

## **Sustainable Business Models for Islamic Boarding Schools: A Strategy for Regional Economic Independence**

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### ABSTRACT

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Pondok Pesantren in Indonesia have increasingly been recognized not only as religious educational institutions but also as potential drivers of community-based economic development. However, many pesantren still depend on traditional funding sources such as donations and student fees, which often limits their financial sustainability. This study aims to analyze the development of sustainable business models in Islamic boarding schools as a strategy to strengthen regional economic independence, with a case study at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin in Banyuwangi, Indonesia. The research employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with pesantren leaders, business unit managers, and teachers, as well as documentation of institutional activities. Data analysis followed an interactive model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that the pesantren has developed a community-based business ecosystem through several units such as a cafeteria, cooperative store, and service activities, which contribute to institutional financial resilience while providing entrepreneurial learning opportunities for students. These economic activities operate through a localized circular model in which resources are generated, consumed, and reinvested within the pesantren environment. The study concludes that sustainable business initiatives in pesantren can strengthen institutional resilience and potentially contribute to regional economic independence through community-based entrepreneurship.

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## INTRODUCTION

Regional economic independence has become a crucial prerequisite for achieving sustainable development (Shashyna et al., 2023), particularly in developing countries where community-based economic structures play a significant role. Diversification of business models at the grassroots level is increasingly recognized as an effective strategy for strengthening local economic resilience and reducing dependence on external financial resources (Hasayotin et al., 2024). In this context, community-based institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) hold a strategic position because they function not only as educational institutions but also as socio-economic centers within local communities (Tambengi, 2025). Indonesia hosts tens of thousands of pesantren with millions of students, making them one of the largest grassroots institutional networks capable of mobilizing economic activities and social capital (Syamsuri et al., 2023). Despite this significant potential, many pesantren have not yet fully utilized their institutional capacity for economic development due to limitations in managerial systems and professional business management. Therefore, transforming pesantren into sustainable economic actors is increasingly viewed as an essential step toward strengthening regional economic stability and fostering inclusive community-based development (Zaki et al., 2022).

Despite their enormous economic potential, many pesantren still rely heavily on traditional funding sources such as community donations, student tuition fees, and philanthropic contributions. While these funding mechanisms have historically supported the operational sustainability of pesantren, they are often unstable and unpredictable in the long term (Saleh, 2025). Financial uncertainty can significantly limit the ability of educational institutions to engage in strategic planning, expand infrastructure, and develop innovative programs for community empowerment (Mohammed et al., 2025). In many cases, limited financial resources constrain pesantren from investing in productive economic sectors that could generate sustainable revenue streams (Sholahuddin, 2024). As a result, the dependence on fluctuating financial support may hinder institutional growth and reduce the capacity of pesantren to contribute to broader socio-economic development. Consequently, developing sustainable business models within pesantren has become an increasingly important strategy for ensuring financial stability while simultaneously strengthening their role in supporting local economic development.

This phenomenon can also be observed in Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin in Banyuwangi, which has initiated several business units as part of its efforts to achieve institutional economic independence. The pesantren manages various economic activities, including a boarding school cafeteria, a foundation-based retail store, internal financial services, and a media unit

designed to support both educational activities and entrepreneurial learning among students. These initiatives illustrate an emerging transformation of pesantren into more economically productive institutions. However, several challenges remain in ensuring that these business units function not merely as supplementary activities but as sustainable economic drivers. Among the key challenges are limited managerial professionalism, insufficient financial recording systems, and marketing strategies that remain largely confined to the internal pesantren environment. Without a clearly structured business model, such economic activities risk remaining small-scale initiatives rather than evolving into institutional growth engines capable of supporting long-term economic sustainability.

Within the field of business management, the concept of the Business Model Canvas (BMC) and sustainable business frameworks has been widely used to design strategic organizational models that integrate value creation, operational efficiency, and long-term sustainability (Pepin et al., 2024). The BMC framework enables organizations to systematically analyze key elements such as value propositions, customer segments, revenue streams, cost structures, and strategic partnerships (Maradita & Aprirachman, 2024). Previous studies have demonstrated that the application of business model frameworks can significantly improve organizational innovation and adaptability in dynamic economic environments. However, the majority of existing research on business model innovation has primarily focused on profit-oriented organizations such as corporations, start-ups, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Limited attention has been given to nonprofit or community-based institutions, particularly religious educational organizations such as pesantren, which operate within a hybrid institutional structure combining social, educational, and spiritual functions. Sustainable business models emphasize the integration of economic viability, social impact, and environmental responsibility within organizational strategies.

