

## IMPACT OF EMPOWERMENT, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SKILL ENHANCEMENT INITIATIVES ON POVERTY ALLEVIATION FOR ASNAF ZAKAT

Suhaimi Mhd Sarif<sup>1\*</sup>  
Yusof Ismail<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> International Islamic University Malaysia

\*Corresponding author (Email: suhaimims@iiu.edu.my)

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**Abstract:** *Zakat* is a wealth-based practice (a deed or an *'ibadah*) that aims to provide for the needs of the *asnaf* (eligible recipients) in society. In advanced and civilized societies, poverty persists, and the global community strives to eradicate it. *Zakat* and other forms of charity are expected to play a crucial role in this agenda. This paper examines the empowerment, entrepreneurship, and skill enhancement initiatives targeted towards alleviating the poor and hardcore poverty-stricken *asnaf*. The study used qualitative personal interviews with activists championing *asnaf*-driven soup kitchen that are supported by *zakat* and charities with the *asnaf* entrepreneurial orientation. Findings of the study support the effectiveness of empowerment, entrepreneurship, and skill enhancement initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty among the poor and hardcore poverty-stricken *asnaf*. These initiatives include the establishment of free food distribution centres that not only provide meals but also offer employment opportunities for the *asnaf*. Additionally, entrepreneurial slots are provided for free premium food sales, allowing *asnaf* to generate income. Moreover, skill enhancement programs, such as food internships, are implemented to enhance the culinary skills of *asnaf*.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Entrepreneurship, Poverty Alleviation, *Zakat* Distribution

### INTRODUCTION

*Zakat* is a vital component of the Islamic faith, and it tends to be performed with *solat*, which is an obligatory prayer aimed at promoting personal strength and growth. Indeed, *solat* and *zakat* enable individual self-control, spiritual development, and societal accountability. *Solat* provides daily opportunities for contemplation and communion with the divine, fostering self-control and attentiveness. *Zakat* fosters the equitable distribution of wealth and cultivates compassion, so bolstering the well-being of the community. Collectively, these *ibadah* provide guidance to Muslims to uphold moral rectitude and enhance communal progress. There are eight specific groups of *zakat* recipients, commonly referred to as *asnaf*. *Zakat* plays a vital role in ensuring the basic human needs of the *asnaf* are met and protecting their dignity. Aside from *zakat*, several forms of philanthropic donations are anticipated to contribute to the support of this initiative (Rani et al., 2022; Safi, Nasir & Dahlan, 2022).

*Zakat* primarily functions as a mechanism for offering financial aid to persons who are most profoundly impacted by poverty, specifically the *fugara* (the exceedingly impoverished) and the *masakin* (the impoverished). Dahlan and Ibrahim (2021) have developed a digital-based entrepreneurial framework called the “Masjid Kitchen” with the aim to empower

individuals *asnaf* under the categories of *fuqara* and *masakin* by offering them charitable assistance, employment opportunities, and entrepreneurial skills, particularly in the food industry. The model has a resemble of the modern soup kitchen, which is commonly linked to *masajid* (plural of *masjid*) in the Malay region, aligns with the *masjid*-centred economic empowerment (Fahmi, Suyitno, & Rochmiatun, 2023; Safi, Nasir, and Dahlan, 2022).

The use of kitchens to empower those facing poverty has been a long-standing practice in Islamic civilizations (Singer, 2006; Lambarra & Riener, 2015; Kuran, 2018; Reich, 2020; Silvasti & Richers, 2014). Although it is recognised that individuals can contribute to reducing poverty by supporting the *asnaf*, it is contended that an institutional approach is crucial for effectively empowering them (Al-Haq, Abd Wahab & Alam, 2021; Bahri, Muhammad & Aslam, 2021).

