

Semi-Free Buffet Stalls in East Java: An Islamic Economic Analysis of Food Security and Cultural Poverty Risk

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Article History: Received August 31, 2025; Received in revised from September 22, 2025;

Accepted November 2, 2025; Published; November 10, 2025

How to Cite this Article: Hasyim, Muhammad Sulaiman, Abdul Kadir Riyadi, and Mamik Syafa'ah. 2025. "Semi-Free Buffet Stalls in East Java: An Islamic Economic Analysis of Food Security and Cultural Poverty Risk". *El-Qist: Journal of Islamic Economics and Business (JIEB)* 15 (2). Surabaya, Indonesia:196-215. <https://doi.org/10.15642/elqist.2025.15.2.196-215>.

Abstract: This study investigates the emerging phenomenon of "semi-free buffet stalls" (*warung semi-gratis*) in East Java, Indonesia—community-based initiatives that provide food on an eat-as-you-wish, pay-as-you-can basis. While these stalls contribute to food security among low-income families, they may paradoxically reinforce dependency and cultural poverty. Addressing the research gap in Islamic economic perspectives on these dual functions, this study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, combining literature review, media content analysis, and comparative analysis of national and international studies. The findings reveal that, although semi-free stalls alleviate immediate economic pressures, passive consumption without participatory reciprocity can foster dependency and learned helplessness. Nevertheless, when integrated with empowerment-oriented programs grounded in *al-Ta'awun* (cooperation)—such as voluntary contributions, skill development, and collective work—these initiatives can balance generosity with capacity building. This research contributes to Islamic economics by proposing a hybrid model of charitable and transformative food distribution, offering a framework for inclusive social finance practices applicable to other Muslim-majority and developing contexts.

Keywords: Semi-Free Buffet Stalls; Food Security; Cultural Poverty; Food Distribution Model; Islamic Economics.

Introduction

The prolonged economic pressure has become a social reality across many regions of Indonesia, including East Java Province. According to The Poverty Profile of East Java, September 2024, published by Statistics Indonesia (BPS), the poverty rate in this province reached 9.56%, equivalent to around 3.89 million people, reflecting persistent economic vulnerability among low-income households.¹ Rising food prices, limited access to nutritious meals, and unstable income exacerbate food insecurity among poor households. Globally, similar patterns have been observed, where low-income populations experience chronic food insecurity due to fluctuating market prices, inadequate social protection, and unequal access to food resources.² Such conditions underscore the urgency of strengthening social solidarity mechanisms (*ta'āwun*) and ensuring equitable food distribution in accordance with Islamic economic values that emphasize justice (*'adl*) and welfare (*maṣlahah*) for all.

In response, community-based initiatives such as semi-free buffet stalls, based on the “eat-as-you-wish, pay-as-you-can” principle, have emerged, serving both as an alternative food provision mechanism and a concrete manifestation of social solidarity and community empowerment. In Indonesia, such initiatives resonate with the philanthropic traditions of *zakat*, *infāq*, and *sadaqah*, serving as localized expressions of Islamic social finance in addressing food insecurity. Studies on food aid across countries indicate that charitable programs can alleviate immediate hunger but may unintentionally create dependency if not coupled with participatory and skills development initiatives.³

Although semi-free buffet stalls have significant social potential to reduce food insecurity, they face a paradox between empowerment and the perpetuation of cultural poverty. On one hand, these initiatives effectively strengthen food security among low-income households; on the other hand, consumption patterns without active participation or reciprocal contribution may foster a passive habitus (a habitual behavior that normalizes dependency on aid). Without proper management strategies, such stalls may shift from instruments of empowerment to mechanisms that reproduce cultural poverty, concealed under the guise of social solidarity. This paradox reflects a moral-economic dilemma that challenges the Islamic economic principle of *istiṭā'ah* (capacity) and *maṣlahah mushtarakah* (collective welfare), emphasizing that true empowerment must align with both individual capability and shared benefit.

The complexity of challenges increases when social interactions around these stalls create new norms and habits. Within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's social praxis theory, habitus (a system of dispositions formed through repeated experiences)

¹ Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Jawa Timur, *Persentase Penduduk Miskin di Jawa Timur September 2024 turun menjadi 9,56 persen, 2024*, <https://jatim.bps.go.id/id/pressrelease/2025/01/15/1474/persentase-penduduk-miskin-di-jawa-timur-september-2024-turun-menjadi-9-56-persen.html>, accessed April 11, 2025.

² Rachel Loopstra and Doireann Lalor, *Financial insecurity, food insecurity, and disability: the profile of people receiving emergency food assistance from The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network in Britain*, (UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 3-5.

³ V. Tarasuk, AA. Fafard St-Germain, and Rachel Loopstra, “The Relationship Between Food Banks and Food Insecurity: Insights from Canada,” *Voluntas Journal*, vol. 31 (2020), p. 841-852.

shapes behavioral patterns and how individuals perceive opportunities.⁴ If semi-free buffet stalls are perceived solely as consumption facilities without reciprocal awareness, the social capital that should develop is reduced to one-sided relationships. Understanding this is relevant for assessing the extent to which community solidarity practices can genuinely foster sustainable empowerment, thereby linking theoretical analysis to the research objectives. Integrating Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* with the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* framework allows the study to explore not only behavioral structures but also ethical dimensions of empowerment in Islamic economics.

The limited participation of beneficiaries has become one of the main factors hindering the sustainability of semi-free buffet stalls. Many recipients come merely as consumers, without engaging in management activities, voluntary donations, or other forms of contribution. If this pattern persists, the spirit of *al-Ta'āwun* (mutual assistance) and *maslahah mushtarakah* (collective benefit) will be difficult to realize in practice. Consequently, the relationship between managers and beneficiaries may shift into a hierarchical dynamic that weakens the values of solidarity and obscures the original goal of community empowerment. Such hierarchical dynamics contradict the spirit of *al-Mas'uliyah al-Ijtimā'iyah* (social responsibility) that Islamic economics seeks to instill in community-based welfare systems.

