

Implementation of Servant Leadership in Improving Service Quality in Nutrition Fulfillment Service Units: A Case Study at SPPG Cijunti

Shelma Shafiyyah, Nurfarida Apriani, Amanda Ariella Putri, Rasila Nur Safitri, Rafiul Akbar Darmawan, Intan Aliya Latifa, Muhammad Yusuf Arya Moren

¹²³⁴⁵⁶⁷ Bina Madani Polytechnic

Corresponding Author e-mail:

shelmashafiyyah12@gmail.com, nurfaridaapriani21@gmail.com, rafiulghokhails@gmail.com, ntanaliyalatifa07@gmail.com, myusufamoren@gmail.com, rasilanrsafitri28@gmail.com, mndariielputri@gmail.com

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Abstract: *This study examines the implementation of servant leadership and its relationship with service quality at the Cijunti Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG). Using a qualitative case study approach, the study involved seven groups of informants: the head of partners, head of SPPG, nutritionists, accountants, field assistants, chefs, and volunteer representatives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings show that servant leadership was particularly evident in listening, empathy, healing, non-coercive persuasion, and building a work community, while structured staff development and long-term innovation were less prominent. These practices were associated with maintained service quality across the five SERVQUAL dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. However, implementation was constrained by limited structural authority, varying volunteer discipline, limited raw material supplies, menu policy restrictions, and potential operational budget pressures. The study concludes that servant leadership supports service quality but functions within institutional and operational constraints.*

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Introduction

The Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit Program is implemented by the Indonesian government to improve public health by providing free nutritious meals to school children. The success of this program depends heavily on the smooth production, processing, and distribution of food that meets food safety standards. Therefore, effective operational management is crucial for maintaining the quality of public services.

During its implementation, the program still faces various operational challenges. Delays in distribution put food at risk of spoilage, leading to food poisoning cases among students. Furthermore, neglect of sanitation standards, poor food management, and low employee discipline are still evident.



These conditions have eroded public trust in the quality of government services and prompted local governments to improve their kitchen operations.

These issues indicate that operational weaknesses are closely related to the management system at the service unit level. While unit heads are responsible for overseeing the entire production process, quality control, direct supervision, and attention to staff working conditions are not optimal. Consequently, various forms of negligence continue to occur in daily operations.

One approach that can be applied to address this situation is servant leadership. This approach positions leaders as servants who prioritize the needs of staff and the public interest. Various public administration and public management studies have shown that servant leadership can increase employee accountability, reduce negligence, and foster a more professional service culture.

Based on these conditions, this study aims to describe the practice of servant leadership by the head of the Cijunti SPPG unit, analyze its impact on the quality of nutrition services, and identify barriers to its implementation. This research is important because the Cijunti SPPG has complex operations with limited resources. The novelty of this research lies in the direct study of the implementation of servant leadership at the Cijunti SPPG to explain the leadership mechanisms in overcoming various operational problems based on real-world experiences.

Literature Review

1. General Leadership Theory

Leadership is the process of influencing individuals or groups to achieve common goals. According to Northouse, leadership is the process of influencing a group of individuals, while Yukl explains that leadership involves influencing others to understand, agree on, and carry out tasks effectively to achieve organizational goals. Leaders function as directors, motivators, decision-makers, and supervisors. In public service organizations, these functions are necessary to maintain operational effectiveness, increase work motivation, and ensure service quality remains up to standard. Kotter differentiates between leadership and management. Management is oriented towards planning, organizing, and controlling, while leadership focuses on change, inspiration, and alignment of organizational members. Both complement each other in supporting organizational success. The literature recognizes various leadership styles, such as autocratic, democratic, transactional, transformational, and servant leadership. This study focuses on servant leadership.

2. Servant Leadership Theory

Servant leadership is considered an appropriate approach for public service organizations because it prioritizes the well-being of subordinates as the foundation for improving the quality of service to the community. This approach is more humanistic than leadership styles that focus solely on control. Greenleaf defines servant leadership as leadership that begins with a desire to serve, then develops into a desire to lead. Its success is measured by the leader's ability to help subordinates develop into more independent, wise, and responsible individuals. Spears developed ten characteristics of servant leadership, including listening, empathy, healing, self-awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to individual growth, and community building. Van Dierendonck emphasized that the empowerment and development of subordinates is at the heart of servant leadership because it can increase self-confidence, responsibility, and work quality.

