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Empowering Islamic Boarding Schools in Achieving Educational Equity: Public Policy Evaluation and Challenges in Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the role of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in non-formal education in Indonesia, particularly in shaping community character, morality, and spirituality. Pesantren are not only focused on religious education but also serve as agents in cultivating ethics and social values that are relevant to everyday life. The research employs a qualitative case study approach to identify character-strengthening programs implemented in pesantren, such as the use of polite language and the study of religious texts, as well as their influence on students' character formation. The study also identifies challenges faced by pesantren, including limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient social support, which hinder their operational quality. The findings reveal that greater government support in terms of financial assistance, training for caretakers, and infrastructure improvement is crucial to addressing these challenges. Collaboration between pesantren and the government is essential to formulate policies that are responsive to pesantren's needs while taking into account local wisdom and social conditions in each region. The results of this study provide in-depth insights into how public policy can strengthen the role of pesantren in community empowerment and ensure the sustainability of pesantren as relevant and effective educational institutions amid ongoing societal transformation.

Keywords : Empowerment of Islamic Boarding Schools, Educational Equity, Public Policy.



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INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) are among the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, playing a strategic role in shaping the morals, character, and religious values of society (Hosaini et al., 2024). Since their inception, pesantren have served as centers of learning that significantly contribute to the development of Indonesia's religious and social identity. According to official data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, in 2023 there were more than 28,000 pesantren spread across Indonesia, with a total student population of approximately 5 million (Anggung & Prasetyo, 2021). This phenomenon underlines that pesantren function not only as Islamic-based educational institutions but also as agents of social transformation, playing a key role particularly in rural areas with limited access to formal education.

Educational equity has become one of the crucial issues in national development, especially in the context of pesantren-based education (Hannan & Rahmawati, 2020). As Islamic educational institutions, pesantren hold strategic potential in nurturing a generation with noble character, broad knowledge, and the capacity to contribute to national development. Nevertheless, challenges in ensuring educational equity within pesantren remain evident, encompassing disparities in access, quality, and educational facilities compared to public schools, particularly in remote regions (Fauzan et al., 2025). Therefore, comprehensive and inclusive public policies are required to support quality improvement in pesantren education.

One progressive step taken by the government in developing pesantren is the enactment of Law Number 18 of 2019 on Pesantren. This policy formally and legally integrates pesantren into the national education system. In addition, the government has provided Pesantren Operational Assistance (Bantuan

Operasional Pesantren, BOP) and organized training programs to enhance the competence of teaching staff (Baitiyah et al., 2024). However, the implementation of these policies continues to face serious challenges, such as unequal funding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to digital technology. These challenges are particularly pressing for pesantren located in rural areas, which require greater attention to achieve equitable access to quality education.

The strengthening of policies focused on educational equity and the institutional capacity-building of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) is expected to enable pesantren to contribute more significantly to producing high-quality human resources capable of competing at both national and global levels (Apiyani, 2024). As a vital pillar of non-formal education in Indonesia, pesantren hold a strategic role in fostering a religious yet competitive society. Nevertheless, public policy support relevant to the development of pesantren is still considered suboptimal (Putri & Maesaroh, 2025).

The report by the National Pesantren Development Commission (2022) notes that many pesantren continue to face major challenges, particularly regarding funding, access to healthcare services, infrastructure, and participation in regional-level policy planning (Muhammad et al., 2022). A concrete example is Pondok Pesantren Bustanul Ulum in Jambesari, Bondowoso, which continues to experience limitations in funding and the development of basic infrastructure. The lack of sufficient support often hinders pesantren from providing adequate facilities for both students and teachers. This, in turn, constrains the optimization of pesantren's role as educational and social institutions.

A study by Safitri & Hammam (2025) revealed that insufficient government attention to the management of pesantren is one of the key factors influencing their operational sustainability, particularly in rural areas. Furthermore, Nuraeni (2021) highlighted that research on the relationship between pesantren and public policy remains relatively limited compared to studies on other educational institutions, such as schools and universities. Policy research itself is not unfamiliar in the academic discourse; for instance, Anwar (2022) emphasized that the implementation of education policy is closely tied to how education is administered responsibly and accountably in accordance with constitutional mandates to improve both quality and accountability in education.

