


Community-Based Economic Empowerment in a Human Ecology Perspective: An Analysis of the Pahlawan Ekonomi Nusantara Program in Indonesia

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Article History

Manuscript submitted:
21 November 2025
Manuscript revised:
23 December 2025
Accepted for publication:
30 December 2025

Keywords

Human ecology,
Person-in-environment,
Community-based empowerment,
Ethical governance,
Sustainable livelihoods

Abstract

This study examines the implementation of the *Pahlawan Ekonomi Nusantara* (PENA) program as a community-based economic empowerment initiative within a local socio-ecological context in Kecamatan Pagelaran, Indonesia. Grounded in the *person-in-environment* and human ecology perspectives, the research aims to analyze how empowerment processes are shaped by interactions between individuals, community environments, and institutional practices. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis involving program beneficiaries transitioning from the *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH) and social facilitators responsible for program implementation. The findings reveal that the alignment of program support with beneficiaries' existing livelihood systems enhanced economic agency and facilitated movement toward self-reliance. Social facilitators played a critical mediating role in translating policy objectives into locally meaningful practices, significantly influencing program outcomes. However, the sustainability of empowerment remained contingent upon institutional capacity, market conditions, and continued facilitation support. From an ethical governance perspective, the study highlights tensions between promoting self-reliance and the potential transfer of structural risks to vulnerable individuals. The study contributes to human ecology scholarship by demonstrating that economic empowerment is not a linear outcome but a relational and ongoing socio-ecological process. Policy implications emphasize the need for adaptive facilitation, strengthened institutional support, and ethically grounded governance to ensure inclusive and sustainable livelihood development, particularly in Global South contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty remains a persistent and multidimensional challenge in many parts of the Global South, where economic deprivation is deeply intertwined with social structures, institutional arrangements, and local livelihood systems. Within the perspective of human ecology, poverty is not merely an outcome of insufficient income, but rather a manifestation of disrupted relationships between individuals, communities, and the socio-economic environments in which they are embedded (Sen, 1999; Bebbington, 1999). This perspective underscores the importance of understanding poverty as a relational and contextual phenomenon shaped by access to resources, social networks, and governance structures.

The *person-in-environment* paradigm further emphasizes that individuals' economic behaviors and capacities cannot be separated from their surrounding social and institutional contexts. Livelihood strategies, entrepreneurial activities, and economic resilience are influenced by household conditions, community support systems, policy frameworks, and broader welfare regimes (Ungar, 2011). Consequently, poverty reduction policies that focus solely on economic inputs risk overlooking the structural and ecological dimensions that shape human wellbeing and long-term sustainability.



In Indonesia, poverty continues to pose significant challenges, particularly in rural areas where limited market access, fragile local economies, and dependence on social assistance remain prevalent. According to regional statistics, Kabupaten Pringsewu recorded a poverty rate of 9.14 percent in 2024, reflecting persistent socio-economic vulnerability among rural households. This condition highlights the need for poverty alleviation strategies that move beyond short-term assistance toward approaches that foster adaptive capacity, community resilience, and sustainable livelihoods within local socio-ecological systems.

In response to these challenges, the Indonesian government has implemented various community-based empowerment programs integrated within the national social protection system. One such initiative is the *Pahlawan Ekonomi Nusantara* (PENA) program, designed to support beneficiaries transitioning from the *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH) toward economic self-reliance. PENA provides productive assets, entrepreneurial capacity building, and continuous social facilitation aimed at strengthening beneficiaries' livelihood strategies. Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly poverty eradication (Goal 1) and decent work and inclusive economic growth (Goal 8), PENA represents an institutional effort to transform welfare dependency into sustainable economic participation.

However, empirical studies on empowerment programs consistently show that the provision of capital or technical assistance alone does not guarantee sustainable outcomes. Empowerment is a complex process involving agency, access to resources, and meaningful outcomes that enhance wellbeing and social participation (Kabeer, 2005). From a human ecology standpoint, these dimensions are shaped by interactions between beneficiaries, social facilitators, community norms, and policy institutions. Without adequate alignment between program design, local contexts, and institutional capacity, empowerment initiatives may produce uneven or short-lived impacts.

Social facilitators play a critical role in mediating the relationship between policy objectives and everyday practices of beneficiaries. Acting as frontline governance actors, facilitators translate policy frameworks into locally meaningful actions, support beneficiaries in navigating institutional requirements, and help integrate economic assistance into broader livelihood strategies (Lipsky, 1980; Riddell, 2014). Their capacity, knowledge, and contextual sensitivity significantly influence whether empowerment programs contribute to sustainable socio-economic transformation or merely function as transitional interventions.