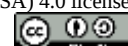
3. The Concept of Public Service Quality

According to Sinambela, public service is a government activity to fulfill the needs of the community, while Moenir defines it as an activity carried out through certain systems and procedures to fulfill the rights of the community.

The service quality in this study refers to the SERVQUAL model by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, which consists of five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. In the context of SPPG, these dimensions are reflected in the cleanliness of kitchen facilities, timely distribution, speed of response to problems, and assurance of food safety and hygiene throughout the production and distribution process.

4. Operational Standards for Nutrition Fulfillment

SPPG operations must comply with standards regarding nutritious menus, production processes, distribution, procurement of raw materials, and quality control to ensure food safety.



The food processing process includes receiving raw materials, storage, preparation, cooking, and serving according to food safety principles to prevent cross-contamination.

Sanitation standards include cleanliness of the work area, use of personal protective equipment, separation of raw and cooked materials, and regular cleaning of equipment. According to the World Health Organization, consistent sanitation practices are a key factor in preventing foodborne illness.

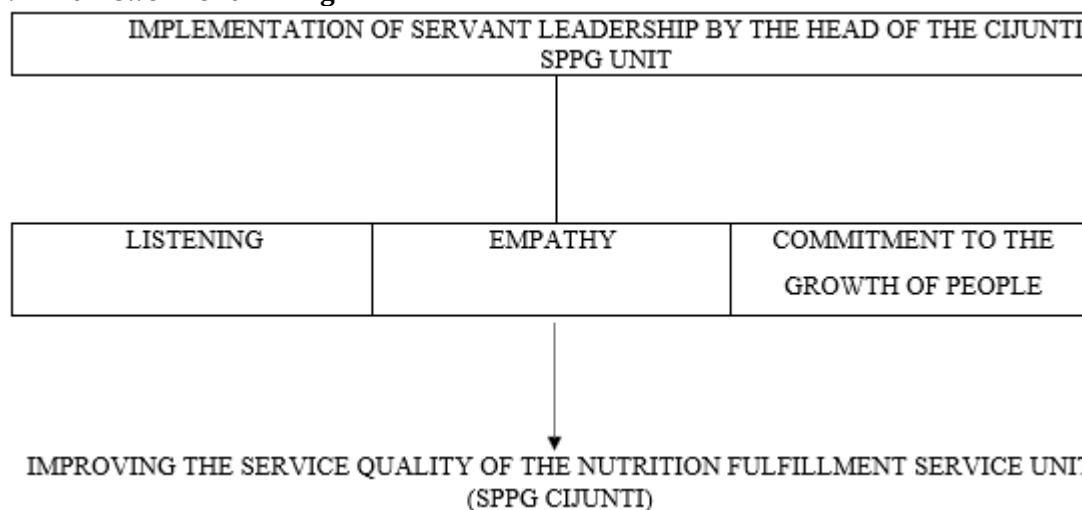
5. The Influence of Leadership on Service Quality

Various leadership theories show that the quality of the relationship between leaders and subordinates influences motivation, commitment, and work productivity. In servant leadership, attention to staff welfare, listening skills, and the involvement of subordinates in decision-making encourage increased responsibility and initiative. The service-profit chain concept by Heskett and colleagues explains that employee satisfaction will increase productivity and service quality. In the context of SPPG, staff who feel supported by their leaders tend to be more disciplined in maintaining sanitation, preparing food, and distributing it on time.

6. Previous Research Review

Previous research has shown that servant leadership can increase employee job satisfaction, improve the quality of public services, and strengthen the relationship between leaders and subordinates. In the food service sector, leadership oriented towards staff empowerment has been proven to reduce operational errors and increase the consistency of hygiene standards. Although its implementation in bureaucratic settings faces challenges due to rigid organizational structures, the characteristics of empathy, listening skills, and commitment to subordinate development remain key factors for its success. This study differs from previous studies because it specifically examines the application of servant leadership in SPPG Cijunti, a nutrition fulfillment service unit. The focus of the study is directed at the relationship between the leadership practices of the unit head and the quality of operational services, particularly the accuracy of food distribution and the implementation of hygiene standards under conditions of limited resources.

