



The Role of Baitul Maal Wat Tamwil (BMT) in Realizing Economic Independence for Islamic Boarding Schools through Empowering Students at Al Bahjah Islamic Boarding School in Cirebon

Muhammad Amrullah Aufa^{1✉}, Toto Sukarnoto², Yucki Prihadi³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Bunga Bangsa Cirebon

Email : muhammadamrullahaufa4@gmail.com, totos3sukarnoto@gmail.com, yuckiprihadi@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study is motivated by the urgency of strengthening pesantren's economic independence as an effort to reduce dependence on external funding sources and to improve the welfare of santri. Baitul Maal wat Tamwil (BMT) Al Bahjah was chosen as the focus of this research due to its strategic role in empowering santri and supporting pesantren's economic development. The objectives of this study are to analyze the role of BMT in empowering santri, its contribution to pesantren's economic independence, as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors in its implementation. The study adopts the empowerment theory (Mardikanto), which emphasizes awareness, capacity building, and access provision, along with the concept of pesantren economic independence that highlights self-managed resources. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. The informants consisted of BMT managers, pesantren administrators, santri, and alumni. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman interactive model through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, techniques, and time. The findings reveal that BMT Al Bahjah actively empowers santri through financing programs, training, and business mentoring. BMT also significantly contributes to pesantren's economic independence by strengthening productive business units and reducing reliance on external funding sources. Supporting factors include the role of kiai, alumni networks, and available capital, while inhibiting factors include limited human resources and business risks. The study concludes that BMT Al Bahjah functions as a key driver of pesantren's economic independence through sustainable santri empowerment.

Keywords: *BMT, santri empowerment, pesantren economic independence*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools, or pesantren, in Indonesia hold significant potential for strengthening the community's economic base. According to data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, there are more than 36,000 pesantren across the country, with millions of students (santri) enrolled (Kemenag, 2024). This vast potential positions pesantren not only as educational and religious institutions but also as socio-economic entities capable of mobilizing community-based economic activities rooted in Islamic values. In recent years, both governmental and internal pesantren policies have shown an increasing focus on economic self-reliance, particularly through the development of business units and Islamic microfinance institutions such as Baitul Maal wat Tamwil (BMT).

The concept of pesantren economic independence reflects the essence of empowerment. Zimmerman (2020) explains empowerment as the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals and communities to gain control over resources and their economic lives. From an Islamic perspective, this principle aligns with the objectives of maqāṣid al-syarī'ah, especially the protection of wealth (ḥifẓ al-māl) (Nasution, Dewi Sartika; Aminy, Muhammad Muhajir; Ramadani, 2019). Hence, strengthening pesantren economies is not merely an economic strategy but also an act of worship and the practical application of sharia principles emphasizing self-sufficiency and productivity.

One prominent strategy developed by many pesantren is the establishment of BMT as a community-based Islamic microfinance institution. BMT serves multiple functions: mobilizing community funds, distributing productive financing, and serving as a platform for economic education for santri. Its presence is expected to foster the growth of santri entrepreneurs and reduce institutional dependence on external financial sources (Mahmudah et al., 2025). Within this context, pesantren economic self-reliance through BMT becomes an academically relevant and timely area of study.

Legally, the foundation for pesantren economic independence is well established. Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren explicitly grants pesantren the right to develop economic activities consistent with Islamic principles. Moreover, the Financial Services Authority Regulation (POJK) No. 62/POJK.05/2015 recognizes BMT as a legitimate Islamic microfinance institution contributing to community economic empowerment, including within pesantren environments. These frameworks demonstrate that strengthening pesantren economies is integral to Indonesia's national Islamic economic development strategy. In support of this effort, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, in collaboration with the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, launched the "Pesantren Preneur" program

aimed at enhancing the economic capacity of pesantren and nurturing santri entrepreneurship (Kemenag, 2024).

Despite these initiatives, various studies indicate that many pesantren still face challenges in implementing sustainable economic programs. Common obstacles include limited financial capital, weak managerial competence, and inadequate understanding of modern Islamic economic systems (Farah Qalbia & M. Reza Saputra, 2023). Furthermore, santri participation in BMT services remains suboptimal due to insufficient financial literacy, business skills, and perceptions of risk (Hakim et al., 2022). Consequently, the potential of BMT as the driving force for pesantren economic independence has not been fully realized.

