

# INTEGRATING FOOD CULTURE INTO INDONESIA'S FOOD SYSTEM AGENDA: THE CASE FOR A CULTURAL DIMENSIONS APPROACH

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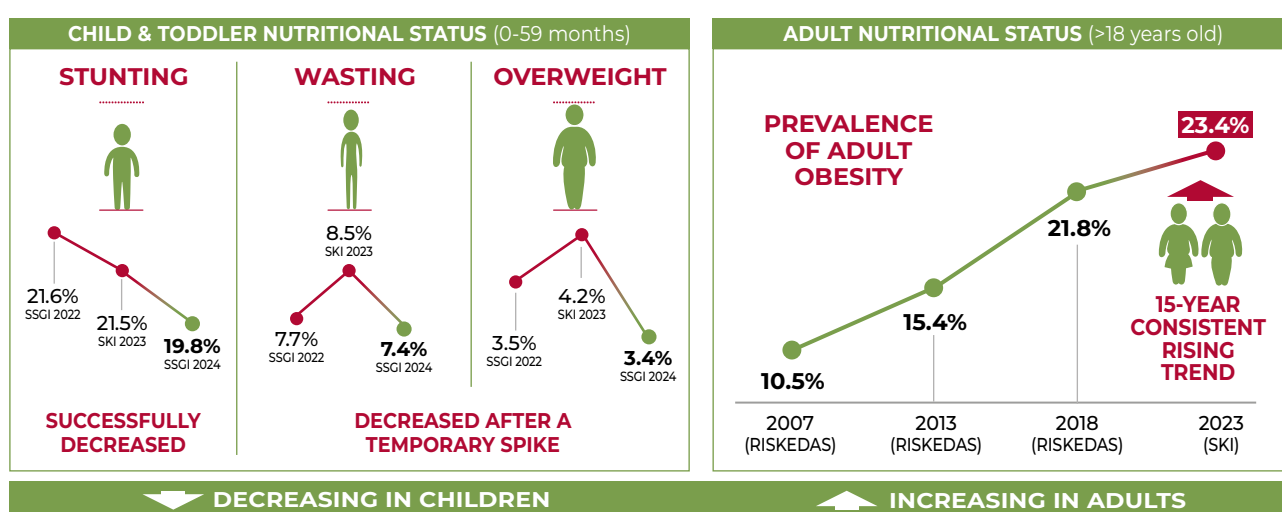
## KEY MESSAGES

- Despite decades of nutrition campaigns, more than 95% of Indonesians consume insufficient fruits and vegetables, and high-risk food consumption continues to rise. Current approaches (supply-side intervention, SBCC and other relevant health and nutrition campaigns) are insufficient because they overlook the cultural values, shared identities, and social norms that drive food preferences, not just individual knowledge or choice.
- Evidence from the Indonesian Food Culture identifies four high-leverage cultural dimensions: Simplistic Abundance, Receptiveness, Fraternity, and Negotiation, that shape how Indonesians evaluate and prioritise food. The NIBS Framework (Narratives, Identity, Beliefs, Systems), developed by GAIN, translates these dimensions into concrete, preference-shaping interventions that offer a practical pathway to durable dietary change at scale.
- The Ministry of Culture and the National Nutrition Agency, supported by the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of National Development Planning, should formally embed Indonesia's food culture dimensions into national food and nutrition policy, establishing cultural preference shaping as a legitimate, evidence-based pillar of Indonesia's food system transformation agenda.



## BACKGROUND: INDONESIA'S FOOD CULTURE AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Despite decades of nutrition campaigns and substantial public investment, Indonesia's dietary patterns have remained resistant to change, and the trajectory is worsening. Child nutrition has long dominated the national agenda: Presidential Decree No. 72 of 2021 on Stunting Reduction Acceleration reflected the assumption that addressing stunting would cascade across other child malnutrition determinants, including breastfeeding, WASH, wasting, and overweight. Yet adult nutrition received comparatively little policy attention, and the consequences are now visible: obesity prevalence among adults aged 18 years and above has risen steadily. Across age groups, the picture is one of a food system under strain — from undernutrition in early childhood to diet-related chronic disease in adulthood — drawing on data from the Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI), Basic Health Research (Riskedas), and the Indonesian Health Survey (SKI), the most comprehensive sources published by the Ministry of Health.<sup>1-8</sup>



