MALACCA: Journal of Management and Business Development
Vol. 3, No. 1 (April 2026): 41-59
E-ISSN: 3047-8782

Economic Protective Strategy in Building Pesantren Independence: A Case Study of Pesantren Misbahul Ulum, Aceh, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies and develops a model of economic protective strategy aimed at enhancing the institutional independence of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), using Pesantren Misbahul Ulum (PMMU) in Aceh, Indonesia, as an empirical case. Employing a qualitative, descriptive single-case design, the research involved seven purposively selected key informants, including the institutional leader, vice-leaders, and senior staff. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis, and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, with source triangulation and member checking to ensure trustworthiness. The findings reveal four integrated protective dimensions: collective entrepreneurial leadership rooted in Islamic democratic governance (shura); innovation management anchored in prophetic principles; trust-based institutional capital as a primary economic resource; and the incremental development of an alumni-led entrepreneurial ecosystem. This study contributes the Protective Economic Strategy (PES) Model, a four-component framework that synthesizes Islamic entrepreneurship, social capital, and institutional economics in an empirically grounded configuration, incorporating theological-normative trust capital as a functional analytic element. The model offers a replicable capacity-building pathway toward financial autonomy for pesantren in Indonesia and other Muslim-majority contexts. Future research should quantitatively validate the PES Model across multiple pesantren and assess its applicability to other value-based educational institutions.

Keywords: Economic Protective Strategy; Pesantren Independence; Islamic Entrepreneurship; Social Entrepreneurship; Educational Management

INTRODUCTION

Across the Indonesian archipelago, pesantren represent the oldest indigenous Islamic educational institutions, serving concurrently as centers for moral development, intellectual growth, and community economic empowerment. However, field observations reveal a persistent paradox: although the number of pesantren continues to increase, most remain reliant on a single source of income. National statistics show that among approximately 38,362 registered pesantren, over seventy percent depend primarily on student fees, while fewer than twenty percent have established self-sustaining business units (Kementerian Agama R, 2023; Santoso & Huda, 2023). This reliance results in institutional vulnerability, whereby fluctuations in enrollment or reductions in donor support jeopardize operational stability, pedagogical innovation, and institutional advancement (Qomar, 2022; Wahid, 2020).

This study originates from observed empirical conditions rather than preconceived theoretical models, revealing three recurrent patterns in the field. First, widespread and structurally entrenched financial dependency remains a significant challenge for many pesantren institutions. Second, those institutions that have successfully overcome this dependency, often citing exemplars such as Pondok Modern Gontor and Pesantren Sidogiri, demonstrate that value-based Islamic schools can function effectively as social enterprises, and in some cases, outperform conventional models (Abdullah, 2018; Ridwan-Makassary et al., 2021). Third, the policy environment has markedly shifted toward promoting autonomy; since 2021, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs has implemented the flagship Pesantren Independence (Kemandirian Pesantren) programme, fostering the development of thousands of pesantren-owned enterprises and reorienting state support from direct financial transfers to capacity building.

National reports emphasize that economically resilient pesantren need not rely on external patrons, highlighting the emergence of hundreds of new business units that serve as drivers of national economic growth, and the critical importance of cultivating entrepreneurial values within these (Antara, 2024; Kompas, 2024; Republika, 2021). Additionally, documented initiatives such as ministry-backed santripreneur schemes and alumni-led village enterprises illustrate practical translations of this policy framework (Republika, 2023). Collectively, these findings establish pesantren independence as both a significant national priority and an uneven empirical achievement, rendering the investigation of successful mechanisms analytically valuable.

