

Economic Independence in Poor Urban Communities in the Mendawai Social Complex, Palangka Raya City

Kurniawan Netanyahu*, Aprianto Wirawan, Isabella Jeniva, Yolantya Widyasari, Eva Inriani, Reynhard Malau, Rindi Juniari, Marlon Tirayoh

Department of Social and Religious Sciences and Christian Religious Sciences, Faculty of Social and Religious Sciences, Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Palangka Raya, Palangka Raya, Indonesia

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Abstract Urban communities residing in the Mendawai Social Complex, Palangka Raya City, face various economic challenges, particularly income instability resulting from irregular employment such as construction work and traditional mining. This Community Service (PKM) program was conducted using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method. Given the broad scope of the PKM area, the researchers encouraged active participation from members of the GKE Panenga Congregation, who are similarly affected by economic hardship, to collaboratively identify solutions. The primary objective of this PKM initiative was to enhance community welfare through three key aspects: economic independence, social capital, and life skills. The outcomes of the program demonstrate that participants were able to identify viable small business opportunities capable of increasing household income through culinary life skills training. In addition, participants received guidance on how to manage business groups effectively, promoting sustainability through business coordination training delivered by experienced practitioners. Furthermore, the program contributed to the reinforcement of participants' social capital by addressing social issues through community-based solutions introduced during the PKM activities. A notable outcome of this initiative was its broader impact beyond individual participants: it provided the Mendawai Social Complex community with a replicable and sustainable business model. Concluding this PKM program, which adopted a Community-Based Development (CBD) approach and yielded effective empowerment outcomes, the researchers recommend that similar approaches be implemented by both government institutions and private stakeholders when engaging with the Mendawai community or other urban populations affected by poverty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 2013 and 2024, residents of the Mendawai Social Complex consistently lived below the poverty line. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency and the Palangka Raya City Media Center in 2024, the Mendawai Social Complex had a population of 42,871 people, with a density of approximately 173 individuals per hectare (BPS Palangka Raya, 2024; Media Center Palangka Raya, 2024). The majority of residents rely on informal employment such as small-scale trading, construction labor, and traditional mining. Observations conducted by the

researchers revealed that most families earned less than IDR 500,000 per month, making it difficult to fulfill their basic daily needs. These challenging economic conditions reflect a persistent form of structural poverty that remains unresolved, despite the rapid economic and infrastructural development occurring in Palangka Raya City.

The economic hardship experienced by the Mendawai Social Complex community extends beyond low income. It is compounded by limited access to skills training and a lack of economic resources to support family livelihoods.

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*Corresponding author: Kurniawan Netanyahu

Department of Social and Religious Sciences and Christian Religious Sciences, Faculty of Social and Religious Sciences, Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Palangka Raya, Jl. Tampung Penyang (RTA. Milano Km. 6), Palangka Raya, Indonesia, 73112