Based on the reviewed literature, pesantren have historically functioned as pivotal Islamic educational institutions that contribute to shaping the moral and intellectual foundations of Indonesian society. While rooted in Islamic traditions, many pesantren today also incorporate elements of formal education, reflecting their evolving role in contemporary contexts. Their contribution to intellectual development, however, requires clearer conceptualization whether in terms of knowledge production, the promotion of Islamic literacy, or participation in broader socio-cultural discourse. Despite these strengths, pesantren continue to face structural challenges, particularly with respect to equitable access, the modernization of pedagogical practices, and the adequacy of learning infrastructure. These challenges, however, should not overshadow the fact that many pesantren are actively pursuing innovations, such as digital integration, entrepreneurship programs, and global collaborations, demonstrating their capacity for adaptation and resilience within Indonesia's dynamic educational landscape.

In line with the implementation of Law Number 18 of 2019 on Pesantren and its accompanying affirmative policies, the academic urgency of this study lies in conducting a critical evaluation of the regulation's application and analyzing its impact on the transformation of pesantren, especially in rural areas. Therefore, this research focuses on a comprehensive examination of the interaction between public policy and the developmental dynamics of pesantren as an integral part of the national education system. The study seeks to fill the academic gap in education policy discourse, which has thus far remained predominantly oriented toward formal education rather than the existence of pesantren. Consequently, this research is expected to offer a new perspective in formulating more inclusive and sustainable policies aimed at enhancing the quality of education in pesantren while strengthening their competitiveness as adaptive educational institutions in the era of globalization.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to examine the role of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in non-formal education in Indonesia, particularly in shaping character, morality, and religious learning. The case study focused on Pesantren Bustanul Ulum as the research site, with the aim of identifying how the institution contributes to providing education grounded in religion as well as social values that are essential to daily life.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: (1) participant observation, in which the researcher was directly involved in the activities of the pesantren to gain deeper insights into the implementation of educational values; (2) in-depth interviews with the pesantren caretakers, the head of the education division, and administrative staff, in order to explore their perspectives on challenges and strategies applied within pesantren education; and (3) document analysis, which included the study of religious texts and programs for moral reinforcement carried out within the pesantren (Rosi et al., 2022).

Table No. 1 Interview Participants

No.	Name	Position
1	Nabil Zuhairi	Caretaker
2	Nur Yasin	Head of Education
3	Abdus Shomad	Administrator

Data analysis was conducted through three stages: data reduction to filter relevant information, data presentation to systematically organize the findings, and conclusion drawing or verification to ensure consistency among the data obtained through observation, interviews, and document analysis (Mastikawati et al., 2022). This process aimed to provide a clear picture of the role of pesantren in non-formal education as well as the challenges they face within the context of public policy.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between pesantren, local communities, and governmental policies, particularly in relation to educational access, regulatory frameworks, and institutional development. In addition, the study aims to formulate evidence-based recommendations that can inform policymakers in designing more effective and context-sensitive support mechanisms for pesantren, thereby enhancing their role as dynamic educational institutions within Indonesia's broader sociocultural landscape.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Pesantren in Non-Formal Education in Indonesia

Pesantren, as educational institutions deeply rooted in Islamic traditions, have played a vital role in Indonesia's educational system (Rambe et al., 2024). Their existence is not only limited to providing religious education but also serves as a medium for instilling cultural, social, and moral values within society (Mujahidin, 2021).

Since their inception, pesantren have evolved into institutions that do not merely teach religious knowledge but also shape the character and attitudes of students (santri), which become essential components of daily life. In this respect, pesantren function not only as educational institutions but also as agents of character and moral formation for Indonesian society as a whole.

