

COLLECTIVE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RELIGIOUS MODERATION AND THE VALUES OF DALIHAN NATOLU IN BATANGTORU DISTRICT

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Abstract

This community service program addresses the need for strengthening religious moderation and social cohesion in Batangtoru District, North Sumatra, a region characterized by diverse religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Despite this diversity, limited understanding of religious moderation and minimal cross-belief interaction have posed social challenges. The program aims to enhance cooperative (gotong royong) economic empowerment and cross-identity social cohesion by internalizing the local cultural values of Dalihan Natolu within four community business groups. Using a community-based empowerment approach and the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method, the program integrates religious moderation principles and local wisdom to foster social solidarity, mutual trust, and economic collaboration. Collective economic practices including joint farming, micro-enterprises, and clan-based cooperatives—serve as practical platforms for applying these values. The results demonstrate significant positive outcomes across three dimensions. Economically, group incomes increased by 15–20%, production efficiency improved through collective procurement, and marketing capacities strengthened. Socially, intergroup trust, open communication, deliberative decision-making, and conflict resolution through customary dialogue (martonggo raso) were enhanced. Culturally, Dalihan Natolu values were reflected in equitable task distribution, respect for individual capacities, and intergenerational solidarity. Overall, the program confirms that local cultural approaches can effectively support economic empowerment, strengthen social capital, and promote sustainable religious moderation, making it suitable for replication in other culturally diverse regions.

Keywords: *Religious moderation, Dalihan Natolu, cooperative economic empowerment.*

INTRODUCTION

At present, religious moderation within a multilateral framework has become one of the strategic issues widely discussed in Indonesia. This is closely related to the nation's pluralistic condition, encompassing diversity in religion, ethnicity, culture, and local traditions that exist within society. Such diversity constitutes a national asset; however, it also contains the potential for friction if not properly managed. Amid increasingly complex social dynamics, the government seeks to strengthen religious moderation as a strategic measure to uphold social harmony and prevent conflicts rooted in differences in belief. Religious moderation refers to efforts to balance religious practices so as to avoid falling into extreme and intolerant attitudes. The essence of religious moderation lies in maintaining strong personal faith while simultaneously respecting the existence and rights of others who adhere to different beliefs. Through this approach, society is encouraged to avoid excessive fanaticism, absolute truth claims, and exclusive attitudes toward other groups. Consequently, religious moderation serves as a foundation for fostering harmony in social, national, and civic life. One of the key objectives of religious moderation programs is to prevent mutual disparagement among religious communities. As a multireligious nation, Indonesia faces challenges in maintaining balanced interreligious relations, particularly in regions with a long history of pluralism. Religious moderation is expected to cultivate inclusive attitudes, openness in social interaction, and the ability to accept differences without perceiving them as threats. In this sense, the program plays an important role in countering radicalism, intolerance, and the potential for social polarization driven by religious sentiment.

Notably, the values embedded in religious moderation strongly intersect with local philosophies in Indonesia, one of which is Dalihan Natolu, the cultural value system of the Batak community. Dalihan Natolu emphasizes balanced social relations, mutual respect, deliberation, and harmonious living. When the principles of religious moderation are integrated with the Dalihan Natolu philosophy, they can give rise to a model of social and economic empowerment based on gotong royong (mutual cooperation) that is highly relevant to the local context. Cooperative economic empowerment is not solely concerned with achieving economic self-reliance, but also with strengthening social networks, building social trust, and enhancing solidarity across clans, families, and even religious boundaries.

Amid current socio-economic challenges, development strategies that rely solely on technocratic approaches have proven insufficient when not accompanied by an understanding of local cultural and religious values. Development approaches rooted in local wisdom tend to be more acceptable, sustainable, and effective in increasing community participation. Therefore, integrating religious moderation with the Dalihan Natolu philosophy is essential as a foundation for community economic empowerment in Batangtoru. These values can be applied in the development of family-based cooperatives, community-based joint enterprises, collective agricultural activities, and the strengthening of inclusive and sustainable household economies. This study aims to explore how the synergy between religious moderation and the Dalihan Natolu philosophy can serve as a foundation for developing a gotong royong-based economic empowerment model. This model not only reflects the cultural richness and religious diversity of Batangtoru but is also expected to support sustainable socio-economic development within the community. In other words, the integration of these two value systems is anticipated to promote a form of development that prioritizes not only material aspects but also social harmony and the cultural resilience of local communities.