Within this framework, Pondok Pesantren Al Bahjah Pusat Cirebon stands out as a progressive institution that has established BMT Al Bahjah as its internal Islamic microfinance body. BMT Al Bahjah plays a pivotal role in mobilizing and distributing funds among santri, alumni, and surrounding communities, while simultaneously providing entrepreneurship training grounded in Islamic values. This initiative not only aims to strengthen the pesantren economy but also to prepare santri to become independent and competitive sharia-based entrepreneurs.

Preliminary observations indicate that BMT Al Bahjah has implemented several santri empowerment programs, including entrepreneurship training, productive business financing, and capital reinforcement for alumni. However, the participation and effectiveness of these programs remain uneven. Some santri have successfully utilized financing opportunities, while others have yet to engage actively. This reveals a gap between potential and practical implementation of BMT-based economic empowerment. Therefore, an in-depth examination of how BMT Al Bahjah contributes to fostering pesantren economic independence is necessary.

Previous studies have explored the broader role of BMT in community and pesantren empowerment. Sitopu & Edi (2024), through their study at Pondok Pesantren Mawaridussalam, found that BMT effectively improved the welfare of santri and the surrounding community through financial services and training programs. Similarly, research by Mahmudah et al., (2025) at Pesantren Al-Arsyadi Samboja revealed that BMT functions not only as a financial institution but also as an Islamic entrepreneurship training center. Additionally, Nisa et al., (2021), in their study of LPD Al Bahjah, highlighted the critical role of kiai leadership and inter-unit synergy in strengthening pesantren economic empowerment. Collectively, these findings affirm the significant impact of BMTs in transforming pesantren economic ecosystems. However, research specifically

examining the strategic role of BMT in empowering santri and its contribution to pesantren economic self-reliance remains limited.

Building upon these gaps, the present study seeks to address three central questions: (1) How does BMT Al Bahjah contribute to santri empowerment? (2) To what extent does BMT enhance the economic independence of Pondok Pesantren Al Bahjah? and (3) What are the enabling and constraining factors influencing this process? This research employs a qualitative case study approach focused on Pondok Pesantren Al Bahjah Pusat Cirebon. The novelty of this study lies in its analytical emphasis on santri-based empowerment strategies within the BMT–pesantren nexus. Unlike prior research that primarily examined institutional structures or social impacts, this study explores the internal dynamics between santri, BMT, and the pesantren as an integrated Islamic economic ecosystem. The findings are expected to offer both theoretical contributions to the discourse on pesantren economic independence and practical insights for optimizing BMT as a sustainable and contextually relevant instrument of community economic empowerment in the modern sharia economy.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the role of Baitul Maal wat Tamwil (BMT) in promoting the economic independence of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) through the empowerment of students (santri). The qualitative case study design was chosen because it allows an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural contexts (Moleong, 2017). The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al Bahjah Pusat, Cirebon, Indonesia, which was purposively selected due to its active implementation of a community-based economic empowerment program through BMT. The study took place over three months, from August to October 2025, covering preparation, field data collection, and analysis.

The researcher acted as the main instrument (human instrument) and was directly involved in collecting and interpreting data. The primary data sources included interviews with key informants such as BMT managers, pesantren leaders, and beneficiary santri, complemented by secondary data from financial reports, program documentation, and institutional records. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis (Sugiyono, 2017). Each method was used complementarily to enhance the validity and depth of findings.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of (Miles et al., 2014), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The

credibility of findings was ensured through source, technique, and time triangulation (Cresweel, John W; Creswell, 2018). This methodological combination provided a holistic and contextual understanding of how BMT contributes to the pesantren's economic self-reliance and the empowerment of its students within an Islamic socio-economic framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the context of Islamic educational institutions, the role of financial intermediaries such as Baitul Maal wat Tamwil (BMT) has become increasingly significant in fostering economic sustainability and independence. Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), as centers of both religious and social transformation, require innovative economic strategies to support their operational needs and empower their communities. The establishment of BMT Al Bahjah in Cirebon reflects a transformative initiative that integrates Islamic finance, entrepreneurship, and community empowerment within the pesantren ecosystem. This section presents the results and discussion of the research, focusing on how BMT Al Bahjah functions as a key instrument in realizing pesantren economic independence through the empowerment of santri (students), emphasizing its strategic roles, mechanisms, and impacts.