According to the caretaker of Pesantren Bustanul Ulum, pesantren hold a central role in shaping the character and morality of santri. Beyond emphasizing profound religious instruction, pesantren also highlight fundamental life values such as honesty, simplicity, discipline, and responsibility. These values form the foundation for santri in their daily lives, both within the pesantren and in society. This perspective is aligned with the expectations of Nur Yasin, the Head of the Education Division at the pesantren, who aspires for santri to not only excel in religious studies but also embody noble ethics and high integrity in every aspect of their lives. Similarly, Agustina et al. (2022) noted that the dormitory-based education system of pesantren has high effectiveness in shaping disciplined and independent personalities due to the intensive supervision and social interaction among santri and caretakers.

Pesantren Bustanul Ulum recognizes the importance of strengthening moral values among santri, and therefore designs various programs aimed at cultivating virtuous character. One such program emphasizes the use of refined Madurese language as a form of reinforcing courtesy and politeness in communication, both among santri and with parents. This program seeks to habituate santri to interact with respect and refinement, consistent with the religious and cultural values upheld within the community.

Amid rapid societal change and modern challenges, pesantren remain consistent in preserving and transmitting the moral values taught by religion as guiding principles for life. Research conducted by several scholars has shown that the values instilled in pesantren can build strong character among

santri (Mediawati, 2023). Consequently, they are better prepared to face social dynamics and societal transformations without losing their identity and moral integrity. The holistic approach applied in pesantren encompassing intellectual, spiritual, and moral dimensions—makes them highly effective institutions in producing a generation that is not only intellectually competent but also spiritually profound, capable of applying these values in real life.

As educational institutions deeply imbued with religious values, pesantren play a major role in shaping the character and morality of society (Sriwahyuni, 2022). The education provided in pesantren is not confined to cognitive and academic dimensions but also encompasses moral and behavioral formation, which in turn shapes the character of the nation. For this reason, pesantren serve as highly strategic institutions in preparing future generations who are not only skilled in knowledge but also noble in character.

Nur Yasin, in his statement, emphasized the importance for santri to live simply, practice discipline, and cultivate a sense of responsibility toward themselves, society, and the nation. Core values such as honesty, simplicity, hard work, and discipline are strongly reinforced in every process of character education within pesantren. As part of this moral education, pesantren provide santri with strong intellectual and ethical foundations through the study of classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) on ethics, such as Akhlak Kullibanin, studied every morning at the Jami' Mosque of Bustanul Ulum, and Adabul Alim, discussed in the evenings. These texts play a significant role in deepening understanding of morality and proper conduct in line with Islamic teachings.

Pesantren also play a crucial role in instilling religious values that go beyond theoretical knowledge of sacred texts, emphasizing their application in daily life. In this regard, pesantren serve as strong moral fortresses, capable of countering challenges such as the negative impacts of technological advancement and rapid social change. Through intensive religious instruction and continuous moral reinforcement, pesantren provide santri with a solid foundation to grow into individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also possess noble character qualities indispensable for navigating the challenges of modern life.

Challenges Faced by Pesantren in the Context of Public Policy

Pesantren, as non-formal educational institutions that play a crucial role in shaping the character and morality of Indonesian society, face significant challenges that affect their sustainability and operational effectiveness (Azizah et al., 2024). One of the main challenges encountered by pesantren is closely related to public policy and the limited resources available (Rahman & Asha, 2024). Although pesantren have demonstrated active roles in providing education to communities, many obstacles hinder the achievement of these goals, including funding, access to healthcare services, infrastructure, and social support, which are often inadequate. These conditions create disparities in the quality of education delivered to santri, thereby threatening both the continuity and quality of pesantren education.

Funding is one of the primary issues faced by many pesantren in carrying out daily operations (Rijal, 2024). Most pesantren rely on community donations, contributions from caretakers, and self-managed enterprises, which often prove insufficient to meet increasingly complex operational needs. The collected funds are frequently inadequate to cover teachers' salaries, curriculum development, or the renovation of deteriorating facilities. Many pesantren located in remote or rural areas also struggle to access funding from the government or other financial institutions, which limits and constrains the quality of education they can provide. Dependence on such limited funds further exacerbates the challenge of creating educational innovations that can compete with formal educational institutions.

