

## TOWARDS ECONOMICALLY INDEPENDENT VILLAGES: COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE *PAHLAWAN EKONOMI NUSANTARA* (PENA) PROGRAM

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### ABSTRACT

*This research aims to find out how to empower the community through community business independence in the Nusantara Economic Heroes Program (PENA) in the Banyumas Regency. In the analysis process, this study uses the theory of ACTORS (Authority, Competence and Confidence, Trust, Opportunities, Responsibilities, and Support). The method used in this study is field research with data collection through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results of the study show that first, the PENA Program fosters the independence of its participants by encouraging the ownership of participants' authority in running their businesses. Second, PENA participants have high confidence that they can manage the business independently. Third, PENA participants have a high belief that the PENA program will bring changes to their social and economic conditions. Fourth, PENA participants feel that they are given a great opportunity to choose for themselves the business they will run. Fifth, PENA participants are fully responsible for the sustainability of the business they pioneer through the PENA program. And finally, PENA program participants get the support they need to start and continue their chosen business.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Poverty is a global phenomenon. There is no country in the world that is free from poverty (Sabran et. al., 2023). Poverty is one of main social welfare problems (SWP) a state should eradicate, through various strategies agreed upon by the administrators of the state. In Indonesia, the 1945 Constitution mandates that the state shall take care of the poor and neglected children.

The mandate of the 1945 Constitution is implemented by, among other, providing social protection in its two main forms, social assistance and social security (Ministry of National Development Planning (MONDP), 2014). Currently, the Government of Indonesia (GOI) is implementing 10 social assistance programs (<https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20220907/15/1574868/pemerintah-keluarkan-10-jenis-bansos-klik-cekbansoskemensosgoid-sekarang>) aimed at helping poor people in Indonesia in having a decent and quality life in order to create a welfare community and a brilliant generation.

Social assistance, as a form of social protection, plays an important role in ensuring that people with incomes below the poverty line can still have a decent standard of living. With social assistance, people without any income or with income below the poverty line will still be able to get proper nutrition and to access quality education and health services (Edi Suharto, 2014).

Despite the great benefits provided by social assistance, one main concern is the dependency of the beneficiaries on the social assistance they receive. One of the famous adages often cited by people is “Don’t give a man a fish, teach him how to fish”. This adage states that the best strategy to help people with social welfare problems is to teach them how to catch fish, meaning building the capacity of poor people to generate income productively, so that the poor beneficiaries will later be able to independently help themselves. On the other hand, the strategy of “giving fish”, which is consumptive social assistance that will run out and leave nothing behind later, is seen as actually creating a stagnant welfare condition, which ultimately creates dependency of the poor people on social assistance, making it must be continuously provided by the state, so that there will be no poverty alleviation in the end.

The concern about the emergence of dependency of beneficiaries on social assistance is the basis for the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) of the Republic of Indonesia to initiate a program called “Nusantara Economic Heroes (*Pahlawan Ekonomi Nusantara* - PENA)” (Yulfi Alfikri Noer, 2023). The PENA program was initiated by the Ministry of Social Affairs at the end of 2022, by launching pilot projects in several regions before being made a national program.

The PENA program has officially been implemented with the issuance of the Minister of Social Affairs Regulation (Permensos) Number 7 of 2023, dated 14 November 2023. The Nusantara Economic Heroes Program (PENA) is defined as “activities to build an entrepreneurial spirit of, and improve the entrepreneurial skills of, poor families, vulnerable groups, isolated groups, and/or disaster victims” (Permensos 7, 2023, article 1 paragraph 1). This program is intended to replace the Productive Economic Business Social Assistance (UEP) program provided to Joint Business Groups (KUBE) because the program is considered no longer in accordance with developments and needs (Permensos 7, 2023, Consideration Section, letter c). The purpose of rolling out this program is to “reduce dependence on Social Assistance through sustainable efforts” (Permensos 7, 2023, article 2).

Since the launch of the pilot projects, the PENA program has showed excellent achievements. These good achievements can be seen from the graduation rate of the program participants from their status as social assistance beneficiaries. Participants who are ready to graduate are those who have achieved economic independence with the indicator of having an income above the minimum wage of their respective districts/cities. Six months after the launch of the pilot projects, in July 2023, this program successfully graduated 1,191 families from their status as social assistance beneficiaries (<https://kemensos.go.id/1191-pm-siap-lepas-dari-bansos-berkat-program-pena-kemensos>). The graduation rate increased to 7,814 families who successfully achieved graduation in November 2023 2023 (<https://news.detik.com/berita/d-7034951/setahun-pena-kemensos-telah-lahirkan-7-814-pahlawan-ekonomi-nusantara>). The good achievements made by the PENA program are interesting to observe further in order to find a social policy formula with great ability to eradicate poverty and reduce poverty rates in Indonesia.