In the Indonesian context, existing research on pesantren economics has largely concentrated on the normative dimension of Islamic economic law (Hakim et al., 2025), particularly the compliance of business practices with sharia principles such as halal certification and contractual legitimacy. While these studies provide valuable insights into the ethical and legal foundations of Islamic economic practices, they often overlook the managerial and strategic aspects of business development within pesantren institutions. Issues such as operational efficiency, business scalability, organizational governance, and innovation management remain relatively underexplored in the current literature (Garad et al., 2024). Consequently, pesantren-based economic activities are frequently analyzed from a purely normative perspective rather than as strategic

institutional enterprises capable of generating sustainable economic value. Addressing this gap requires integrating perspectives from Islamic economics and strategic management in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how pesantren can build sustainable and scalable business models.

Based on the issues outlined above, this study aims to develop a sustainable business model framework for Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin as a strategic approach to strengthening regional economic independence. The study argues that by restructuring existing economic activities through a systematic business model approach such as integrating digital platforms, strengthening local supply chains, and optimizing community-based entrepreneurial units pesantren can transform into centers of regional economic innovation. Such transformation positions pesantren not only as religious educational institutions but also as key actors in local economic ecosystems. By implementing sustainable and innovative business models, pesantren have the potential to stimulate local economic growth, support community entrepreneurship, and create employment opportunities within surrounding rural areas. Ultimately, strengthening pesantren-based economic institutions may contribute significantly to building resilient and inclusive regional economies.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024) to obtain a deeper understanding of how business models within Islamic boarding schools are developed and integrated with the institutional values of pesantren. This approach was selected because the study does not merely focus on identifying the structure of pesantren business units, but also seeks to explore managerial practices, organizational processes, and social dynamics that influence economic activities within the institution. Through a case study design, the researcher was able to examine the phenomenon within its natural context, considering the unique social and cultural characteristics of pesantren as community-based educational institutions. The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin located in Wongsorejo District, Banyuwangi Regency, East Java, Indonesia. The research site was selected using purposive sampling, in which the location was intentionally chosen based on its relevance to the research objectives. This pesantren was selected because it has developed several business units as part of its efforts to strengthen institutional economic independence. In addition, the pesantren is currently undergoing a gradual transformation by integrating educational activities with entrepreneurial initiatives, making it a

relevant context for examining the development of pesantren-based business models in supporting local economic independence.

The data for this study were obtained from several key informants who were directly involved in the management of pesantren economic activities. These informants included the pesantren leader (kyai), managers of pesantren business units or cooperatives, and teachers from SMK Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin who are involved in student entrepreneurship programs. Data collection was conducted through three primary techniques, namely participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was carried out by directly observing the operational activities of pesantren business units, including how these businesses are managed and how students participate in economic activities within the institution. In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing the researcher to explore broader insights regarding business management strategies, challenges faced by the institution, and perspectives on the future development of pesantren-based economic initiatives. In addition, documentation was used to support and complement the information obtained from interviews and observations, including institutional documents, business profiles, and records related to the management and development of pesantren business units.

The data analysis process in this study followed the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024), which consists of three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data condensation stage, the researcher selected, simplified, and organized raw data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation by focusing on information relevant to the research objectives. The selected data were then organized and presented in the form of descriptive narratives to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships among the findings. The final stage involved drawing conclusions while continuously verifying the data to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected the empirical conditions in the field. To ensure the credibility of the research findings, several validation techniques were applied (Shaheen et al., 2023). These included source triangulation, which compares information obtained from different informants; technique triangulation, which compares data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation; and member checking, where preliminary findings were confirmed with the informants to ensure that the interpretations accurately represented their perspectives and experiences.

## RESULT

### Identification of Pesantren-Based Business Units

The findings of this study indicate that Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin has developed a community-based economic model through the diversification of several business units that are closely integrated with the educational and social activities of the pesantren. These business units include the management of a pesantren cafeteria, a foundation-based cooperative store, internal financial services, as well as service and media units managed within the pesantren's educational institutions. The presence of these units does not only function as a source of institutional income but also serves as a practical learning space where students are introduced to entrepreneurial practices. In this study, the notion of sustainability is understood as the ability of the pesantren to maintain its business activities over time while utilizing internal resources, strengthening financial independence, and involving the pesantren community in the economic process. Therefore, sustainability in this context goes beyond the continuity of economic activities and also reflects social and educational values embedded in the institutional structure of the pesantren.