1. The Role of BMT Al Bahjah in Santri Empowerment

The findings of this study reveal that BMT Al Bahjah plays a strategic and transformative role in empowering santri through four major dimensions: the provision of empowerment programs, facilitation of capital access, mentoring and monitoring activities, and the creation of economic independence among students. These dimensions affirm that BMT is not merely a financial intermediary but a community-based socio-economic transformation agent rooted in the pesantren environment. This aligns with the community-based economic empowerment theory proposed by (Chambers, 1995), emphasizing that empowerment requires not only access to financial capital but also capacity building, mentoring, and the creation of a supportive socio-religious environment for independence to flourish.

The thematic coding results, visualized in Figure 1, further demonstrate that the role of BMT Al Bahjah can be clustered into three interrelated domains: empowerment programs, business assistance, and financing mechanisms. In the empowerment program cluster, BMT focuses on enhancing the capacity of santri through entrepreneurship training, business mentoring, and program evaluation. The business assistance cluster emphasizes practical mentoring and ongoing monitoring, including consultation with mentors and follow-up technical workshops. Meanwhile,

the financing cluster highlights BMT's role in providing sharia-based capital access using simple procedures and religiously compliant contracts designed specifically for santri.

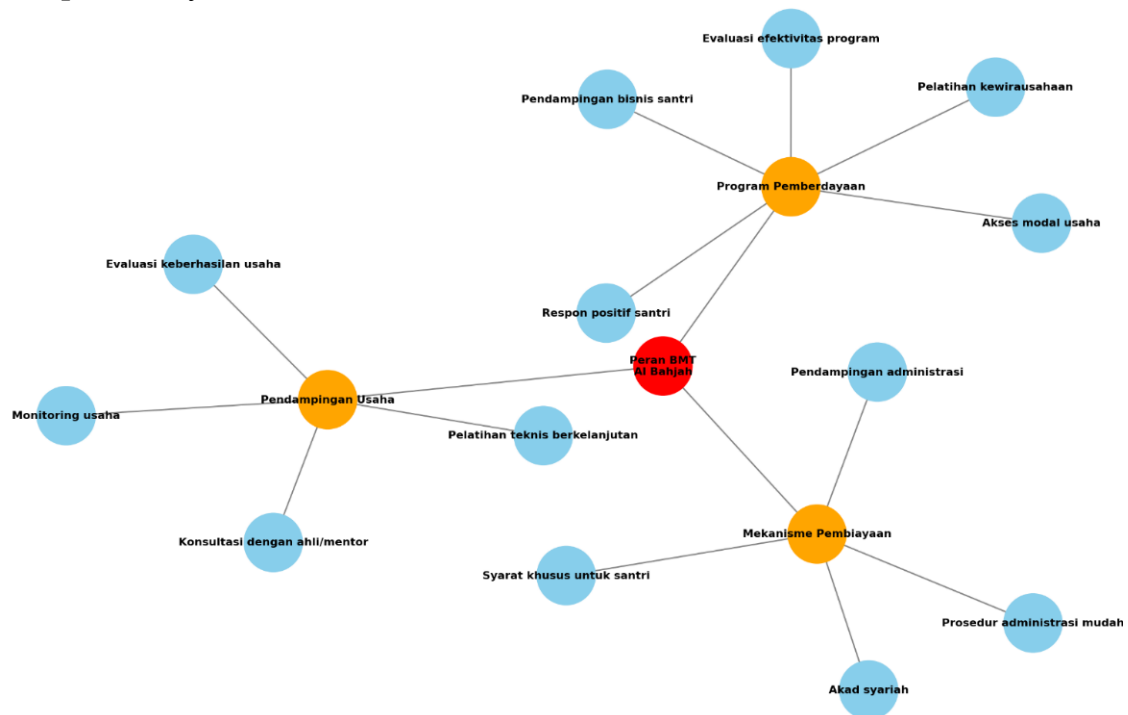


Figure 1. Coding Results of BMT Al Bahjah's Role in Santri Empowerment

Together, these three clusters illustrate that BMT's empowerment efforts operate holistically integrating economic, social, and spiritual dimensions. As a micro sharia financial institution, BMT Al Bahjah holds moral and religious legitimacy that fosters trust, social norms, and community networks (Putnam, 1993). This legitimacy serves as social capital that enhances the program's effectiveness by strengthening cooperation, lowering transaction costs, and increasing participation among santri and the surrounding community.