Based on the description above, this research is important to be conducted in order to see the extent to which the PENA program is able to build people independence from social assistance. There are two sides that need to be seen by this research, namely (1) how much the PENA program is able to graduate social assistance recipients at the research location (quantitative side); and (2) how far the independence of social assistance beneficiaries at the research location is (qualitative side).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Poverty remains a persistent global and national challenge that requires comprehensive and sustainable policy interventions. In Indonesia, poverty alleviation is constitutionally mandated through the 1945 Constitution, which obliges the state to protect

poor and vulnerable citizens. Social assistance has become one of the main instruments used by the government to ensure access to basic needs such as food, education, and health services (Ministry of National Development Planning, 2014; Suharto, 2014). While social assistance is effective in reducing short-term vulnerability, numerous studies highlight that purely consumptive assistance may lead to long-term dependency among beneficiaries if not accompanied by empowerment-oriented strategies.

To address this limitation, community empowerment has increasingly been adopted as a key approach in poverty reduction policies. Empowerment-based programs emphasize capacity building, skills development, and access to productive resources, enabling beneficiaries to become economically independent. Previous research indicates that productive social assistance—combining capital support, training, and mentoring—can improve beneficiaries' self-reliance and income sustainability. Such programs shift beneficiaries from passive recipients of aid to active economic actors who are capable of managing businesses and making independent decisions.

The Nusantara Economic Heroes (Pahlawan Ekonomi Nusantara—PENA) program represents a policy innovation that integrates social assistance with entrepreneurship-based empowerment. Regulated under the Minister of Social Affairs Regulation Number 7 of 2023, the PENA program aims to reduce dependency on social assistance by fostering entrepreneurial skills, providing business capital in kind, and offering continuous mentoring. Early implementation reports show promising results, particularly in terms of beneficiary graduation from social assistance schemes, which is widely recognized in the literature as an important indicator of successful empowerment and poverty alleviation.

Analytically, community empowerment programs are often examined using the ACTORS framework, which includes Authority, Confidence and Competence, Trust, Opportunities, Responsibilities, and Support. This framework positions beneficiaries as subjects of development who actively shape their socio-economic conditions. Previous studies applying the ACTORS perspective demonstrate that sustainable empowerment requires not only material assistance but also autonomy, confidence, institutional trust, and continuous support. However, empirical studies that qualitatively examine how these dimensions are realized within the PENA program at the local level remain limited, highlighting the need for further in-depth research.

## **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

This is a field research with a qualitative approach, focusing on descriptive data through holistic observation of words and behaviour. The researchers served as the main instruments that conduct data analysis from the beginning to the end of the research. Research Subjects involved 27 recipients of the PENA Program in Banyumas District, the TKSK Coordinator, and five social advisors who supervised the implementation of the program from submission to reporting. The research was conducted in Banyumas District for six months, from January to June 2024.

Data collection involved interviews (both structured and non-structured), observations (participatory and non-participatory), and documentation. Interviews were conducted in-person or online to complete the data, while observations supported the data through direct observation, and documentation was used as supporting data. Data were analyzed descriptively using the ACTORS (Authority, Confidence and Competence, Trust, Opportunities, Responsibilities, and Support) perspective to understand community empowerment in the PENA Program. Data was validated using triangulation, which is verifying data between subjects and confirming with other data or related documents. The analysis discusses community empowerment in the PENA Program, with the results of the analysis producing conclusions and recommendations.

## **Community Empowerment Through the Nusantara Economic Heroes (Pena) Program in Banyumas District**

One of the community empowerment programs managed by the Ministry of Social Affairs is the Nusantara Economic Heroes (PENA) aimed at assisting the currently-cash-transfer-beneficiary families in order to make them more financially independent. People who participate in this program will be entitled to assistance of products and supplies needed for their business of worth IDR 5-6 million. The PENA program aims to reduce community dependence on social assistance.

The main beneficiary families (KPMs) of the Nusantara Economic Heroes (PENA) program in Banyumas are those aged between 20 and 45 years old. They must not have elderly or disabled family members. The program is implemented by providing business training, packaging, marketing, financial literacy, and mentoring.

