

Islamic Boarding Schools as Agents of Sustainable Development: A Social Innovation Perspective from Darussalam Blokagung

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia hold deep-rooted social capital and community trust, yet their potential as institutional actors for sustainable development remains underexplored, particularly within the framework of social innovation theory and the SDGs agenda. As global challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and ecological degradation intensify, there is a growing need to understand how faith-based educational institutions can serve as strategic agents of transformative change. This study aims to identify and analyze the role of Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School in adopting social innovation as a strategy for local-to-global sustainable development aligned with the SDGs. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving 15 purposively selected participants, comprising boarding school administrators, senior students, local community members, and institutional partners. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, with triangulation applied to ensure credibility and validity. The findings reveal three interlocking mechanisms: (1) the visionary and transformative leadership of Kiai Dr. KH. Ahmad Munib Syafa'at as the primary catalyst for innovation; (2) multi-sector collaboration with universities, government agencies, and NGOs that expands the school's social reach; and (3) ecological initiatives — including reforestation programs and waste banks — that institutionalize environmental responsibility within the *pesantren* culture. This study contributes theoretically by integrating Islamic educational leadership with SDG-based social innovation, offering a holistic framework that bridges local Islamic wisdom with global sustainability agendas — an integration absent from previous studies that addressed these dimensions only partially. In practice, the findings recommend collaborative policies among *pesantren*, the government, and NGOs, as well as the integration of green curricula into national Islamic boarding school education standards.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pesantren, a traditional Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, has long shaped the character, morals, and social values of society [1], [2]. Today, Islamic boarding schools are not only centers of religious education but also adopt social innovations to address challenges such as economic empowerment through MSMEs for students, waste management, renewable energy, and environmental and social justice campaigns [3], [4].

This transformation creates long-term, inclusive change by integrating Islamic values and sustainable development principles, in line with global awareness of the climate crisis, poverty, and inequality. Islamic boarding schools, with their strong community base and high levels of public trust, have the potential to act as agents of change through innovative approaches aligned with the SDGs [5].

Problems arise because traditional Islamic boarding schools often struggle to adapt to global dynamics that require innovative strategies to address economic, social, and environmental challenges. Innovations such as organic farming and student cooperatives are not yet widespread, requiring Islamic boarding schools to evolve from subsistence to an ethical Islamic economic model for self-sufficiency [6], [7].

Furthermore, complex socio-ecological issues such as urbanization and environmental degradation require integrating green curricula and collaborating to achieve the SDGs. Many Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) are not yet optimal strategic partners, although examples like Al-Ittifaq and Ath-Thaariq Islamic Boarding Schools demonstrate potential as ecological laboratories.

The theoretical basis of QS. Ar-Ra'd: 11 emphasizes human agency for internal change for external transformation, where Islamic boarding schools realize this through empowering MSMEs and waste management [8]. This study aims to identify and analyze the role of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in adopting social innovation for local-global sustainable development, with the urgency of bridging local wisdom and the SDGs agenda through trusted social actors such as Islamic boarding schools. The novelty lies in the holistic integration of Islamic boarding schools, social innovation, and the SDGs, which differs from previous studies that focused on partial aspects, resulting in recommendations for collaboration among Islamic boarding schools, the government, and NGOs.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to deeply explore the meaning, role, and socio-cultural dynamics of pesantren in adopting social innovation as a sustainable development strategy [9], [10]. A case study design was selected because it enables intensive, contextually grounded investigation of a specific institution — in this case, Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Blokagung, Banyuwangi — with a focus on innovative programs rooted in Islamic values across social, economic, and environmental dimensions. This approach is descriptive-interpretive in nature, prioritizing natural context and allowing flexibility in response to emergent field dynamics [11], [12].

Participants and Sampling

The study involved 15 participants selected through purposive sampling, a technique chosen because it allows the researcher to deliberately select information-rich informants who have direct involvement in or knowledge of the pesantren's social innovation programs. Participants were drawn from four key groups: (1) pesantren administrators and kiai (3 participants), who provided institutional and leadership perspectives; (2) senior santri (students) actively involved in empowerment programs (5 participants); (3) local community members living in proximity to the pesantren and benefiting from its programs (4 participants); and (4) external institutional partners, including representatives from collaborating universities and government agencies (3 participants). This multi-stakeholder composition ensured diverse perspectives on the pesantren's role as a social innovation agent.

Data Collection

Data were collected from November to December 2025 through three primary instruments: (1) in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with all 15 participants to capture individual experiences, perceptions, and institutional narratives; (2) participant observation of key activities including entrepreneurship training, environmental management programs, and inter-institutional MoU signings; and (3) field documentation such as photographs, program reports, and activity records. Secondary data were drawn from pesantren institutional documents, government policy documents, academic journal articles, and research program reports to contextualize and enrich primary findings [13].