a. Provision of Empowerment Programs

One of the key functions of BMT Al Bahjah is providing empowerment programs such as the Santri Savings Program (Tafaqquh) and entrepreneurship training. These initiatives are not purely financial but also educational, aiming to cultivate financial literacy and independence among santri. In the perspective of life skill education, the Tafaqquh and entrepreneurship training programs represent an integrative educational model that links religious knowledge with practical economic competence. While traditional pesantren education often emphasizes religious scholarship, the BMT's initiatives embed an

implicit or hidden curriculum that equips santri with real-world skills needed to navigate modern socio-economic challenges.

The Tafaquh program trains santri to save and manage personal finances responsibly, aligning with financial literacy theory, which stresses understanding basic concepts of saving, investing, and risk management from an early age. Through consistent saving practices, santri internalize financial discipline and long-term planning, reflecting Islamic economic ethics such as qana'ah (contentment) and amanah (trustworthiness).

Furthermore, the entrepreneurship training programs provide santri with opportunities to develop creativity, innovation, and managerial ability. This finding supports the study of Sukarnoto et al., (2023), who showed that the Assalafiyah Islamic Boarding School in Cirebon successfully promoted santri entrepreneurship through the establishment of the Al Burhany Community Training Center (BLK). That center effectively nurtured motivation, self-reliance, and entrepreneurial competence among santri. Similarly, BMT Al Bahjah's entrepreneurship education embodies the concept of Islamic entrepreneurship, which integrates profit-making with spiritual and social responsibility (Antonio, 2021). Santri are thus prepared not only to become workers but to create jobs for others as well.

From a social capital perspective, these programs strengthen bonding capital the internal ties among santri through shared participation in training and business activities, fostering solidarity and mutual support. Simultaneously, they build bridging capital by connecting santri with external business networks and communities. Hence, BMT's empowerment initiatives not only equip individuals with entrepreneurial skills but also enhance the pesantren's socio-economic resilience within broader networks. Overall, the empowerment programs of BMT Al Bahjah demonstrate that pesantren can successfully bridge traditional religious learning and modern economic competencies. Through these programs, santri evolve from being passive learners to active economic agents who combine moral integrity with business capability.

b. Financing Mechanisms

Another major contribution of BMT Al Bahjah lies in its role as a facilitator of sharia-based financing. Limited access to capital is one of the most common barriers faced by aspiring entrepreneurs, including santri. BMT Al Bahjah, as a microfinance institution grounded in Islamic

principles, provides a concrete solution to this problem through accessible and ethical funding mechanisms. Its financing model is based on sharia contracts such as mudharabah (profit-sharing) and murabahah (cost-plus financing), ensuring fairness, partnership, and the avoidance of riba (usury). As Antonio (2021) explains, Islamic financial institutions should serve as instruments for achieving social justice, equitable wealth distribution, and collective welfare. This approach aligns with Chambers (1995) community-based empowerment framework, which emphasizes enabling marginalized groups to control economic resources. By offering santri direct access to business capital, BMT effectively paves the way for economic self-reliance. Microfinance theory also highlights that financial support must be coupled with guidance to ensure productive outcomes and long-term sustainability (Helmy Syamsuri, Abdul Wahab, 2024).

The financing mechanism also connects to the four indicators of pesantren economic independence identified by Maya Silvana & Lubis (2021): institutional strength, production, stakeholder participation, and market access. Institutionally, BMT operates as a professionally managed business unit. In terms of production, its funds support santri-led ventures such as poultry farming and small-scale entrepreneurship. Regarding stakeholders, it integrates santri, alumni, and community involvement, while in the market dimension, it enables santri to expand their business networks locally and regionally.

Capital thus functions as an enabler for creativity and innovation (Zimmerman, 2020). Without adequate capital, ideas and skills remain conceptual. Through its financing services, BMT transforms potential into practical enterprise, guiding santri from ideation to implementation. Trust-based lending also minimizes bureaucratic barriers that conventional banking imposes on small borrowers. In BMT's model, social trust, religious ethics, and collective responsibility replace formal collateral requirements, reflecting (Putnam, 1993) argument that trust and norms reduce transaction costs and foster cooperation.