Interviews with the pesantren leader revealed that the establishment of business units is part of a broader institutional strategy aimed at strengthening the economic independence of the institution. According to one of the informants, pesantren can no longer rely solely on traditional sources of funding such as donations or student fees. Instead, there is a growing awareness that developing internal economic activities is necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of the institution. As expressed by one of the key informants:

*"A pesantren cannot depend only on donations or student contributions. We try to build our own business activities so that the educational programs can continue and the institution can gradually become economically independent."*

This statement reflects an institutional commitment to developing alternative economic resources. The establishment of business units is therefore seen as an important step toward reducing financial dependency while strengthening the pesantren's capacity to sustain its educational mission.

### Mechanism of Financial Independence and Sustainability

In addition to the institutional vision described above, the study also found that the operational management of pesantren business units follows a distinctive pattern of financial circulation. Based on interviews with business unit managers, the revenue generated from these economic activities is not primarily directed toward profit accumulation. Instead, it is largely reinvested to support the daily operations of the pesantren, educational activities, and the further development of the business units themselves. One informant explained:

*“The income generated from the pesantren businesses is usually reinvested. It helps support operational costs, student activities, and sometimes the development of other business initiatives.”*

This finding suggests that the pesantren’s economic activities operate under a logic that differs from conventional profit-oriented enterprises. Rather than focusing on maximizing financial gains, the economic activities within the pesantren are directed toward maintaining institutional sustainability and supporting educational functions. In this sense, business activities become an instrument for sustaining the institution and strengthening its social mission.

Field observations further illustrate how economic activities are embedded in the daily life of the pesantren community. The pesantren cafeteria, for instance, functions as a central point of economic interaction among students, administrators, and occasionally members of the surrounding community. Transactions occur throughout the day, supplying daily needs while also creating a simple but consistent circulation of goods and services within the pesantren environment. The cooperative store also plays a role in distributing basic goods needed by students and staff. Although the management system remains relatively simple, these activities demonstrate a functional economic structure that allows the pesantren to meet part of its internal economic needs independently. The interaction between students, managers, and staff within these economic spaces reflects a form of community-based economic practice that supports the continuity of the pesantren’s internal economy.

Taken together, these findings show that the pesantren’s business units contribute significantly to strengthening the institution’s economic resilience. The diversification of economic activities provides additional sources of income that help support educational programs and operational expenses. At the same time, the involvement of students in these activities creates opportunities for experiential learning in entrepreneurship and economic management. In this way, the pesantren’s business initiatives function not only as financial instruments but also as part of a broader institutional effort to strengthen internal capacity and economic sustainability.

Another pattern emerging from the data is what can be described as a localized circular economic system within the pesantren environment. In this system, the pesantren simultaneously acts as a producer, consumer, and distributor within its own economic ecosystem. Goods and services produced through the pesantren’s business units are largely consumed within the internal community, while some are also distributed to people living around the pesantren. This circulation creates a relatively self-contained local economic cycle that supports both institutional sustainability and community engagement. As such, the pesantren does not merely operate as an educational institution but also