Table 1.
Growth and Economic Condition of Indonesian Pesantren, 2019–2023

Year	Pesantren	Santri (students)	Independent (%)	Fee-dependent (%)
2019	27,722	4,285,867	16.3	76.4
2020	29,151	4,389,121	17.1	74.8
2021	31,385	4,506,772	18	73.2
2022	34,510	4,723,044	19.2	71.9
2023	38,362	5,004,120	20.4	70.1

Source: Kementerian Agama RI (2023) and Badan Pusat Statistik (2023)

Table 1 elucidates the paradox with precision. The proportion of independent pesantren increased steadily from 16.3 percent in 2019 to 20.4 percent in 2023; however, the majority dependent on fees remained above seventy percent throughout this period. Consequently, quantitative growth has outpaced any substantive transformation in economic governance, rendering financial autonomy an urgent yet largely unmet strategic priority (Wibisono et al., 2022).

Over the past decade, scholarship on pesantren economic independence has matured, focusing on diverse aspects such as pesantren business units (Apip et al., 2024; Fahmi & Aswirna, 2023), entrepreneurial leadership of the kiai (Haedari, 2019; M A M Prasetyo & Zulkhairi, 2022), productive endowments or waqf (Çizakça, 2023; Kahf, 2019), and community-based social entrepreneurship (Ridwan-Makassary et al., 2021; Zuhdi, 2021). Within this corpus, studies specifically examining pesantren in Aceh have addressed organizational effectiveness and governance design (M A M Prasetyo et al., 2021; M A M Prasetyo & Zulkhairi, 2022; Zulkhairi & Fikri, 2025).

This study addresses three key gaps: the lack of an integrated "protective strategy" model to safeguard pesantren independence from external and environmental threats; limited research on pesantren within the unique post-conflict, Shariʿa-governed context of Aceh, which fosters a distinct entrepreneurial logic; and the predominance of descriptive studies without an operational conceptual model. To fill these gaps, the study develops an empirical, context-sensitive, and potentially replicable Protective Economic Strategy (PES) Model.

This study is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: social entrepreneurship, which explains how mission-driven institutions generate economic and social value simultaneously (Austin et al., 2006; Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018; Mair & Martí, 2021; Rashid, 2019; Zahra et al., 2009); institutional economics, emphasizing the role of norms, trust, and rules in shaping economic behavior (North, 2022; Williamson, 2015); and Islamic entrepreneurship, which offers a prophetically based normative perspective on entrepreneurship within Islamic institutions (Al-Buraey, 2019; Beekun & Badawi, 1999). The study aims to identify economic protective strategies employed by PMMU to achieve institutional independence, analyze the entrepreneurial values supporting these strategies, and develop a conceptual model of protective strategy for pesantren governance nationwide. It argues that genuine economic independence requires a holistic protective strategy—including leadership, innovation, trust capital, and entrepreneurial ecosystems—beyond mere asset accumulation, defined as institutional actions that safeguard pesantren economic capacity from external pressures such as donor dependency, fee fluctuations, and environmental disruptions while reinforcing internal resilience (Mair & Martí, 2021; Wibisono et al., 2022).

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive design within an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The paradigm is appropriate because the phenomenon under study the construction of an economic protective strategy within a pesantren is complex, meaning-laden, and not reducible to quantitative variables without forfeiting contextual depth. An instrumental single-case design (Yin, 2018) was used, with Pesantren Misbahul Ulum (PMMU) in Aceh Province as the unit of analysis. PMMU constitutes a theoretically revelatory case: a pesantren that has accomplished an entrepreneurial transformation

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Vol. 3, No. 1 (April 2026): 41-59
E-ISSN: 3047-8782

across two decades of stable leadership within a post-conflict, Shariʿa-governed environment.

Seven informants were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of role relevance and depth of knowledge of pesantren economic governance (Patton, 2015). The composition comprised the institutional leader as principal key informant; the second vice-leader and the pesantren secretary as core informants; and four supplementary informants senior teachers and alumni who manage business units. Theoretical saturation was reached at the fifth informant, and the final two interviews served confirmation and triangulation (Morse, 2015). All informants provided written informed consent before participation. Each informant received an information sheet transparently describing the study's aims, procedures, and participant rights; confidentiality was guaranteed; and data were used for scholarly purposes only. Data collection respected the social and religious norms of the pesantren as a distinctive value environment.