From an ethical governance perspective, empowerment policies also raise normative questions regarding responsibility, autonomy, and sustainability. Development interventions must ensure that efforts to promote self-reliance do not inadvertently shift structural risks onto individuals or reproduce new forms of vulnerability (Sen, 1999; Todaro & Smith, 2011). Therefore, evaluating empowerment programs requires attention not only to economic outputs, but also to how such programs reshape social relations, institutional trust, and long-term wellbeing within communities.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the implementation of the PENA program in Kecamatan Pagelaran, Kabupaten Pringsewu, through the lens of human ecology and the person-in-environment perspective. Specifically, this research aims to: 1) analyze the alignment between beneficiaries' socio-economic needs and the forms of support provided by the program; 2) examine the role of social facilitators as mediators between policy, institutions, and community contexts; and 3) assess the implications of the program for beneficiaries' transition toward economic self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods. By situating community-based economic empowerment within a broader socio-ecological and ethical framework, this study seeks to contribute to the development of more inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable poverty reduction policies in the Global South.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the implementation of the *Pahlawan Ekonomi Nusantara* (PENA) program within its local socio-ecological context in Kecamatan Pagelaran, Kabupaten Pringsewu, Indonesia. Guided by the *person-in-environment* and human ecology perspectives, the research focused on understanding how economic empowerment processes are shaped by interactions between individuals, community environments, and institutional practices (Creswell, 2015). Data were

collected through purposive sampling involving eight informants, consisting of five program beneficiaries transitioning from the *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH) and three social facilitators responsible for program implementation. Primary data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation, complemented by document analysis of program guidelines and implementation reports. Data analysis followed an iterative thematic process involving data reduction, thematic coding, and interpretive synthesis to identify patterns related to agency, institutional mediation, and livelihood sustainability. To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation across data sources and methods was applied, and ethical principles were upheld through informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of all participants (Creswell, 2015).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Socio-Ecological Alignment of Program Support and Local Livelihood Systems

The findings demonstrate that the PENA program generally aligned its forms of assistance with the socio-economic conditions and livelihood strategies of beneficiaries. Productive assets and business inputs were provided according to the type of micro-enterprises managed by participants, including food processing, small-scale trading, and service-based activities. This alignment enabled beneficiaries to integrate program support into their existing household economies and community-based production systems rather than requiring them to adopt unfamiliar or externally imposed livelihood models.

From a human ecology perspective, such alignment is crucial because livelihoods are embedded within specific socio-ecological contexts characterized by informal markets, family labor arrangements, and limited access to capital (Bebbington, 1999). Beneficiaries' enterprises were closely linked to household responsibilities and local demand, indicating that economic activities were shaped not only by market logic but also by social relations and cultural norms. This finding supports the argument that empowerment interventions are more likely to succeed when they build upon existing livelihood ecologies rather than attempting to restructure them through standardized policy designs (Sen, 1999).

However, the findings also suggest that alignment at the level of asset provision does not automatically translate into long-term sustainability. While beneficiaries reported short-term improvements in productivity and income, their enterprises remained vulnerable to market fluctuations, input price volatility, and limited access to broader value chains. This highlights the importance of viewing empowerment as an ongoing socio-ecological process rather than a one-time economic intervention.

3.2 The Role of Social Facilitators in Mediating Policy and Community Contexts

Social facilitators emerged as key actors in shaping how the PENA program was experienced and implemented at the community level. Beyond their formal administrative roles, facilitators functioned as mediators between policy frameworks, institutional requirements, and the everyday realities of beneficiaries. They assisted beneficiaries in identifying suitable business activities, preparing proposals, and managing the procedural aspects of receiving support.

This mediating role aligns with the concept of street-level governance, which emphasizes the discretionary power of frontline actors in translating policy objectives into practice (Lipsky, 1980). Facilitators' interpretations of program guidelines, their responsiveness to local conditions, and their interpersonal engagement with beneficiaries significantly influenced program outcomes. Where facilitators demonstrated contextual sensitivity and adaptive problem-solving, beneficiaries reported higher levels of confidence and clarity in managing their enterprises.

At the same time, the findings indicate constraints in facilitators' capacity, particularly regarding advanced business mentoring, financial planning, and market expansion strategies. While facilitators were effective in guiding initial stages of enterprise development, their limited training in specialized entrepreneurial skills constrained their ability to support long-term business growth. This limitation underscores the institutional

dimension of empowerment, where the effectiveness of community-based programs is contingent upon the capacity of implementing actors and the resources available to them (Riddell, 2014).

3.3 Transition from Social Assistance to Economic Self-Reliance

One of the most significant outcomes observed in this study was beneficiaries' transition from reliance on social assistance toward economic self-reliance, as reflected in their readiness to graduate from the Program Keluarga Harapan (PKH). This transition involved not only changes in income sources but also shifts in self-perception, aspirations, and social identity. Beneficiaries described increased confidence in their ability to manage economic activities and reduced dependence on state assistance.

From the perspective of empowerment theory, this transition reflects an increase in agency, defined as the capacity to make strategic life choices within existing structural constraints (Kabeer, 2005). Access to productive assets enabled beneficiaries to exercise greater control over economic decisions, while ongoing facilitation supported their ability to navigate institutional processes. However, the findings also reveal that agency was relational rather than absolute, remaining dependent on continued institutional support, stable markets, and household conditions.

