

Empowerment of Social Entrepreneurs among Poverished Persons with Disabilities (Asnaf Oku) Through Social Entrepreneurship: A Case Study in Perlis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social entrepreneurship in empowering social entrepreneurs among Asnaf Persons with Disabilities (OKU) in the state of Perlis, Malaysia. Drawing on the Social Network Empowerment Model and Social Capital Theory, the study investigates how interactions within social networks, access to resources, and participation in social entrepreneurship activities enhance participants' capacity, agency, and economic independence. This qualitative case study involved seven (7) active Asnaf OKU social entrepreneurs and two (2) officers from the Department of Social Welfare (JKM) Perlis. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo 12 software. Findings indicate that social entrepreneurship serves as a crucial channel for the mobilization of social capital, particularly relational and cognitive capital, enabling participants to overcome infrastructural barriers, social stigma, and financial constraints. Interventions from NGOs and support from JKM were instrumental in capacity building and market access. Nevertheless, participants continue to face challenges related to physical mobility, lack of dedicated start-up funding, and bureaucratic procedures. The study suggests that empowerment programs for Asnaf OKU should shift from a paternalistic aid-based model to a community centered social entrepreneurship ecosystem, supported by inclusive policies. The implications highlight the importance of strategic collaboration frameworks among government agencies, NGOs, and the private sector to develop a holistic, sustainable, and effective support system for Asnaf OKU social entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Asnaf Persons with Disabilities (OKU), Empowerment, Social Capital, Case Study, Inclusive Development

INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurs among Persons with Disabilities (OKU) who are also Asnaf (zakat recipients) represent a unique and complex group, as they face multiple intersecting vulnerabilities across economic, physical, and social dimensions (Hassan & Dali, 2019; Ghazali et al., 2021). Their position at the intersection of disability and poverty renders economic empowerment a challenging endeavour that requires a specialized and holistic approach (Shaffril et al., 2022).

In Malaysia, including in smaller states such as Perlis, frameworks for the economic empowerment of vulnerable groups largely rely on conventional welfare-based mechanisms. Assistance such as cash stipends, one-off equipment aid, and short-term training programs, while necessary, are often temporary, reactive, and limited in fostering agency, autonomy, and long-term economic independence (Khalid et al., 2020; Abd Wahab & Muhammad, 2021). Such approaches risk creating a cycle of dependency and fail to address the systemic barriers faced by Asnaf OKU (Yaakob et al., 2019).

Within this context, social entrepreneurship has emerged as a promising alternative capable of transforming this narrative. Social entrepreneurship is defined as an activity that combines a clear social mission with financial sustainability, aiming to solve social problems while generating income (Abu-Saifan, 2012; Dees, 2017). For Asnaf OKU, this model offers a pathway to transition from being passive aid recipients to active change agents,

capable of generating economic value for themselves while positively impacting their communities (Mair & Martí, 2006; Saad et al., 2022). It has the potential to counter stigma, enhance self-esteem, and construct new identities grounded in capabilities rather than limitations (Renko et al., 2016).

Despite this potential, empirical understanding of how social entrepreneurship mechanisms operate specifically to empower Asnaf OKU particularly within socio-economic contexts like Perlis remains limited (Ishak et al., 2021). Perlis, with its smaller population, relatively constrained resources, and close-knit community dynamics, provides a unique context for exploring these empowerment processes. Previous studies have largely focused either on entrepreneurship among OKU in general (Hassan et al., 2020) or on social entrepreneurship in isolation (Norris et al., 2021), without critically examining the intersectional dynamics of disability, Asnaf status, and social entrepreneurship (Saad et al., 2022). This knowledge gap hinders the development of effective, context-sensitive policies and intervention programs for this group.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by exploring the processes and outcomes of empowerment through the lens of social entrepreneurship among Asnaf OKU social entrepreneurs in Perlis. Specifically, it investigates how social entrepreneurship is understood and practiced, the support resources accessed, the challenges encountered, and the implications of these activities for their economic and social empowerment. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence to inform the development of a more inclusive, sustainable, and community centered empowerment framework for Asnaf OKU.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Empowerment in the Context of Persons with Disabilities (OKU) and Asnaf

Empowerment is defined as a multidimensional process that enhances the ability of individuals and communities to control their lives through the strengthening of self-efficacy, access to resources, and participation in decision-making processes (Zimmerman, 2000). In the context of Persons with Disabilities (OKU) who are also classified as Asnaf, empowerment becomes more complex due to the intersectionality of identities, which can lead to compounded marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989; Shakespeare, 2014). Studies indicate that empowerment programs that fail to account for this intersectionality are often ineffective in the long term (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012).