Data were collected through three complementary methods consistent with Denzin's triangulation principle: semi-structured in-depth interviews of 60–90 minutes guided by a theoretically derived protocol; participant observation across a 30-day field engagement at PMMU facilities; and documentary analysis of institutional policies, meeting minutes, and accessible financial records. Analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021) of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Trustworthiness was secured through the four criteria of (Lincoln & Guba, 2020): credibility (source triangulation and member checking with three key informants), transferability (thick description), dependability (an audit trail of analytic decisions), and confirmability (reflexive memo-writing throughout analysis).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the seven interview transcripts produced a systematic codification mapping empirical excerpts to categories of entrepreneurial value. Table 2 presents the selected excerpts together with their codes and the entrepreneurial value each expresses, providing the inductive evidentiary base from which the protective-strategy model was subsequently abstracted.

Table 2.
Interview Excerpts, Thematic Codes, and Entrepreneurial Values

No.	Interview Excerpt	Thematic Code	Entrepreneurial Value
1	*We built a canteen and a mini-market on the land we already had; the turnover supports the pesantren, especially teacher welfare. (Leader)*	Autonomous business-unit development	Opportunity recognition
2	*To build something you first need trust, and from that trust the pesantren grows larger. (Vice-Leader II)*	Trust (social) capital	Reputation building
3	*We practise Islamic democratic leadership exercised collectively, drawing on the teachers' potential through a division of tasks. (Leader)*	Collective-democratic leadership	Shared value creation
4	*Any innovation we create must accord with Islam and fit the needs of Aceh. (Leader)*	Islamic innovation filtering	Context-sensitive innovativeness
5	*We use the Prophetic pattern siddiq, tabligh, amanah, fathonah as the benchmark of leadership effectiveness. (Leader)*	Prophetic leadership	Value-based integrity
6	*The mini-market is run by alumni and the canteen is leased to nearby residents; we also apply simplicity to contain spending. (Leader)*	Community entrepreneurial ecosystem	Inclusive resourcefulness
7	*We designed our own curriculum, combining the salafi and national curricula, and added a Qur'an memorisation programme and talent development. (Leader)*	Hybrid curricular innovation	Differentiation
8	*He never asks for help; if told to write a grant proposal he declines, holding that*	Proposal-free self-reliance	Autonomy orientation

No.	Interview Excerpt	Thematic Code	Entrepreneurial Value
	building something requires trust. (Vice-Leader II)		
9	*The leader hopes PMMU can rival Gontor and urges the foundation to build food and oil-palm ventures so as not to depend on parents. (Vice-Leader II)*	Long-term independence vision	Strategic proactiveness
10	*Allah will not change a people's condition until they change themselves; success rests on effort, not mere luck. (Leader)*	Internal locus of control	Achievement motivation

Source: Field interviews (2024)

Two distinct patterns emerge from Table 2. First, the entrepreneurial values expressed by the informants do not reflect the profit-maximizing orientation typical of conventional firms; rather, they embody mission-aligned dispositions such as opportunity recognition, autonomy orientation, value-based integrity, and achievement motivation, wherein economic actions are consistently subordinated to institutional values. This finding supports the social entrepreneurship premise that mission-driven organizations simultaneously pursue economic and social value rather than trade off between them (Mair & Martí, 2021; Zahra et al., 2009). Second, these values form a coherent, interconnected system rather than a scattered set of traits. Opportunity recognition (excerpt 1) is governed by an autonomy orientation that rejects external grants (excerpt 8), legitimized through value-based integrity (excerpt 5), and projected forward by strategic proactiveness (excerpt 9). This codification reveals an interlocking value system in which each entrepreneurial disposition reinforces the others, indicating a systemic, layered underlying strategy rather than a reactive or incidental approach. This analytic foundation underpins the comparative mapping presented in Table 3.

Comparative mapping: independence dimensions and protective strategies

Cross-data analysis yielded a comparative mapping between the dimensions of pesantren independence and the protective strategy securing each. Table 3 sets out this correspondence, demonstrating that independence at PMMU is a multidimensional construct rather than a purely financial outcome.

