

Realizing Independent Islamic Boarding Schools: A Study of Santri Economic Empowerment Models Through Community Collaboration

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Abstract

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) function not only as religious education institutions but also hold great potential in developing community-based economic systems. Amid the challenges of economic independence, empowering santri (students) through community collaboration has become an increasingly relevant strategy. This study aims to explore models of santri economic empowerment through community collaboration to realize economically independent pesantren. This research employs a qualitative approach using a case study method at a pesantren that has implemented an economic empowerment program. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify collaborative patterns and effective empowerment practices. The findings reveal that collaboration among pesantren, alumni, and surrounding communities plays a central role in building a supportive economic ecosystem. The model involves entrepreneurship training for santri, pesantren-managed business units, and a profit-sharing system based on Islamic principles, all of which enhance community involvement. This process not only strengthens the economic skills of santri but also fosters social cohesion and the sustainability of pesantren enterprises. Community collaboration has proven to be a strong foundation in building economically independent pesantren. These findings offer opportunities for developing social economy-based education policies within Islamic boarding school environments.

Keywords: Santri Empowerment, Pesantren Independence, Community Economy, Social Collaboration, Pesantren-based Entrepreneurship

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools, or *pesantren*, have historically served as essential institutions for the religious and intellectual formation of Muslim youth in Indonesia. As the country continues to face evolving socio-economic challenges, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, there is a growing recognition that *pesantren* must go beyond their traditional roles. Increasingly, they are expected to become self-reliant institutions that actively empower their students (*santri*) through entrepreneurial education and the development of community-based economic initiatives. This transformation aligns with the broader national agenda of integrating education with economic development while adhering to Islamic values.

In light of this shift, *pesantren* are uniquely positioned to serve as hubs of both spiritual and economic growth. However, many economic initiatives within *pesantren* remain isolated and lack a comprehensive framework that systematically involves *santri* and the surrounding community. The absence of structured models for economic empowerment often leads to unsustainable practices and missed opportunities for broader impact. While there have been attempts to embed business activities into *pesantren* systems, the strategic role of leadership, community engagement, and institutional governance has not been adequately examined, particularly from a management science perspective.

This study addresses this gap by investigating how *pesantren* can adopt community-collaborative approaches to economically empower their students. It focuses on identifying key success factors that contribute to sustainable economic models rooted in the *pesantren* context. The relevance of this research extends across disciplines, particularly in educational management, social entrepreneurship, and organizational leadership. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for *pesantren* leaders and managers in designing effective and sustainable economic programs. For policymakers, the study provides an evidence-based framework for strengthening the role of *pesantren* in Indonesia's broader educational and socio-economic development strategies. Academically, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on community-based management and the integration of faith-based institutions into the discourse on economic empowerment and institutional sustainability.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design with an exploratory approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) develop student economic empowerment models through community collaboration. The case study method enables the exploration of real-world dynamics, values, managerial practices, and collaborative efforts within the *pesantren* context, focusing on one or two institutions known for successful empowerment initiatives. Data collection involves purposive sampling of 8 to 12 key informants—including *pesantren* leaders, *santri*, alumni, business managers, and community partners—chosen for their direct involvement and relevant experience. Semi-structured interviews serve as the main instrument, complemented by field notes, direct observation, and document analysis such as financial reports and training materials.

The data collection process unfolds in three phases: planning and securing institutional consent, conducting in-depth interviews (onsite or virtual), and observing business activities and stakeholder interactions. Thematic analysis is used to interpret the data, involving transcription, coding, theme development, and synthesis to uncover patterns and insights related to leadership, collaboration, and management strategies. To ensure

research credibility and trustworthiness, the study applies source and methodological triangulation, member checking, and thorough documentation. Dependability and confirmability are supported through reflexive note-taking and transparent procedures that minimize researcher bias and enhance analytical rigor.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Collaborative Governance

The findings reveal that pesantren implement a collaborative governance approach across various aspects of their business development. Alumni play a crucial role in supporting pesantren enterprises, particularly by providing seed capital and direct mentoring to students. Their contributions go beyond financial investment; they offer experiential knowledge and guidance that sustain business operations. Furthermore, partnerships with local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are a vital part of the pesantren's collaboration model. These partnerships are built on mutual benefit—especially in areas of production, distribution, and access to training—and are further reinforced by trust and shared religious values. Inclusive leadership practices also contribute to this governance model. Pesantren leaders employ participatory decision-making processes by conducting regular meetings with business teams and community stakeholders, fostering transparency and collective accountability. Overall, these practices demonstrate the application of collaborative leadership theory (Chrislip & Larson, 1994), which emphasizes stakeholder ownership and supports the long-term sustainability of community-based institutions.