People demonstrate a strong tendency to participate in philanthropic activities that go beyond the mandatory Islamic practice of *zakat*. According to Jamal et al. (2019), the act of donating is driven by both empathy and religious fervour. However, it is crucial to provide the recipients of *zakat*, who are classified as *asnaf*, with the essential abilities to effectively reduce poverty (Shiyuti, Zainol, & Ishak, 2021; Busari, 2022). Various studies have shown that in order to lift the impoverished *asnaf* population out of poverty, it is necessary to implement initiatives that empower them, such as entrepreneurship programmes and interventions that help develop their skills (Rosalina & Bahri, 2022; Dahlan & Ibrahim, 2021; Busari, 2022; Ibrahim & Chek, 2020).

This study argues that the factors of empowerment, entrepreneurship, and enhancement of skills have an impact on the outcomes of reducing poverty through the distribution of *zakat* to eligible recipients (*asnaf*). This study aims to investigate the impact of empowerment, entrepreneurship, and enhancement of skills on reducing poverty among the beneficiaries of *asnaf zakat*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an extensive review on empowering persons who are classified as *asnaf*, with a particular focus on empowerment, entrepreneurship, skill enhancement, motivation for charitable acts, and collective endeavours. The cooperation between *zakat* organisations and charities is essential to offer economic prospects to *asnaf*, while also supporting national development objectives. Modern *zakat* frameworks and new business models greatly enhance the empowerment of *asnaf* through entrepreneurial endeavours. Indeed, acquiring knowledge and improving abilities through education and technology is crucial for securing job and fostering self-assurance. Likewise, religious fervour drives philanthropy, which is essential for economic effectiveness. Not to forget, the collaborative efforts, encompassing all parties involved, are also crucial for the elimination of poverty and enhancing the well-being of *asnaf*, emphasizing a complete strategy to empower them.

### Empowerment of *Asnaf* Individuals

This sub-section reviews the significant role that empowerment collaboration and charitable giving have in enhancing the economic empowerment of individuals who are *asnaf*. Al Haq, Abd Wahab, and Alam (2021) argued that there is a significant need of fostering collaboration between *zakat* and charitable organisations as means to augment the economic welfare of *asnaf* individuals through the provision of employment and entrepreneurial prospects.

Individuals who are *asnaf zakat* differentiate themselves by the characteristic of being enterprising. According to Bahri, Muhammad and Aslam (2021), the *asnaf* group has demonstrated for a number of noteworthy entrepreneurial accomplishments. In addition, Busari (2022) argued that the idea of community participation lends support to a paradigm of empowerment that incorporates the utilisation of communal resources and cooperative endeavours. Furthermore, there has been a strong linkage of individual initiatives to empower entrepreneurs from the *asnaf* community with national development goals (Rani et al., 2022). This noteworthy development has been observed by many researchers as very encouraging (Reich, 2020; Rani et al., 2022; Rosalina & Bahri, 2022).

According to Reich (2020), philanthropic organisations and the charitable practices have collaborated to result in significant impact on the economic empowerment of individuals who are individuals with disadvantages and disabilities. In fact, Rosalina and Bahri (2022) emphasise the significance of establishing formalised procedures for the distribution of *zakat* and cultivating strategic partnerships within the community. Indeed, by recognising the significance of collaborative activities, institutional support, and community involvement is necessary to advance the cause of economic empowerment among persons who require assistance.

### **Entrepreneurship of *Asnaf* Individuals**

Individuals who are *asnaf* have demonstrated that they possess the qualities and skills necessary to be successful business owners, and they are capable of becoming entrepreneurs (Ibrahim & Chek, 2020; Dahlan & Ibrahim, 2021; Fahmi, Suyitno & Rochmiatun, 2023). Ibrahim and Chek (2020) argued the incorporation of *zakat* within the framework of Industrial Revolution 4.0, with *al-falah* maximization enhances the effectiveness of *zakat* in improving the welfare of *asnaf* individuals. Likewise, Dahlan and Ibrahim (2021) argued that entrepreneurship through the freemium multi-sided platform business model, with a particular emphasis on mosque kitchens, has proven to empower, enhance and employ *asnaf zakat*. Indeed, the incorporation of *zakat* into the Fourth Industrial Revolution and entrepreneurial endeavours, particularly through *masjid* kitchens, enhances and empowers the entrepreneurial of *asnaf*.