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, comprising three cyclical stages: (1) data reduction — systematically selecting, focusing, and summarizing raw data to identify emerging themes relevant to social innovation and the SDGs; (2) data display — organizing reduced data into narrative descriptions, matrices, and thematic maps to facilitate pattern recognition; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification — iteratively constructing and confirming interpretations until theoretical saturation was achieved. This cyclical process ensured that thematic patterns linking pesantren social innovations to SDG principles were systematically and credibly revealed [14].

Data Validation Strategy

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings, this study applied four validation strategies adapted from Lincoln and Guba's criteria of qualitative credibility: (1) triangulation of sources, by cross-verifying data from interviews, observation, and documentation across multiple participant groups; (2) member checking, by returning preliminary findings to key informants for confirmation of accuracy and interpretive alignment; (3) prolonged engagement, through sustained on-site involvement over the study period to build rapport and contextual depth; and (4) peer debriefing, by discussing analytical interpretations with academic colleagues to minimize researcher bias. These measures collectively strengthen the internal validity and dependability of this qualitative inquiry [15], [16].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. RESULTS

The analysis of data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and field documentation at Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School revealed three core thematic findings that directly address the study's research objectives.

The first finding concerns the role of visionary *kiai* leadership as the primary institutional catalyst for social innovation. Dr. KH. Ahmad Munib Syafa'at, serving as both *the pesantren caretaker and Rector of UIMSYA*, consistently demonstrated a leadership character that transcends mere preservation of tradition. He actively initiated progressive programs including digital literacy, student economic empowerment, and environmental conservation, and articulated a clear institutional vision: "*Students must be ready to face global challenges in the economy, digital, and the environment. I encourage them to think critically, design their own programs, and apply them in real life.*" Observations across the study period confirmed that the *kiai* simultaneously functions as spiritual guide, program manager, and external partnership broker — shifting roles fluidly in response to institutional and community needs.

The second finding reveals that Darussalam Blokagung has established five structured multi-sector partnerships with universities, government agencies, and civil society organizations. These include formal MoUs and program-based collaborations with Banyuwangi State Polytechnic (POLIWANGI), UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, the Litapdimas program of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Banyuwangi Environmental Service, and UIMSYA Blokagung. Each partnership has produced concrete social innovation outcomes, including vocational skills training, digital and media literacy programs, waste management research, ecological awareness campaigns, and digitalization of *pesantren* administrative services. These outcomes were documented through MoU agreements, program activity reports, and direct observation of training events.

The third finding demonstrates that the *pesantren* has undergone measurable ecological transformation. In February 2023, UIMSYA and *santri* collectively planted 1,000 tree seedlings on campus as part of a reforestation program. Circular economy-based waste management initiatives, including waste banks and organic waste utilization, were subsequently implemented under LPPM UIMSYA guidance. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with academics, local government officials, and community leaders further consolidated the *pesantren*'s role as a collaborative bridge for environmental sustainability in the local community.

3.2. DISCUSSIONS

Visionary Leadership of Kiai as a Driver of Social Innovation

The Kiai at the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School not only serve as religious teachers who maintain the continuity of Islamic scholarly traditions, but also as visionaries who devise innovative strategies to address the challenges of the times. The leadership demonstrated by Dr. KH. Ahmad Munib Syafa'at, as the caretaker of the branch Islamic boarding school and the Rector of UIMSYA (KH Mukhtar Syafaat University Banyuwangi), shows a dynamic leadership style. He sees opportunities in every challenge,

adapts methods to the context, and creates an Islamic boarding school ecosystem that is responsive to global issues such as climate change, social justice, and an inclusive economy. This kind of leadership encourages the development of progressive programs such as digital literacy, student economic empowerment, and environmental conservation.

This leadership style is in line with the theory of “Transformative Islamic Educational Leadership” put forward by Yusof & Ahmad (2023), which states that “effective leadership in Islamic education today requires a fusion of prophetic ethics with strategic transformation that responds to global and societal shifts.” [17]. In this context, a kiai is not only tasked with preserving the legacy of knowledge and spirituality, but must also create a direction for change that is relevant to the dynamics of the times. Thus, the leadership of Islamic boarding schools, as demonstrated by KH. Ahmad Munib Syafa'at represents the actualization of prophetic values in modern managerial and social practices.