This study is motivated by the limited academic works that specifically discuss the role of semi-free buffet stalls within the socio-economic paradox framework. Previous studies, such as research on food security in Tulungagung during the COVID-19 pandemic, which examined the relationship between social assistance, coping strategies,⁵ and household food security, as well as a study on community empowerment models based on local resources in North Sebatik, focusing on enhancing food resilience through local participation, highlight the significance of community initiatives in sustaining food access.⁶ However, the interaction between community-based food assistance and the formation of dependency habitus remains largely underexplored. Islamic economics studies have not yet examined the integration of food aid practices with *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, particularly the ethical concern of preventing long-term dependency.⁷ Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap through a comprehensive analysis of literature and credible online reports.

This study addresses the need to develop a food security model that alleviates short-term hunger while promoting long-term economic self-sufficiency. Without participatory approaches and strong social capital, community-based initiatives risk perpetuating poverty. This study proposes an Islamic economics-aligned approach that promotes social welfare while preventing *muḍārat*, a dependency that

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 24-25.

⁵ Novianti Tysmala Dewi, Dwi Nastiti Iswarawanti, and Novia Silvia Hardiany, "The association between dietary diversity, social assistance and coping strategy with household food security during COVID-19 in Tulungagung district, East Java," *World Nutrition Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2022), p. 16.

⁶ Nia Kurniasih Suryana, Sekar Inten Mulyani, and Hendris, "Local Resources-Based Community Empowerment Model to Achieve Food Security in the Indonesian Border Community of North Sebatik," *Kawistara: The Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2023), p. 56.

⁷ Sulaeman, Rifaldi Majid, and Tika Widiastuti, "The Impact of Zakat on Socio-Economic Welfare before COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia: A Quantitative Study," *International Journal of Zakat*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2021), p. 75-90.

undermines individual and collective resilience.⁸ Thus, the study contributes to the discourse of Islamic economics by proposing a sustainable welfare model that integrates social solidarity with productive empowerment.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how semi-free buffet stalls function as mechanisms of food security while simultaneously posing the risk of cultural poverty, viewed through the integrative framework of Islamic economics. In this context, the study advances understanding of community-based food assistance and offers policy insights for economic and business development, highlighting the balance between social solidarity and empowerment.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the paradoxical role of semi-free buffet stalls, which are beneficial for food security but may risk reproducing cycles of cultural poverty, with a focus on Islamic economic perspectives. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena, examining the interactions and perceptions of relevant actors, and exploring the meanings behind community practices; insights that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods. In the context of Islamic economic inquiry, the qualitative approach is particularly relevant, as it enables the exploration of ethical values, behavioral intentions, and socio-religious meanings that underlie economic actions.

The data consist of secondary sources from credible online publications, including national and local news, official reports from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), local government policy documents, books, religious texts, and relevant academic articles. The study covers the period from April to July 2025, ensuring that the findings reflect the most recent developments.

Data collection techniques were conducted through content analysis using a criterion sampling approach, selecting sources that met the study's relevance criteria.⁹ A total of 14 online news articles, 26 high-reputation scholarly journals, and 18 books or religious texts were included as primary data sources. The units of analysis consisted of news narratives discussing the operations and impact of semi-free buffet stalls, journal articles addressing food security and community empowerment, and descriptions of community practices reflecting social and economic interactions. Selection criteria followed established methodologies to ensure data relevance and quality.

Inclusion criteria included sources explicitly discussing semi-free buffet stalls, food security, or related socio-economic impacts. Exclusion criteria encompassed sources addressing general topics without direct relevance to the stalls, opinion pieces lacking supporting data, and publications not available in full text. This approach

⁸ Aris Anwaril Muttaqin et al., "Mapping Maqāṣid Sharia Models in Islamic Economics: A Scoping Review of Literature (2018-2022)," *El-Qist: Journal of Islamic Economics and Business*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2025), p. 69.

⁹ Nyimbili Friday and Nyimbili Leah, "Types of Purposive Sampling Techniques with Their Examples and Application in Qualitative Research Studies," *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies: English Lang., Teaching, Literature, Linguistics & Communication*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2024), p. 97.

ensured that all analyzed sources provided representative and high-quality data to address the research questions.

This study acknowledges the limitations of using secondary data. First, media reports may carry inherent bias, framing issues according to editorial or political perspectives. Second, although triangulation was attempted by cross-referencing news, journal articles, and official documents, the study is limited by the availability and scope of data. Third, some relevant local practices are underreported in media or academic sources, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness of findings. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the results.

Data were analyzed thematically following the stages proposed by Braun and Clarke, including data familiarization, initial coding, searching and reviewing themes, and naming and reporting themes.¹⁰ This thematic approach allows the researcher to capture both the normative Islamic perspective and the sociocultural dimensions of community practices. From the initial coding process, several main themes emerged: the contribution of semi-free buffet stalls to food access for low-income families, the potential emergence of dependency and passive habitus, and the imbalance between economic benefits and long-term social impacts. These themes form the basis for interpreting findings and analyzing the socio-economic implications of semi-free buffet stalls. Ethical considerations were maintained by accurately representing data and respecting the cultural and religious sensitivities inherent in the community practices studied.

The research framework employs two complementary perspectives. First, the *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* approach is used to assess the normative value and alignment of semi-free buffet stalls with Islamic legal objectives, namely the five fundamental goals: *ḥifẓ al-Dīn* (preservation of religion), *ḥifẓ al-Nafs* (preservation of life), *ḥifẓ al-'Aql* (preservation of intellect), *ḥifẓ al-Nasl* (preservation of lineage), and *ḥifẓ al-Māl* (preservation of wealth).¹¹ Following al-Shāṭibī in *al-Muwāfaqāt*, these five objectives serve as the ethical foundation for assessing socio-economic practices and ensuring that welfare initiatives align with the higher intent of the *Sharī'ah*.¹² Second, Pierre Bourdieu's framework is applied to explain sociocultural processes, including how a passive habitus may develop through interactions among stall managers, beneficiaries, and the community, and how the distribution of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital shapes behavioral patterns.¹³ This relationship is illustrated in a conceptual diagram (Diagram 1), highlighting how the stall's role in food security intersects with the development of social habitus and emerging socio-economic tensions.