**Figure 1:** Trend of Indonesia Nutritional Status from Under-5 Children to Adults in 2007-2024

Indonesia faces a growing triple burden of malnutrition: persistent child undernutrition, rising overweight and obesity among adults, and widespread micronutrient deficiencies, or hidden hunger, such as iron-deficiency anaemia. **Figure 1** illustrates only the first two of these burdens; hidden hunger, while not shown in the figure, remains equally pervasive across the population. At the same time, dietary quality across the population continues to deteriorate, further exacerbating nutrition-related challenges. More than 95% of Indonesians aged five years and above consume insufficient fruits and vegetables,<sup>3,7</sup> while the intake of high-risk foods has risen sharply: fatty food consumption increased by 2.2 percentage points, salty food by 9.2 percentage points, and instant noodle consumption grew from 45% to about 52% between 2018 and 2023 (Figure 2).<sup>3,7</sup> The proportion of the population meeting adequate vegetable intake fell from 4.6% to 3.3% over the same period.<sup>3,7</sup>

Successive policy cycles have sought to address this through public education campaigns and supply-side interventions, built on the assumption that people will make better food choices once they have access to nutritious options and accurate information. Yet despite this sustained effort, challenges related to dietary quality and unhealthy consumption patterns persist. While existing interventions, including supply-side innovations and individual behaviour change approaches, have contributed to important progress, they may be insufficient on their own to address the cultural and social factors that shape dietary preferences. What Indonesians eat is shaped not by knowledge alone, but by deeply held values, social norms, and shared meanings surrounding food.<sup>9</sup> Knowing that fried foods are unhealthy, for example, rarely outweighs the comfort and social belonging of sharing them with colleagues.



**Figure 2:** Trend of High-Risk Foods compared to Fruits and Vegetables between 2018-2023

typically assume.<sup>10</sup> Until policy moves beyond supply-side innovation, consumer choice, and individual behaviour change toward deliberate engagement with the cultural and social structures that anchor food preferences, efforts to shift Indonesia's dietary patterns will continue to fall short.

Recent national research identifies four high-leverage cultural dimensions: Simplistic Abundance, Receptiveness, Fraternity, and Negotiation. These four consistently determine food preferences across Indonesia's regions and socio-economic groups,<sup>11</sup> and which this brief proposes as the primary levers for a more effective and culturally grounded policy approach, directly supporting Indonesia's broader food systems transformation agenda, including Visi Indonesia Emas 2045 and national targets for nutrition and food diversification.<sup>11</sup>



What needs to change is the policy framework itself, but its underlying logic. Indonesia's current nutrition architecture, spanning National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2025–2029, Presidential Decree Number 81/2024 on Food Diversification, Presidential Decree Number 72/2021 on Stunting Reduction Acceleration, and the Balanced Nutrition Guidelines from the Ministry of Health, predominantly operates within what researchers call a consumer choice and behaviour change paradigm: assuming that better information, clearer labelling, and supply-side improvements will be sufficient to shift what people eat.<sup>10</sup> Yet this approach addresses only the visible tip of the iceberg. What lies beneath, the shared cultural meanings, social routines, and collective norms that make certain foods feel normal and desirable, remains largely outside the frame of policy design. Research on social practices shows that individual food choices are not simply expressions of personal preference; they are performances of culturally embedded, socially shared habits that are far more resistant to information-based interventions than policymakers

# THE URGENCY: INDONESIA'S WINDOW FOR CULTURAL INTERVENTION IS NOW

Indonesia's food system stands at a critical juncture. Despite substantial public investment, dietary patterns continue to resist change, and as unhealthy ultra-processed food consumption rises, driven by aggressive marketing and increasing affordability, and dietary diversity declines, the cultural normalisation of poor dietary patterns becomes increasingly difficult and costly to reverse.<sup>12</sup> Addressing this requires moving beyond supply-side and behavioural tools toward a framework that directly engages the cultural structures shaping what people find desirable. In order to support policy implementation using food culture angle, GAIN developed the NIBS Framework as an evidence-based alternative to conventional sociocultural drivers in food systems, and it is precisely here that the Ministry of Culture and the National Nutrition Agency have a unique opportunity to work in concert, the former shaping the cultural environment in which food preferences form, the latter embedding those preferences into national nutrition programmes.