These results resonate with critiques of linear empowerment models that assume a straightforward progression from dependency to independence. Instead, the transition observed in this study was characterized by negotiation, uncertainty, and vulnerability, reinforcing the human ecology view that empowerment unfolds within dynamic and interconnected social systems (Ungar, 2011).

3.4 Ethical and Governance Dimensions of Community-Based Empowerment

The findings raise important ethical considerations regarding the governance of empowerment programs. While the PENA program successfully promoted economic initiative among beneficiaries, it also shifted certain risks, such as market uncertainty and business failure from the state to individuals. From an ethical governance perspective, empowerment policies must balance the promotion of self-reliance with mechanisms that protect beneficiaries from excessive exposure to structural vulnerabilities (Sen, 1999).

The limited capacity of facilitators to provide long-term mentoring further accentuates this ethical tension. Without adequate institutional support, beneficiaries may face pressures to sustain enterprises in precarious economic environments, potentially leading to renewed vulnerability. Todaro and Smith (2011) argue that inclusive development requires not only enabling economic participation but also ensuring that institutional frameworks remain responsive to the risks faced by marginalized groups.

Strengthening facilitator capacity, expanding access to follow-up support, and integrating empowerment programs with broader local economic development strategies are therefore critical for ensuring ethical and sustainable outcomes. Such measures would help align empowerment initiatives with principles of inclusive governance and long-term socio-ecological resilience.

3.5 Implications for Sustainable Livelihoods and Human Ecology

Overall, the implementation of the PENA program in Kecamatan Pagelaran illustrates both the potential and the limitations of community-based economic empowerment within a human ecology framework. The program contributed to short-term economic improvements and enhanced beneficiaries' agency, yet long-term sustainability remained contingent upon institutional capacity, market conditions, and social support networks.

These findings underscore the importance of situating empowerment programs within broader socio-ecological systems that encompass households, communities, institutions, and governance structures. Empowerment should thus be understood not as an endpoint but as a continuous process requiring adaptive policy design, ethical responsibility, and sustained institutional engagement (Bebbington, 1999; Kabeer, 2005).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Pahlawan Ekonomi Nusantara (PENA) program holds significant potential as a community-based economic empowerment initiative when implemented in alignment with local socio-ecological contexts. Guided by the person-in-environment and human ecology perspectives, the findings show that empowerment outcomes are shaped not only by the provision of productive assets, but by the quality of institutional mediation, the adaptability of facilitation practices, and the integration of beneficiaries' livelihood strategies within household and community environments. The program contributed to increased economic agency and facilitated beneficiaries' transition from social assistance toward self-reliance, yet this transition remained relational and contingent upon sustained support structures.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces human ecology and empowerment scholarship by illustrating that economic self-reliance is not a linear outcome, but an ongoing socio-ecological process embedded within intersecting systems of policy, community, and market dynamics (Bebbington, 1999; Kabeer, 2005). The findings challenge technocratic approaches to empowerment that prioritize economic indicators while overlooking ethical responsibilities and structural vulnerabilities. Instead, they highlight the need to conceptualize empowerment as both a capability-enhancing and risk-sensitive intervention (Sen, 1999).

In terms of policy and practice, the study underscores the central role of social facilitators as street-level actors whose discretionary capacity significantly influences program effectiveness (Lipsky, 1980). Strengthening facilitator training, particularly in business development and adaptive mentoring, is essential to enhance the sustainability of empowerment outcomes. Moreover, integrating empowerment programs with broader local economic development strategies and follow-up support mechanisms would help mitigate market-related risks faced by beneficiaries and promote long-term livelihood resilience (Todaro & Smith, 2011).

Ethically, the findings call for greater attention to inclusive and responsible governance in the design of empowerment policies. While promoting self-reliance, the state and implementing institutions must remain accountable for ensuring that empowerment does not translate into the privatization of structural risks borne by vulnerable households. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches to examine how empowerment trajectories evolve over time and across different socio-ecological settings, particularly in the Global South. By doing so, scholarship can contribute more effectively to the development of equitable, sustainable, and ethically grounded human–environment relations.

Ethical approval

This study was conducted in compliance with internationally recognized ethical principles for research involving human participants. Formal approval from an institutional review board was not required for this qualitative study; however, all procedures adhered to ethical standards, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity throughout data collection and reporting.

Informed consent statement

All participants, and where applicable their legal guardians, provided informed consent prior to participation. The study objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits were explained in clear and accessible formats. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Consent was also obtained for audio recording and the use of anonymized quotations in publications.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

SAK conceptualised the study, developed the research design, and led the manuscript drafting and finalisation of the manuscript.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the finalization of this work the authors used ChatGPT 3.5 in order to improve the language of the article. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Notes on Contributors

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