Furthermore, Fahmi, Suyitno, and Rochmiatun (2023) contended that *masjid*-based economic empowerment has been in the Malay world. Fahmi et al. (2023) explained that Ibnu Khaldun's *Asabiyah* and Malik Bennabi's civilization theories are the sources of inspiration for the economic development model that include the participation of *zakat asnaf* in entrepreneurial endeavours. In doing so, it places an emphasis on social cohesion and the growth of civilizations, implying that strong communal relationships and cultural improvements considerably boost the economic empowerment and success of those who received *zakat*. This approach has been instrumental in facilitating the empowerment of individuals belonging to the *asnaf* group within Malay Muslim communities. Through the utilisation of social cohesion and the collective power derived from these theoretical frameworks, initiatives centred around mosques have achieved notable success in improving the economic standing and overall welfare of individuals classified as *asnaf*.

Indeed, *asnaf* individuals have demonstrated the potential to become successful entrepreneurs, and they gained advantages from the integration of *zakat* into modern frameworks such as the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and entrepreneurship models such as freemium multi-sided platforms, where *masjid* kitchens have been particularly prominent. The

economic standing and general well-being of *asnaf* individuals have significantly improved as a result of programmes that are centred on mosques.

### **Skill Enhancement of *Asnaf* Individuals**

Enhancing one's skills is essential for empowering those who are disadvantaged and disabled so that one can have an expansion of work options, encouragement for entrepreneurialism and amazing personal development. Skill enhancement signifies the systematic endeavour of enhancing and cultivating the knowledge, abilities, and competencies of individuals, specifically focusing on *asnaf* individuals (Yusoff et al., 2018; Dahlan & Ibrahim, 2021; Amin, 2022; Hanafi et al., 2023).

Indeed, by acquiring additional skills or enhancing existing ones, individuals can broaden their range of employment prospects and augment their potential for earning higher incomes (Dahlan & Ibrahim, 2021; Amin, 2022; Hanafi et al., 2023). Moreover, the enhancement of skills plays a crucial role in promoting entrepreneurship within the *asnaf* community. According to Yusoff et al. (2018), the acquisition of advanced talents greatly expands a person's knowledge and opens up several opportunities in different areas. Thus, improving one's skills not only increases job opportunities but also enables the start and expansion of company initiatives, fostering entrepreneurship. By gaining and honing these abilities, individuals are more adept at navigating the intricacies of the contemporary workforce, seizing emerging economic prospects, and engaging more profoundly with society. Likewise, Hanafi et al. (2023) argued that individuals can also establish and manage their own businesses by acquiring entrepreneurial skills in areas such as business management, marketing, financial planning, and problem-solving.

The enhancement of skills also plays a significant role in the personal development and cultivation of self-confidence among individuals classified as *asnaf*. The acquisition of new knowledge and abilities through this process enhances individuals' self-esteem and confidence in their own capabilities (Yusoff et al., 2018; Amin, 2022; Hanafi et al., 2023). To promote the development of skills among individuals classified as *asnaf*, a range of strategies encompass the implementation of training programmes, vocational education, apprenticeships, mentorship, and the provision of educational resources (Yusoff et al., 2018; Hanafi et al., 2023). The augmentation of skills can utilize contemporary technology. Dahlan and Ibrahim (2021) argue that the enhancement of skills is crucial to augment individuals' capabilities, thereby positively impacting their overall well-being. Safi, Nasir, and Dahlan (2022) have highlighted the importance of skill development in the context of the post-pandemic and digital era.

Indeed, a significant contribution to the *asnaf*'s total well-being and the growth of society is made by the enhancement of their abilities, which not only improves their economic possibilities but also helps them increase their self-confidence.

