

Social Entrepreneurship in Islamic Educational Institutions: Financial Independence Strategy at Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the implementation of *social entrepreneurship* (SE) at the Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School as a strategy to overcome significant economic pressures resulting from dependence on traditional financing sources, in order to achieve financial independence and sustainability. Using a qualitative case study approach with data from interviews, observations, and documentation, this study found that Gontor successfully integrated the philosophy of “berdikari” through the diversification of productive business units managed professionally under a transparent productive waqf system. This model rests on four pillars: income diversification, reinvestment, efficiency, and human resource empowerment. These findings have resulted in significant impacts, including expanding access to education through scholarships, improving staff welfare, and creating local jobs. The tension between profit and social mission is addressed through the implementation of SROI framework and program capacity building. Based on this success, it is recommended that other Islamic boarding schools replicate the Gontor model by adopting the principles of productive waqf, business diversification, and the use of SROI framework to ensure a balance between profitability and social mission.

Keywords: *Financial Independence, Social Entrepreneurship, Islamic Boarding Schools, Productive Waqf*



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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the Islamic education landscape in Indonesia faces complex challenges in balancing the preservation of traditional Islamic values with the demands of modernity and sustainable financial independence. Islamic boarding schools, as the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, are experiencing significant economic pressure due to their dependence on donations, government assistance, and student fees, which are often insufficient to cover the operation and development of adequate educational infrastructure. Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs shows that 68% of the 28,194 Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia are experiencing financial difficulties that hinder improvements in the quality of education and the welfare of Islamic teachers. Amid these

limitations, the concept of social entrepreneurship has emerged as an alternative paradigm that promises innovative solutions by integrating socio-religious missions with sustainable business strategies to create financial independence without sacrificing spiritual and educational values and Indonesia has a vast pesantren ecosystem, yet many small and remote pesantren operate with fragile cash flow because they rely on student fees, irregular donations, and unstable business income, while the costs of student meals, utilities, learning materials, dormitory maintenance, and teacher honoraria keep rising, and higher distribution costs make basic goods more expensive outside urban centers. Government support helps, but it often covers only specific components, so pesantren must still finance many routine and development needs, and access to programs remains uneven because smaller pesantren frequently face administrative constraints and limited business capacity. Unequal access to capital, business mentoring, and market networks slows economic strengthening, and the technology gap, including weak internet, costly devices, and limited electricity, makes it difficult for remote pesantren to use digital tools to improve efficiency and expand income (Kawakip, 2020). Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School, as one of the largest and most influential Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia with more than 20,000 students and a global alumni network, has demonstrated a successful model of financial independence through diversification of productive business units that is worthy of academic study as a best practice for other Islamic educational institutions (Triyawan & Sa'idah, 2022).

The concept of social entrepreneurship in the context of Islamic educational institutions represents a unique synthesis of an entrepreneurial mindset with a socio-religious mission oriented toward both social value creation and economic sustainability. According to Dees, as quoted in the research (García-Jurado et al., 2021). Social entrepreneurship is defined as an innovative activity that creates social value through the combination of resources in new ways to explore and exploit opportunities to create sustainable social change. From an Islamic perspective, this concept is in line with the principle of *falah* (holistic welfare) and *maqashid sharia* which emphasizes the protection of religion (*hifz al-din*), life (*hifz al-nafs*), reason (*hifz al-aql*), descendants (*hifz al-nasl*), and property (*hifz al-mal*) as the main objectives of Islamic law (Ascarya et al., 2024). Study (Findiana & Bahar, 2023) revealed that Islamic educational institutions adopting a social entrepreneurship model demonstrated a 73% increase in financial independence and were able to allocate more resources to scholarships for underprivileged students, improve teacher welfare, and develop educational facilities. Transforming Islamic boarding schools from institutions dependent on charity to productive and financially independent entities is a necessity in facing the complex challenges of 21st-century education, which require continuous investment in technology, infrastructure, and human resource development.

Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School has implemented a social entrepreneurship model since the Trimurti leadership era (KH. Imam Zarkasyi, KH. Zainuddin Fananie, and KH. Imam Syubani) in 1926 with the philosophy of "*berdikari*" (standing on one's own feet) which has become the organization's DNA to date. The Gontor Islamic boarding school's business model includes diversified productive business units such

as the Islamic boarding school cooperative, Darussalam Press printing, bookstores and student supplies, agricultural and livestock units, food processing industries, educational and training services, and property investments that are professionally managed with modern management principles but still based on Islamic values. However, the implementation of social entrepreneurship in Islamic boarding schools also faces various challenges such as resistance to change from traditionalists, limited managerial competencies, potential conflicts between business orientation and educational missions, and the complexity of maintaining a balance between profit generation and social missions.

Empirical studies on social entrepreneurship in Islamic educational institutions are still relatively limited, especially those that comprehensively analyze the strategy, implementation, and impact of social business models in the context of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia. Previous research tends to focus on partial aspects such as Islamic boarding school financial management, productive business units, or students' entrepreneurial orientation without integrating a holistic perspective on how social entrepreneurship contributes to financial independence and the achievement of the school's socio-educational mission. This research gap is significant considering the enormous potential of Islamic boarding schools as agents of socio-economic transformation that require sustainable business models to maintain their existence and improve the quality of education in an era of disruption. Furthermore, the literature on social entrepreneurship in the Islamic context is still dominated by conceptual-normative studies that have not sufficiently explored empirical practices and lessons learned from successful Islamic boarding schools like Gontor, which can serve as models for replication for other Islamic educational institutions. (Stephan et al., 2015) emphasizes the importance of context-specific analysis in understanding social entrepreneurship because cultural, institutional, and religious factors greatly influence how social business models are constructed and implemented, which in the context of Islamic boarding schools have unique characteristics that are different from social enterprises in general.

This study aims to comprehensively analyze the implementation of social entrepreneurship at the Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School as a financial independence strategy by identifying the business model, governance mechanisms, success factors, implementation challenges, and resulting socio-economic impacts. The urgency of this research is based on the urgent need to develop a sustainable model of Islamic boarding school financial independence amidst limited resources and the increasing complexity of educational challenges, as well as Gontor's potential as a best practice that has proven successful for almost a century in maintaining financial independence without sacrificing the quality of education and the integrity of Islamic values.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of a contextually relevant social entrepreneurship framework for Islamic educational institutions by integrating the perspectives of entrepreneurship theory, Islamic economics, and educational management within a holistic analytical framework. Practically, the findings of this research are expected to provide strategic guidance for Islamic boarding school administrators, Islamic education

policymakers, and other stakeholders in designing and implementing social business models that can increase financial independence while strengthening the socio-educational mission of Islamic boarding schools as centers for developing quality and noble human resources. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the transformation of Islamic boarding schools from institutions dependent on charity to productive, independent, and sustainable social enterprises in realizing the vision of superior and inclusive Islamic education for all levels of society.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine how social entrepreneurship operates at Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School as a strategy for financial independence. The study purposively selects Gontor as the case because it has a long institutional track record in developing and sustaining diversified productive business units under a clearly articulated “berdikari” philosophy, it has institutional scale and governance structures that allow observation of multiple business units and decision layers, and it is widely recognized as a reference point for other pesantren seeking replicable practices in economic self-reliance. The research subjects include pesantren leaders, managers of productive business units, religious teachers (ustadz), senior students (santri), alumni, and local community leaders, selected through purposive and snowball sampling to capture perspectives from strategic leadership, daily operations, beneficiaries, and external stakeholders. Data collection uses in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation review to capture practices, routines, and governance mechanisms in their natural context, and the study applies method triangulation to strengthen the credibility of findings. Thematic analysis guides data analysis through a transparent procedure.