7. Framework of thinking



Based on the above framework, this study focuses on the application of servant leadership by the Head of the Cijunti SPPG Unit in improving service quality at the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit. The application of servant leadership is analyzed through three main characteristics: listening, empathy, and commitment to the growth of people.

These three characteristics are used to assess how unit leaders lead, build relationships with kitchen staff, and develop the skills and professionalism of subordinates in carrying out operational tasks. The implementation of servant leadership is expected to encourage improved work discipline, adherence to standard operating procedures, timely food distribution, and proper sanitation practices, all of which will ultimately improve the quality of nutrition services at the Cijunti SPPG.

8. Research purposes

To find out how the Head of the Cijunti SPPG Unit applies servant leadership in improving the quality of service at the Cijunti Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG).

Research methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the servant leadership practices of the head of the Cijunti SPPG unit in a real-life operational context. According to Creswell and Poth, qualitative research aims to explore the meaning of a phenomenon through inductive data collection and analysis. The case study was chosen because the research focuses on a single unit of analysis, namely the Cijunti SPPG, in line with Yin's opinion that case studies are appropriate for answering how and why questions in real-life contexts.

The research was conducted at the Cijunti SPPG as the sole research location due to its high operational complexity. Data collection was conducted throughout the year until data saturation was achieved.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling. The informants included unit heads as key informants, chefs, nutritionists, accountants, field assistants, volunteers, and partners. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies. Interviews were used to explore informants' experiences, observations were made of daily operational activities, and documentation was used to supplement and validate the research data.

The primary research instrument was the researcher, acting as the key instrument. Supporting instruments included interview guidelines, observation guidelines, a voice recorder, field notes, and a camera, developed based on the concepts of servant leadership and public service quality.

Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes data collection, data condensation, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. The analysis was conducted continuously until credible findings were obtained.

Data validity was maintained through source and technical triangulation, comparing interview results, observations, and documentation. Furthermore, member checking was conducted with informants to ensure the researchers' interpretations matched the information provided.

Results and Discussion

Servant Leadership Characteristics Practice by the Head of the Cijunti SPPG Unit

To answer the first problem formulation, field findings were mapped against the ten characteristics of servant leadership formulated by Spears based on Greenleaf's concept, in order to see which characteristics appeared prominent and which were less observed in the practices of unit leaders.

Listening and empathy. The unit head demonstrated a communication pattern that first acknowledged staff and volunteer complaints before making decisions, then resolved them through deliberation with the team. This pattern was consistently confirmed by both the SPPG head herself and partners, who described the unit head's communication style as persuasive and family-like. The congruence between internal (SPPG head) and external (partner) perspectives regarding this communication pattern strengthened the credibility of the findings through source triangulation.



Figure 1 Interview with the Head of SPPG Cijunti

Healing and restoration of morale. This characteristic is evident in the willingness of unit leaders to go directly into the field when the team's workload is high, assisting with physical tasks such as lifting raw materials or cleaning equipment, although this is not done regularly and does not replace the volunteer's primary duties. Volunteer testimonials corroborate this, stating that unit leaders assist when work piles up, although technical tasks remain the responsibility of the coordinated team.

Table 1 Triangulation of Characteristics of Work Spirit Healing

Data source	Field Findings / Concrete Actions
Head of SPPG	Expressing willingness to go directly into the field to help with physical work, such as lifting raw materials or cleaning tools, when the team's workload is high is high.
Volunteers	Strengthening this picture, it is stated that the unit head also helped. When work piles up, even technical tasks remain the responsibility of the coordinated team.

Non-coercive persuasion and error handling. When staff negligence or errors occur, the SPPG head stated that the approach used is to find a solution together, rather than assigning blame. This pattern is also evident at the field supervision level, where violations of personal protective equipment (PPE) use are handled through warnings and gradual reminders, rather than punitive sanctions. This approach is consistent with the principle of persuasion, rather than coercive authority, which is a hallmark of servant leadership.

Table 2 Triangulation of Persuasive Characteristics Without Coercion

Data source	Field Findings / Concrete Actions
Head of SPPG	State the approach used when negligence or error occurs. The staff is looking for a joint solution, not blaming certain parties.
Field Assistant	Shows a similar pattern in violations of PPE use, which are handled through gradual warnings and reminders, rather than sanctions of a punitive nature. punish.