The religious moderation-based community service program was implemented in Batangtoru District, South Tapanuli Regency, involving communities from various villages. This area is characterized by strong multiculturalism, where diverse ethnic groups, customs, and religious traditions coexist. The Batangtoru community is widely recognized for its strong adherence to customs and cultural values, indicating significant potential for leveraging local wisdom as social capital to strengthen moderate religious life. In designing the community service program, the socio-cultural characteristics of the Batangtoru community were a primary consideration. The program involved religious leaders and community figures with a deep understanding of religious moderation, as well as respected individuals within the customary structure. This approach was chosen to ensure that the program aligned with local values and was readily accepted by the community. Religious leaders were empowered not only as conveyors of teachings but also as facilitators of dialogue, community mobilizers, and mediators in the event of differing viewpoints among residents.

To strengthen program implementation, community members were encouraged to practice mutual respect, openness to dialogue, and avoidance of absolute truth claims regarding their beliefs. The program also provided space for individuals to share their religious perspectives within a safe and structured environment. In this way, religious moderation was not merely taught as a concept but was also directly practiced in everyday life through positive social interactions. Preliminary findings indicate that the Batangtoru community exhibits considerable diversity in customs, culture, and ethnicity. However, this diversity has not yet been fully accompanied by a deep understanding of the importance of religious moderation. Several challenges remain, including limited interaction among residents from different religious groups and restricted access to accurate information regarding the concept of religious moderation. In certain situations, differences in belief still give rise to social awkwardness or prejudice that can hinder interaction.

In the broader national context of Indonesia, religious and cultural diversity should serve as a unifying force rather than a source of division. Diversity is an essential element in shaping the nation's collective identity. Therefore, systematic efforts are required to integrate religious education, the strengthening of local culture, and economic development into a comprehensive and integrated solution. The Batangtoru community requires social spaces that facilitate encounters, dialogue, and cross-identity cooperation as concrete manifestations of religious moderation. Given these realities, community service activities based on religious moderation are highly relevant. The program aims to foster new understanding, strengthen tolerant attitudes, and increase social interaction among community members. Strengthening religious moderation at the community level is expected to create a conducive environment for the growth of gotong royong-based economic cooperation, which in turn contributes to improved welfare and long-term social stability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Religious Moderation

Religious moderation has emerged as a strategic concept in managing religious diversity within plural societies. Etymologically derived from the Latin *moderatio*, meaning balance or restraint, religious moderation refers to a religious outlook and practice that avoids extremes, both conservative-fundamentalist and liberal secular (Azra, 2020). In the Indonesian context, the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019) defines religious moderation as a way of understanding and practicing religion that upholds human dignity, social justice, and public welfare while remaining consistent with constitutional values and national unity. Importantly, religious moderation does not seek to dilute religious doctrine or compromise core beliefs; rather, it promotes the alignment of religious commitment with humanitarian values, social harmony, and respect for diversity. The concept is deeply rooted in religious traditions, particularly in Islam through the notion of *ummatan wasathan* (the middle community), which emphasizes balance, justice, and proportionality in religious life (Yusuf, 2019).

From a broader theoretical perspective, moderation is not exclusive to Islam. Similar principles can be found in the Buddhist Middle Way and Aristotle's golden mean, both of which stress moral equilibrium (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Sociologically, religion plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion (Durkheim, 1912/2001); therefore, religious moderation functions as a social mechanism that mitigates fanaticism and prevents social fragmentation. Empirically, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019) operationalizes religious moderation through four key indicators: national commitment, tolerance, rejection of violence, and acceptance of local traditions. These indicators reflect the integration of religious values with nationalism, pluralism, and socio-cultural adaptation. In public policy terms, religious moderation has become an essential strategy for strengthening national integration and countering radicalism and intolerance (Suharto, 2021).