The researcher first familiarizes with the dataset through repeated reading of transcripts, field notes, and documents, then generates initial codes using a combination of deductive codes derived from the study focus (business model, governance, success factors, challenges, impacts) and inductive codes that emerge from participants’ accounts. The researcher groups codes into candidate themes by identifying recurring patterns, relationships, and contrasts across informant groups and data types, then reviews themes against the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and clear boundaries between themes. The researcher refines and defines the final themes by writing analytic memos that explain what each theme captures, how it connects to the research questions, and which evidence supports it, and the researcher constructs an analytical narrative that integrates quotes, observational evidence, and documents to support interpretations. To ensure validity and trustworthiness, the study applies triangulation across sources and methods, member checking by confirming key interpretations with selected informants, prolonged engagement through 4–6 months of fieldwork, audit trails that document coding and theme decisions, and reflective journaling to manage researcher positionality and reduce bias. The research prioritizes ethics by obtaining official permission from the institution, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and securing informed consent for interviews and

observations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Entrepreneurship Models and Strategies at Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School

Based on the results of an in-depth interview with Ustadz Ahmad Hidayat (pseudonym), one of the senior administrators who has served for more than two decades, it was revealed that the Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School implements a very unique social entrepreneurship model by integrating the “Panca Jiwa” philosophy and the “Gontor Motto” as the spiritual and operational foundation of all productive business units. In a warm conversation in his office, he explained that “we never view business as something separate from the educational mission, but rather as an instrument to realize the independence and sustainability of quality Islamic education.” Participatory observation over four months in various business units revealed that the Islamic boarding school has a variety of productive business units that include the Pondok Modern Cooperative, Darussalam Press Printing, agricultural and livestock units, bookstores and student supplies, food processing industries, educational and training services, and property investments, all of which are managed with the principle of professionalism while remaining rooted in Islamic values. This finding is in line with research (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024) which states that business unit diversification is a key strategy in building the financial resilience of Islamic boarding schools in the face of uncertain economic dynamics. What’s interesting from my observations is how each business unit is managed with a clear organizational structure, separating managerial functions from educational ones, yet remains under the supervision of the Waqf Board, which ensures that every business decision remains aligned with the Islamic education mission that is the soul of the Islamic boarding school.

Gontor’s financial independence strategy is built on four fundamental pillars that I discovered through an in-depth analysis of interview transcripts and the boarding school’s policy documents. First, diversification of revenue sources aims to reduce the risk of dependence on a single source of funding, as expressed by the Head of the Boarding School’s Economics Division, who stated that “we have learned from history that dependence on donations or external assistance makes boarding schools vulnerable to changes in donor policies and economic conditions.” Second, reinvestment of profits for capacity building and sustainable business expansion, where every rupiah generated is returned to the education of students, the welfare of teachers, and infrastructure development. Third, operational efficiency through the application of modern management principles that do not conflict with Islamic values, such as strategic planning, quality control, and a transparent accountability system. Fourth, empowerment of internal human resources through ongoing training and development of entrepreneurial competencies, which serve as long-term investments for the boarding school. These findings confirm the research (Chatterjee et al., 2021) which emphasizes that the success of social entrepreneurship depends heavily on an organization’s ability to integrate business strategy with its social values. In interviews with

managers of the Pondok Modern Cooperative, researchers found that the market penetration strategy not only focuses on the internal Islamic boarding school community but also reaches the general public and a global alumni network spread across various countries, creating a mutually supportive economic ecosystem.

The governance mechanisms implemented by Gontor in managing social entrepreneurship demonstrate a sophisticated balance between business accountability and the integrity of Islamic values through a system of checks and balances involving various parties. My documentation study revealed that the Islamic boarding school's organizational structure positions the Waqf Board as the asset owner, delegating operational management to the Kyai (Islamic scholars) and the Daily Board. The latter then forms a Business Management Board to coordinate all productive business units with a strict periodic reporting system.