In practice, although Malaysia's Disability Act 2008 provides a legal foundation for rights protection, the economic empowerment of OKU still largely relies on welfare-oriented approaches. While these measures such as stipends, one-off equipment aid, and short-term training programs address immediate needs, they tend to perpetuate dependency and fail to build long-term economic autonomy (Hassan & Dali, 2019; Khalid et al., 2020). Therefore, the literature emphasizes the need for transformative empowerment approaches that prioritize individual agency and participation within supportive ecosystems.

Social Capital and Networks as Mechanisms of Empowerment

Social capital theory offers a framework to understand how empowerment can be facilitated among marginalized groups (Putnam, 2000; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Social capital is generally conceptualized in three dimensions: structural, relational, and cognitive, which collectively provide access to information, support, and economic opportunities. For the Asnaf OKU community, social networks serve as a critical mechanism to enhance the effectiveness of social entrepreneurship initiatives (Datta, Gailey, & Rasul, 2020; Sefotho, 2015).

Research in Malaysia has shown that networks involving OKU entrepreneurs and NGOs are more effective in providing support compared to reliance solely on family networks (Ismail, Zainal, & Ahmad, 2021). The Social Network Empowerment Model (Foster-Fishman, Salem, Chibnall, Legler, & Yapchai, 2001) posits that empowerment occurs when individuals can access, leverage, and influence resources within their social networks. This model is particularly relevant for examining interactions between formal networks (e.g., zakat agencies, JKM, NGOs) and informal networks (e.g., family, local community).

Social Entrepreneurship as a Vehicle for Transformative Empowerment

Social entrepreneurship integrates a social mission with economic sustainability, offering opportunities for psychological, economic, and social empowerment (Mair & Martí, 2006; Saebi, Foss, & Linder, 2019). For Asnaf OKU, social entrepreneurship enables economic autonomy, positive identity construction, and stigma reduction (Renko, Parker Harris, & Caldwell, 2016).

International studies show that social entrepreneurship initiatives by persons with disabilities can create shared value, benefiting both entrepreneurs and their communities, although primary challenges include limited access to capital, markets, and networks (Haugh & Talwar, 2020). In Malaysia, research on Islamic financing mechanisms such as zakat and waqf highlights their potential to support Asnaf entrepreneurs but often lacks detailed exploration of subjective experiences and empowerment processes for OKU (Saad et al., 2022).

Critical Synthesis and Research Justification

This literature review identifies three major gaps:

1. Theoretical Gap – Limited application of network-based empowerment models in the context of Asnaf OKU in Malaysia.
2. Contextual Gap – Lack of in-depth studies focused on smaller states like Perlis, where community ecosystems are unique.
3. Empirical Gap – Insufficient understanding of the subjective experiences and empowerment processes of Asnaf OKU social entrepreneurs.

This study adopts Social Capital Theory and the Social Network Empowerment Model to examine the experiences of Asnaf OKU social entrepreneurs in Perlis through a case study approach, emphasizing how social networks influence psychological, economic, and social empowerment.

Table 1. Summary of Key Literature

Theme	Authors	Main Focus	Relevance to the Study
Empowerment & Intersectionality	Crenshaw (1989); Shakespeare (2014)	Intersectional identities and marginalization	Understanding the compounded challenges of Asnaf OKU
Social Capital & Networks	Putnam (2000); Foster-Fishman et al. (2001)	Networks as mechanisms for empowerment	Analytical framework for the case study
Entrepreneurship & OKU	Renko et al. (2016); Sefotho (2015)	OKU as social entrepreneurs	Justification for empowerment through entrepreneurship
Malaysian Context	Ismail et al. (2021); Hassan & Dali (2019)	Institutional support & local networks	Contextual relevance for Perlis

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on three main components:

1. Input – Social capital (formal & informal networks), institutional support (zakat agencies, NGOs, JKM), and financial resources.
2. Process – Engagement in social entrepreneurship activities, interactions within social networks, skills and knowledge development, and self-confidence building.