Table 3.
Dimensions of Pesantren Independence and Their Protective Strategies

Dimension of Independence	Protective strategy
Fiscal independence	Revenue diversification through canteen and mini-market units and planned agribusiness; a principle of expenditure simplicity sustaining debt-free, non-fee income.
Governance independence	Collective Islamic-democratic (shura) leadership operating through a tiered foundation–leader–teacher–student structure, with weekly and monthly deliberative forums distributing accountability.
Value and identity independence	Normative filtering of innovation and prophetic leadership (siddiq, tabligh, amanah, fathonah), reinforced by a Qur'anically grounded internal locus of control that stabilises institutional culture.
Human-resource independence	Competence-based teacher placement, postgraduate study opportunities, competitive talent development for students, and the transfer of business-unit management to alumni.
Social and reputational independence	Institutional trust capital, the deliberate refusal of grant dependency, and the inclusion of the local community in the pesantren's economic ecosystem.

Source: Cross-analysis of interview, observation, and documentary data (authors, 2024).

Table 3 demonstrates that independence at PMMU cannot be reduced solely to its financial dimension. Five distinct dimensions fiscal, governance, value and identity, human resource, and social-reputational each encompass dedicated protective strategies that collectively form a comprehensive system of institutional protection. This finding aligns with the institutional resilience perspective within institutional economics, which asserts that institutional durability depends on the diversification of capacities rather than the mere accumulation of financial assets. The interrelated entrepreneurial values identified in the interview data (Table 2) are operationalized, dimension by dimension, into the protective strategies mapped in Table 3. Thus, the progression moves from observed values to enacted strategies and then to realized dimensions of independence—precisely the sequence that the Discussion formalizes into a conceptual model, thereby grounding the study's contribution as analytical rather than merely descriptive.

Discussion

PMMU was founded in Aceh in the 1980s as a Shāfiʿi salafi pesantren. Under two decades of stable leadership it has moved through successive milestones: integrating the salafi and national curricula into a hybrid system; establishing canteen and cooperative or mini-market units as early steps toward fiscal independence; developing flagship Qur'an-memorisation and classical-text programmes that strengthen recruitment; building separate facilities for male and female students; and raising academic standards through a cohort of postgraduate-qualified teachers. Provincial and national student achievements provide observable evidence that a protective strategy anchored in human-capital development has been applied consistently rather than rhetorically.

Collective Islamic entrepreneurial leadership

The first finding identifies collective entrepreneurial leadership as the foundation of PMMU's protective strategy. Moving beyond the traditional charismatic-patronal model centered on a single kiai, PMMU implements a collective leadership structure explicitly rooted in Islamic democratic deliberation (shura). This leadership operates through a tiered framework comprising the foundation, leader, vice-leaders, teaching council, dormitory supervisors, and student organization that fosters distributed intelligence and collective accountability. This approach aligns with Beekun and Badawi's (1999) proposition that effective Islamic leadership institutionalizes four prophetic attributes siddiq (integrity), tabligh (transparency), amanah (accountability), and fathonah (competence) as operational standards rather than mere ideals (Beekun & Badawi, 1999).

From an educational management perspective, this pattern exemplifies the characteristics of a learning organization. Distributing leadership enables knowledge to be accumulated and shared collectively, making innovation an organizational process rather than the initiative of an individual at the top. Weekly executive meetings and monthly community-wide forums serve as institutionalized infrastructures for knowledge exchange, forming the governance backbone of pesantren entrepreneurship. Similar findings on participatory and culturally aligned leadership in Acehnese pesantren further support the interpretation that distributed governance underpins organizational effectiveness. Functioning as a protective mechanism, this design reduces the risk of reliance on any single person and enhances the institution's adaptive capacity.