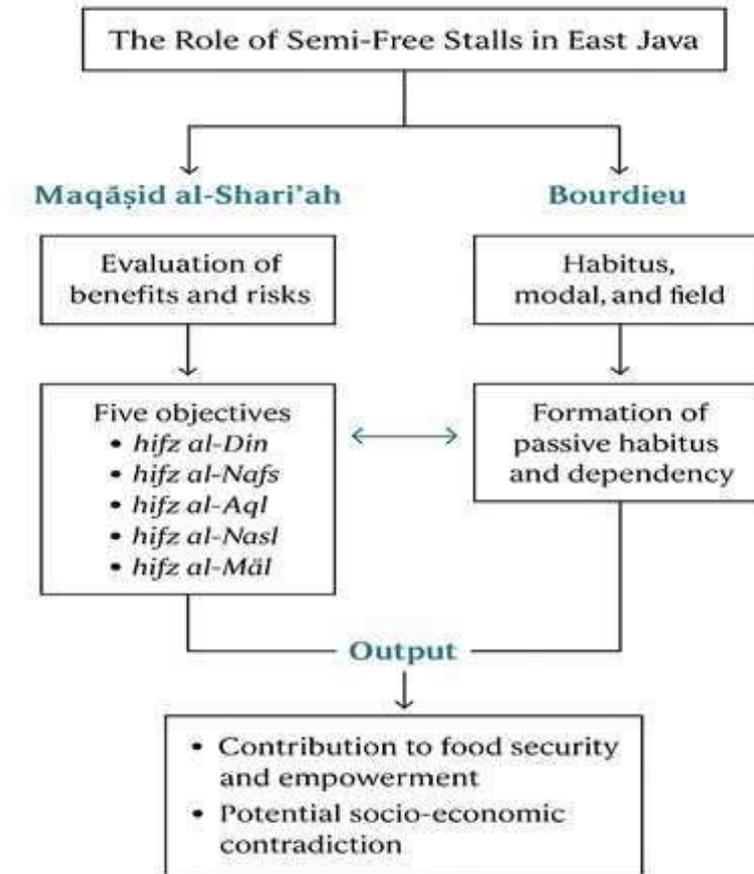
¹⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reporting guidelines for qualitative research: a values-based approach," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2025), p. 309.

¹¹ Muḥammad Ṭāhir b. 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah al-Islāmiyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā'is, 2001), p. 288-290.

¹² Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm bin Mūsā al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Sharī'ah*, vol. 2 (Kairo: Dār Ibn 'Affān, 1997), p. 191-200.

¹³ M. Nur et al., "Habitus dan Modal Sosial dalam Kesuksesan dan Kegagalan Bisnis," *Jurnal Sosiologi USK*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2020), p. 27.

Diagram 1. Link between *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* and Bourdieu's framework in understanding the role of semi-free stalls in East Java



Through this framework, the research identifies not only normative alignment but also potential sociocultural contradictions arising from community interactions. This dual approach enables a holistic analysis by integrating a normative assessment grounded in Sharia principles with a critical examination of sociocultural dynamics that may foster or reinforce dependency. Accordingly, the study not only maps the contribution of semi-free buffet stalls to strengthening food security but also uncovers potential social risks that could perpetuate cycles of cultural poverty, thereby providing a balanced perspective between empowerment opportunities and sustainability challenges.

Results

Semi-Free Food Stalls as a Means of Strengthening Food Security

The presence of semi-free food stalls has proven to be an effective means of strengthening food security for underprivileged families in East Java. On average, 775 meals are served daily.¹⁴ Assuming that each meal saves approximately IDR 10,000, the total daily savings can reach around IDR 7,750,000. Over the course of a month, these savings accumulate to approximately IDR 232,500,000 from 21,680 meals, and

¹⁴ This average was not drawn from a single report but calculated by the author through aggregating and averaging figures from several verified East Java local media sources that reported meal distributions at different semi-free food stalls.

annually, they could total around IDR 2,78 billion from 260,160 meals. These figures are based on reports and local media coverage of several semi-free food stalls across East Java. It is important to note that these numbers represent a minimum estimate, as not all semi-free food stalls in the region are documented in media reports.¹⁵ Therefore, the actual contribution of these stalls to family food security is likely even higher. These quantitative indicators reflect not only direct food provision but also the socio-economic significance of local philanthropy in mitigating food vulnerability among low-income families.

Table 1. Average Number of Meal Portions Served

No	Regency/City	Portions/Week	Portions/Month	Portions/Year
1	Bojonegoro	300	1.200	14.400
2	Gresik	120	480	5.760
3	Pasuruan	200	800	9.600
4	Nganjuk	150	600	7.200
5	Ponorogo	500	2.000	24.000
6	Surabaya	200	800	9.600
7	Banyuwangi	300	1.200	14.400
8	Jombang	150	600	7.200
9	Kediri	450	1.800	21.600
10	Tulungagung	700	2.800	33.600
11	Jember	600	2.400	28.800
12	Mojokerto	500	2.000	24.000
13	Jombang	200	800	9.600
14	Malang	200	800	9.600
15	Lamongan	450	1.800	21.600
16	Tuban	200	800	9.600
17	Madiun	200	800	9.600
	Total	775	21.680	260.160

The data presented are derived from verified media reports and thus represent minimum estimates of actual community contributions.

¹⁵ For example, in the city of Surabaya, local reports and media coverage only documented one semi-free food stall. Given that Surabaya is the second-largest city in Indonesia, it is reasonable to assume that there are more such stalls operating, but they have not been reported in media sources. This observation serves as the basis for considering the figures presented earlier as a minimum estimate of the contribution of semi-free food stalls to family food security. See Theo Reza, “Warung Makan di Surabaya ini Sajikan Konsep dengan Bayar Seikhlasnya,” *Kompas TV*, 2022, <https://www.kompas.tv/advertorial/356173/warung-makan-di-surabaya-ini-sajikan-konsep-dengan-bayar-seikhlasnya>, accessed April 11, 2025.