3. Output / Outcome – Psychological empowerment (confidence, positive identity), economic empowerment (financial autonomy, asset accumulation), and social empowerment (community influence, creation of shared value).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Empowerment for Asnaf OKU Social Entrepreneurs through Social Entrepreneurship

[Social Capital & Institutional Support] --> [Engagement in Social Entrepreneurship / Network Interaction] --> [Psychological, Economic & Social Empowerment]

- Inputs influence the process by providing access to networks and support.
- The process develops skills, confidence, and agency of individuals.
- Outputs reflect the level of empowerment and sustainability of social entrepreneurship initiatives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a single, in-depth qualitative case study design aimed at exploring the experiences, perceptions, challenges, and empowerment pathways of Asnaf persons with disabilities (OKU) social entrepreneurs in Perlis. This design was selected due to its suitability for investigating complex phenomena within their real-life context, allowing for rich explanations of the interactions between individuals and the surrounding social systems (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative case study approach enables the researcher to explore participants' lived experiences holistically, providing depth of understanding that cannot be achieved through quantitative methods alone (Stake, 1995).

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure the representation of individuals who met the study criteria and were able to provide rich, relevant data (Patton, 2015).

Inclusion Criteria for Entrepreneur Participants:

1. Registered as a person with disability (OKU) with the Department of Social Welfare (JKM).
2. Classified as Asnaf and/or a recipient of zakat assistance.
3. Operating an active social enterprise for at least one year in Perlis.
4. Willing to participate voluntarily.

Out of ten identified individuals, seven (7) social entrepreneurs met these criteria. To triangulate perspectives and institutional context, two (2) JKM officers involved in the OKU and Entrepreneur Development sections were also interviewed. Additionally, one academic expert in social development and entrepreneurship was included for member checking to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation. Participant selection followed the principle of data saturation, continuing until no new themes emerged (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over three months (July–September 2025) using triangulated methods to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings:

Semi-Structured Interviews

- Conducted face-to-face at participants' business premises or mutually agreed locations.

- Interview questions were designed to explore participants' experiences in starting and running their social enterprises, challenges encountered, support and networks utilized, and perceptions of changes in their lives since engaging in social entrepreneurship (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).
- All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of the information.

Non-Participant Observation

- Observations were conducted at participants' business premises to understand daily operations, customer interactions, and utilization of support networks.
- Field notes were systematically recorded to provide contextual depth to the interview data (Angrosino, 2007).

Document Analysis

- Documents such as business profiles, JKM program reports, and other relevant materials on social entrepreneurship were analyzed to triangulate the data and verify information obtained from participants (Bowen, 2009).

DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), supported by NVivo 12 software to facilitate data management, coding, and pattern identification. The analysis was conducted in a systematic, staged manner to ensure rigor, validity, and reliability of the findings.

Introduction to Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows researchers to identify, analyze, and report patterns within data in a systematic way, while retaining flexibility to relate findings to the literature and the study's conceptual framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). This approach is suitable for case studies that aim to explore the subjective experiences of Asnaf persons with disabilities (OKU) social entrepreneurs and their empowerment processes through social entrepreneurship.

Steps of Analysis

Step 1: Data Familiarization

Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were repeatedly reviewed to develop initial understanding. Critical elements in each transcript were highlighted, and field notes were used to capture context and observations that might not be reflected in the transcripts.

Step 2: Open Coding

Each transcript was broken down into meaning units, and initial descriptive codes were assigned using NVivo. Examples of initial codes included "access to social capital", "logistical challenges", and "family support". This step enabled comprehensive and unbiased coding, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data.

Step 3: Axial Coding

Related codes were then grouped into categories or parent codes, helping to identify relationships between codes and broader concepts. For instance, codes such as "NGO support" and "peer entrepreneur support" were combined under the parent category "support networks".