Additionally, BMT leverages bonding, bridging, and linking social capital to sustain financing operations. Bonding occurs within the pesantren community, bridging connects santri with external partners, and linking involves collaboration with formal institutions such as banks and government agencies. This structure strengthens both the financial and moral foundations of BMT's microfinance system. Through this integrated financing model, BMT Al Bahjah not only supports short-term business development but also nurtures a sustainable culture of

entrepreneurship and accountability. By combining financial access, Islamic ethics, and social trust, BMT serves as a catalyst for pesantren-based economic independence and the empowerment of santri as active participants in the socio-economic development of the Muslim community.

2. The Contribution of BMT to the Economic Independence of Al Bahjah Islamic Boarding School

This section presents the results and discussion regarding the contribution of Baitul Maal wat Tamwil (BMT) Al Bahjah to the economic independence of the Al Bahjah Islamic Boarding School. The findings indicate that the BMT has become an integral part of the pesantren's economic system, functioning as both a financial intermediary and a developmental institution that supports the pesantren's sustainability. The concept of economic independence in this context refers to the pesantren's ability to finance its educational and operational activities through internal economic resources rather than external donations or temporary assistance. This model aligns with the pesantren's vision of creating a self-sustaining Islamic institution grounded in the values of productivity, khidmah (service), and barakah (blessing).

The contribution of BMT Al Bahjah can be identified through its effective strategy in developing collaborative business units involving santri and alumni. The establishment of productive ventures such as the Program Tafaqquh and the layer chicken farming business represents a practical step toward realizing financial self-reliance. These initiatives are managed collectively, where BMT provides access to financing and technical support while the pesantren supervises management and accountability. Such collaboration has reduced the pesantren's dependency on external funding sources and created a more stable and predictable income flow. The reinvestment of profits into educational and welfare programs further strengthens the internal economic cycle, ensuring that benefits extend to both the institution and its community (Maya Silvana & Lubis, 2021).

In addition, BMT Al Bahjah's empowerment strategy has transformed santri from passive learners into active economic agents. Through involvement in productive enterprises, they not only acquire entrepreneurial skills but also internalize the values of discipline, accountability, and self-reliance. The learning process that occurs within these business units is not merely economic but also moral and spiritual, as it integrates Islamic principles of honesty (amanah) and responsibility (mas'uliyah). The impact is evident in the growing number of santri who, after completing their

education, continue their own independent ventures or participate in community-based economic activities under BMT supervision. This process illustrates how empowerment contributes directly to economic independence, as competence and confidence among santri increase over time (Zimmerman, 2020).

Moreover, the contribution of BMT Al Bahjah to economic independence is reflected in its institutional collaboration model. The synergy between pesantren leaders, alumni, and the BMT management has produced a comprehensive support system for sustaining productive activities (Kartikawati, 2023). The kiai's endorsement provides spiritual and moral legitimacy, while alumni involvement ensures technical expertise and network expansion. The BMT, in turn, acts as a bridge that connects financial capital, human resources, and business opportunities. Regular evaluations conducted jointly by the pesantren and BMT ensure that each business unit remains effective and adaptive to market challenges. This systematic evaluation also allows continuous improvement of programs, reinforcing the sustainability of economic activities in line with the pesantren's long-term vision (Antonio, 2021).

However, the findings also reveal several challenges that may hinder the effectiveness of BMT in strengthening pesantren economic independence. The main obstacles include limited access to large-scale capital, low levels of financial literacy among santri, and the shortage of professional human resources capable of managing modern business operations. In addition, the inherent risks in business activities such as market fluctuations and operational inefficiencies pose significant threats to sustainability (Maya Silvana & Lubis, 2021). To anticipate these problems, BMT has developed adaptive strategies through innovation, alumni partnerships, and human resource capacity-building. These measures aim to ensure that both institutional and individual capabilities continue to grow in tandem with the demands of economic development.