Filtered Islamic innovation and value-based risk management

The second dimension represents a filtered innovation mechanism, whereby every proposed change must undergo a normative Islamic evaluation prior to adoption. This filter is governed by three operational principles: the innovation must align with Islamic values; it must address the contextual needs of Aceh; and it must be subjected to multi-stakeholder consultation before implementation. This process transforms a potential legitimacy deficit into a legitimacy asset (Suchman, 2021). The Qur'an-memorization program serves as the clearest empirical example: initially resisted as a threat to the pesantren's established identity, it was piloted over two years and ultimately adopted as a flagship initiative. Rather than pursuing first-mover advantage, PMMU prioritized depth of social legitimacy, which over time created a strong barrier to exit among parents and the surrounding community.

This reconceptualizes innovation. While the Schumpeterian tradition characterizes innovation as disruptive (Zahra et al., 2009), the case of PMMU suggests that within a strong-identity institution, innovation functions as an integrative synthesis a creative reconciliation of inherited values with contemporary opportunities. The managerial implication is that normative due diligence prior to adoption does not serve as an entrepreneurial constraint but rather as a sophisticated risk-management mechanism that minimizes the social costs of innovation failure. This interpretation aligns with institutional theories explaining how value-based screening stabilizes organizational change (Abernikhina, 2025; Dempere et al., 2024; M A M Prasetyo & Zulkhairi, 2022).

Trust capital as primary economic capital

The third and most theoretically distinctive finding is the role of trust capital as PMMU's primary economic resource. A leadership principle of consistently refusing external grants and donor proposals paradoxically fosters a sustained flow of community support over nearly two decades. The underlying logic is that trust constitutes an appreciating asset, whose value increases over time when nurtured, unlike depreciating physical capital. This extends Putnam's social capital theory (Putnam, 2020) by demonstrating that, within an Islamic institution, trust capital assumes a theological dimension: the Qur'anic principle that a community's condition changes only through its own effort is internalized as an ethic of self-reliance, directly shaping a strategy to avoid dependency.

Accordingly, trust at PMMU is not merely a social-relational construct but also a theological-normative one endowed with intrinsic motivational power. From the perspective of institutional economics, this behavior exemplifies a credible commitment mechanism: by persistently declining external assistance, PMMU cultivates a reputation for managerial integrity that reduces information asymmetry and transaction costs in its interactions with the community. Consequently, parents entrusting their children to PMMU do not require elaborate formal contracts, as the institution's two-decade record of integrity functions as a stronger trust signal than any legal document. This finding aligns with research on trust-based organizational culture within Acehnese pesantren (Prasetyo et al., 2024)

Incremental and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem

The fourth dimension entails the development of an incremental, inclusive, and community-oriented entrepreneurial ecosystem. PMMU constructed this ecosystem progressively, beginning with a canteen leased to local residents, followed by a mini-market managed by alumni, and plans for an agribusiness venture centered on oil palm. This model integrates multiple value propositions simultaneously, including institutional revenue generation, alumni empowerment, local community inclusion, and entrepreneurial training for students through direct observation. Such inclusivity aligns

MALACCA: Journal of Management and Business Development
Vol. 3, No. 1 (April 2026): 41-59
E-ISSN: 3047-8782

with the principle of productive waqf in Islamic economics, which regards productive assets as instruments of community welfare rather than mere institutional accumulation.

Engaging alumni as business-unit managers fosters a loyalty network that transcends the conventional institution–alumnus relationship: alumni gain a direct economic interest in the pesantren's sustainability, thereby becoming active stakeholders who enhance institutional resilience beyond the institution's physical confines. In this regard, the alumni-based ecosystem functions as a mechanism of institutional extension, enabling the pesantren to mobilize resources without reliance on external grants. Investment in alumni is thus not only a moral obligation but also a strategic long-term economic investment that yields compounding returns.