This visionary leadership view is also reflected in the statement of Dr. KH. Ahmad Munib Syafa'at, as the Rector of Uimsya and the Caretaker of the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Blokagung branch, who emphasized the importance of leadership direction that is not only focused on preserving tradition, but also on strengthening the vision of the future of the Islamic boarding school. He emphasized that the challenges of the times are increasingly complex and require students to be ready in various aspects of life. "Alhamdulillah, the leadership at this Islamic boarding school not only maintains tradition, but continues to strengthen the vision of the future: students must be ready to face global challenges in the economy, digital, and the environment. I encourage them to think critically, design their own programs, and apply them in real life," he said. This statement reflects his visionary and strategic view in shaping students who are not only scholarly but also resilient, independent, and able to play an active role in the global community.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Darussalam Academics from 2006 to 2025 showed that the leadership style adopted by the kiai in these Islamic boarding schools is adaptive and situational. In practice, the kiai can shift roles as needed, from spiritual guides instilling Islamic values, to managerial leaders managing the pesantren's programs, to motivators driving change. This flexible approach aligns with the "Contextual Islamic Leadership" approach [18], [19] developed by Fathurrahman & Hasan (2024), which states that "Islamic leadership must be fluid and context-sensitive, especially within Islamic boarding schools, to bridge classical scholarship with real-world complexities in the 21st century."

The leadership of the kiai (Islamic scholars) goes beyond formulating a vision; it also oversees its implementation on the ground. The kiai plays an active role in providing strategic direction, motivating daily administrators, and forging partnerships with various external parties. This role makes the kiai a key catalyst in building a progressive and highly competitive Islamic boarding school ecosystem. This supportive leadership creates space for collaboration, participation, and the sustainability of the school's social programs. In conclusion, the visionary leadership of Dr. KH. Ahmad Munib Syafa'at and the caretakers of the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School is the primary foundation for the creation of various social innovations relevant to the needs of the times. They are not only spiritual leaders who uphold Islamic values and local traditions, but also strategic leaders

capable of guiding the school to become a key actor in addressing global challenges. With foresight, an adaptive attitude, and a supportive approach, this Islamic boarding school has successfully positioned itself as a center of dynamic change in society.

Multi-sector Collaboration Increases the Reach of Islamic Boarding Schools' Social Innovations

Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School has demonstrated its strategic role as an agent of change in sustainable development through broad and productive multi-sector partnerships. No longer confined to its traditional function as a solely religious educational institution, the Islamic boarding school has successfully expanded its reach through active collaborations with universities, local governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector. This collaboration not only enriches the educational process and empowers students, but also strengthens the Islamic boarding school's position as a center of social innovation rooted in Islamic values and local wisdom. As stated by KH. Ahmad Munib Syafa'at, during the signing of the MoU with the Banyuwangi State Polytechnic (POLIWANGI), said, "This kind of collaboration must have a direct impact on students. We want them to have the skills, build networks, and have the courage to enter society bringing adaptive and solution-oriented messages of da'wah."

The partnership established by the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School is not merely symbolic; it has been translated into concrete programs, including media literacy training, digital technology skills, development of a student information system, journalism training, and environmental education and waste management. This approach aligns with the theory of collaborative leadership in Islamic education developed by Alzyoud et al. (2021). In their research, they stated that "Islamic educational institutions in the 21st century must embrace collaborative leadership that connects religious values with multidisciplinary partnerships to remain responsive to global challenges." In this context, collaboration is not only a means of improving educational quality but also a strategic effort to instill in students the values of empowerment, social relevance, and adaptive capacity [20], [21].

This collaborative strategy also reflects the principles of agile leadership in Islamic education, as stated by Huda et al. (2022), who emphasized that "Agile Islamic leaders must develop organizational partnerships that are flexible, responsive, and value-driven in order to meet the fast-changing demands of society." [22], [23]. Collaborations with institutions such as POLIWANGI, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, and the Banyuwangi Environmental Agency demonstrate the adaptive and synergistic capabilities of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in responding to the dynamics of the times. By leveraging each partner's potential, Islamic boarding schools not only strengthen their internal institutional structures but also directly contribute to global agendas such as the SDGs.