Table 02. Main Sources of Pesantren Funding and Related Challenges

Funding Source	Description	Challenges
Community Donations	Regular contributions from students' guardians and local community.	Fluctuating, unstable, and limited.
Caretakers' Contributions	Personal financial support from pesantren caretakers.	Inconsistent and dependent on individual capacity.
Independent Enterprises	Pesantren-run business units (agriculture, cooperatives, automotive, etc.).	Small scale, limited capital, and insignificant outcomes.

Government Support	Educational funding assistance from the Ministry of Religious Affairs or related agencies.	Complicated administration, with frequent disbursement delays.
Alumni and External Partners	Alumni networks as partners in independent ventures.	Not yet systematically managed.

The caretaker of Pesantren Bustanul Ulum stated that funding is the main issue they face, indicating that the pesantren relies heavily on community donations and independent enterprises as its primary sources of financing. However, limited funds often pose challenges in paying teachers' salaries, developing curricula, and improving educational facilities. Efforts to obtain financial support from the government are also hindered by complex administrative procedures and uncertainty in disbursement. Therefore, the pesantren must seek creative solutions to optimize existing funds, including the development of independent enterprises and building collaborations with external partners to increase available resources (Pamungkas et al., 2024).

Abdus Shomat, as the pesantren's administrator, added that in order to expand funding sources, the pesantren involves alumni as partners in independent business ventures. One example is the development of creative enterprises, such as automotive businesses and other sectors. This step is considered an attempt to achieve economic independence for the pesantren, although financial challenges remain. Nur Yasin, Head of the Education Division of the pesantren, emphasized that Pesantren Bustanul Ulum in Jambesari, Bondowoso, serves as a concrete illustration of the difficulties pesantren face in terms of funding and the development of basic infrastructure. Despite its vital role in educating rural communities located far from urban centers, the pesantren is constrained by limited physical conditions and facilities, which reduces its ability to maximize the potential of its students.

The lack of sufficient funding directly affects the development of more innovative educational programs and the improvement of teaching quality. Furthermore, poor infrastructure such as inadequate facilities hampers the teaching and learning process and reduces students' comfort in pursuing their education. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that many parents hesitate to send their children to pesantren due to the facilities falling short of expectations. As a result, pesantren must work hard to increase their attractiveness, both in terms of teaching quality and the facilities provided, in order to maintain their role as educational institutions that significantly contribute to society.

In facing these challenges, pesantren need to collaborate with various stakeholders including the government, community, and private sector to create a more sustainable funding system and encourage innovation in educational development (Apriliana & Pujiyanto, 2024). A more strategic and coordinated approach will enable pesantren to overcome existing obstacles and maximize their potential to make a greater contribution in producing a generation that is not only academically competent but also morally grounded.

The Relationship Between Pesantren and the Government in Public Policy

Research on the relationship between pesantren and public policy, particularly in relation to social welfare and pesantren management, remains very limited and has not received sufficient scholarly attention (Tsauri & Wahidah, 2023). This presents a major challenge in formulating policies that are appropriate and effective in supporting pesantren as educational and social institutions with strategic roles. Pesantren, which have long played a central role in religious education and in shaping community values, require more in-depth study to identify how public policies can better accommodate their existence and needs within the broader context of Indonesia's social and educational development (Muna & Awaliyah, 2021).

Existing government policies often fail to take into account the specific needs of pesantren, whether in terms of funding, facilities, or community empowerment. The imbalance between the vital role of pesantren and the limited support they receive from the government may hinder their potential to improve the quality of education they provide. Hence, more comprehensive research is needed to formulate policies that not only assist pesantren in operational management but also optimize their role in advancing social welfare.