Step 4: Development of Main Themes

Categories were synthesized to form major themes aligned with the research objectives, including:

- Psychological empowerment of OKU entrepreneurs
- Economic empowerment through social entrepreneurship
- The role of social capital and support networks
- Challenges and barriers in entrepreneurial activities

Step 5: Validation and Data Triangulation

- Member Checking: Initial themes were presented to an academic expert and several participants for feedback on the accuracy of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- Source Triangulation: Discussions with JKM officers and document analysis were conducted to examine consistency and relevance of themes.
- Method Triangulation: Interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed collectively to enhance the trustworthiness of findings (Patton, 2015).

Step 6: Reflexivity and Audit Trail

The researcher maintained a comprehensive audit trail, including reflective notes, coding decisions, and triangulation procedures. This step allows external evaluation of the transparency, reliability, and integrity of the data analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

Role of NVivo Software

NVivo 12 was utilized to:

1. Systematically manage transcripts, observation notes, and documents.
2. Facilitate open coding, axial coding, and theme identification.
3. Enable visualization of code networks, code frequency, and inter-theme relationships, making the analysis process transparent and structured.
4. Support progress monitoring of the analysis in stages, allowing collaborative review with supervisors or academic experts.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study:

- Credibility: Achieved through data triangulation, observations, and member checking.
- Transferability: Provided through detailed contextual descriptions of entrepreneurs, locations, and social entrepreneurship processes.
- Dependability: Maintained via a complete audit trail and systematic documentation of analysis steps.
- Confirmability: Researcher reflexivity and supporting documents ensured interpretations were grounded in data and could be verified by third parties (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

The data analysis yielded four main themes, reflecting the experiences, challenges, and impact of social entrepreneurship on the empowerment of Asnaf persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Perlis.

Theme 1: Social Entrepreneurship as a Bridge to Social Capital

All participants acknowledged that involvement in social entrepreneurship programs, whether initiated by NGOs or JKM opened access to new social networks, providing technical support, emotional encouragement, and social legitimacy.

A visually impaired participant remarked:

"Previously, I was only known as 'the blind person receiving zakat.' Now, through this entrepreneurial group, I am 'Ali, the mat-weaving entrepreneur'... customers respect me."

This demonstrates the exchange of relational social capital (trust, recognition) and cognitive social capital (new identity), aligning with Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000) and the Social Network Empowerment Model (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001).

Theme 2: Complementary Roles of Government Agencies and NGOs

JKM primarily provided basic support such as registration, foundational training, and equipment assistance. NGOs, in turn, played complementary roles, including advanced capacity building, business planning, and market access. A JKM officer stated:

"We have limited allocations and strict procedures. Collaborating with NGOs such as Bahtera Prihatin Rakyat Perlis allows programs to be more flexible and market-focused."

However, this gap may create dependency on NGOs and reduce the sustainability of the support system.

Theme 3: Layered and Persistent Challenges

Participants continued to face substantial challenges: inaccessible transportation, limited working capital, bureaucratic procedures in applying for assistance, and restricted market access. This indicates that PWD empowerment is multidimensional and intersectional, reflecting overlapping barriers related to disability, poverty, and social marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989; Ghazali et al., 2021).

Theme 4: Personal and Community Transformation

Participation in social entrepreneurship contributed to psychological and social empowerment, including improved self-confidence, communication skills, self-esteem, financial autonomy, and positive impacts on family. A physically disabled single mother shared:

"Previously, my child was embarrassed to talk about me. Now, she brings her school friends to buy my cakes... I can pay her school fees myself."

Table 2: Summary of Themes, Challenges, and Empowerment Impacts

Main Theme	Key Challenges	Empowerment Impacts
Social Entrepreneurship as a Bridge to Social Capital	Limited initial networks, social stigma	Increased relational & cognitive capital, new identity, social legitimacy
Roles of Government Agencies and NGOs	Imbalanced support, bureaucracy, dependency	Capacity building, market access, structured economic opportunities
Layered Challenges	Mobility, working capital, bureaucratic procedures, limited market access	Resilience, problem-solving creativity, awareness of systemic constraints

Personal and Community Transformation	Stigma, income uncertainty	Increased self-confidence, financial autonomy, positive family & community impact
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CRITICAL DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that social entrepreneurship functions as a multidimensional empowerment mechanism. It is not merely an economic activity but also a means for identity transformation and social capital development, turning participants from passive recipients of aid into competitive entrepreneurs with social influence (Mair & Martí, 2006; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001).