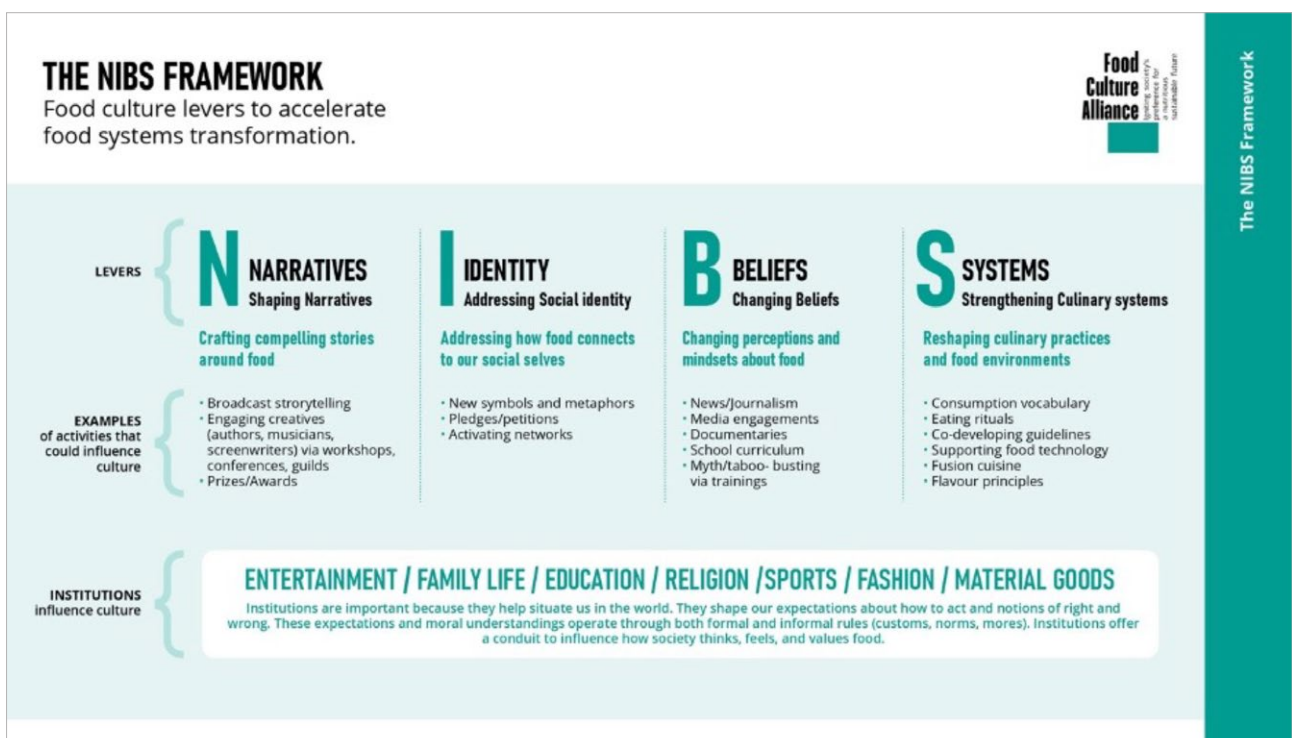


Figure 3: NIBS Framework<sup>9</sup>



The four levers of the NIBS Framework are not merely conceptual (Figure 3). While the NIBS framework itself is not a nutrition intervention, it provides a lens through which existing nutrition, food diversification, and food environment initiatives can be designed and implemented in ways that better align with prevailing social norms and cultural preferences. As set out in Table 1, each lever offers potential entry points for culturally grounded interventions that can be integrated within Indonesia’s existing institutional landscape, providing the Ministry of Culture and the National Nutrition Agency with a practical framework for strengthening efforts to influence food preferences at a population level.