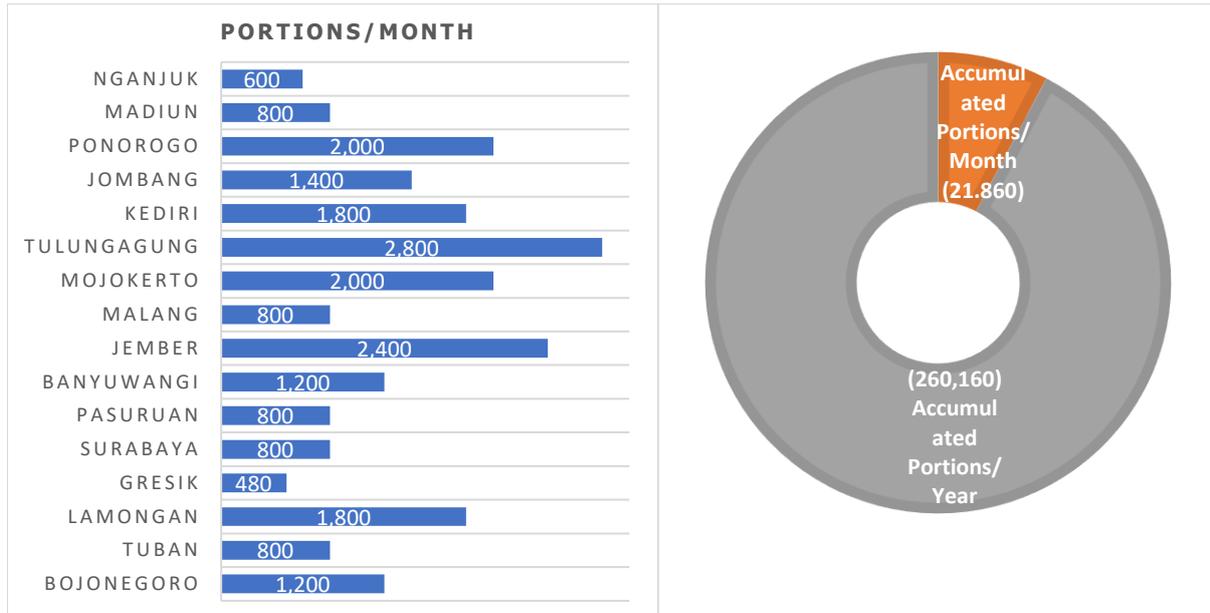


Diagram 2. Relationship between the number of stalls and average monthly meal portions (conceptual visualization)

Diagram 3. Total accumulated portions per year (conceptual visualization)

Diagram 2 shows the relationship between the number of stalls and average monthly meal portions, illustrating how an increase in semi-free food stalls corresponds to a significant rise in total monthly portions served. The cumulative impact of these semi-free food stalls throughout the year is illustrated in Diagram 3, showing how small-scale daily contributions can accumulate into a substantial annual figure. This accumulation highlights the sustainability and long-term potential of community-based food security initiatives in East Java.

From an Islamic economics perspective, semi-free food stalls embody the principle of *maṣlaḥah* (public welfare) by ensuring equitable access to sufficient food for underprivileged families.¹⁶ In Islamic economic thought, *maṣlaḥah* serves as a normative foundation for socio-economic justice. Within this framework, semi-free stalls operationalize the *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* principles of *ḥifẓ al-Nafs* (safeguarding life) and *ḥifẓ al-Māl* (protecting property) by securing both nutritional access and household financial stability.¹⁷

Empirically, *ḥifẓ al-Nafs* is realized through guaranteed daily access to nutritious meals for families at risk of food insecurity. Meanwhile, *ḥifẓ al-Māl* is reflected in the substantial cost savings generated through the pay-as-you-wish mechanism, which collectively amount to significant annual reductions in household food expenditure across East Java. Thus, these community-based stalls not only

¹⁶ Miftahul Janna Ritonga and Mawardi, "Landasan Filosofis Pemikiran Ekonomi Syariah: Prinsip Maslahah Sebagai Pilar Utama Dalam Mencapai Kesejahteraan Ekonomi," *Jurnal Masharif al-Syariah: Jurnal Ekonomi dan Perbankan Syariah*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2025), p. 192.

¹⁷ M. Umer Chapra, *The Future of Economics: An Islamic Perspective*, (Leicester: Kube Publishing, 2016), p. 50.

embody charitable virtue but also institutionalize *maṣlahah*-oriented social empowerment consistent with the Islamic economic vision of distributive justice.

Beyond philanthropic action, semi-free food stalls function as a social mechanism that strengthens food security, reduces economic burdens, and fosters a culture of solidarity (*ta'āwun*). By distributing benefits to vulnerable groups, this practice exemplifies the implementation of *al-'Adl* (distributive justice) in Islamic economics, thereby contributing to a socially empowered and sustainable ecosystem. As noted by al-Qaraḍāwī, initiatives that prioritize public welfare and equitable distribution are central to the objectives of *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, thereby reinforcing the view that these stalls are not merely charitable acts but practical embodiments of Islamic economic ethics.¹⁸ To provide a broader context, similar initiatives have also been implemented globally, demonstrating that community-based food distribution is a recognized approach to enhancing food security and social solidarity.

Globally, comparable models such as soup kitchens and pay-as-you-can restaurants reflect similar community-based efforts to alleviate food insecurity while fostering solidarity. For instance, in the United States and Europe,¹⁹ soup kitchens provide free meals for the homeless and low-income populations, while community food banks distribute groceries to families in need.²⁰ These initiatives demonstrate how charitable food provision can enhance access to nutrition and social inclusion. Research shows that participation in food pantry and soup kitchen programs significantly improves diet quality and reduces food insecurity.²¹ While in the UK, community food organisations function as strategic action fields that mobilise local resources toward food justice.²²

This comparison highlights that the East Java semi-free stalls not only follow global best practices but also adapt them to local social and cultural conditions, reinforcing both food security and community cohesion.

The Potential Perpetuation of the Cultural Cycle of Poverty

While the semi-free stalls offer tangible social benefits, they also raise critical concerns regarding the possible reproduction of cultural poverty patterns. Conceptual and literature-based studies reveal a potential risk of perpetuating the cycle of dependency if such initiatives are implemented without empowerment components.²³ Previous studies on consumption-based aid programs indicate that ongoing assistance without empowerment measures can cultivate a passive habitus, diminishing

¹⁸ Yusuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Fiqh Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (Jakarta: Pustaka Al-Kautsar, 2007), p. 311.