The PENA program has assisted poor people in Banyumas to be independent, thereby graduating them from their status of social assistance beneficiaries. Based on the description above, the role of human resources is very important in running educational programs, good

human resource management, and business development such as catfish farming or other fields. The assistance provided includes capital provision and business training.

### The Process of Mentoring the Nusantara Economic Heroes (PENA)

#### a. Verification and Validation

At this stage, the advisors will find information from the Social Welfare Information System (SIKS) about PENA program participants. In the application, the advisors will find information about the details of program participants, whose data will be verified by the advisors. The verification is intended to check the accuracy of data in the field. If the data is accurate, the advisors will validate the participants and proceed to the next stage.

Based on information in the field, there were several issues found in the verification and validation process, as follows:

First, PENA participants at a certain location is not necessarily assisted by an advisor assigned for the location. For example, a PENA participant, who is registered in the SIKS Application as located in Sirau village of Kemranjen Subdistrict, is assisted by an advisor who is assigned in the application for Sumbang Subdistrict. The observation showed that the actual verification and validation process is technically made by the local advisor (for Sirau village), who must be in coordination with the advisor for Sumbang Subdistrict. The informant described that intensive coordination and communication are needed to implement this program, as follows:

*It is not necessarily a problem, but there are challenges, indeed. Technically, those working in the field are local advisors, such as the advisor for Sirau Village. He/she work in coordination with the advisor assigned for Sumbang Subdistrict. So, even though the application records that it is the advisor for Sumbang subdistrict is on duty, it is the local advisor who accomplish the task. (PENA Advisor for Sirau Village, Interview, 2024)*

In order to ensure that the program runs smoothly, advisors must always communicate and coordinate with each other. Communication and coordination are very much needed because verification and validation are benchmarks for the accuracy and suitability of program targets with real conditions in the field. In an interview a PENA advisor said:

*The main key is intensive coordination and communication. The advisors in the field and the advisors registered in the application need to always communicate with each other to ensure that the program runs on the track. With good communication, challenges can be addressed (PENA Advisor, Interview, 2024).*

Second, at the field verification stage, the advisors found that some of the data in their hands did not match the facts they observe. For example, some participants, who were still recorded as poor and were considered to be entitled to assistance, were found lived a prosperous

life, such as having a permanent house, a four-wheeled vehicle and even becoming a village official. For such cases, the advisors change the data in accordance with to facts they found in the field. For cases where the data is accurate, the advisors validate it and proceed to the next stage. As described by an advisor as follows

*In the field verification process, it is not uncommon for us to find data that does not match the actual conditions of the participants. For example, there are participants who were still registered as poor and are considered to be entitled to assistance, but upon the checking in the field, it turned out that their conditions are much better. There are cases where a participant had had a permanent house, a four-wheeled vehicle, and some even became village officials (PENA Advisor, Interview, 2024).*

The challenge found by the advisor is the availability of data that does not match and has not been reported periodically so that the data is still raw. In addition, communication by the advisors also determines the smoothness of this process. This is because the potential beneficiaries are sometimes surprised by the the data in the report. An advisor described as follows:

*One of the biggest challenges is the accuracy of data we receive. The recorded data is often not updated regularly, so we have to be very careful in verifying it in the field. In addition, the communication process with participants is also an important factor, because sometimes they see that the data recorded is no longer relevant to their current situation. The main key is good coordination and continuous data updating. In addition, communication with both participants and local government is very important to ensure that the data we use is always accurate and up-to-date. We also work with local village officials to get the latest information on the conditions of their villagers (PENA Advisor, Interview, 2024).*

Third, an informant described that not all PENA participants are happy to be participants of the program. The informant understood that participating in the PENA will make her being removed from the Integrated Social Welfare Data (DTKS). Once removed from the data, she will not be entitled to any assistance from the Government in any form. It is such status what worries the informant. In a case where an advisor finds a PENA participant like this, the advisor provides him or her an understanding and comprehension regarding the program.

My biggest concern is the impact of participating in the PENA Program on my status in the Integrated Social Welfare Data (DTKS). Once registered as a PENA beneficiary and seen as prosperous, I will be removed from the DTKS. This means that I am no longer entitled to receive various forms of social assistance from the government, such as cash transfer, food assistance, and other programs. The status as a DTKS assistance beneficiary is a kind of social security for me. Losing this status, although it indicates that the better economic condition, I still have concerns because I am afraid of losing access to government assistance in the future (Sofi, Interview, 2024).