Email: kurniawan.netanyahu@mail.ugm.ac.id

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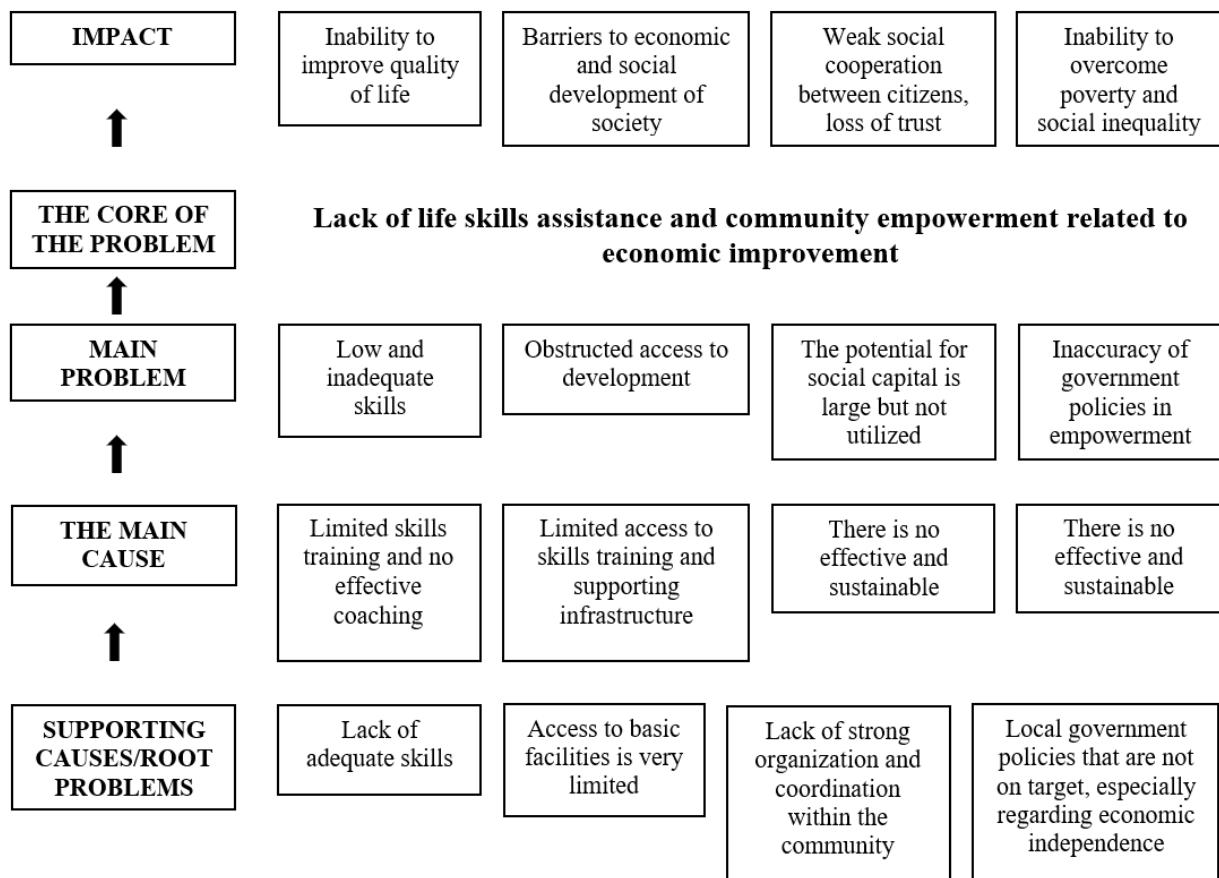


Figure 1 . Social problem tree of the community in the Mendawai social complex (GKE Panenga congregation)

Additionally, reliance on seasonal employment contributes to the instability of household income. Other contributing factors include low levels of trust in government institutions, weak community solidarity, and poor coordination among business groups, all of which exacerbate a sense of social powerlessness. These interconnected factors indicate that the challenges faced by residents of the Mendawai Social Complex are multidimensional, encompassing economic, social, and institutional dimensions. Figure 1 presents a problem tree diagram developed by the researcher to illustrate the various social issues affecting the Mendawai Social Complex community in Palangka Raya.

In addressing the social problems faced by the Mendawai Social Complex community, a community empowerment approach is essential. Empowerment is a process that enables individuals and groups to gain control over their own lives (Feste & Anderson, 1995; Hikmawati, 2022). This process involves collective action by individuals and communities to assert greater control over their circumstances and environment (Kabeer, 2021b). Within this framework, the government should serve as a partner rather than a sole authority. It can facilitate empowerment by providing access to resources, training, and technical support (Ardiansyah & Agustina, 2023; Susilowati & Mafruhah, 2023). However, in practice, empowerment initiatives often face obstacles due to differing understandings and a lack of mutual

trust, particularly from governmental actors. An effective empowerment model should enable a transfer of ownership and decision-making power from the government to the community (Coy et al., 2021; Coy et al., 2022). Through this transitional process, communities can develop the full capacity to manage and sustain development initiatives independently. For empowerment to function effectively, the government must foster open communication channels to receive feedback from the community. This requires creating inclusive spaces that encourage participation from all societal elements (Morgan et al., 2024; Yudarwati & Gregory, 2022).