¹⁹ Damien Gayle, "We're totally pay as you can': the UK restaurant prioritising people and planet," *The Guardian*, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/mar/06/pay-as-you-can-uk-restaurant-prioritise-people-and-planet>, accessed May 25, 2025.

²⁰ Logan Mitchell, "Soup Kitchens: A Lifeline For The Hungry and Homeless," *Ansoup*, 2025, <https://www.missionwithoutborders.org.za/appeals/soup-kitchens>, accessed June 13, 2025.

²¹ Tamara Y Mousa and Jeanne H Freeland-Graves, "Food security of food recipients of a food pantry and soup kitchen," *Public Health Nutrition*, vol. 22, no. 8 (2019), p. 1451–1460.

²² Filippo Oncini, "Charitable food provision as a strategic action field: introducing a meso-level perspective on food support organizing," *Agriculture and Human Values*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2024), p. 189–204.

²³ Edi Suharto, *Analisis Kebijakan Publik: Panduan Praktis Mengkaji Masalah dan Kebijakan Sosial* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2016), p. 74.

beneficiaries' motivation to pursue economic independence.²⁴ For instance, Salsabila's study shows that welfare programs in Indonesia that focus primarily on consumptive assistance without capacity-building measures often lead to dependency and weaken long-term economic resilience.²⁵

Although empirical confirmation remains limited, theoretical evidence suggests the need for preventive measures. Referring to the principles of *tanzīh al-Nafs* 'an al-*Tawākul* (avoiding dependence without effort) and *tamkīn* (empowerment), the management of such stalls should be accompanied by empowerment programs to ensure long-term benefits.²⁶ Thus, semi-free food stalls have the potential to become social ecosystems that not only alleviate immediate hunger but also foster sustainable economic self-reliance.

Discussion

Semi-Free Food Stalls as a Means of Strengthening Food Security

The presence of semi-free food stalls serves not only as a medium for affordable food distribution but also as an embodiment of social solidarity rooted in Islamic economic ethics.²⁷ From the perspective of *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, this initiative supports *ḥifẓ al-Nafs* by ensuring that low-income families consistently access balanced daily meals, thereby preventing malnutrition and safeguarding basic life needs. In terms of *ḥifẓ al-Māl* (protection of wealth), the pay-as-you-wish system reduces household food expenditure by an average of IDR 10,000 per meal, allowing families to allocate funds for other essential needs such as education and healthcare.²⁸ From this perspective, semi-free food stalls constitute not merely a charity but a practical manifestation of Islamic moral economy, positioning ethical solidarity above market-based exchange.

Beyond this theological dimension, such initiatives exemplify a form of moral economy that prioritizes human dignity and communal care over market rationality.²⁹ Unlike the capitalist-commercial model driven by profit accumulation, the semi-free food stall operates through a social logic, emphasizing distributive justice, empathy, and collective responsibility. This model highlights that food security is not solely about resource availability but also about sustaining the moral and relational fabric that upholds community resilience.³⁰ Hence, the semi-free stall represents not only a

²⁴ Agus Heruanto Hadna and Media Wahyudi Askar, "The Impact of Conditional Cash Transfers on Low-Income Individuals in Indonesia," *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2022), p. 23.

²⁵ Nanda Salsabila et al., "Analisis Efektivitas Bantuan Sosial (Bansos) dalam mengatasi Kemiskinan di Indonesia," *Journal of Macroeconomics and Social Development*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2024), p. 7-8.

²⁶ Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 4, (Beirut: Dār Al-Ma'rifah, 2000), p. 50-70.

²⁷ Fathoni Nur Alami and Wily Mohammad, "Applying the Principles of Maqasid Al-Shariah to Address Poverty and Hunger in Indonesia," *Cognitionis Civitatis et Politicae*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2024), p. 57.

²⁸ Fathoni Nur Alami and Mohammad Wily, "Maqasid Al-Sharia Application on Food Security in Indonesia," *Seriat Ekonomisi*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2024), p. 95.

²⁹ Mehmet Asutay, "Islamic Moral Economy: Bringing Back Substantive Morality to Humanise Islamic Finance," *Global Policy*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2025), p. 7.

³⁰ Oona Morrow, Esther Veen, and Stefan Wahlen, *A critical reparative approach towards understanding community food initiatives* (UK: Taylor & Francis, 2023), p. 13.

response to immediate hunger but also a cultural critique of economic systems that have increasingly detached morality from material life.

This moral orientation is reflected in various real examples across East Java. The semi-free buffet stalls are typically managed by community organizations, foundations, individuals, or volunteer groups committed to humanitarian values and social solidarity. For example, the Bariklana food stall in Ponorogo is run by Jam'un Haidar together with the Bariklana Foundation under a "eat as much as you like, pay what you wish" concept. The stall opens daily at 08:00 and offers a different menu each day. Payment is made through a donation box, enabling individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds to access meals regardless of their ability to pay.³¹ In Kediri, the ACT (*Aksi Cepat Tanggap*) food stall was managed by volunteers during the pandemic under the same "pay what you can" scheme.³²

Then in Tulungagung, the Mbok Berkah stall initiated by the Sedekah Subuh community serves lunch for IDR 2,000 (or simply by a prayer) from 11:00 daily, providing about 100 meals each day. The nominal IDR 2,000 is essentially a strategy to preserve diners' dignity; in practice, the meals are free for anyone in need, and the donation box is often hidden behind the door.³³

In Surabaya, the Kea Resto charity food stall run by a volunteer group opens every Sunday at 10:00 and uses a "donation-box payment" system without compulsion.³⁴ In Lamongan, WSL, run by Afif, Novi, and six volunteers, operates from Friday through Sunday to help those struggling with food costs and to fund the development of similar stalls elsewhere.³⁵ In addition, many other semi-free food stalls are scattered across various regions of East Java, such as Bojonegoro,³⁶ Gresik,³⁷ Pasuruan,³⁸ and several other areas, each adapting the same principle of voluntary payment and social care according to their local community context. These examples are drawn from publicly available media reports and community documentation, rather than direct observation or interviews.

