary targets of MBG include elementary to secondary school children, as well as other vulnerable groups such as pregnant women. The program was initiated to address chronic nutritional problems such as stunting, which, although declining, remains prevalent and significantly affects health, cognitive development, and the competitiveness of younger generations (Hastuti et al., 2026).

One best practice that may serve as a reference in implementing school based nutritional intervention programs is a structured and sustainable supplementary feeding model. Such programs not only focus on fulfilling daily energy requirements but also consider feeding frequency, nutrient composition, and cost efficiency. In a study by Sakiyama et al. on nutritious meal programs, supplementary snacks were provided mid morning three days per week throughout the year, totaling 108 snack distributions annually. Each snack contained at least 300 kcal of energy and 5 grams of protein, with an allocated cost of approximately US\$0.10-0.15 per portion (Sekiyama et al., 2018).

Operational costs constitute an essential component of program implementation, as they encompass all routine expenditures necessary to ensure effective and sustainable execution. In the context of nutritional intervention programs, operational costs include food procurement, processing and distribution, personnel expenses, supporting facilities, as well as monitoring and evaluation activities. The Government of Indonesia has allocated a substantial budget for the MBG Program as part of the APBN. For 2025 alone, the MBG allocation is estimated at approximately IDR 71 trillion, covering food procurement, distribution, monitoring, and nationwide program management support.

Analysis of the MBG Program from the Perspective of *Maqasid al-Shariah*

The analysis of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) from the perspective of *maqasid al-shariah* may be positioned as a state effort to realize the fundamental objectives of Islamic law (*al-dharuriyyat al-khams*). First, the program contributes to *hifz al-nafs* (protection of life) through the provision of adequate nutrition to prevent stunting, malnutrition, and health disorders among children. Second, MBG supports *hifz al-'aql* (protection of intellect), as sufficient nutritional intake significantly influences cognitive development, learning concentration, and the overall educational quality of students. According to Adinugraha et al as cited in Nuraini et al the free nutritious meal program reflects efforts to safeguard three fundamental aspects of *maqasid al-shariah*, namely life (*hifz al-nafs*), intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), and progeny (*hifz al-nasl*) (Nuraini et al., 2025).

Furthermore, in the context of *hifz al-nasl* (protection of progeny), the program plays a crucial role in preserving the quality of future generations to ensure that they grow into healthy and productive individuals. From the perspective of budget governance, the principle of *hifz al-mal* (protection of wealth) requires that the implementation of MBG be conducted transparently, efficiently, and free from wasteful practices or misappropriation of public funds. According to Rofiullah, regulations that support public institutions enable the realization of *maqashid* through equitable wealth distribution (*hifz al-mal*), poverty alleviation and community economic empowerment (*hifz al-nafs* and *hifz al-nasl*), as well as sustained education and sharia financial literacy (*hifz al-'aql*) (Suprpto et al., 2025).

Conceptually, the success of the MBG Program within the framework of *maqashid al-shariah* depends heavily on accurate targeting, accountable governance, and sustainable implementation across regions. The program should not merely be understood as food distribution, but rather as a strategic policy addressing the simultaneous protection of life, intellect, progeny, and wealth. Chapra and Kahf's findings are consistent with the Islamic Fiscal Governance framework, which emphasizes that public financial management based on the principles of justice (*'adl*) and trustworthiness (*amanah*) not only enhances fiscal efficiency but also strengthens the government's social legitimacy in the eyes of society (Angraini et al., 2025). Therefore, synergy between central and regional governments, strict supervision, and active community participation are essential to ensure that these sharia objectives are effectively realized in public policy practice.

The approach of the MBG Program from the perspective of *maqashid al-shariah* emphasizes that government intervention directed at students must be strategic and measurable. This program does not merely provide meals, but also aims to support children's optimal growth and development in terms of health, cognition, and learning capacity. According to Herdiana in her research, children as the subjects of the MBG policy have responded positively, viewing it as part of the government's effort to fulfill children's nutritional adequacy, which will ultimately impact their growth (Herdiana, 2025). Through the implementation of Islamic Fiscal Governance principles, budget allocation for MBG is carried out in a transparent, accountable, and well targeted manner, ensuring that each student receives appropriate benefits and that equitable access can be achieved. Furthermore, this program is consistent with the objectives of the shariah in safeguarding life (*hifz al-nafs*), intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), and progeny (*hifz al-nasl*), as it ensures that the younger generation grows up healthy, intellectually capable, and well prepared to face the future.

Accordingly, if properly designed and implemented, the MBG Program should not merely be regarded as a social policy initiative, but also as one that is consistent with the fundamental objectives of Islamic law in realizing public welfare (*maslahah*) and preventing harm (*mafsadah*) for society at large. The integration of public policy principles with the values of *maqasid al-shariah* positions MBG as a strategic instrument for equitable and sustainable human development.