Skills training is a fundamental component of community empowerment, as it enhances the capacities of both individuals and groups. Through such training, communities oriented toward change can pursue their self-defined goals. Importantly, these goals must be determined internally, not imposed by external actors. The success of empowerment also depends on the active participation of community members, which must take place within the framework of a mutually agreed-upon system (Coy et al., 2021). In capacity-building efforts, women can serve as key agents of empowerment (Asmorowati et al., 2024). Women are often recognized for their ability to manage household finances and improve their financial capacity independently (Gonçalves et al., 2021; Indriasiyah et al., 2023). Women's groups typically strive to

avoid dependence on loans provided by the government or private institutions. Their financial independence and persistent efforts to support their families motivate them to seek alternative income-generating opportunities (Walker & Groves, 2022). Furthermore, women frequently demonstrate leadership and negotiation skills equal to those of men, particularly in formal discussions and decision-making forums (Palash et al., 2024).

A persistent challenge in increasing self-capacity through empowerment programs is identifying sustainable resources for empowerment (Retnowati et al., 2023; Rodiah et al., 2024). Many impoverished populations depend on non-renewable natural resources for income, a practice that ultimately undermines long-term community well-being (Asif et al., 2021). Consequently, there is an urgent need to introduce renewable natural resources as a foundation for empowerment efforts. Utilizing these renewable resources can also enhance the effectiveness of public services such as education and healthcare (Khan et al., 2022). Moreover, renewable energy can assist communities in processing local food products, thereby reducing reliance on external food supplies (Tamasiga et al., 2024).

One of the root causes of persistent poverty in the Mendawai Social Complex is the inadequacy of government intervention, which has failed to address fundamental issues. Government efforts tend to focus on the provision of material aid without accompanying training or sustained support. Such assistance, when limited to material goods, fosters dependency and fails to develop residents' capacity for independent living (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024; Efrina, 2022; Ginting et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2025). Under these circumstances, empowerment initiatives must aim to strengthen community capacity through the development of social capital and the establishment of cooperative business groups (Rudito et al., 2022; Widiartanto et al., 2022). Empowerment becomes more effective when it is participatory and positions citizens as primary agents of change. Additional benefits of community empowerment include fostering a sense of unity and mutual support, which in turn reinforces social capital (Alzamel, 2024; Davies & Reid, 2024).

To develop an empowerment model suited to the local context, this PKM initiative was implemented in the Mendawai Social Complex community using the Panenga Kalimantan Evangelical Christian Church (GKE) as its operational base. The Mendawai Social Complex faces a range of social issues – unpredictable income, limited access to skills training, and economic vulnerability. These socio-economic conditions portray an urban poor community with untapped potential. Key challenges include low social trust, weak coordination among groups, and reliance on external aid. Therefore, this PKM initiative was designed to promote economic self-sufficiency and strengthen social networks by providing skills training and facilitating the formation of community-based business groups. Utilizing the Community-Based Development (CBD) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches, the PKM program is expected to

produce not only short-term outcomes – such as improved skills – but also to establish a more resilient and empowered socio-economic system within urban environments like the Mendawai Social Complex.

2. METHOD

The PKM activities conducted in the Mendawai Social Complex community were designed using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach in combination with the Community-Based Development (CBD) framework. These approaches were selected because they position the community as the primary agent of change rather than as a passive recipient of aid. The PAR method was particularly suited to address the complex socio-economic challenges faced by poor urban communities such as those in the Mendawai Social Complex. It empowers residents to act as agents of change rather than mere beneficiaries of training programs, resulting in solutions that are both contextualized and sustainable. The PAR approach is especially relevant given that one of the underlying problems in the Mendawai Social Complex is the community's low sense of ownership over development programs, as well as the limited opportunities for participation in the planning and evaluation of previous empowerment efforts. In this context, PAR serves not only as an operational method but also as a strategy for social transformation.