Commitment to staff development. This characteristic was observed to a limited extent. Chefs mentioned that technical guidance from unit leaders was routine, but formal training was less frequent than daily guidance and relied more on the staff's prior experience. Meanwhile, field assistants reported that guidance on maintaining food quality during delivery was provided periodically. Thus, commitment to staff development was more evident in informal coaching and daily operational guidance, rather than structured training programs.

Table 3 Triangulation of Characteristics of Commitment to Staff Growth

Data source	Field Findings / Concrete Actions
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Chef	Mentioning technical direction from the unit leader is routinely given, but formal training ongoing No as often as possible directions daily And more Lots rely on basic staff experience.
Field Assistant	Convey that the directions regarding how to maintain food quality during deliveries are provided periodically.

Self-awareness and conceptualization. The unit leader positions herself as the person responsible for monitoring the three operational pillars: nutrition, finance, and field implementation, without taking over the technical authority of the nutritionist or accountant. This division of roles demonstrates the unit leader's awareness of the limits of her own competence and trust in the expertise of specialists in each area, a pattern consistent with the conceptualization and stewardship characteristics of servant leadership, which view the organization as a shared trust, not a vehicle for personal authority.

Table 4 Triangulation of Self-Awareness and Stewardship Characteristics

Data source	Field Findings / Concrete Actions
Head of SPPG	Positioning oneself as a party that carries out monitoring functions for three operational pillars, namely nutrition, finance, and field implementation, without taking over technical authority from nutritionists or accountants.

Building a work community (community building). The working relationship between unit leaders and subordinates tends to be perceived as one of equality or co-workers, rather than a distant superior-subordinate relationship. Field assistants explicitly stated that the working relationship felt more like a peer relationship than formal supervision, although it still entailed demands for professionalism and discipline. Volunteers' perceptions further reinforced this image, describing the work atmosphere as one of mutual support without excessively pressing targets.

Overall, the findings from the first research question indicate that the head of the Cijunti SPPG unit practices most of the characteristics of servant leadership, particularly in the dimensions of listening, empathy, collaborative problem-solving, and building equal work relationships. However, the dimensions of structured staff development and the dimension of foresight or long-term innovation have not yet been prominently displayed in the field data, as will be discussed further in the discussion section.

Table 5 Triangulation of Characteristics of Building a Work Community (Community Building)

Data source	Field Findings / Concrete Actions
Field Assistant	Explicitly stating that the working relationship with the unit head is felt more like a peer relationship than formal supervision, although still accompanied by demands for professionalism and discipline.

Volunteers	Strengthens this picture, describing the work atmosphere as an atmosphere of mutual assistance without excessively pressing targets.
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The Impact of Servant Leadership Implementation on the Quality of Nutrition Services

To answer the second problem formulation, the findings were mapped against the five dimensions of service quality in the SERVQUAL model, namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

Tangibles. Data from partner leaders and volunteer representatives indicate that kitchen facilities, cooking utensils, and wastewater treatment facilities (IPAL) are available and deemed adequate to meet the standards required by the National Land Agency (BGN).

Volunteer representatives stated that work facilities were complete and the need for additional equipment could be met immediately when requested.



Figure 2 Wastewater Treatment Plant (IPAL) SPPG Cijunti

Reliability. The Cijunti SPPG workflow is structured sequentially and strictly scheduled, starting from the afternoon receipt of raw materials, the early morning cooking process, portioning before dawn, and the morning distribution to beneficiary schools. The SPPG head, chef, and field assistants consistently stated that there had been no significant distribution delays at the time of the study, and partners also confirmed that there had been no complaints from schools or beneficiaries since the start of operations. The consistency of information from various sources on this dimension strengthens the reliability of the findings through source triangulation.

Responsiveness. The unit leader's speed of response to field challenges is evident in their willingness to provide additional supplies as soon as they are reported, including replacement raw materials when there are market shortages. Chefs stated that reports of material shortages are responded to well and followed up promptly, while volunteers noted that equipment needs can be met simply by communicating verbally.

Assurance. The safety and hygiene of raw materials are maintained through adherence to BGN standard operating procedures (SOPs), including separating cooking utensils for raw and cooked ingredients, using personal protective equipment (PPE), and limiting the shelf life of raw materials to a maximum of three days to prevent quality degradation. Nutritionists also

emphasized that food safety monitoring is carried out from the receipt of goods through distribution, including monitoring the personal hygiene of volunteers.