The Impact and Potential of the MBG Program on Community Economic Welfare in Indonesia

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) not only provides direct benefits to children's health and growth but also holds significant potential to generate broader economic impacts for communities in Indonesia. Directly, MBG reduces household expenditure on children's food consumption, enabling families to reallocate income toward other essential needs, such as education, healthcare, and productive economic activities. As noted by Aji, cited in Nissa et al., the program reduces household financial burdens because daily food necessities are subsidized by the government. This reduction in economic pressure allows families to allocate their budgets to other sectors, such as education and health, thereby contributing directly to improved living standards (Nissa et al., 2015). Bundy further emphasizes that adequate nutrition constitutes the foundation for cognitive function and learning processes; therefore, regular access to balanced meals enhances students' concentration and academic achievement (Yusriadi, 2025). In this regard, MBG contributes to strengthening household purchasing power, particularly among low income communities, and promotes a more equitable distribution of economic welfare.

In addition, MBG functions as a stimulus for local economic development through the procurement of food supplies and supporting services. Regional governments frequently involve local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and catering service providers in the distribution of nutritious meals. This involvement creates business opportunities, increases demand for local products, and generates employment for surrounding communities. Research by Kelara et al. indicates that the MBG Program significantly increases employment absorption ($\beta = 0.801$; $p < 0.001$), suggesting that this initiative opens opportunities for community participation in productive economic activities within the local MSME sector (Kelara et al., 2025). Through MSME engagement, the program not only benefits students but also strengthens microeconomic structures and fosters inclusive local economic growth.

The long term impact of MBG is also reflected in the productivity of younger generations. Children who receive adequate nutrition tend to demonstrate better health and cognitive abilities, which in turn enhance academic performance and

future earning potential. This generates a positive economic cycle, as a healthy and intellectually capable generation is more likely to be productive and contribute to national economic growth. According to Kahar et al., while the MBG Program has produced positive effects for both students and MSMEs surrounding schools, ensuring the sustainability of MSMEs requires strategic measures that enable them to survive and grow independently without excessive reliance on government programs. Mentorship initiatives, capacity building programs, and fair market regulations are essential to support the long term sustainability of MSMEs (Kahar et al., 2025)

Furthermore, the implementation of MBG can be integrated with poverty alleviation policies and sharia based community empowerment initiatives. Public funds managed transparently and allocated appropriately in accordance with Islamic Fiscal Governance principles can maximize the program's socio economic benefits while simultaneously strengthening governmental legitimacy in the eyes of society. From an Islamic perspective, transparency (*shafafiyyah*) emphasizes honesty, openness, and accountability in all aspects of life. It serves as a key element in maintaining trust, justice, and integrity, both in interpersonal relationships and in the relationship between government and society (Sulaeman, 2024). Accordingly, MBG should not be viewed merely as a health or education policy, but rather as a strategic instrument for promoting sustainable community economic welfare.

Although it has various positive impacts, the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) also faces several challenges, such as a significant budget burden, potential targeting inaccuracies, and limited supervision in various regions. In addition, differences in infrastructure capacity may affect the quality of food distribution and nutritional standards, while the involvement of MSMEs may create dependency if not balanced with capacity strengthening. From an Islamic economic perspective, these conditions require strengthening the principles of justice ('adl), trustworthiness (amanah), and efficiency so that the program can truly achieve sustainable public benefit (maslahah).

To address these challenges, it is necessary to strengthen program governance through a transparent and digital-based monitoring system to ensure accurate targeting and prevent inefficiency. The government also needs to enhance coordination between central and regional authorities so that food quality standards and distribution remain consistent. From a fiscal perspective, regular budget evaluation is important to maintain program sustainability. In addition, strengthening MSME capacity through training and mentoring is required to prevent dependency on the program. From an Islamic economic perspective, all these efforts must be based on the principles of justice ('adl), trustworthiness

(amanah), and public welfare (masalah) to ensure the program runs effectively and sustainably.

Conclusion

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) constitutes a strategic policy initiative that not only focuses on fulfilling the nutritional needs of school age children but also carries broader implications for human resource development and community economic welfare. The persistent challenges of stunting and malnutrition, which adversely affect cognitive quality and long term productivity, render this program a relevant and urgent intervention within the framework of national development.

From the perspective of Islamic economics, MBG aligns with the principles of justice (*al-'adl*), public welfare (*masalah*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), and the objectives of *maqasid al-shariah*, particularly in safeguarding life (*hifz al-nafs*), intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), progeny (*hifz al-nasl*), and wealth (*hifz al-mal*). The program not only protects the health and development of younger generations but also holds the potential to strengthen welfare distribution through the reduction of household economic burdens, the empowerment of MSMEs, and the utilization of local food resources. When governed transparently, accountably, and with accurate targeting, MBG reflects the practice of Islamic Fiscal Governance, supporting fiscal efficiency while reinforcing the government's social legitimacy. Overall, the integration of Islamic economic principles into the planning, management, and evaluation of MBG will enhance the program's long term effectiveness. Accordingly, MBG may be positioned not merely as a social policy in the fields of nutrition and education, but also as a holistic, justice oriented, and sustainable socio economic development instrument aimed at improving the economic welfare of Indonesian society.

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