What is very interesting about *Focus Group Discussion* The key to the business unit managers' understanding is their recognition that each unit has Key Performance Indicators that measure not only the achievement of financial targets but also social impact indicators such as contributions to student scholarships, local employment, and the economic empowerment of the surrounding community. Ustadz Abdullah (pseudonym), a member of the Waqf Board, confidently explained that "the productive waqf system we implement ensures that Islamic boarding school assets cannot be sold or transferred for personal gain, but must be managed productively to generate sustainable benefits for Islamic education." Observations of internal and external audit practices demonstrate a strong commitment to transparency and accountability, with internal audits conducted every semester by an independent team consisting of alumni with accounting competencies, while external audits are conducted annually to ensure the credibility of financial reports. These findings align with the principles of good governance in social enterprises emphasized by (Formentini & Taticchi, 2016), which states that effective governance mechanisms are a prerequisite for the sustainability of hybrid organizations facing institutional complexity.

The innovative business model developed by Gontor demonstrates extraordinary creativity in adapting to changes in the external environment and the internal needs of Islamic boarding schools through a proactive, entrepreneurial approach. During my in-depth observation at the Darussalam Press Printing Unit, I was amazed to see how this unit not only prints books for the Islamic boarding school but has also grown into a printing company serving other Islamic educational institutions, commercial publishers, and even government agencies with very adequate production capacity. The manager of Darussalam Press shared that innovations in digital printing technology and an online pre-order system have transformed the way they do business, expanding their market reach to neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam. Meanwhile, the Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Unit implements a very interesting integrated farming system concept, combining organic rice cultivation, cattle and goat farming, and compost processing that not only meets the internal consumption needs of the Islamic boarding school but also supplies the local market. The most significant aspect of this innovation is how these

business units not only function as a source of income but also serve as practical learning laboratories for students in agriculture and entrepreneurship subjects, creating authentic experiential learning. This finding is in line with the concept of experiential learning put forward. (Rahim et al., 2022) which emphasizes the importance of hands-on learning in developing entrepreneurial competencies. In interviews with several students involved in the business unit, they revealed that this practical experience was far more memorable and meaningful than theoretical classroom learning.

The factors for the successful implementation of social entrepreneurship at Gontor, identified through thematic analysis, include leadership, organizational culture, human resource competency, stakeholder support, and strategic alignment between the business mission and the educational mission. In interviews with various key informants, the most dominant theme emerging was the visionary leadership of the Kyai, who have had an entrepreneurial orientation since the Trimurti era, who have instilled the DNA of independence in all aspects of Islamic boarding school life. The Kyai proudly stated that “the founders of the Islamic boarding school have instilled the philosophy of ‘berdikari’ (self-reliance) which has become the spirit of all our activities, both in education and economics, so that independence is not just a slogan but is truly practiced in daily life.”

From *Focus Group Discussion* Interviews with senior students revealed that most of them felt that involvement in Islamic boarding school business units had shaped their entrepreneurial mindset and practical skills that would be invaluable when they returned to their communities. Managerial competencies developed through ongoing training programs and the recruitment of alumni with expertise in business and management were critical factors in the professionalization of business unit management, with the majority of managers being Gontor alumni who had pursued further education in economics, management, or engineering. These findings confirm the research conducted by (Rahman et al., 2020) which emphasizes the importance of entrepreneurial orientation and managerial capability in the success of social entrepreneurship in Islamic educational institutions, identifies that internal and external stakeholder support is an important enabler in overcoming resistance to change and building the legitimacy of social enterprises in religious environments.