Figure 3 SOP SPPG Cijunti

Empathy. This dimension is reflected in the unit head's attention to the physical working conditions of staff, willingness to accept complaints openly, and efforts to ensure the comfort of beneficiaries, for example by adapting menus based on student input as long as they comply with the nutritional standards set by the National Nutrition Agency (BGN). A nutritionist provided a concrete example of adjusting explanations to beneficiaries regarding changes to menu composition, demonstrating a service orientation that considers user acceptance, not simply administrative compliance.

The findings across these five dimensions generally indicate that the quality of nutrition services at the Cijunti SPPG is relatively well maintained, with no indications of distribution delays, food contamination, or beneficiary complaints since the start of operations. For objectivity, these positive findings should be interpreted with consideration that the Cijunti SPPG's operational period at the time of the study was relatively short, having commenced operations in October 2025. Therefore, it may not necessarily reflect the resilience of service performance over a longer period or under conditions of higher operational pressure.

Table 6 Triangulation of Listening and Empathy Characteristics

Data source	Field Findings / Concrete Actions
Head of SPPG	Receive staff and volunteer complaints first before taking action. Decision, then resolve it through deliberation with the team.
Head of Partners	Confirming the unit leader's communication style as a persuasive approach with a family atmosphere, in line with information from internal parties.

Obstacles to the Implementation of Servant Leadership at SPPG Cijunti

The third problem formulation is answered by identifying a number of obstacles that arise from various data sources, which can be broadly grouped into the following four categories.

Limited structural authority. Data from accountants indicate that decisions regarding pricing and raw material procurement do not directly involve unit heads, as this authority rests with the nutritionist for budget planning (RAB) and the accounting function for pricing,

following a centrally determined budget ceiling based on the number of beneficiaries. A similar pattern was confirmed by the head of the SPPG and the accountant, who stated that daily operations follow centrally-mandated rules and guidelines, leaving relatively limited room for unit heads to innovate or modify technical work independently. These findings indicate a tension between the servant-oriented and participatory leadership model and the standardized bureaucratic structure that accompanies government programs.

Variations in individual volunteer discipline. Nutritionists specifically noted that some volunteers still need constant reminders and reinforcement regarding PPE use, despite generally adequate facilities and availability. This suggests that barriers don't always stem from systems or policies, but also from the consistent behavior of individual implementers in the field, which requires ongoing monitoring.



Figure 4 Cijunti SPPG APD

Limited supply and raw material standards in the market. Nutritionists explain that the availability of raw materials in the market does not always meet established nutritional standards, necessitating adaptive menu adjustments without compromising nutritional adequacy standards. These external constraints are beyond the direct control of the unit head or the internal SPPG team. Centrally-mandated menu policy restrictions. Nutritionists also explained that the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) has certain menu restrictions, such as the use of seafood for SPPG locations in the highlands, due to transportation distances and the risk of food quality degradation, as well as menu restrictions due to potential allergies. While these policies are focused on national food security, they also limit the flexibility of the Cijunti SPPG to fully respond to local beneficiary preferences.

Potential operational budget pressures. Accountants say that non-raw material operational budget constraints, such as electricity and vehicle fuel costs, tend to be increasing, potentially affecting the smoothness of distribution if it exceeds the established limit, although this has not occurred significantly during the research period.

Discussion

The findings in the first research question indicate that the leadership practices of the SPPG Cijunti unit head align with the basic concept of servant leadership proposed by Greenleaf, namely an orientation to serve the needs of subordinates as a foundation before carrying out leadership functions. The characteristics of listening, empathy, and collaborative problem solving, which Spears places as key elements of servant leadership, appear most prominent in the field data compared to other characteristics such as foresight or structured staff

development. This pattern aligns with Van Dierendonck's explanation that the dimensions of empowerment and human development are the core of servant leadership, but in the context of SPPG Cijunti, these dimensions are manifested in the form of daily informal coaching, rather than scheduled and documented capacity building programs. This difference in form is natural considering that SPPG Cijunti is a small-scale operational unit with a lean organizational structure, so formal staff development mechanisms as commonly found in large organizations are not necessarily relevant to be applied on this unit's scale.