2. Dalihan Natolu as Local Social Ethics

Dalihan Natolu constitutes a foundational socio-cultural system within Batak Toba society in North Sumatra. Literally meaning "a three-legged stove," the concept symbolizes a balanced social structure composed of three interdependent elements: *hula-hula* (wife-givers), *dongan tubu* (clan relatives), and *boru* (wife-receivers) (Simanjuntak, 2006). These elements function synergistically to maintain social equilibrium and communal harmony. Beyond kinship relations, Dalihan Natolu represents a comprehensive philosophy governing social interaction, moral conduct, and ethical responsibility (Siahaan, 2018). Each individual simultaneously occupies relational positions that may shift according to customary contexts, reflecting the system's dynamic and non-hierarchical nature (Simatupang, 2017). This flexibility underscores its emphasis on balance, reciprocity, and mutual dependence.

Normatively, Dalihan Natolu is structured around three core principles: *somba marhula-hula* (respect for wife-givers), *manat mardongan tubu* (prudence and fairness among clan members), and *elek marboru* (care and guidance toward wife-receivers). Collectively, these principles promote respect, solidarity, compassion, and justice—values that resonate with universal ethical norms (Pasaribu, 2019). In contemporary contexts, Dalihan Natolu remains highly relevant as a form of local wisdom that reinforces cultural identity, social cohesion, and intergroup harmony in plural societies. Its emphasis on balance and mutual respect aligns closely with the principles of religious moderation, positioning Dalihan Natolu as an effective form of social capital for fostering inclusive social development (Hutapea, 2020).

3. Gotong Royong–Based Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment refers to processes that enhance individuals' and communities' capacities to control economic resources, participate in decision-making, and achieve sustainable livelihoods (Chambers, 1997). In Indonesia, economic empowerment is inseparable from *gotong royong*, a deeply rooted cultural value emphasizing collective action, mutual assistance, and social solidarity (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). *Gotong royong*–based economic empowerment integrates economic objectives with social and cultural dimensions. Rather than prioritizing profit maximization, this model emphasizes collective welfare, mutual trust, and shared responsibility (Yunus, 2010). It is consistent with the principles of the solidarity economy, which place human relationships and social justice at the center of economic activity (Laville, 2010). Theoretically, this approach is supported by Empowerment Theory, which highlights increased control and agency at the community level (Zimmerman, 2000), and Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes trust, networks, and reciprocity as foundations for collective action (Putnam, 1993). Empirically, *gotong royong*–based empowerment is manifested through cooperatives, village-owned enterprises (BUMDes), joint business groups, and community-based microenterprises.

COLLECTIVE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RELIGIOUS MODERATION AND THE VALUES OF DALIHAN NATOLU IN BATANGTORU DISTRICT

Abdul Nasser Hasibuan et al

Within the framework of national development, gotong royong-based economic empowerment contributes to inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and social equity, aligning closely with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). More broadly, it represents not merely an economic strategy but a socio-cultural approach to development that integrates local values with modern economic principles to achieve sustainable and equitable outcomes.

METHOD

This study employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which combines systematic inquiry with direct community engagement. PAR was selected due to its suitability for addressing complex social issues through collaborative problem identification, collective action, and continuous reflection involving researchers and community members. This approach enables the empowerment of local communities while generating empirical insights into the effectiveness of culturally grounded social interventions. The research focused on strengthening religious moderation through the internalization of local cultural values, specifically the philosophy of Dalihan Natolu, as a foundation for collective economic empowerment and social cohesion in Batangtoru District, South Tapanuli Regency, Indonesia. The study was conducted in Batangtoru District, a region characterized by significant religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Participants included local residents, teachers, and micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) actors from Muslim, Protestant Christian, and Catholic communities. In addition, religious leaders and traditional figures with recognized authority and deep understanding of religious moderation and Dalihan Natolu values were involved as facilitators and key informants. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure representation across religious affiliations and social roles relevant to community empowerment activities.