Socio-Economic Impacts and Challenges of Implementing Social Entrepreneurship

The socio-economic impact of the implementation of social entrepreneurship at the Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School shows a very significant contribution, not only to the internal financial independence of the Islamic boarding school but also to the welfare of the surrounding community and the development of the broader Islamic economic ecosystem. In an in-depth interview with the Head of the Student Affairs Section, he expressed with great emotion that “without income from productive business units, we would not be able to provide access to quality education to thousands of students from poor families who are a priority of the Islamic boarding school’s social mission.” Observations of the scholarship program show a very fair selection system based on economic need and

academic achievement, providing educational opportunities to students from all provinces in Indonesia and even from various countries, with a significant proportion of scholarship recipients coming from families with very limited economic conditions.

What was most touching about the observations was how the scholarship recipients demonstrated extraordinary dedication to learning and contributing to the life of the Islamic boarding school, proving that this social investment yields returns far beyond financial calculations. This finding confirms the research. (Setiawan et al., 2024) which states that social entrepreneurship in Islamic educational institutions can increase the inclusivity and accessibility of education for marginalized groups, in line with the principle of social justice in Islam, which emphasizes equal opportunity. In addition to the scholarship program, business unit revenue allocation is also used to improve the welfare of religious teachers and employees through a competitive salary system and various benefits, as well as continuous development of educational infrastructure to ensure optimal learning quality.

The economic impact on the communities surrounding the Islamic boarding school demonstrates a very real multiplier effect through job creation, knowledge transfer, and stimulation of local economic activity that contributes to poverty reduction and improved community well-being. From the personnel data I obtained, it was revealed that Gontor's productive business units absorb thousands of workers, a very high proportion of whom come from the communities surrounding the Islamic boarding school in several sub-districts, with wages above the regional minimum wage standard. Interviews with community leaders in Gontor Village provided a very interesting perspective on the economic transformation that has occurred: "The existence of the Islamic boarding school business units has changed the village's economic structure from one previously based on subsistence agriculture to a more diverse one with trade, services, and small industry sectors that serve the needs of the Islamic boarding school and students." Observations around the Islamic boarding school complex revealed the development of hundreds of locally owned micro and small businesses, including food stalls, grocery stores, laundry services, transportation, and rental accommodation that serve the needs of students and visiting families, creating a dynamic and mutually beneficial local economic ecosystem. *Focus Group Discussion* with local entrepreneurs, almost all participants acknowledged that the existence of Islamic boarding schools had significantly increased their income, with some of them even being able to develop their businesses to a larger level.

The transfer of entrepreneurial knowledge and skills to Islamic boarding school students as part of the hidden curriculum demonstrates a highly strategic long-term impact in shaping a generation of Muslims with an entrepreneurial mindset and the capability to become agents of socio-economic change in society. From a survey I conducted of hundreds of senior students, the majority of respondents expressed a strong interest in entrepreneurship after graduation. Most had practical experience involved in managing Islamic boarding school business units through internal internships, and almost all stated that entrepreneurship learning in Islamic boarding schools was far more applicable than theoretical learning in the classroom. An interview with the coordinator of the

entrepreneurship education program revealed a very interesting learning philosophy: “We don’t just teach business theory but provide opportunities for students to be directly involved in the operation of business units, from planning, production, marketing, to performance evaluation, so they gain in-depth and authentic experiential learning.”

Observations of the “Santripreneur Incubator” program launched several years ago demonstrate extraordinary enthusiasm from Islamic boarding school students. Dozens have participated in the business incubation program, with several business proposals receiving initial funding from the Islamic boarding school. Several businesses have already operated commercially with promising results. Most encouraging is alumni tracking data, which shows that a significant proportion of alumni have become entrepreneurs in various sectors, some working in the corporate sector in managerial positions, and the rest contributing as educators or working in the public sector and non-profit organizations. These findings confirm research (Sulistiyowati et al., 2025) about the effectiveness of experiential learning in entrepreneurship education, as well as the integration of entrepreneurship education with real business practices in Islamic boarding schools can produce graduates with superior entrepreneurial competencies.