Technically, the PKM activities in the Mendawai Social Complex were implemented through five main stages: To Know, To Understand, To Plan, To Act and React, and To Reflect. These five stages are cyclical and interrelated, with each stage having its own objectives, concrete activities, and direct relevance to the specific social and economic challenges faced by the community. Figure 2 illustrates the five stages involved in the implementation of PKM in the Mendawai Social Complex.

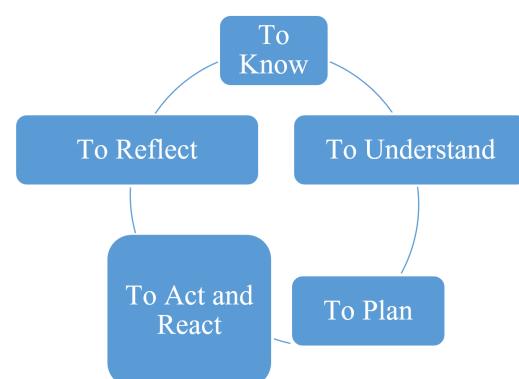


Figure 2 . PKM activity stage chart using the PAR method

The following section elaborates on each stage implemented during the PKM skills development activities at the GKE Panenga Congregation:

1. To know

In the initial stage of the PKM program, the researchers conducted field observations and informal interviews with representatives from

the broader community and the GKE Panenga Congregation, including church leaders, housewives, and neighborhood administrators (RT). This stage aimed to directly identify the problems faced by residents, such as dependence on informal labor (e.g., construction workers, street vendors, and traditional miners), irregular income, and limited access to entrepreneurship training. Data were collected through unstructured interviews with five community leaders and direct observation of residents' economic activities. These findings revealed that the main challenges extended beyond low income and included weak entrepreneurial capacity and limited socio-economic networks among residents. This stage produced qualitative data that served as a foundation for designing activities tailored to the local context.

2. To understand

Following the initial overview, the researchers proceeded to a deeper understanding phase through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The FGD involved 20 participants, comprising representatives of the Mendawai Social Complex, church administrators, housewives, and local youth. The discussion utilized problem-grouping techniques and a priority needs assessment. The goal was to systematically explore the community's aspirations, challenges, and available local resources. During the session, participants expressed a need for practical training aligned with local potential. Most participants recommended culinary skills training, citing the availability of raw ingredients and access to nearby traditional markets. Based on these discussions, it was concluded that life skills training in the culinary sector would be the most appropriate and impactful intervention.

3. To plan

The "to plan" stage involved collaboratively preparing an action plan. Together with community members, the researchers outlined a program agenda consisting of culinary product-making workshops, business group formation, and basic financial and marketing training. The joint action plan was developed based on FGD outcomes, considering both available resources and local constraints. The training was designed not only to impart technical skills but also to cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets and collaborative work ethics. The venue was selected within a church facility that was easily accessible to participants. Equipment and ingredients were provided through support from a local partner, CU Betang Asi. This activity was structured for sustainability, allowing residents to replicate it independently after the program ended. The final outcome of this stage was a two-day training schedule covering cooking practices, basic bookkeeping, and marketing strategies.

4. To act and react

At the implementation stage, the program was delivered through workshops focusing on the production of marketable snacks such as pudding and solo sausage. Training was conducted using a hands-on participatory approach, giving each participant the opportunity to be directly involved in the full production process—from ingredient preparation to cooking and packaging. In addition to culinary skills, participants also received instruction on basic financial management and marketing strategies, including how to plan daily sales and promote products in their immediate environment using tools like social media. These sessions featured local culinary practitioners as trainers. The workshop was attended by 25 active participants, primarily housewives who already ran small home-based businesses. The training saw high levels of enthusiasm, with participants actively engaging in food preparation, cooking, and packaging. At the end of the training, an informal evaluation was conducted using group discussions and feedback forms. The PKM team also carried out a participatory evaluation, gathering feedback on the training's benefits, implementation challenges, and future plans. Results indicated that 80% of participants found the training relevant to their needs and expressed readiness to apply their new skills in daily life.