Despite these challenges, BMT Al Bahjah's overall contribution remains substantial and strategic. It provides a model of how Islamic financial institutions can play a central role in empowering local communities while maintaining alignment with religious and educational missions. The pesantren's gradual movement toward financial autonomy not only secures its operational continuity but also enhances its credibility as an institution capable of producing economically and spiritually independent graduates. Through empowerment, training, and access to capital, BMT Al Bahjah demonstrates that economic development in Islamic boarding schools can be

achieved without departing from Islamic ethical and social foundations (Isnaeni et al., 2025).

In essence, the contribution of BMT Al Bahjah goes beyond financial assistance it establishes an ecosystem of empowerment rooted in Islamic values. By combining education, entrepreneurship, and community service, the pesantren has succeeded in transforming the traditional understanding of Islamic learning into a dynamic and sustainable model of socio-economic development. This integration of faith-based motivation and economic practice represents a new paradigm for pesantren independence, one that aligns spiritual growth with material progress.

3. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of BMT in Realizing the Economic Independence of Islamic Boarding Schools

The journey of Baitul Maal wat Tamwil (BMT) Al Bahjah in realizing the economic independence of the pesantren is shaped by a combination of supporting and inhibiting factors that continuously interact and influence both the empowerment of santri and the institutional development of the pesantren. Understanding these factors is essential to formulate sustainable strategies for strengthening the role of BMT in the pesantren's economic ecosystem. Based on qualitative analysis and coding visualization, the findings reveal that the dynamics between social legitimacy, resource management, and human capacity form the foundation of BMT's operational resilience within the Al Bahjah community.

The first dimension concerns the supporting factors that serve as pillars of strength for BMT Al Bahjah. The study found that the legitimacy and support of the kiai and pesantren leadership are dominant elements sustaining the institution's credibility. Within the pesantren tradition, the kiai's blessing holds not only moral but also spiritual legitimacy, which becomes the social capital that fosters trust among santri, alumni, and the surrounding community. As Putnam emphasizes, trust, norms, and social networks constitute the foundation for successful community-based institutions (Putnam, 1993). In the case of BMT Al Bahjah, this form of social capital manifests in the santri's willingness to save through the Tafaqquh Savings Program, the alumni's active role as business managers, and the community's participation as consumers and distribution partners. This trust-based relationship distinguishes pesantren-based BMTs from conventional financial institutions that prioritize profit-oriented logic over social and spiritual engagement.

Alumni involvement also plays a crucial supporting role. The alumni of Al Bahjah not only serve as business partners but also extend market

networks, provide innovative ideas, and act as field consultants. Hidayat's research highlights that alumni networks serve as vital bridges between pesantren and the modern business world (Hidayat et al., 2022). In this context, the success of BMT Al Bahjah depends not solely on its internal capacity but also on external collaboration through alumni engagement. When viewed through the framework of pesantren economic independence proposed by Silvana and Lubis, these supporting factors can be categorized into four indicators: institutional support from the kiai and pesantren leadership; production innovation driven by alumni participation; stakeholder integration involving community and alumni networks; and market expansion through external linkages (Maya Silvana & Lubis, 2021). Collectively, these factors establish BMT Al Bahjah as a community-based institution grounded in trust and solidarity values that distinguish it from conventional financial entities.

On the other hand, the study also identifies inhibiting factors that act as structural challenges to BMT's sustainability. These include limited capital, low financial literacy among santri, business risks, and a shortage of professional human resources. As Mardikanto asserts, empowerment must involve more than just capital access it requires awareness building, capacity strengthening, and access to business networks (Mardikanto & Soebiato, 2015). Without these complementary processes, empowerment initiatives risk reproducing dependency cycles. At BMT Al Bahjah, while financing access has been established, many santri still face challenges in managing their businesses due to limited financial and entrepreneurial literacy. This finding resonates with Sahid's view that inadequate financial literacy among pesantren entrepreneurs hampers record keeping, risk analysis, and cash flow management (Mahmudah et al., 2025). Consequently, some santri-led businesses fail to achieve optimal results despite receiving capital and mentoring support from BMT.

In addition to financial literacy, the lack of professional human resources in areas such as accounting, marketing, and managerial planning further constrains institutional growth. Many santri-run enterprises remain traditional and small-scale, struggling to compete in more dynamic markets. These structural weaknesses reflect the importance of continuous mentoring and managerial capacity-building programs. Drawing from Scoones's sustainable livelihood theory, these obstacles can be understood as limitations in mobilizing five key capitals particularly human, social, and physical capital (Scoones, 1998). Although financial capital is available through BMT's microfinance system, the human capital of santri and the

technological and network capital of the institution still require reinforcement to achieve full sustainability.