Data collection was carried out over several months using multiple qualitative techniques. These included participatory observation, structured lectures delivered by religious leaders, and facilitated group discussions. The lectures focused on the principles of religious moderation, interfaith respect, and the socio-economic relevance of Dalihan Natolu. Group discussions provided a space for participants to exchange perspectives, reflect on lived experiences, and explore collaborative economic initiatives. Field notes and reflective documentation were systematically recorded throughout the program to capture social interactions, participation dynamics, and changes in community attitudes toward religious diversity and cooperation. The implementation of the program followed four main stages:

1. Problem Mapping Stage,
2. Opportunity and Social Capital Mapping Stage,
3. Program Design and Implementation Stage,
4. Evaluation and Reflective Stage,

The program actively involved multiple stakeholders, including MSME actors, community leaders, religious figures, and residents of Batangtoru District. Their engagement ensured cultural legitimacy, enhanced participation, and strengthened the sustainability of the empowerment model. Stakeholders functioned not only as beneficiaries but also as collaborators in program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study prioritized inclusivity, mutual respect, and cultural sensitivity, particularly in facilitating interfaith interactions and community-based decision-making processes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Initial Impacts of the Collective Economic Empowerment Program

The collective (gotong royong)-based economic empowerment program implemented over several months demonstrated notable early impacts on both the economic and social well-being of the target communities. Although the program duration remains insufficient for assessing long-term outcomes, preliminary evidence indicates a strong transformative potential. The impacts extend beyond economic gains to encompass social relations, reinforcement of local cultural values, enhanced collective capacity, and the emergence of cross-identity solidarity in everyday community life. These findings align with theoretical perspectives on community empowerment, social capital, and community-based development. According to Zimmerman (2000), empowerment involves processes that increase individuals' and groups' control over decisions affecting their lives. The collective economic model applied in this program operationalizes this concept by positioning community members as key actors in managing resources, making decisions, and shaping their economic development pathways.

2. Social Context and Collaboration Challenges

The program was conducted in a socially segmented context characterized by divisions based on religion, clan (marga), and customary affiliation. In social anthropology, such conditions are described as social segmentation, where strong identity boundaries tend to limit intergroup interaction (Barth, 1969). While functional in certain respects, this segmentation often constrains cross-group economic cooperation.

Prior to the intervention, economic activities in Batangtoru were predominantly individual or confined to small homogeneous groups. This pattern restricted cross-group synergy and limited access to broader economic opportunities. Consistent with Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness, overly homogeneous networks tend to inhibit economic expansion. The program addressed this challenge by forming cross-identity economic groups, aiming not only to increase income but also to foster bridging social capital that connects diverse social groups (Putnam, 2000).

3. Early Economic Outcomes

One of the most tangible outcomes was a 15–20% increase in group income within the first months of implementation. This improvement can be explained through principles of economies of scale and collective efficiency (Schmitz, 1995). Collective action enabled cost reductions through joint procurement, shared production tools, efficient task allocation, and enhanced bargaining power. Furthermore, collective business groups improved participants' market access and negotiation capacity with external actors. From an economic empowerment perspective, this collective strength represents a form of economic social capital that accelerates welfare improvement. Psychologically, income growth also increased self-confidence and entrepreneurial motivation among participants, particularly among those who initially doubted their business capabilities.

4. Social Impacts and Trust Formation

Social impacts were more pronounced than economic gains, underscoring the program's role in strengthening social cohesion within a plural society. Increased interpersonal trust emerged among participants who previously interacted within exclusive identity-based networks. Trust is a foundational element of social capital and a prerequisite for effective collaboration (Coleman, 1988). Sustained interaction in collective economic activities gradually reduced identity boundaries. Participants began sharing information, exchanging experiences, and engaging in social interactions beyond program activities. Additionally, the emergence of cross-village networks signaled improved social integration. In rural development contexts, such networks facilitate innovation and resource exchange, consistent with Castells' (2000) network society framework.