Table 1. Multi-sector Collaboration of Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School

No	Collaboration Partners	Types of Partnership	Impact of Social Innovation
1	Banyuwangi State Polytechnic	MoU Tri Dharma: education, life skills training	Students receive job skills training
2	Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta	Community service (digital & media literacy)	Digitally literate students and multiplatform preaching
3	Litapdimas Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia	Assistance with waste management research programs	Islamic boarding school uses waste banks as an ecological solution
4	Banyuwangi Environmental Service	Environmental education and greening programs	Tree planting and environmental love campaign
5	UIMSYA Blokagung	Research & development of Islamic boarding school information systems	Digitalization of Islamic boarding school services (SIS, finance)

With the partnership model described above, Islamic boarding schools have transcended their historical role as centers of religious instruction to become key actors in shaping an empowered and resilient civil society. The social innovation resulting from this multi-sectoral synergy has helped create a contextual educational space for students, where spiritual values, 21st-century competencies, and a spirit of sustainability go hand in hand. This demonstrates that cross-sector collaboration is not merely an additional strategy, but a key foundation for building an Islamic boarding school ecosystem that is adaptive to global change while maintaining local roots and Islamic spirituality.

Islamic Boarding Schools Transform into Ecological Social Institutions

Darussalam Islamic Boarding School in Blokagung, Banyuwangi, has undergone a significant transformation from a traditional religious educational institution into a community empowerment center that emphasizes sustainable development principles. A commitment to environmental management has become an integral part of this Islamic boarding school's new identity. One concrete step is the reforestation program implemented in February 2023, when KH Mukhtar Syafaat University (UIMSYA) initiated the planting of 1,000 tree seedlings on the campus grounds. This program not only beautifies the environment but also serves as a form of ecological da'wah (Islamic outreach) involving close collaboration between UIMSYA administrators and students in planting and maintaining the area. This transformation aligns with the Green Islamic Education theory developed by Arifin et al. (2022) [24], [25] which states that “environmentally based Islamic education must encourage contextual spiritual, ethical, and practical ecological involvement in Islamic boarding school life.”

Furthermore, concrete efforts to mainstream environmental awareness among Islamic boarding school students (santri) are being carried out through training programs and practices in circular-economy-based waste management. Initiatives such as waste banks and the utilization of organic waste have begun to be implemented at the Islamic boarding school

community level under the guidance of the UIMSYA Research and Community Service Institute (LPPM). These activities aim to foster ecological awareness and improve students' practical skills in resource management. This approach aligns with the Ecological Citizenship theory proposed by Dobson (2023) [26], [27] which emphasizes that “ecological citizenship is a form of active involvement in managing environmental resources and responsibilities, especially through local value-based institutions.”

Furthermore, the Islamic boarding school has also established strategic partnerships with various stakeholders, including academics, local government officials, and community leaders, to strengthen this ecological transformation. Through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), technical assistance, and cross-sector collaboration, the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School demonstrates its active role as a collaborative bridge between Islamic educational institutions and local communities in promoting environmental sustainability. The Head of the UIMSYA Institute of Islamic Studies (LPPM), M. Faruk, emphasized that the tree-planting and waste management education activities are not only environmental in nature but also an expression of Islamic spiritual values that foster a love for God's creation.



Figure 1. Discussion of the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School in Blokagung with Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

This transformation has transformed the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School into a living socio-ecological laboratory. Activities such as reforestation, waste management, and environmental conservation are now part of the Islamic boarding school's cultural curriculum, demonstrating that Islamic values are not only taught theoretically but also practiced in real, contextual ways. Thus, the Islamic boarding school emerges as an institution that is not only spiritually strong but also empowered as an agent of change in sustainable development at the local level.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Blokagung has successfully transformed into a strategic agent of sustainable development through three interlocking

mechanisms: the visionary and transformative leadership of Kiai Dr. KH. Ahmad Munib Syafa'at, broad multi-sector collaboration with universities, government agencies, and NGOs, and institutionalized ecological initiatives including reforestation and waste bank programs — all of which demonstrate that *pesantren* can operationalize the SDGs from within a locally rooted, Islamic value-based framework. Theoretically, this study contributes an integrated model linking Transformative Islamic Educational Leadership, Social Innovation Theory, and the SDGs paradigm, filling a gap left by prior studies that examined these dimensions in isolation rather than as mutually reinforcing forces within a single institutional context. From a policy standpoint, the findings recommend that the Indonesian government formalize *pesantren*-NGO-university partnerships through national grant mechanisms, integrate green and ecological citizenship curricula into the national *pesantren* education standard, and develop SDG-oriented leadership training programs for *kiai* to scale the impact demonstrated at Darussalam Blokagung. This study acknowledges limitations in its single-case design and two-month timeframe, which restrict generalizability and longitudinal assessment; future research should employ multi-site comparative designs using mixed methods to validate these findings more broadly. Ultimately, the case of Darussalam Blokagung affirms that when Islamic values, visionary leadership, and cross-sector synergy converge, *pesantren* become not merely educational institutions, but irreplaceable pillars of Indonesia's sustainable development architecture.

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