Facing these challenges, BMT Al Bahjah demonstrates its adaptive capacity through innovative and collaborative strategies. The institution has diversified its products beyond traditional savings and loan services to address the diverse needs of its community. For instance, BMT introduced the Layer Chicken Farming Program and the Tafaqquh student savings scheme, both of which foster productive behavior and financial discipline among santri. These initiatives align with social innovation theory, which posits that the sustainability of community organizations depends on their ability to generate relevant and adaptive solutions to member needs. Through such product innovation, BMT Al Bahjah has strengthened its institutional appeal and broadened its socio-economic impact within the pesantren community (Sukarnoto et al., 2023).

Collaboration also serves as a strategic pillar of adaptation. BMT actively involves alumni and senior advisors in managing business units and designing development strategies. This integration of intergenerational experience and social networks embodies the essence of community-based organization theory. The institution's capacity to build solidarity and flexibility through cooperative governance allows it to withstand internal and external pressures. Furthermore, BMT Al Bahjah has begun implementing digital financial systems to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accessibility of its services. As noted by Nasution, digital innovation and product diversification are essential for improving BMT competitiveness in the contemporary financial landscape (Nasution, Dewi Sartika; Aminy, Muhammad Muhajir; Ramadani, 2019). Through digitalization, BMT not only minimizes administrative errors but also strengthens members' trust by ensuring financial transparency.

From the perspective of adaptive capacity theory, as discussed by Folke et al., BMT Al Bahjah exhibits a high level of resilience and learning ability (Wyckoff et al., 2022). Rather than merely surviving institutional barriers, it continuously evolves through innovation, collaboration, and technological adaptation. This demonstrates that pesantren economic independence is not a static condition but a dynamic process driven by ongoing learning and strategic transformation. Ultimately, the findings indicate that BMT Al Bahjah's success in promoting pesantren economic independence is not only instrumental through capital provision but also transformative, by professionalizing institutional management. Despite facing constraints such as limited capital and low literacy, the supporting elements of kiai legitimacy,

alumni participation, and pesantren social networks serve as powerful social capital that enhances institutional sustainability. This aligns with Putnam's concept of social capital, where trust, shared norms, and community networks act as key drivers of institutional endurance.

Moreover, the interconnection among three forms of capital social, economic, and human creates a synergistic foundation for pesantren empowerment. The moral legitimacy provided by the kiai, the financial strength offered through BMT, and the increasing capacity of santri collectively foster a self-sustaining ecosystem. This process resonates with Chambers' empowerment theory, which defines empowerment as a long-term participatory process of capacity development and self-management (Chambers, 1995). Beyond empowerment, BMT Al Bahjah exemplifies how Islamic entrepreneurship integrates economic activities with spiritual ethics ensuring that every business operation upholds principles of honesty, blessing, and social welfare. Through these dynamics, pesantren evolve into centers of both religious learning and economic empowerment, providing an empirical model of how faith-based institutions can cultivate sustainable independence in the modern Islamic economy.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study on the role of Baitul Maal wat Tamwil (BMT) Al Bahjah in promoting the economic independence of pesantren through santri empowerment, it can be concluded that BMT plays a multifaceted role as a facilitator, mentor, and provider of business capital. Through entrepreneurship training, productive business units, and accessible financing, the empowerment program has generated positive engagement among santri and fostered their entrepreneurial spirit both within and beyond the pesantren environment. Furthermore, BMT's contribution to economic independence is evident in its ability to reduce reliance on external funding sources by developing sustainable, community-based business ventures. The success of these initiatives is supported by strong leadership from the kiai, institutional support, alumni involvement, and the santri's intrinsic motivation rooted in religious values. Despite challenges such as limited capital, low financial literacy, business risks, and the need for professional management, BMT's adaptive strategies including innovation, partnerships, and capacity building have strengthened the sustainability of its empowerment model. This study thus highlights BMT as a transformative institution that integrates spiritual values with economic empowerment, offering a replicable framework for advancing pesantren-based economic resilience.

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