5. To reflect

The reflection stage served as both a closing and evaluative process. Researchers facilitated an open discussion with participants to review the training process, its perceived outcomes, and the potential for further development. Participants reported increased confidence in starting their own businesses, the acquisition of practical new skills, and motivation to form joint business groups. Many expressed interest in continuing with additional training and establishing a collective marketing system. This shared commitment to enhancing soft skills in the culinary sector demonstrated the success of the program in fostering motivation and collective awareness. Additionally, the reflection session revealed that the PKM initiative had contributed to strengthening social solidarity, expanding networks among residents, and rebuilding trust in the community's collective potential. The outcomes of this stage suggest that the program holds strong potential for replication in other urban communities facing similar socio-economic challenges.

The PKM implementation in the Mendawai Social Complex spanned two months, from initial preparation through training and reflection. All activities were designed to be flexible and responsive to community dynamics. The program involved not only academics but also business practitioners and representatives of the GKE Panenga Congregation. The success of the initiative was evaluated

not solely on the basis of participant numbers or product outputs but also on qualitative indicators such as shifts in mindset, the emergence of new business initiatives, and the strengthening of social cooperation. Based on participant feedback, high levels of engagement, and community interest in continuing the activities independently, the PKM program has demonstrated strong initial effectiveness. Although the long-term economic impacts have yet to be fully assessed, improvements in skills, participant involvement, and the formation of business groups suggest that the program effectively addressed key community needs and provides a viable model for replication elsewhere.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This PKM activity was conducted in response to the socio-economic challenges faced by the Mendawai Social Complex community—particularly the low level of economic independence, which reflects deeper structural issues commonly encountered among urban poor populations. This community exhibits a high dependency on informal labor, limited productive skills, fragile social ties, and a lack of collective learning spaces—factors that have contributed to a persistent state of socio-economic vulnerability. Recognizing these multidimensional issues, the PKM program was designed as a direct intervention targeting the root causes through the application of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which emphasizes active community engagement, and the Community-Based Development (CBD) strategy, which focuses on mobilizing local resources and reinforcing internal social networks. Culinary skills training was selected as a realistic and context-appropriate intervention that could simultaneously enhance economic capacity and foster social trust among community members.

In the Mendawai Social Complex, the PKM program was implemented over a two-day period, featuring hands-on training in basic culinary skills. This training involved 25 active participants, the majority of whom were housewives from economically vulnerable households. The first day of training centered on the practical preparation of snacks such as pudding and sausage rolls. Activities were conducted in small groups, allowing each participant to engage in every aspect of the process—from preparing ingredients to cooking and packaging. The training environment was interactive and participatory, with participants not only following the instructions provided but also contributing their own experiences and experimenting with recipe variations.

On the second day, the training shifted focus to small business management. Topics included expense and income tracking, basic simulations for calculating capital and profit, and strategies for promoting products via social media. For many participants, this was their first exposure to such material. A particularly important realization among attendees was the need to separate business finances from household expenses. Participant testimonials indicated that the practice-oriented approach and contextual

relevance of the training effectively supported both skill acquisition and the development of an entrepreneurial mindset. The training helped participants begin to envision themselves not only as producers but as community-based entrepreneurs capable of building sustainable income streams and strengthening social networks. Figure 3 illustrates the workshop activities designed to enhance participants' life skills in the culinary field, as well as the engagement of community partners who supported this PKM initiative.



Figure 3 . Workshop activities



Figure 4 . Product

The results of this PKM activity revealed several notable initial outcomes. First, participants successfully acquired basic culinary production skills that, while simple, hold economic potential, as finding revealed by Asmorowati et al. (2024). These included the preparation of snack foods with commercial value. Figure 4 below displays examples of the food products created during the PKM training sessions.