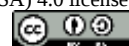
In the second research question, the relationship between servant leadership practices and service quality across the five SERVQUAL dimensions provides empirical support for the conceptual framework proposed in Chapter II, particularly the service-profit chain logic proposed by Heskett et al., which asserts that satisfaction and support for internal staff correlate with the quality of service received by external parties. When unit leaders demonstrated a willingness to listen to complaints, respond quickly to technical needs, and treat subordinates as equal colleagues, staff and volunteers appeared to demonstrate relatively consistent adherence to food safety SOPs and distribution schedules, as reflected in the absence of reports of delays or complaints from beneficiaries throughout the study period. This finding aligns with previous studies in the public service and catering management sectors, which demonstrated that empowerment-oriented leadership contributed to reduced operational error rates and increased consistency in product hygiene standards.

However, these results should also be interpreted cautiously and not as evidence of a single causal relationship between servant leadership and service quality. Several contextual factors contributed to this relatively stable service condition, including the relatively short and easily accessible distribution distance as conveyed by the field assistant, the availability of standard operating procedures from BGN, and the relatively short operational duration that has not been tested under long-term operational pressures. Therefore, servant leadership in this case is more appropriately understood as one important supporting factor, not the sole determinant of observed service quality.

In the third research problem formulation, the findings regarding the limited authority of unit heads in making certain operational decisions provide empirical confirmation of the argument in previous research studies that the implementation of servant leadership in government bureaucratic environments faces different challenges compared to the private sector, primarily due to a more rigid hierarchical structure and standardization of policies from the center. In the case of SPPG Cijunti, this standardization is evident in the form of budget ceilings, menu restrictions, and uniform SOPs from BGN, which on the one hand provide quality assurance and consistency across units, but on the other hand also limit the room for unit heads to innovate independently as is ideally characteristic of foresight in servant leadership. This finding indicates that the effectiveness of servant leadership in public service organizations based on government programs is not solely determined by the capacity of individual leaders, but also by the extent to which the program's institutional design provides space for leadership flexibility at the implementing unit level.

Meanwhile, obstacles stemming from variations in individual volunteer discipline and limited raw material supplies in the market demonstrate that not all operational issues can be resolved solely through a more humanistic leadership approach. Routine oversight mechanisms and a more adaptive raw material procurement system are also needed to complement the servant leadership style. Therefore, servant leadership needs to be understood as an approach that works in conjunction with the operational management system, not as a single solution to all service problems.

Overall, the results of this study confirm the framework proposed in Chapter II, namely that the implementation of servant leadership by unit leaders positively contributes to increased staff work motivation and consistency of operational standards, which in turn supports the



quality of nutrition services received by the community. However, this study also found that the effectiveness of servant leadership implementation in the context of government programs is contextual, limited by the degree of policy standardization from the center and external factors beyond the direct control of unit leaders.

Conclusion

Based on the results of interviews, observations, and documentation studies at SPPG Cijunti, this study produced three main conclusions. First, the head of the Cijunti SPPG unit has implemented several characteristics of servant leadership, particularly listening and empathy, healing, non-coercive persuasion, and building a work community. However, aspects of structured staff development and long-term innovation (foresight) have not been optimally implemented. This indicates that the implementation of servant leadership remains partial and contextual.

Second, the implementation of servant leadership contributes to maintaining the quality of nutrition services across the five dimensions of SERVQUAL: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. However, service quality is influenced not only by leadership style but also by other factors such as the BGN's standard operating procedures (SOPs), the relatively short distribution distance, and the short operational period of the Cijunti SPPG. Therefore, servant leadership plays a supporting role, not the sole determinant of service quality.

Third, the implementation of servant leadership still faces several obstacles, including limited authority of unit leaders in budget management and raw material procurement, varying levels of volunteer discipline, limited raw material supplies, and restrictions on menu policies from the National Service Agency (BGN). These conditions indicate that leadership flexibility at the unit level is influenced by organizational systems and policies.

Overall, this study shows that servant leadership positively contributes to staff motivation and consistent implementation of operational standards, thus supporting improvements in the quality of nutrition services. The novelty of this study lies in the finding that the effectiveness of servant leadership in public service organizations is contextual and complementary, so its success is influenced by the support of institutional systems and applicable operational policies.

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