The Protective Economic Strategy (PES) Model

The principal novelty of this study is the construction of the Protective Economic Strategy (PES) Model, which integrates four entrepreneurial components into a coherent pathway toward pesantren economic independence. The model crystallises a single explanatory proposition: Identification of Entrepreneurial Values, Strategy, Pesantren Economic Independence. Entrepreneurial values identified inductively in the data (Table 2) are operationalised into layered protective strategies, which in turn realise the dimensions of independence (Table 3) and, finally, the economically sovereign pesantren. Figure 1 presents the model.

MALACCA: Journal of Management and Business Development
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E-ISSN: 3047-8782

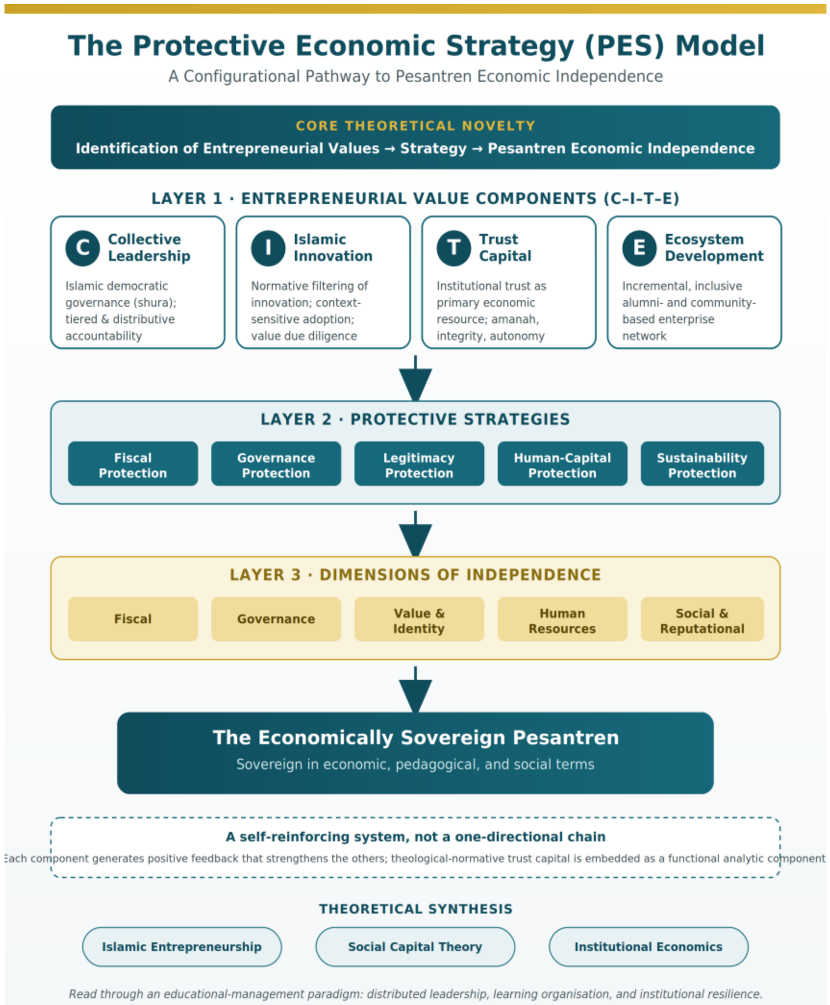

Figure 1.
The Protective Economic Strategy (PES) Model (Authors' Construction)

The model visualises the causal pathway from the four entrepreneurial components (C–I–T–E: Collective leadership, Islamic innovation, Trust capital, Ecosystem development) through layered protection to the dimensions of independence and, ultimately, the sovereign pesantren. The pathway is not a one-directional chain but a self-reinforcing system in which each component feeds positive returns to the others. The decisive novelty lies in embedding a theological-normative dimension trust capital grounded in prophetic values as a functional analytic component within a social-entrepreneurship framework that is conventionally secular-rational. The PES Model thereby contributes a configuration, rather than a checklist, in which Islamic entrepreneurship, social capital, and institutional economics are synthesised under an educational-management paradigm.