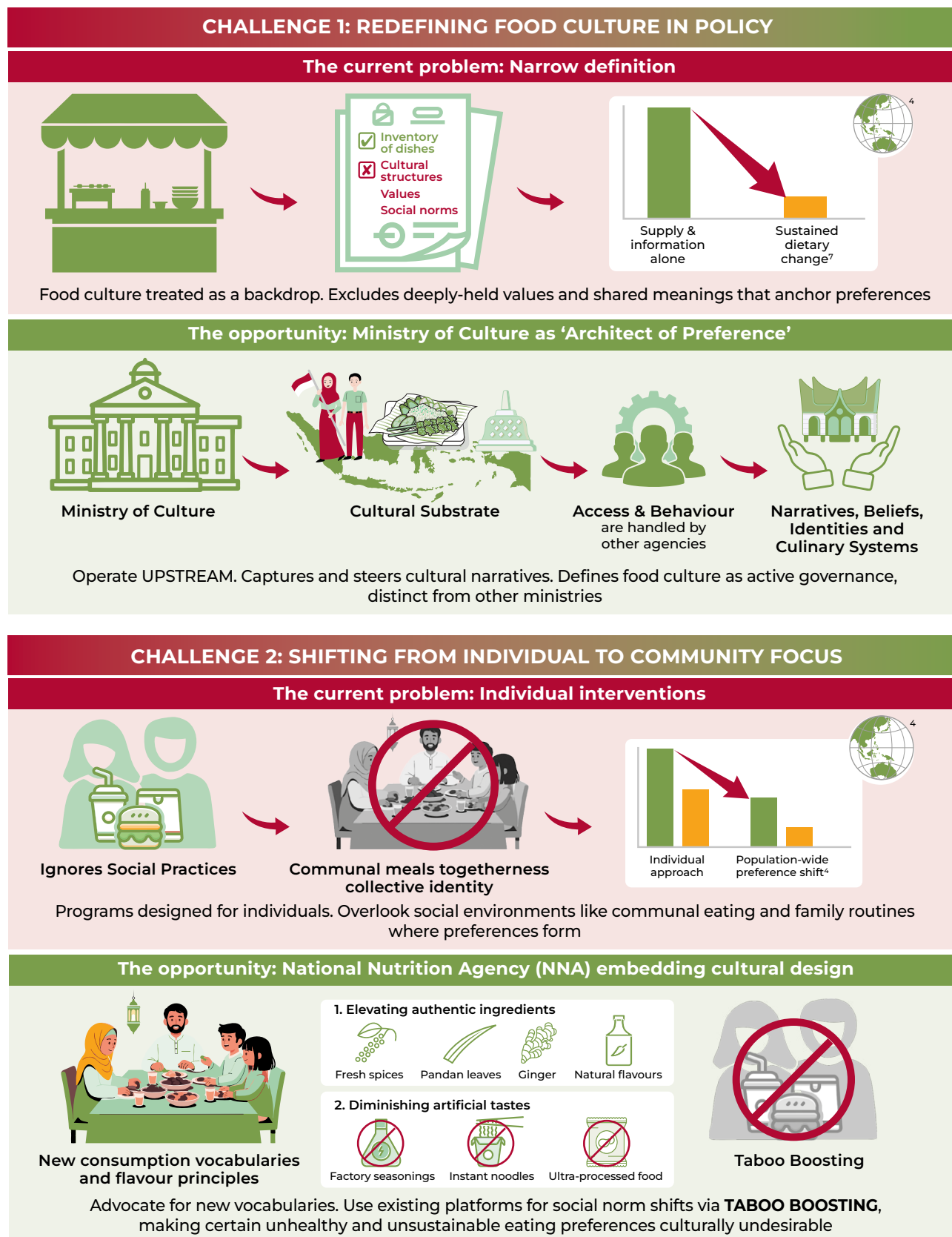
NIBS Lever	Cultural Dimension	Proposed Intervention
<b>Narratives</b> ( <i>Stories and emotions, but not health messaging</i> )	Simplistic Abundance	<i>Jejak Rasa Nusantara</i> — weaving nostalgia and culinary history into contemporary storytelling to anchor local dishes within a living cultural heritage, while introducing elements of trendiness that make traditional cuisine more aspirational and nutritionally appealing within contemporary food environments.
<b>Identity</b> ( <i>Social self identity</i> )	Receptiveness + Fraternity	<i>Ritual Cantik Nusantara</i> — leveraging the diverse beauty identities and aesthetics across Indonesia’s islands as a cultural entry point to build new communities that position nutritious local foods, herbal drinks, and natural ingredients as symbols of contemporary Nusantara beauty, wellness, and belonging, over unhealthy ultra-processed foods.
<b>Belief</b> ( <i>Mindsets</i> )	Negotiation	<i>Hidup Selaras dengan Makanan</i> — cultivating a sense of reciprocity between urban dwellers and the food systems that sustain them, embedding values of balance and ecological mindfulness into city-based schools, urban youth organisations, and workplace communities to reframe nutritious local eating as a modern urban value rather than a rural tradition, and positioning as desirable and socially valued choices.
<b>Narratives</b> ( <i>Culinary Practices and Food Environment</i> )	Negotiation	<i>Ruang Makan Baru Indonesia</i> — recrafting the social practice elements through upgrading warungs, canteens, and community kitchens — including those participating in Makan Bergizi Gratis — to normalise simple cooking methods and position fresh locally sourced dishes as the default everyday choice.