³¹ Charolin Pebrianti, "Ada Warung Sedekah di Ponorogo, Makan Sepuasnya-Bayar Seikhlasnya," *detikJatim*, 2023, <https://www.detik.com/jatim/berita/d-6732046/ada-warung-sedekah-di-ponorogo-makan-sepuasnya-bayar-seikhlasnya>, accessed April 11, 2025.

³² Prasetia Fauzani, "Warung Makan Bayar Seiklasnya," *AntaraJatimNews*, 2021, <https://jatim.antaranews.com/foto/522126/warung-makan-bayar-seiklasnya?> accessed April 11, 2025.

³³ Adhar Muttaqin, "Makan di Warung Ini Hanya Bayar Rp 2 Ribu Saja Atau Doa," *detikNews*, 2021, <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-timur/d-5668511/makan-di-warung-ini-hanya-bayar-rp-2-ribu-saja-atau-doa>, accessed April 11, 2025.

³⁴ Theo Reza, "Warung Makan di Surabaya ini Sajikan Konsep dengan Bayar Seikhlasnya," *Kompas TV*, 2022, <https://www.kompas.tv/advertorial/356173/warung-makan-di-surabaya-ini-sajikan-konsep-dengan-bayar-seikhlasnya>, accessed April 11, 2025.

³⁵ Hanif Manshuri, "Potret Warung Sedekah di Lamongan, Makan Sepuasnya Bayar Seikhlasnya," *Surya.co.id*, 2018, <https://surabaya.tribunnews.com/2018/08/18/potret-warung-sedekah-di-lamongan-makan-sepuasnya-bayar-seikhlasnya>, accessed April 11, 2025.

³⁶ kulturbojonegoro, *Warung Makan Peduli Bojonegoro*, Instagram, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DIf08_STSFk/, accessed April 11, 2025.

³⁷ Chofifah Q.N., "Cukup Bayar Rp 2.000 Bisa Makan Hingga Kenyang di Gresik," *Gresik Satu*, 2023, <https://www.gresiksatu.com/cukup-bayar-rp-2-000-bisa-makan-hingga-kenyang-di-gresik/>, accessed April 11, 2025.

³⁸ Muhajir Arifin, "Warung Berkah di Pasuruan Sediakan Ratusan Porsi Makan Gratis Tiap Jumat," *detikJatim*, 2023, <https://www.detik.com/jatim/kuliner/d-6880599/naik-jumat-warung-berkah-di-pasuruan-sediakan-ratusan-porsi-makan-gratis-tiap-jumat>, accessed April 11, 2025.

The system of semi-free food stalls depends crucially on trust and respect for human dignity; the key symbolic asset sustaining the “pay-what-you-wish” concept. In a world governed by written contracts and formal legal frameworks, these stalls instead rely on social norms and the informal regulation of behavior by shame and mutual accountability. Because trust is extended first, diners feel valued and are motivated to act honestly.³⁹ This moral capital functions as symbolic capital that enhances social legitimacy within the field of community charity, in line with Bourdieu’s notion that recognition and trust operate as social assets sustaining collective practices.⁴⁰

The foundation of trust that underpins the “pay-as-you-wish” system resonates deeply with Islamic values, emphasizing social compassion and honesty as pillars of communal life. The Prophet Muhammad said, “Whoever relieves a believer from one of the hardships of this world, Allah will relieve him from one of the hardships of the Day of Judgment. Whoever eases the difficulty of one in distress, Allah will ease his affairs in this world and in the Hereafter. Whoever conceals the faults of a Muslim, Allah will conceal his faults in this world and in the Hereafter. Allah will continue to help His servant as long as the servant helps his fellow Muslim.”⁴¹

According to al-Nawawī in *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, this *ḥadīth* is not merely an ethical exhortation but a call to social responsibility, urging every believer to be part of the solution to others’ suffering.⁴² Historically, the message emerged in the socio-political context of early Madinah, where solidarity between the *Muhājirīn* and *Anṣār* formed the moral foundation of a new communal order.⁴³ Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, in *Fath al-Bārī*, interprets this narration as a manifestation of *ta‘āwun* (mutual aid), which nurtures social trust and strengthens the moral economy of compassion.⁴⁴ Similarly, al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* argues that acts of assistance and generosity represent forms of *tazkiyah al-Nafs* (self-purification), elevating both spiritual rank before God and moral stature within society.⁴⁵ In this sense, semi-free food stalls embody these classical ethical teachings through modern forms of collective compassion.

However, as in any social arena, not all individuals respond to this trust in the same way. Honesty and participation in this space depend heavily on one’s character, habitus, and internalized moral values. Some use it as a motivation to contribute more,

³⁹ Ruruh Jatmiko and Muhammad Abdullah, “Habitus, Modal, dan Arena dalam Cerbung Salindri Kenya Kebak Wewadi Karya Pakne Puri Tinjauan Bourdieu,” *Sutasoma: Jurnal Sastra Jawa*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2021), p. 110.

⁴⁰ May Linda Sari, Tahan Mentria Cambah, and Helen Melenia, “Habitus, Modal, dan Arena Warga Desa Belanti Siam dalam Pusaran Food Estate di Kalimantan Tengah,” *Jurnal Teologi Pabelum*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2022), p. 11.

⁴¹ Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushairiy, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, vol. 1, (Makkah: Dar al-Tayba, 2006), p. 71.

⁴² Abū Zakariyyā Yahyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawiy, *Al-Minhāj Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj*, vol. 21, (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Araby, 2010), p. 17.

⁴³ Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Ḥamzah al-Ḥusayniy, *Al-Bayān wa al-Ta’rīf fi Asbāb Wurūd al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf* (Kairo: Maktabah Ibn Taimiyyah, 2011), p. 230.

⁴⁴ Abū al-Faḍl Aḥmad b. ‘Aly al-‘Asqalāniy, *Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhāriy*, vol. 3, (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 2007), p. 341.

⁴⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, p. 176.

while others may take it as a reason to continue receiving without reciprocating. This dynamic may potentially contribute to passive consumption patterns if not accompanied by awareness and empowerment mechanisms. Consequently, the existence of these stalls generates a dilemma between reinforcing food security and the potential preservation of a cultural poverty cycle.