The PES Model carries social implications at three levels. At the pesantren level, it offers a governance blueprint that fee-dependent institutions can adopt to transform incrementally toward independence without sacrificing institutional identity. At the community level, the alumni-based entrepreneurial ecosystem generates economic spillovers through local employment and trade. At the national-policy level, the model gives the Ministry of Religious Affairs an empirical basis for designing pesantren-independence support as capacity building strengthening governance and managerial capability rather than as direct financial transfer, which can undermine institutional autonomy (Antara, 2024; Kompas, 2024).

Academically, this study contributes to four fields. In Islamic management studies, it provides empirical evidence that prophetic leadership attributes are not only normatively significant but also managerially effective as foundations for entrepreneurial decision-making. Within social entrepreneurship theory, it proposes expanding the concept of mission-driven value creation to incorporate a theological-normative dimension, which plays a decisive role in Islamic institutions. Regarding institutional economics, the study presents field evidence supporting trust capital as a partial substitute for formal financial capital under particular institutional conditions. In the field of Islamic educational management, it advances a new paradigm of protective independence, emphasizing a protective strategy rather than aggressive expansion as the most sustainable approach to autonomy for value-based educational institutions.

However, three limitations deserve acknowledgment. First, the single-case design limits statistical generalizability; thus, the Protective Economic Strategy (PES) Model remains a theoretical proposition requiring validation across diverse contexts. Second, the seven informants exclude students and parents, the principal stakeholders, resulting in an analysis predominantly from an institutional management perspective. Third, Aceh's post-conflict, Shariʿa-governed environment constitutes a unique boundary condition; therefore, replicating this study in non-Shariʿa regions would necessitate careful adaptation.

Consequently, future research should: conduct comparative multi-case studies involving at least five pesantren with varying independence levels to evaluate the PES Model's transferability; develop a quantitative survey instrument based on the four C–I–T–E components for national-level statistical validation; include perspectives of students and parents using a more inclusive mixed-methods approach; and explore the application of the PES Model to Islamic educational institutions in other countries such as Malaysia, Türkiye, and West Africa, thereby contributing to the development of a genuinely global theory of Islamic institutional entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSION

This study identified and developed the Protective Economic Strategy (PES) Model as an original conceptual framework for understanding and operationalizing entrepreneurship-based independence in pesantren. Through a qualitative case study at Pesantren Misbahul Ulum in Aceh involving seven key informants, the research found that economic independence is founded upon four integrated entrepreneurial components arranged along a C–I–T–E pathway: collective Islamic-democratic leadership grounded in shura; Islamic innovation filtering, which evaluates changes against religious values and contextual needs; trust-capital development that positions institutional trust as a primary economic resource; and incremental entrepreneurial ecosystem growth facilitated through alumni- and community-based business units. The study contributes in three main ways. Theoretically, it extends social entrepreneurship theory by incorporating a theological-normative dimension as a functional element rather than a mere contextual factor. Empirically, it presents the first systematic documentation of an economic protective strategy within a post-conflict Acehnese pesantren, addressing a significant contextual gap. Practically, it offers an adaptable governance blueprint for the numerous pesantren still grappling with financial dependency. The overarching conclusion asserts that authentic pesantren independence transcends financial achievement alone; it represents a multidimensional condition cultivated incrementally through consistent values, collective governance intelligence, and the nurturing of community trust as an invaluable economic asset. Consequently, the independent pesantren emerges as sovereign in economic, pedagogical, and social dimensions an ideal applicable not only to pesantren but also to value-based educational institutions globally.

Declarations

Author Contributions: All authors contributed jointly to the conceptualisation, field data collection, analysis, drafting, and final revision of this article.

Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent was obtained from every informant prior to participation in this study.

Declaration of Generative AI: Generative artificial-intelligence tools were used solely to assist with language editing, structural organisation, and reference formatting, and the authors reviewed all content and take full responsibility for the integrity and originality of the work.

Acknowledgments: The authors gratefully acknowledge the informants of Pesantren Misbahul Ulum, Aceh, for generously sharing the institutional experience and knowledge that made this study possible.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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