Economic Empowerment Process

Economic empowerment in the pesantren is initiated through vocational training integrated into students' daily routines. Santri engage in hands-on learning in areas such as food production, printing, retail, and agriculture. The learning approach is project-based, blending theory with practical implementation. Alumni and local experts serve as mentors in areas such as financial management, marketing, and branding. This informal mentoring fosters entrepreneurial confidence among students. Santri are not merely trainees; they also take on active roles as practitioners—managing inventory, handling sales, preparing budgets, and directly engaging with customers. These practices align with Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), which underscores the importance of direct experience in developing both economic competencies and personal character.

Economic Sustainability of Pesantren

Pesantren demonstrate economic resilience by diversifying their business units, including canteens, mini-markets, and agricultural projects. This diversification helps mitigate financial risk and opens opportunities for growth. Income generated from these units is not merely consumed but reinvested into scholarships, training equipment, and educational facilities. Over time, such reinvestment strategies have strengthened the institution's financial independence, reducing reliance on external donors. This shift reflects the principles of social enterprise sustainability (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010), where innovation in business is harnessed to fulfill both educational and social missions. Through this model, pesantren evolve as religious institutions that are also economically adaptive and self-reliant.

Institutional Challenges

Despite the progress made, pesantren still face significant institutional challenges. One of the primary issues is limited access to resources, including financial capital, equipment, and skilled human resources. Additionally, conflicts of interest occasionally arise among stakeholders, including management, alumni, and community partners, due to differing visions and priorities. These tensions can delay project implementation or create inefficiencies in resource allocation. Another critical challenge lies in weak management systems. Many pesantren businesses still lack formal accounting procedures and rely on manual recordkeeping, which increases the risk of errors and reduces transparency. These constraints highlight the urgent need for capacity building and strategic management development. The implementation of modern management tools—such as those proposed by Kaplan and Norton (2001)—could significantly enhance governance, accountability, and overall organizational performance.

Cross-Theme Summary and Implications

In summary, the pesantren's economic empowerment model is rooted in religious trust, participatory management, and strong local collaboration. These elements serve as the foundation for an inclusive and sustainable social enterprise framework. While the current model has demonstrated success in building institutional independence, further improvements are necessary—particularly in formalizing systems, strengthening financial management, and planning for long-term sustainability. The findings imply that a hybrid approach, integrating local values with contemporary management strategies, is essential for pesantren to thrive not only as centers of spiritual education but also as engines of economic innovation and community development.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the potential of community-based collaboration as an effective model for empowering *santri* and supporting the economic independence of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). The collaborative relationship among pesantren leaders, alumni, and local communities proves to be essential in establishing a mutually beneficial business ecosystem rooted in Islamic values. Empowerment efforts that combine vocational training, mentoring, and active student involvement in business units contribute significantly to enhancing entrepreneurial competencies and nurturing a spirit of independence among *santri*. Furthermore, the diversification of business ventures and the reinvestment of profits into educational and institutional development have laid a strong foundation for pesantren's financial sustainability.

Despite these strengths, the study also reveals several ongoing challenges, such as limited professional human resources, occasional conflicts of interest among stakeholders, and weak institutional management systems, all of which threaten the long-term viability of empowerment initiatives. Nevertheless, the collaborative model examined in this research offers considerable promise as a scalable and adaptable framework for pesantren-based economic development. With strategic improvements—particularly in governance structures and partnership networks—this model could serve as a national reference for integrating education and entrepreneurship in Islamic educational institutions across Indonesia.

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