Second, participants gained a foundational understanding of financial administration, recognizing its importance in effective business management. Similar with Palash et al. (2024), this awareness marked a critical shift in mindset, particularly for individuals who had previously operated informal businesses without structured financial practices.

Third, the initiative sparked the reactivation of Kelompok Kelakai, a congregation-based business group that had been inactive. This revival demonstrated an

emerging sense of collective entrepreneurship and a willingness to engage in coordinated group efforts for economic improvement (Efrina, 2022). Figure 5 illustrates the training activities focused on financial administration, which served as a foundational step toward sustainable business development.



Figure 5. Financial administration management training in starting a business activity

Fourth, the PKM activity sparked participants' enthusiasm to continue training independently through internal coordination within the congregation. These outcomes can be interpreted as early indicators of a community empowerment process. According to Kabeer (1999) Empowerment Theory, empowerment begins with individuals gaining access to resources, developing the capacity to act (agency), and achieving tangible outcomes from their actions (Kabeer, 1994; Kabeer, 1999; Kabeer, 2021a; Kabeer, 2021b). In the context of this PKM initiative – which focused on enhancing culinary and sales management skills – participants began to demonstrate the ability to design and sustain their own change processes.

Despite these achievements, the PKM activities in the Mendawai Social Complex also encountered several challenges. The most significant barrier was the low literacy level of participants, which limited the effective delivery of business management content. To address this, materials needed to be adapted using visual aids and hands-on, repetitive practice to ensure comprehension. Additionally, participants faced limitations in terms of production tools at home and lacked access to adequate market distribution systems – factors that complicate the independent replication of the training outcomes. These challenges highlight that a one-time training session is insufficient to establish a sustainable community-based business ecosystem. As such, follow-up initiatives are necessary. These may include the establishment of internal cooperatives among residents or congregants and the expansion of collaboration with external partners.

This PKM activity, which focused on improving culinary skills and sales management in the Mendawai Social Complex, underscores the importance of involving residents throughout the entire Community-Based Development (CBD) process. The CBD approach has proven effective in identifying the actual needs of the

community and encouraging active participation (Khair et al., 2020; Priatmoko et al., 2021; Sambodo et al., 2023; Wilkinson & Quarter, 1995), while Participatory Action Research (PAR) served as a suitable framework for facilitating reflection and collective action. The success of this initiative lies not only in the acquisition of technical skills but also in the emergence of renewed social trust and collective spirit – elements that had been significantly weakened within the community.

Given the limited duration of the program, this article does not claim long-term impact. Instead, it highlights a set of initial outcomes that can serve as a foundation for broader and more sustainable program development. Community empowerment, as demonstrated through this PKM activity, is not an immediate outcome but a gradual process – one that begins with accessible, meaningful, and participatory opportunities for residents to engage in change.

4. CONCLUSION

The PKM activity conducted in the Mendawai Social Complex, with the GKE Panenga serving as the host venue, demonstrated that a community-based participatory approach – centered on culinary skills development and microenterprise sales management – can yield meaningful initial outcomes in fostering economic independence among poor urban communities. Through the active involvement of participants at every stage of the training process, the initiative not only enhanced technical competencies but also fostered collective awareness regarding the value of independent and cooperative business practices.

This PKM initiative also contributed to the reactivation of community-based business groups, the strengthening of internal social networks, and the creation of a reflective space for church-based community economic empowerment. Although implemented within a limited timeframe, the program laid a promising foundation for further development. It also affirmed that empowerment strategies designed to be contextual, reflective, and grounded in local potential are capable of addressing the structural dimensions of poverty in a gradual and sustainable manner.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The researchers declare that there were no conflicts of interest related to the PKM activities carried out in the Mendawai Social Complex, including those involving the GKE Panenga Congregation.

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