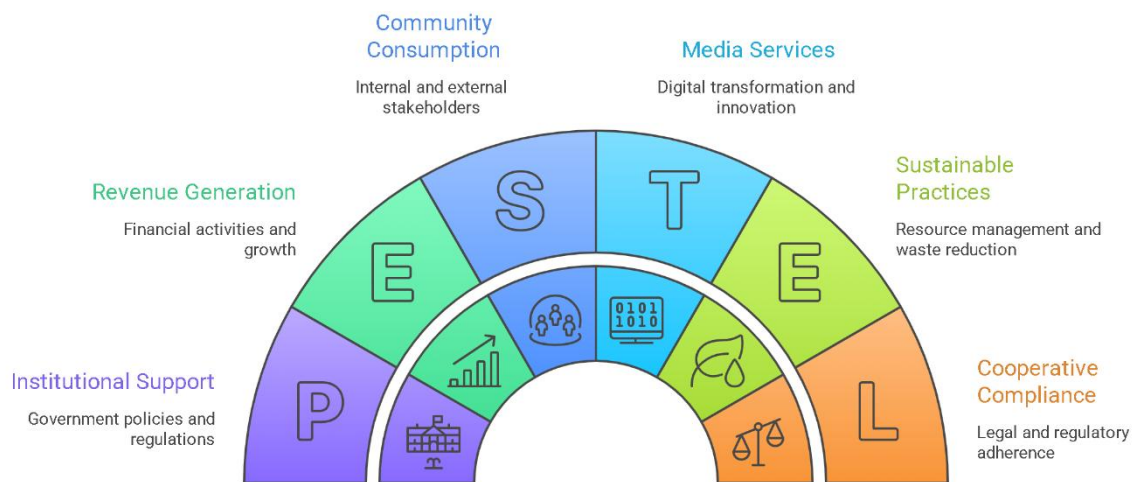
plays a role in shaping a small-scale economic ecosystem that contributes to local economic resilience.

**Table 1. Integration Matrix of the Pesantren Business Model**

<b>Informant Position</b>	<b>Interview Excerpt</b>	<b>Sustainability Indicator</b>
Pesantren Leader	“A pesantren cannot rely only on donations. We try to develop our own businesses so that the institution can become economically independent.”	Sustainability
Business Unit Manager	“The profits from our businesses are usually reinvested to support operational needs and the development of other business activities.”	Growth
SMK Teacher	“Students are also involved in business activities so they can learn entrepreneurship through direct experience.”	Innovation

The information presented in Table 1 shows that the development of business units within the pesantren is closely linked to the institution’s broader strategy for long-term sustainability. From the perspective of the pesantren leader, economic independence is considered essential for maintaining the stability of educational activities. This perspective reflects a sustainability-oriented approach in which economic initiatives are viewed as supporting mechanisms for the continuity of institutional functions.

Meanwhile, the perspectives of the business unit manager and the SMK teacher highlight the dimensions of growth and innovation within the pesantren’s economic system. The reinvestment of business income into operational activities and further business development indicates an internal growth mechanism that gradually strengthens the institution’s financial capacity. In addition, the involvement of students in these economic activities represents an innovative educational approach that integrates entrepreneurial learning with real-world economic practices.



**Figure 1. Circular Business Model Framework in Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al Robbaniyin**

This framework illustrates how the pesantren’s business units create an internal economic cycle in which value is generated, circulated, and reinvested within the institutional ecosystem. Such a system contributes to both institutional sustainability and the strengthening of the local economic environment surrounding the pesantren.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the business initiatives developed at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin function not merely as supplementary economic activities, but as an integral part of the institution’s broader strategy to strengthen its economic resilience. The integration of spiritual values with relatively structured business management practices has created a model of economic activity that is both adaptive and sustainable (Ciuciuc et al., 2026). Business units such as the pesantren cafeteria, cooperative store, and other internal services generate financial resources while at the same time reinforcing the internal economic ecosystem of the pesantren community. From the perspective of a sustainable business model, these practices illustrate how community-based organizations can develop economic systems that are not solely profit-driven, but also oriented toward long-term institutional and social sustainability. In this context, sustainability is not defined only by the financial performance of business activities, but also by the institution’s ability to mobilize social networks, religious values, and community participation as strategic economic resources.

These findings resonate with earlier studies that emphasize the role of Islamic boarding schools as centers of community-based economic