The Potential Perpetuation of the Cultural Cycle of Poverty

Behind its undeniable contribution to strengthening food security among underprivileged families, the semi-free food stall also carries a social paradox that deserves deeper reflection. The concept of “eat as much as you wish, pay as you wish” has proven effective in easing the economic burdens of many poor families, particularly in East Java. It stands as a tangible expression of social solidarity amid the state’s limited welfare coverage. Yet a critical question arises: does this initiative merely reinforce a culture of dependency and resignation that has long been internalized, or can it instead stimulate value transformation, self-reliance, and empowerment capable of eroding cultural poverty?

This question invites a more critical reading of the habitus of dependency that sustains life patterns within the shadow of cultural poverty. As Oscar Lewis explains through his concept of the culture of poverty, deprivation is not only about the lack of economic resources but also about a system of thought and values inherited across generations that normalizes helplessness and dependency.⁴⁶ In this regard, empirical studies in Indonesia reveal similar patterns among recipients of social assistance programs. For instance, Haliim and Hakim in 2024 found that long-term recipients of government aid displayed decreased work motivation and increased reliance on consumptive assistance.⁴⁷ This reflects what Martin Seligman terms learned helplessness: a state in which individuals become accustomed to receiving without striving to escape limitation.⁴⁸

Such conditions could emerge similarly among beneficiaries of semi-free food stalls, especially if their presence is not accompanied by participatory awareness. When people repeatedly visit not out of urgent need but out of comfort in responsibility-free giving, a mental pattern of dependency begins to form.⁴⁹ Over time, this may reproduce a habitus of cultural poverty that treats social assistance as a safe zone rather than a pathway out. In other words, the semi-free stall risks becoming an arena for reproducing dependency values unless balanced with social education and the strengthening of work ethics.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” *Journal Scientific American*, vol. 215, no. 4 (1966), p. 19.

⁴⁷ Wimmy Haliim and Andy Ilman Hakim, “Ketergantungan Masyarakat Miskin Dan Dilema Kebijakan Sosial: Studi Pada Implementasi Bantuan Sosial Program Keluarga Harapan,” *Jurnal Kebijakan Pemerintahan*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2024).

⁴⁸ Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, (New York: Free Press, 1998), p. 17.

⁴⁹ Gracenda Febina Br Purba et al., “Peran Program Bantuan Sosial dalam Pengentasan Kemiskinan: Evaluasi Dari Berbagai Penelitian,” *Jurnal Publikasi Ilmu Manajemen*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2025), p. 109.

⁵⁰ Nur Palikhah, “Konsep Kemiskinan Kultural,” *Alhadharah: Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah*, vol. 15, no. 30 (2016), p. 11.

This phenomenon represents the perpetuation of poverty not through structural forces but through subtle cultural processes sustained within the stall's social arena. It is a culture not imposed externally but cultivated naturally through the repetition of passive roles. This resembles what Paulo Freire describes as the pedagogy of the oppressed.⁵¹ Although statistical data on how many individuals experience cultural impoverishment through these food stalls are unavailable, the symptoms can be observed in the mindset of those who entrust their life direction to others' generosity. In this sense, the semi-free stall serves as a mirror that reflects the social reproduction of dependency, mediated through moral legitimacy and sustained by everyday interaction.

Within the local Islamic social context, this dependency phenomenon is often framed through the virtues of *qanā'ah* (contentment) and *tawakkul* (trust in God). While these are noble values, when interpreted passively, they risk legitimizing structural complacency. In contrast, Islam emphasizes that effort (*ikhtiyār*) must accompany reliance (*tawakkul*), as expressed in the Prophet's saying: "Tie your camel first, then put your trust in Allah."⁵² The message implies that receiving kindness must not negate one's responsibility to strive. Therefore, the semi-free food stall should not merely serve as a space of reception but also as a space of moral education and social consciousness that nurtures an active spirit of *ta'āwun* (mutual assistance).

Moreover, the principle of self-reliance as a core element of community empowerment is consistent with Islamic ethical teachings that commend diligence and caution against dependency as a habitual condition. The Prophet Muhammad said, "By the One in Whose hand is my soul, it is better for one of you to take his rope, gather a bundle of firewood on his back, and sell it, so that Allah protects his dignity through it, than to beg from people -whether they give to him or withhold from him." (HR. al-Bukhari).⁵³

According to Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī in *Fatḥ al-Bārī*, this hadith carries a moral and social call to avoid dependence, uphold dignity, and cultivate a spirit of initiative and productivity.⁵⁴ Quraish Shihab further explains that hard work is a form of social worship that safeguards human dignity and upholds economic justice. Wahbah al-Zuhailī emphasizes that Islam not only encourages *ta'āwun* (mutual help), but also productive effort as a moral responsibility toward oneself and society.⁵⁵ Similarly, Ibn 'Āshūr, through the framework of *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, asserts that the ultimate goal of the law is to establish an empowered and self-sufficient community (*tamkīn al-ummah*), not one that survives merely on compassion.⁵⁶ Therefore, the semi-free food

⁵¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 1970), p. 48.

⁵² Muḥammad b. 'Īsā b. Saurah b. Mūsā b. al-Ḍaḥḥak al-Tirmidhiy, *Sunan al-Tirmidhiy*, vol. 2, (Beirut: Dār al-Ghurb al-Islām, 2010), p.119.

⁵³ Abū 'Abdillāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhāriy, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhāriy*, vol. 5, (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002), p. 535.

⁵⁴ Abū al-Faḍl Aḥmad b. 'Aly al-'Asqalāniy, *Fatḥ al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhāriy*, (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 2007), p. 341.

⁵⁵ Wahbah b. Musthafa al-Zuhailī, *al-Fiqh al-Islāmī wa Adillatuh*, vol. 3, (Dimashq: Dār al-Fikr, 1989), p. 620-622.

⁵⁶ Muḥammad Ṭāhir b. 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah al-Islāmiyyah*, p. 136.

stall should evolve into a participatory institution that internalizes both ethical faith and productive self-reliance.

These perspectives highlight that the Islamic work ethic extends beyond the individual sphere; it serves as the foundation of *tamkīn* (social empowerment). *Tamkīn* demands that any form of social assistance should foster capacity-building rather than dependency.⁵⁷ In the context of semi-free food stalls, this implies that the initiative should not only provide meals but also serve as a space that cultivates social responsibility and economic self-reliance.