### **Motivation for Charity**

The ongoing inculcation of *zakat* payment and charitable donations is important. According to Jamal, Yacob, Bartikowski, and Slater (2019), the level of religious devotion among individuals who contribute to *zakat* plays a significant role in motivating their philanthropic actions. Kuran (2018) postulates a robust correlation between Islam, philanthropy, and economic efficacy. According to Fahmi, Suyitno, and Rochmiatun (2023), charitable behaviour is not only prevalent in Malay Muslim societies but also in Moroccan Muslim

societies. Indeed, Lambarraa and Riener (2015) recognised the impact of social and cultural factors on charitable behaviours within Moroccan Islamic societies.

Likewise, Singer (2006) underscores the notable importance attributed to charitable endeavours, including the establishment of soup kitchens. The practices have been deeply ingrained within Islamic societies for an extended period of time and possess significance in terms of offering aid and support to individuals requiring assistance. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the historical context and cultural significance associated with charitable practices is crucial to launch initiatives aimed at empowering individuals classified as *asnaf* and effectively addressing their unique needs within the wider scope of Islamic societies.

### **Empowerment Through Collaboration**

The successful eradication of poverty through the empowerment of *asnaf* individuals necessitates the active engagement and involvement of all relevant stakeholders. Safi, Nasir, and Dahlan (2022) emphasised the significance of the Malaysian University of the Future (UOTF) framework in the context of the post-pandemic and digital age. Shiyuti, Zainol, and Ishak (2021) argued that those *zakat* institutions in Malaysia have expanded their scope of *zakat* disbursement beyond the conventional model. The emphasis on entrepreneurship facilitates the exploration of innovative strategies that promote economic autonomy and sustainable empowerment among individuals classified as *asnaf*. Silvasti and Riches (2014) underscore the imperative of cohesive endeavours in tackling the predicament of hunger and food charity, with a particular emphasis on poverty alleviation through the lens of the right to food.

Undoubtedly, the elimination of poverty by means of empowering *asnaf* individuals necessitates the active engagement of all relevant parties. The concept of the ultimate objective of the *zakat* fund, *zakat* institutions, and initiatives aimed at alleviating hunger and promoting food charity collectively contribute significantly to the empowerment of *asnaf* individuals (Haji-Othman, 2016; Kuran, 2018; Safi et al., 2022). Through active participation in community initiatives, the provision of entrepreneurial opportunities, and the fulfilment of basic needs, society can collaborate in efforts to enhance the economic conditions and overall well-being of individuals classified as *asnaf*. This collective endeavour ultimately aims to eliminate poverty.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research employed a qualitative methodology, specifically personal interviews, to gather data from activists who advocate for soup kitchens driven by *asnaf*, which are financially supported by *zakat* and charitable organisations with an *asnaf* entrepreneurial orientation. The researchers employed qualitative personal interviews as means to gather the firsthand accounts and viewpoints of activists who are actively engaged in the management of entrepreneurship, employment, and skill development for *asnaf zakat* within the community (Merriam, 2015; Ariffin & Osman, 2022; Brinkmann, 2022).

The primary rationale for employing a qualitative research design lies in its ability to effectively capture the intricate and multifaceted perspectives of activists operating within their respective domains (DeMarrais, 2004; Merriam, 2015; Brinkmann, 2022). Qualitative research is considered suitable for investigating the intricate social dynamics and individual experiences related to entrepreneurship, employment, and initiatives aimed at enhancing skills in endeavours to alleviate poverty (Flick, 2004; Haji-Othman, 2016; Larsen, 2023). The

researchers utilised a purposive sampling method to choose individuals who were actively involved in stewardship initiatives focused on entrepreneurship, employment, and skill development (Merriam, 2015; Kuckartz, 2019; Lochmiller, 2021). The selection criteria were determined by evaluating the candidates' experience, knowledge, and participation in initiatives aimed at addressing the needs of *asnaf zakat* and impoverished individuals within the community (Merriam, 2015; Larsen, 2023).