The caretaker of Pesantren Bustanul Ulum in Jambesari, Bondowoso, emphasized the urgency of strategic synergy between pesantren and the government in resource management and institutional capacity building. In his interview, he revealed: *"Funding is a fundamental constraint. Reliance on*

community donations and self-managed businesses is often insufficient to support teacher welfare, curriculum development relevant to contemporary needs, and educational infrastructure improvements.” This statement reflects the necessity of more substantial government interventions, both in the form of sustainable budget allocations and managerial capacity development. Such support is crucial for pesantren to adapt to social dynamics and remain competitive educational institutions. The caretaker further expressed hope for more inclusive access to funding schemes and comprehensive managerial training programs, so that pesantren management can become significantly more effective in fulfilling their educational and social missions.

Closer collaboration between pesantren and the government is essential, particularly in sustaining pesantren as educational and social institutions (Janna et al., 2025). Key aspects requiring attention include the management of pesantren resources—such as funding, teaching staff, and infrastructure. The government can provide stronger support through more consistent financing, training programs for pesantren leaders, and facility improvements, enabling pesantren to operate more effectively. It is equally important to foster policy synergy that grants pesantren easier access to various government programs supporting education and community development, such as social assistance, health initiatives, or entrepreneurship training.

Abdus Shomat, one of the pesantren administrators, stated that pesantren have sought to optimize the role of alumni as strategic partners in developing independent businesses to mitigate funding shortages. This initiative represents an adaptive strategy to find alternative solutions amid ongoing financial constraints. Therefore, more progressive public policies are needed to broaden pesantren access to funding opportunities and to promote a pesantren-based economic ecosystem that is more competitive and sustainable.

Moreover, public policies supporting pesantren should be locally grounded and take into account local wisdom in their formulation. As social institutions, pesantren are deeply embedded within their surrounding communities and often serve as centers of social activity that unite diverse social elements (Malindra, 2025). Thus, policies aimed at supporting pesantren must consider local contexts—including culture, religion, and social needs. Nur Yasin, another administrator of Pesantren Bustanul Ulum, affirmed: “Our pesantren maintains a close bond with the surrounding community. We often serve as a center of social interaction as well as a forum for dialogue in responding to social challenges. Government support would provide a significant stimulus to strengthen our role in community empowerment.” This illustrates how synergy between local wisdom and public policy can reinforce pesantren as social entities adaptive to community needs, while also ensuring their sustainability as progressive educational institutions responsive to societal change.

In conclusion, to ensure the sustainability and advancement of pesantren as vital educational and social institutions for Indonesian society, public policies must be more targeted, locally responsive, and attentive to funding and empowerment needs (Hermansyah et al., 2025). Stronger collaboration between pesantren and the government will create opportunities to overcome existing challenges, enabling pesantren to grow and to continue playing their crucial role in building a stronger and more competitive society.

CONCLUSION

Pesantren play a highly significant role in non-formal education in Indonesia, particularly in shaping the character, morality, and spirituality of society. Since their inception, pesantren have not only focused on religious education but have also functioned as agents of moral formation and social value cultivation that benefit everyday life. Character-building programs implemented in pesantren—such as the use of refined language and the study of classical Islamic texts—provide a strong foundation for the personal development of santri.

However, pesantren face a number of challenges that hinder their sustainability and operational quality, particularly in relation to funding, infrastructure, and social support. Limited financial resources and inadequate facilities constrain pesantren from developing innovative educational programs and improving the quality of teaching. In this regard, stronger government support is essential, whether through financial assistance, training for pesantren leaders, or improvements in infrastructure.

Collaboration between pesantren and the government is crucial in addressing these challenges. The government needs to formulate policies that are more responsive to the specific needs of pesantren, while also considering local wisdom and social contexts in each region. More targeted support, based

on the particular characteristics of pesantren, will strengthen their role in community empowerment and ensure their sustainability as relevant and effective educational institutions amid societal transformation. Overall, pesantren function not only as centers of religious learning but also as vital pillars in shaping the character and morality of Indonesian society. Their sustainability therefore depends heavily on public policies that support funding, management, and the development of more adequate facilities.

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