**Table 1:** Illustrative examples of how the NIBS Framework could be operationalised to support food system transformation in Indonesia

## STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR A CULTURALLY GROUNDED FOOD POLICY

Indonesia’s food and nutrition policy has long operated on the assumption that cultural context is fixed, a given that programmes must work around rather than actively engage. This assumption has produced two structural gaps that persist across successive policy cycles. The Ministry of Culture has never been formally engaged as an active actor in Indonesia’s food system, despite holding the mandate most relevant to shaping the cultural environment in which food preferences form<sup>13</sup>, making this a critical and largely untapped entry point for a new kind of policy contribution. Through its existing mandates on cultural promotion, heritage preservation, creative industries and public engagement, the Ministry of Culture is well positioned to influence the narratives, identities and social norms that shape food preferences. Integrating food culture considerations into cultural programmes, public campaigns and community initiatives could therefore complement existing nutrition interventions while remaining

fully aligned with the Ministry's core mandate. At the same time, the National Nutrition Agency commands the largest nutrition budget in the country's history and has become one of the most publicly visible institutions in Indonesia's development agenda, yet its programmes remain anchored in individual dietary targets rather than the cultural and social environments that determine whether those targets are ever meaningfully achieved.<sup>10,14</sup> Both institutions have a role to play, and the opportunity to align them around a shared cultural strategy has never been greater. Hence, the action should be to revise the nutrition policy by incorporating the cultural and social environment (**Figure 4**).



**Figure 4:** Policy recommendation roadmap to maximise food culture approach

Institution	Action	Priority
<b>Ministry of Culture</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Formally recognise Indonesia's food culture dimensions as a framework for cultural advancement, establishing food preference, not merely food heritage — as a legitimate domain of cultural governance.</li> <li>2. Fund NIBS-based pilots in five priority provinces to test how cultural levers can be operationalised within existing community and creative economy programmes.</li> </ol>	Critical
<b>National Nutrition Agency</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Integrate Simplistic Abundance as the core design standard for Makan Bergizi Gratis procurement and menu guidelines, prioritising simple cooking methods and diverse local produce over unhealthy processed ingredients.</li> <li>2. Leverage Receptiveness to introduce nutritious regional food variations across programme menus, countering menu fatigue while building familiarity with the breadth of Indonesia's local food culture and displacing unhealthy ultra-processed foods.</li> </ol>	High
<b>Other Ministries: Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of National Development Planning</b>	In support of the two primary actors, the Ministry of Agriculture should frame food diversification and regenerative agricultural practices through the Negotiation dimension — positioning them as a continuation of Indonesia's cultural relationship with nature rather than a technical imposition. BAPPENAS should complement this by incorporating Fraternity-based social cohesion metrics alongside caloric indicators in the evaluation of community nutrition programmes, ensuring that cultural and collective dimensions of dietary change are systematically measured.	Medium

**Table 2:** Policy Recommendations for Embedding Food Culture Dimensions into Indonesia's National Food System Agenda

Food culture can play an important role in supporting Indonesia's target for food systems transformation and nutrition objectives. By incorporating food culture concepts, Indonesia's food future will be shaped not only by what is available on the plate, but equally by what people find desirable, meaningful, and worth choosing. Embedding food culture dimensions into national policy — through the Ministry of Culture and the National Nutrition Agency — represents one critical and long-neglected pillar for activating the demand side of the food system, using sociocultural drivers as a complement to existing supply-side, market-based, and behaviour change initiatives. Without deliberate engagement with the cultural and social structures that shape food preferences, efforts to achieve sustained dietary change may continue to face important limitations.



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