empowerment, particularly in the context of social entrepreneurship and grassroots economic development (Ciuciuc et al., 2026; Muniah et al., 2023). Previous research has shown that pesantren can function as incubators of local entrepreneurship, supporting the development of small and medium enterprises within surrounding communities. However, the case of Pesantren Nurul Abror also reveals certain characteristics that distinguish it from many of the cases discussed in existing literature. While earlier studies often portray pesantren as institutions that rely heavily on philanthropic support, the findings of this study suggest a gradual shift toward a more productive and self-sustaining economic model. Resources that previously depended on charitable contributions are increasingly redirected toward the development of income-generating business activities. This transformation reflects a broader institutional shift in which pesantren move from being passive recipients of assistance to becoming active economic actors capable of generating value within their local economic environment.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the discussion on business models in community-based institutions. Conventional frameworks such as the Business Model Canvas generally emphasize value creation, revenue streams, customer segments (Jin et al., 2022; Salwin et al., 2022), and operational efficiency within profit-oriented organizations. The findings of this study, however, suggest that the sustainability of business models in pesantren contexts cannot be explained solely through conventional economic variables. Instead, two additional dimensions appear to play a crucial role: social capital and spiritual capital. The strong relationships of trust among pesantren leaders, students, and surrounding communities create a relatively stable environment for economic interaction. Religious values and collective norms also influence how economic activities are organized and sustained over time. These elements are rarely addressed in conventional business model frameworks, yet they appear to be central to the functioning of economic initiatives within pesantren institutions. In this sense, the study expands the existing discussion by demonstrating that community-based business models may depend as much on social and cultural resources as on financial and managerial capacities.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study also carries practical implications for the development of pesantren-based economic initiatives at the regional level. The business practices observed in this research suggest that Islamic boarding schools possess significant potential to become drivers of local economic growth, particularly in regions where religious institutions play a strong social role. By integrating entrepreneurial activities into educational environments, pesantren can simultaneously support institutional sustainability and provide practical learning opportunities for students in areas such as

business management and community-based entrepreneurship. For regional policymakers, these findings highlight the importance of strengthening collaboration between local governments, pesantren institutions, and the broader small and medium enterprise (SME) sector. Policy support in the form of access to microfinance, managerial training, and integration with digital economic platforms could significantly accelerate the transformation of pesantren into local hubs of economic innovation.

Ultimately, the novelty of this research lies in its effort to reposition pesantren not only as religious educational institutions but also as emerging actors within local economic transformation. The sustainable business practices observed at Pesantren Nurul Abror demonstrate how educational institutions rooted in community values can gradually build relatively independent economic systems. The interaction between business units, internal consumption patterns, and community participation forms what can be understood as a localized circular economic ecosystem, in which value is produced, circulated, and reinvested within the institutional environment (Fehrer et al., 2024). Over time, such a system has the potential to reduce institutional dependence on external assistance while simultaneously strengthening local economic networks. In the longer term, models of this kind may also open opportunities for pesantren to engage more actively with broader economic developments, including digital entrepreneurship and community-based innovation within the evolving landscape of the modern economy.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights an important lesson regarding the evolving role of Islamic boarding schools in building sustainable economic practices within community-based institutions. The experience of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyin shows that economic independence can be gradually cultivated through the integration of entrepreneurial initiatives with the social and spiritual values that shape the pesantren tradition. Business units such as the cafeteria, cooperative store, and other service-based activities function not merely as sources of institutional income, but as part of a broader ecosystem that supports the continuity of educational and social programs within the pesantren. In this context, sustainability cannot be understood solely in terms of financial performance. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between economic activity, social solidarity, and spiritual commitment, which together strengthen the institutional resilience of the pesantren. The broader insight offered by this research is that the sustainability of pesantren-based economic initiatives lies not only in profit generation but in their ability to transform communal values and collective participation into productive and enduring economic resources.

From an academic standpoint, this study contributes to the expanding discussion on sustainable business models within community-based organizations. The findings suggest that the development of business models in religious educational institutions involves dimensions that are often overlooked in conventional economic frameworks. In the pesantren setting, social trust, communal engagement, and spiritual values operate as forms of capital that shape the organization and continuity of economic activities. By illustrating how these elements interact within a pesantren-based economic system, this research offers an alternative perspective on business model development that moves beyond purely market-oriented approaches. In doing so, it enriches the literature on business transformation and regional economic development by highlighting the potential of Islamic boarding schools as emerging actors within local economic ecosystems.

At the same time, this study is limited by its focus on a single case study within one pesantren environment, which means that the findings should be interpreted within the specific context of the institution studied. Future research could extend this inquiry by examining similar economic models in pesantren with different organizational structures, regional contexts, or economic capacities. Comparative studies involving multiple pesantren, or quantitative analyses that measure the broader economic impact of pesantren-based enterprises, would help deepen our understanding of their contribution to regional development. Despite these limitations, the findings of this research suggest that strengthening pesantren-based economic initiatives holds considerable promise for fostering local economic resilience. In the long term, the emergence of economically independent pesantren may not only support the sustainability of Islamic educational institutions but also play a meaningful role in reinforcing the foundations of a more inclusive and resilient national economy.

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