The researchers employed open-ended interview questions to prompt participants to discuss their experiences, the difficulties they encountered, the approaches they used, and their perspectives on the efficacy and consequences of interventions related to entrepreneurship, employment, and skill development (Merriam, 2015; Larsen, 2023).

The interviews were carried out using a semi-structured approach, which provided participants with the opportunity to expand their answers. The interview data that was gathered was transcribed in its entirety, without any alterations, thus creating a textual foundation for subsequent analysis. The researchers utilised thematic analysis, a commonly employed qualitative analysis method, to discern recurring patterns, themes, and significant findings within the collected data (Flick, 2004; Merriam, 2015; Vogl, Schmidt & Zartler, 2019; Brinkmann, 2022). Recurring themes pertaining to entrepreneurship, employment, and skill enhancement for poverty alleviation were identified and analysed through a systematic process involving coding and categorization.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researchers posed two primary interview questions to three activists:

(a) Could you provide a concrete illustration or personal encounter that exemplifies the influence of the *asnaf*-driven soup kitchen initiative, which is backed by *zakat* and charitable organisations, on the empowerment of *asnaf* individuals in terms of entrepreneurship, employment, and skill development?

(b) As an activist engaged in the management of entrepreneurship, employment, and skill enhancement for *asnaf zakat*, what are some significant challenges or barriers you have faced in the implementation of these initiatives?

According to Activist 1, their soup kitchen operates from the mosque and employs *asnaf* individuals identified by the mosque. The *asnaf* workers receive a daily wage for their work in the kitchen. In addition to preparing free meals for the local *asnaf*, the kitchen staff, who are also *asnaf*, take orders for premium food through digital marketing. The volunteer chef in the soup kitchen provides culinary and marketing skills to enhance *asnaf* workers abilities.

As for Activist 2, their soup kitchen operates on a university campus near the mosque. They employed *asnaf* students identified by the university's welfare unit and provide them with a daily wage for their work in the kitchen. In addition to preparing free meals for their *asnaf* peers, the student *asnaf* workers in the kitchen also sell food at a special booth on campus. The *asnaf* students also take orders for premium food through digital marketing, serving students, university staff, and others. In addition, these *asnaf* students also earn culinary and marketing skills from a volunteer chef in the soup kitchen.

Activist 3 used an unconventional method when the *asnaf* chefs used cloud-based soup kitchen to invites *asnaf zakat* recipients to cook from their own kitchens. The *asnaf* chefs

provide all the necessary raw materials and cooking stoves. The *asnaf* participants earn commissions from the food they cook and deliver it to nearby free food centres located next to a community hall. The *asnaf* chefs also offer them capital to sell premium food to the public, and the *asnaf zakat* recipients have the opportunity to attend skill enhancement programs at the *asnaf* chefs' soup kitchen centre. Based on the feedback, Table 1 summarises the feedback from informants.

**Table 1. The List of Item**

Informants	Employment	Entrepreneurship	Skill Enhancement
Activist 1	Kitchen operations	Premium food via digital marketing	Culinary and marketing
Activist 2	Waged cook & helpers	Booth & digital	Networking
Activist 3	Commissioned-based home kitchen	Different orders	Culinary and marketing

Notes: Taken from interview notes.

The activists faced a lot of challenges as well. According to Activist 1, some of the *asnaf* who were working in the soup kitchen unexpectedly stopped showing up without giving prior notice. When the Activist followed up with them, they expressed their preference to stay at home as they found the kitchen work to be physically demanding. They preferred receiving *zakat* money without having to go through the hardships of working in the kitchen. Cooking for premium food did not interest them either, as they were not inclined towards cooking. Instead, they chose to visit other free food distribution centers to have their meals or bring packed food home. The targeted *asnaf* participants said they desire for a simpler life, questioning the need to put in so much effort when their basic needs could be met in an easier way.