The advisors provide the potential beneficiaries with explanation and understanding that when they are eligible for graduation, the advisor will still include them in the PENA program. However, if the facts in the field show that they are not eligible for graduation, the advisor will state that the potential beneficiaries are not yet eligible for participating in the PENA program. Following the verification and validation process, the next step is to prepare business proposals for the PENA participants.

*In the case of finding participants hesitant or worried, the first step is providing a clearer description of the PENA Program. I explain that the main goal of this program is to help them become more economically independent, by improving their standard of living, thereby no longer dependent on social assistance. We also explain that being removed from the DTKS is a positive indication, showing an improvement in their welfare (PENA Advisor, Interview, 2024).*

**b. Assistance in Preparing Business Proposal Documents**

The PENA Program is intended to promote its participants' economic strength so that they are free from dependence on social assistance. Therefore, the preparation of the business proposals is directed at businesses the participants currently engage in. Thus, PENA participants are assessed as having the ability and expertise in operating the businesses. Facts in the field show that the majority of participants have had businesses that match their abilities. Such participants will usually continue the businesses they currently operate. For participants who have not had any businesses, they will discuss it with their family and advisor, and then choose businesses of their choice based on careful consideration.

Facts in the field also show that PENA participants engage in discussions with their fellow PENA participants or with other business actors in choosing the type of business to be started. This step will minimize the risk of competition in term of the type of business they will start.

*Usually, there are several special sessions provided for discussion, both in groups and individually. In group sessions, participants can share experiences, ask questions, and share their concerns. The advisor is present to provide explanations and clarifications, as well as listen to feedbacks from the participants. This discussion space is very flexible and is held routinely during the program (Ahmad, Interview, 2024).*

In this way, the participants' confidence and trust is built, and participants can choose a business in accordance with their abilities thereby can be used as capital for participants in developing their business.

In this stage of the process, the advisors, in addition to providing advice and suggestion regarding the preparation of the type of business, they also assist in the process of preparing the Budget Plan. The budget submitted is IDR 5,000,000. It is prepared in accordance with the

type of business to be started by the PENA Participant needs. Once this preparation process is complete, the advisor will upload the document online in the SIKS application and wait for further instructions by monitoring the SIKS website periodically. Here are a statement in an interview.

*In addition to providing advice regarding the type of business, the advisor also assists participants in preparing the Budget. This is a very important stage, because budget serves as a guide in managing the aid funds they receive. We help participants detail their business needs, calculate the costs required for their operations, and predict realistic expenses and income (Masitoh, Interview, 2024).*

c. Disbursement and Purchase of Goods

After all submission documents are uploaded to the SIKS application, the next stage is the disbursement of PENA funds. Information regarding PENA disbursement is obtained and then communicated by the advisors to the PENA participants. Disbursement is made through the Indonesian Post Office in the Subdistrict where the PENA Participants live. The advisors take part in the disbursement process.

*Yes, advisors are indeed involved in the fund disbursement process. However, role of the advisors in this case is more technical in nature and in ensuring that all disbursement procedures are followed properly by the participants. They are not directly involved in the management or distribution of funds, but they assist participants in preparing the necessary documents and ensure that they understand the disbursement procedure well (Mukromah, Interview, 2024).*

After the disbursement is made, the PENA participants then spend the funds in accordance with the budget they submitted. Each purchase must be accompanied by a purchase receipt to be used in preparing the financial statement. Facts in the field show that the advisor performed her duties carefully and thoroughly so that PENA participants are motivated in implementing the program.

*After the funds are disbursed, the advisors still play a role in guiding on how the funds should be spent in accordance with the Budget that was prepared previously. They ensure that the funds are allocated appropriately, in accordance with the business objectives planned by the participants, so that they can start or develop their businesses well (Hartini, Interview, 2024).*

In the process of implementing the PENA program, some advisors also initiated in registering a Business License Number (Nomor Izin Berusaha - NIB) through OSS. OSS is an online service that facilitates entrepreneurs in obtaining business permits quickly and easily. The advisors also facilitate PENA participants to register Halal certificates for the products they sell. This initiative creates public trust that the products sold have good standards and quality.

*Indeed, some advisors initiated the processing of NIB for PENA Program participants. We see that many participants need business legality, and having a NIB is an important step in this regard. The advisors often take the initiative to help participants understand the benefits of NIB and take care of the registration process (Zaenurrohmah, Interview, 2024).*

**d. Activity Report**

The next stage is activity reporting. Reporting is made by the advisors after funds have been spent and the business is operating. This reporting is made to ensure that the PENA program has been implemented in accordance with the established Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). Local PENA advisors communicate and coordinate with other advisors to facilitate reporting. The report is uploaded via the available Google drive.