5. Structural Economic Constraints and Collective Solutions

The program was implemented in a rural economy characterized by reliance on agriculture, small-scale livestock farming, and household-based micro-enterprises. Despite substantial local potential, communities faced persistent structural constraints, including limited access to capital, unstable markets, low financial literacy, and minimal innovation capacity. These conditions reflect structural barriers to local economic development (Chambers, 1997). The collective empowerment model offered a practical response by enabling internal capital formation through pooled contributions, reducing dependence on formal financial institutions. This approach is consistent with community-based microfinance, which emphasizes social collateral over material guarantees.

6. Socio-Cultural Dynamics and Social Reintegration

Beyond economic constraints, socio-cultural dynamics shaped by religious, clan, and customary identities influenced social interaction patterns. Such segmentation may generate social cleavages that weaken social cohesion and collective action. Accordingly, the program was designed not only as an economic intervention but also as a mechanism for social reintegration. Through cross-identity group formation, entrepreneurship training, and

COLLECTIVE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RELIGIOUS MODERATION AND THE VALUES OF DALIHAN NATOLU IN BATANGTORU DISTRICT

Abdul Nasser Hasibuan et al

continuous facilitation, the program strengthened horizontal social cohesion, a critical condition for sustainable development in plural societies.

7. Participatory Approach and Community Ownership

The participatory approach constituted a central pillar of the program's effectiveness. Following Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, community members were actively involved in planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. This involvement fostered a strong sense of ownership, enhancing the likelihood of program sustainability beyond the facilitation period. Active participation also ensured inclusive decision-making and prevented dominance by specific groups, contributing to the emergence of more inclusive local leadership structures.

8. Community Engagement and the Erosion of Identity Boundaries

High levels of community engagement were observed throughout the program. Participants reported tangible benefits, including skill development, economic opportunities, and improved social relations. Initial concerns regarding identity differences gradually diminished as interaction frequency increased. In line with symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), social meanings are constructed through interaction. Positive and sustained interactions within collective economic activities reshaped perceptions across identity boundaries, positioning economic collaboration as an effective unifying mechanism.

9. Specific Findings: Formation of Cross-Religious Business Groups

A key specific outcome of the program was the establishment of three cross-religious collective business groups in Batangtoru District. Each group consisted of 8–12 members from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, including Batak Toba, Batak Angkola, and other minority groups. Group formation was facilitated through village deliberation processes, emphasizing the strategic importance of cross-identity collaboration for community-based economic development. The types of business activities developed include:

Group 1: Production of traditional processed food products.



TAHU



Sablak

Group 2: Handicraft enterprises based on recycled waste materials.



Group 3: Fish farming (aquaculture ponds).



CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the integration of local cultural values, particularly Dalihan Natolu, with collective economic empowerment and religious moderation offers a viable and sustainable model for community-based development in plural societies. The findings indicate that economic initiatives grounded in ethical norms, social solidarity, and cultural legitimacy are more effective in fostering inclusive participation and long-term community resilience. The implementation of cross-religious collective business groups in Batangtoru District provides empirical evidence that religious moderation can be operationalized through collaborative economic practices rather than remaining a purely normative or discursive concept. The internalization of Dalihan Natolu values—emphasizing respect, balance, and mutual responsibility—has proven instrumental in strengthening trust, reducing social segmentation, and enhancing cross-identity social capital.

From an economic perspective, the program generated positive initial outcomes, including increased household income and improved collective bargaining capacity. More importantly, these economic gains were accompanied by significant social impacts, such as heightened intergroup cooperation, strengthened community cohesion, and the revitalization of local cultural ethics within everyday economic activities. Overall, this study highlights the strategic importance of culturally embedded and participatory approaches to community empowerment. By aligning economic development with local wisdom and religious moderation, such models can contribute not only to economic improvement but also to social harmony and sustainable development in culturally diverse contexts. Future studies are encouraged to examine the long-term impacts of this model and explore its applicability in other pluralistic settings.

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COLLECTIVE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RELIGIOUS MODERATION AND THE VALUES OF DALIHAN NATOLU IN BATANGTORU DISTRICT

Abdul Nasser Hasibuan et al

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