In the experience of Activist 2, the *asnaf* individuals working in the soup kitchen struggle with the pressure from customers, particularly from among the *asnaf* community, who criticize the free food as being unsatisfactory and not meeting their taste preferences. Additionally, the seed money provided to them for kitchen entrepreneurship initiatives is not being utilized to its full potential.

As for Activist 3, the *asnaf* participants who are working as the crew in the soup kitchen express their dissatisfaction with the current setup, perceiving it as merely charity work with earnings that fall below market standards. Feeling unhappy with their financial situation, they decided to report the issue to the labour office. As a result, the soup kitchen is compelled to formalize its employment, adhering to the regulations and requirements set by the labour office. Efforts to strike a balance between fulfilling legal obligations and maintaining financial stability are essential. Exploring cost-effective strategies, such as seeking *pro bono* legal assistance or collaborating with organizations specializing in employment support, can help mitigate the financial burden associated with formal employment. Additionally, efforts to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of operations within the soup kitchen, such as streamlining processes and optimizing resource allocation, can contribute to minimizing costs and maximizing impact.

In summary, the interviews with the activists shed light on the diverse approaches taken by soup kitchens in empowering *asnaf* individuals through entrepreneurship,

employment, and skill development. While each activist's approach differs, they all aim to support the *asnaf* community through the utilization of *zakat* and charitable organizations. Activist 1 operates a soup kitchen from a *masjid* (a place of worship for Muslims) employing *asnaf* individuals identified by the *masjid*. Activist 1 provides wages for kitchen work and offers culinary and marketing skills training. Activist 2 runs a soup kitchen on a university campus, employing *asnaf* students identified by the university's welfare unit. He also provides wages, along with opportunities for culinary entrepreneurship and marketing. Activist 3 utilizes a cloud-based model, inviting *asnaf zakat* recipients to cook from their own kitchens, providing necessary resources and commissions for their efforts. However, the activists also faced significant challenges. Activist 1 encountered *asnaf* workers who preferred receiving *zakat* money without working in the kitchen, and some lost interest in cooking or providing premium food. Activist 2 dealt with criticism from *asnaf* customers regarding the quality of free food and under-utilisation of seed money for entrepreneurship initiatives. Activist 3 had to navigate the transition to formal employment due to a report to the labour office, resulting in financial strain for the soup kitchen due to limited donations.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach, including community engagement, advocacy, and innovative fundraising strategies. Thus, there is a need of raising awareness about the importance of supporting soup kitchens, fostering community ownership, and diversifying funding sources can help ensure sustained operations and impactful service to the *asnaf* community. Efforts to streamline operations, optimize resource allocation, and seek cost-effective solutions can alleviate financial burdens while maintaining legal obligations. By addressing these issues, soup kitchens can continue empowering *asnaf* individuals and serving their needs effectively.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this qualitative study provide valuable insights into the role of empowerment, entrepreneurship, and skill enhancement initiatives in addressing poverty among the hardcore poverty-stricken *asnaf*. The findings emphasize the effectiveness of soup kitchens supported by *zakat* and charities, which not only provide meals but also create employment opportunities for *asnaf* individuals. The inclusion of entrepreneurial slots for selling premium food enables *asnaf* to generate income and improve their economic well-being. Additionally, skill enhancement programs, such as food internships, contribute to enhancing the culinary skills of *asnaf* individuals. The study underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach that involves community engagement, advocacy, and innovative fundraising strategies. By raising awareness about the significance of supporting soup kitchens and fostering community ownership, sustainable operations and impactful services can be ensured for the *asnaf* community. Diversifying funding sources and optimizing resource allocation can help alleviate financial burdens while adhering to legal obligations. By addressing these challenges and implementing the findings from this study, soup kitchens can continue to empower *asnaf* individuals and effectively serve their needs. These initiatives play a vital role in alleviating poverty, fostering entrepreneurship, and enhancing skills, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being and economic stability of the hardcore poverty-stricken *asnaf* population.



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