The challenges of implementing social entrepreneurship at Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School reveal the stark complexity of balancing commercial business logic with a socio-educational mission, managing institutional complexity, and maintaining legitimacy among internal and external stakeholders. From a thematic analysis of interview transcripts, I identified five main, interrelated categories of challenges. First, the tension between profit orientation and social mission, which has the potential to lead to mission drift, where the pressure to generate profits can shift the focus away from the socio-educational mission. Second, the limited managerial and entrepreneurial competencies among Islamic religious teachers (ustadz), the majority of whom have a religious background without formal training in business and management. Third, resistance from traditionalists who view business activities as contaminating the sanctity of the Islamic educational mission and distracting from the primary focus on religious learning. Fourth, the complexity of measuring and reporting social impact, which is intangible and difficult to quantify. Fifth, increasingly fierce market competition from commercial businesses that have higher operational efficiency and are not burdened by a social mission. Interviews with members of the Daily Management revealed a common dilemma: “we are often in difficult situations when we have to decide between maximizing profits for financial sustainability or prioritizing social impacts that might reduce profitability, such as in the case of pricing products that are affordable for Islamic boarding school students versus higher market prices.”

The strategy developed by Gontor to address the challenges of implementing social entrepreneurship demonstrates a very interesting adaptive approach, combining internal capacity building, governance system innovation, and legitimacy building through communicating values to stakeholders. From the documentation I studied, the Islamic boarding school has initiated a very comprehensive capacity building program, including

business management and entrepreneurship training for religious teachers and business unit managers in collaboration with universities and professional training institutions, recruitment of external professionals with specific expertise for strategic positions, a mentoring and coaching system by successful alumni who have become entrepreneurs or corporate executives, and comparative studies to successful social enterprises both at home and abroad to learn best practices.

An interview with the capacity building program coordinator revealed a strong commitment: "Investment in human resource development is our strategic priority because the success of social entrepreneurship depends heavily on the quality of the people who manage it, not just on the business model or the availability of capital." Particularly innovative is the development of a Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework that integrates financial performance indicators with social impact indicators in the business unit performance evaluation system, providing a balanced weighting between financial achievements and social impact. Observations indicate that this system has improved the alignment of business activities with the Islamic boarding school's social mission, with the majority of business unit managers stating that the SROI framework provides clarity in strategic decision-making involving trade-offs between profit and social mission. To overcome resistance from traditionalists, Islamic boarding school leaders consistently communicate that entrepreneurial activity is not only permitted in Islam but is highly encouraged, citing the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) practice as a successful trader and various Islamic teachings that encourage Muslims to be economically independent. These findings confirm the research (Crucke & Decramer, 2016) which states that the development of a hybrid performance measurement system is key to managing institutional complexity in social enterprises, and emphasizes the importance of continuous learning and adaptation in social enterprise governance to respond to dynamic challenges faced in a constantly changing environment.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the implementation of social entrepreneurship at the Darussalam Gontor Islamic Boarding School has successfully created a sustainable financial independence model through the integration of the "berdikari" philosophy with the diversification of productive business units managed professionally but still rooted in Islamic values. This model is built on four strategic pillars: diversification of revenue sources, reinvestment of profits, operational efficiency, and empowerment of human resources, supported by a governance mechanism based on a productive waqf system. The success of this model is not only measured by the financial aspect but also by the resulting social impact, including expanding access to education through scholarship programs, improving the welfare of ustadz and employees, creating jobs for the surrounding community, and transferring entrepreneurial knowledge to students. Despite facing challenges such as tension between profit orientation and social mission, limited managerial competency, and

resistance from traditionalists, Gontor has developed adaptive strategies through capacity building programs, the development of a Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework, and consistent communication of values. These findings provide theoretical contributions in developing a social entrepreneurship framework that is contextually relevant for Islamic educational institutions, as well as practical implications as best practices for other Islamic boarding schools in realizing the transformation towards productive, independent, and sustainable social enterprises.

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