Support Ecosystem Imbalance

Although social entrepreneurship opens opportunities, there is a notable institutional imbalance. JKM operates predominantly within a welfare paradigm ("giving fish"), while NGOs fill gaps through capacity building and market access initiatives ("teaching to fish"). This imbalance increases dependency on NGOs and poses risks for program sustainability (Hassan et al., 2020).

Psychological Empowerment as an Economic Catalyst

The self-transformation achieved enhanced confidence, self-esteem, and communication skills indicates that psychological empowerment often precedes economic transformation. This challenges the deficit-oriented narrative commonly associated with PWDs (Shakespeare, 2014), suggesting that psychosocial development is foundational to sustainable economic achievement.

Layered Challenges and the Need for Holistic Interventions

The identified challenges including mobility, capital limitations, and bureaucratic obstacles highlight that empowerment for PWDs requires systemic, multi-level interventions. Holistic, flexible policy support and dedicated funding schemes are critical to maintaining long-term empowerment pathways.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. The need for rights-based holistic policies for Asnaf PWDs.
2. Restructuring JKM-NGO collaborations to ensure sustainable and continuous support.
3. Provision of dedicated funding schemes and PWD-friendly infrastructure to address layered challenges.
4. Designing pathways for psychological transformation prior to economic empowerment as a strategic approach for inclusive development.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social entrepreneurship is an effective and meaningful mechanism for empowering Asnaf PWD entrepreneurs in Perlis, not only economically but also psychologically and socially. Empowerment is primarily achieved through the activation and expansion of social capital within both formal and informal networks, including JKM, NGOs, family, peers, and local communities. Through these networks, participants gain technical support, guidance, market access, social legitimacy, and increased self-confidence, enabling them to build positive entrepreneurial identities and enhance financial autonomy.

Although current approaches are beneficial, the study highlights that the existing support ecosystem remains fragmented. While JKM and NGOs complement one another, they do not fully form an integrated and sustainable system. Support gaps lead to dependency on NGOs, limited access to dedicated funding, and ongoing bureaucratic challenges. Effective empowerment thus requires holistic, rights-based strategies emphasizing

participant autonomy, systemic interventions, and coordination among government agencies, NGOs, and communities.

The study also emphasizes that psychological and social empowerment acts as a catalyst for economic success, highlighting that PWD entrepreneurship should not be narrowly assessed solely through financial outcomes. Participant transformation generates positive ripple effects for families and communities, reinforcing social entrepreneurship as a tool for inclusive and transformative development.

Theoretically and empirically, the study strengthens the Social Network Empowerment Model (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001) in the Malaysian context and provides practical implications for policymakers, government institutions, NGOs, and researchers to design more effective, inclusive, and sustainable empowerment programs for Asnaf PWD entrepreneurs. Future research may explore funding models, technology interventions, and market network development strategies specifically for PWDs to enhance long-term empowerment through social entrepreneurship.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

1. Establishment of Dedicated Start-up Funds: State authorities, zakat institutions, and entrepreneurship foundations should establish dedicated startup and working capital funds for Asnaf PWD social entrepreneurs, with simplified application processes.
2. Strengthening Collaborative Networks: JKM Perlis should serve as a central coordinator to establish a permanent collaborative platform connecting PWD entrepreneurs, NGOs, corporate buyers (Bumiputera/OKU vendor programs), and business mentors.
3. Service Coordination: Training and mentorship programs from different agencies (JKM, MARA, PERDA, etc.) should be coordinated at the state level to avoid duplication and ensure clear support pathways.
4. Accessible Business Infrastructure: Local authorities should ensure that farmers' markets, permanent stalls, and micro-business centers provide PWD-friendly facilities and priority leasing for PWD entrepreneurs.

Future Research Directions

Larger-scale quantitative studies are needed to measure the relationships between social capital, types of institutional support, and business independence among PWD entrepreneurs. Comparative studies across states could identify best practices adaptable to other regions.

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