Conceptually, there is a clear connection between Islamic values, social behavior, and economic impact:

Diagram 4. Link between Islamic values, participatory behavior, and food resilience outcomes.



Thus, the semi-free food stall is not merely a charitable space; it holds the potential to become an arena of *tamkīn*, where Islamic values are reproduced through socially and economically empowering actions.

A stall managed with a participatory spirit has the potential to drive more meaningful social change. In practice, this participatory spirit is expressed through the formation of a shared social space where community members assume collective roles and responsibilities. As a result, individuals shift from being passive beneficiaries to active contributors who challenge dependency-oriented mindsets. Conversely, stalls that still operate with a top-down approach -maintaining the dominant relationship between “the giver” and “the receiver”- risk reinforcing the habitus of cultural poverty.⁵⁸

Although there is no empirical evidence yet indicating that semi-free stalls in East Java truly perpetuate cultural poverty, this potential can be mapped through the concept of habitus, which explains how certain behavioral and cognitive patterns are repeatedly formed, including the habit of receiving assistance without parallel efforts to enhance self-capacity.⁵⁹

Comparative studies show that the paradox of benefit and risk also appears in other sectors. For instance, studies on the Sentani Lake Festival in Papua indicate that

⁵⁷ Syamsuri Syamsuri et al., “Implementation of Islamic Economic Empowerment Strategies in the Development of Human Resources,” *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 409, no. 1 (2019), p. 606.

⁵⁸ Humas Seputar Birokrasi, “Mengapa Bansos Tidak Selalu Menyelesaikan Masalah Kemiskinan?,” *Seputar Birokrasi*, 2025, <https://seputarbirokrasi.com/mengapa-bansos-tidak-selalu-menyelesaikan-masalah-kemiskinan/>?, accessed July 20, 2025.

⁵⁹ Alya Muflihatud Dini et al., “Habitus Pengembangan Desa Wisata Kampung Topeng Pada Warga Binaan Kelurahan Tlogowaru Kecamatan Kedungkandang,” *Asketik: Jurnal Agama dan Perubahan Sosial*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2022), p. 281.

weak local community participation significantly reduced the festival's potential economic gains.⁶⁰ In the international context, several studies on food aid programs in Sub-Saharan Africa found that distributing aid without empowerment mechanisms tends to decrease recipients' work motivation.⁶¹ The main difference with the semi-free stalls in East Java is that this initiative emerged from community participation rather than external intervention, thus providing a wider space to integrate empowerment mechanisms.

The implication of these findings for Islamic economics is the need to combine the principle of benefit distribution (*ta'āwun*) with empowerment strategies that prevent dependency. These strategies may take the form of micro-entrepreneurship training, participatory stall management involving santri and community members, and collaborative work programs that reinforce shared responsibility. Therefore, semi-free stalls in East Java can be regarded as an effective instrument for strengthening food resilience as well as a testing ground for Islamic value-based economic empowerment. Thus, this study contributes to Islamic economic discourse by proposing a transformative model that integrates food security initiatives with empowerment-oriented Islamic social enterprise frameworks.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that semi-free buffet stalls have dual potential for the socio-economic lives of pre-prosperous families in East Java. On one hand, they enhance food resilience by offering easily accessible, low-cost meals. On the other hand, the absence of participatory mechanisms risks reinforcing a one-directional giver–recipient relationship that perpetuates cultural poverty. This paradox illustrates that social initiatives, even when well-intentioned, require governance capable of balancing care and empowerment. From the perspective of *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, the presence of semi-free stalls can support the objectives of wealth protection (*ḥifẓ al-Māl*) and life preservation (*ḥifẓ al-Nafs*). However, they do not yet fully promote a productive habitus that prevents dependency (*ḥifẓ al-'Aql*, in the sense of preserving rational consciousness and self-governance). In this regard, *ḥifẓ al-'Aql* entails more than safeguarding intellectual capacity; it involves nurturing critical awareness and responsible decision-making that enable individuals to transition from passive recipients to active agents of change.

To achieve such a transformation, empowerment strategies should be integrated into stall management through structured participation requirements, practical education on resource management, and a “graduate-to-donor or volunteer” system for beneficiaries whose economic conditions improve. These mechanisms transform the act of giving into a participatory process that cultivates independence and collective responsibility.

⁶⁰ Moh. Syarifudin and Imam Wahyudhi, “Empowering Indigenous Communities through Cultural Festivals: An Islamic Economic Perspective on Income-Generating Projects in Jayapura, Papua,” *El-Qist: Journal of Islamic Economics and Business*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2025), p. 11-10.

⁶¹ Danny Cassimon, Olusegun Fadare, and George Mavrotas, “The Impact of Food Aid and Governance on Food and Nutrition Security in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Jurnal Sustainability*, vol. 15, no. 1417 (2023), p. 14-15.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its analytical framework, which combines the dynamics of habitus, social capital, and socio-economic arenas within the context of semi-free stalls. This framework extends the discourse on *maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* into the realm of community-based food security, emphasizing the interplay between philanthropy, socio-cultural practices, and behavioral transformation.

Practically, these findings offer insights for multiple stakeholders. Local governments can use them to design food assistance programs that not only meet physical needs but also strengthen communities' economic and social capacities. Community organizers are encouraged to incorporate participatory and empowerment-based mechanisms to prevent the development of a passive habitus. Likewise, global Islamic philanthropic movements can draw lessons from the local implementation of distributive justice and *maṣlaḥah*, adapting similar empowerment-oriented approaches in other contexts. As this study is based on conceptual synthesis and secondary observations, the identified risks and potentials are indicative rather than determinative. The absence of longitudinal data limits the ability to measure long-term impacts, meaning the potential perpetuation of cultural poverty remains hypothetical. Future research should thus employ field surveys, longitudinal designs, and cross-country comparisons to test the effectiveness of participation-based interventions in semi-free stalls and assess their capacity to transform beneficiaries' habitus.

Ultimately, semi-free stalls embody not merely a moral economy of care but a transformative vision of empowerment, where compassion evolves into capability, and charity becomes a pathway to justice and sustainable self-reliance.[]

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