*The advisors reports various items, starting from the allocation of funds, the condition of the business operated by the participants, to the initial outcome of the business. We also report the obstacles or constraints faced by the participants while operating their business. All of this information is included in the official report which will later be submitted to the relevant parties, such as the local government or program organizers, for further evaluation (Marfuah, Interview, 2024).*

**e. Monitoring and Evaluation**

Monitoring and Evaluation of the PENA Program is made by the advisors and by the Surveyor team. The Monev activity aims to ensure that PENA has been running and to find out the development of the PENA business.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The Actors Theory is often used to analyze various empowerment programs. The ACTORS theory was put forward by Sarah Cook who tried to view society as a subject. ACTORS stands for A (Authority), C (Confidence and Competence), T (Trust), O (Opportunities), R (Responsibilities) and S (Support). Findings in this research regarding empowerment through the PENA program include:

**a. The PENA program fosters the independence of its participants by encouraging participants to have authority in operating their businesses**

The PENA program focuses on building the capacity and capabilities of participants. Participants can develop their businesses independently and sustainably. The PENA program aims to strengthen this independence by providing participants with training, access to resources, and guidance needed to operate their businesses independently. This independence includes financial, operational, and strategic aspects.

In addition, the PENA program also encourages participants to have authority.

Ownership of authority gives participants full freedom and responsibility to make decisions about their businesses. In the context of the PENA Program, this means that participants are encouraged to take full control of their businesses, from planning to implementation. They are encouraged to become key decision makers, including resource management, product development, marketing strategies, and so on. Participants are not only provided with knowledge and skills, but also the confidence to manage their businesses on their own, with little or no interference by external parties (Umi Sholihah, Interview, 2024).

**b. PENA participants have high self-confidence that they are able to manage the business independently**

The PENA Program participants are highly confident that they are able to address challenges and make the decisions needed to manage their businesses. This high self-confidence is built through various forms of training, mentoring, and support provided during the program.

In addition, the PENA participants also believe that they have the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to do all of this well. They are ready to solve problems and make important decisions that can affect the success of their business. Participants are able to operate a business without having to rely too much on external assistance. They are independent in decision making and executing business strategies. Independence also means that they are ready to take full responsibility for all aspects of their business, including possible successes and failures (Auva, Interview, 2024)

**c. PENA participants have high confidence that the PENA program will bring changes to their social and economic conditions**

High confidence means that participants have strong belief and optimism that the PENA Program will have a positive impact on their lives. They believe that this program can really help them achieve certain goals, both in the short and long term. The PENA program is an initiative designed to help participants, especially small and medium entrepreneurs, improve their skills, knowledge, and capacity to develop their businesses. This program also often includes providing access to resources, mentoring, and other support needed for business success. In addition, participants also see an increase in appreciation or recognition in their community because of the success of the business they operate. This also refers to improved income, financial stability, and ability to provide a better life for themselves and their families. Participants believe that with the skills and support they gain from the PENA Program, they can improve their businesses, which in turn will improve their economic well-being (Muntingah, Interview, 2024)

**d. PENA participants see that they are provided with a great opportunity to choose the business they will operate**

The PENA program does not limit participants' choices, but rather gives them the freedom and support needed to make the best decisions for themselves. Participants are not forced or directed to a particular type of business by the program organizers. Instead, they are encouraged to explore options that suit their interests, skills, and the market conditions they understand.

**e. PENA participants are fully responsible for the sustainability of the business they start through the PENA program**

Participants have an obligation and commitment to ensure that the business they start can continue to operate and grow. Participants take all necessary steps to ensure the continuity and success of the business, without relying on other parties to take this responsibility. Business sustainability refers to the ability of a business to continue operating and growing in the long term. This includes the financial, operational, and strategic aspects of the business. Participants must ensure that their business has a solid business plan, good financial management, and effective marketing and product development strategies to maintain sustainability (Auva, Interview, 2024)

**f. PENA program participants receive the support needed to start and continue the business of their choice.**

The support needed includes all forms of assistance provided for participants to help them start and operate a business. This support can be in the form of: first, training, providing the necessary knowledge and skills in various aspects of business, such as management, marketing, finance, and operations. Second, guidance, mentoring by experts or experienced entrepreneurs to provide direction and advice. Third, Access to resources, this can include access to capital, raw materials, technology, or business networks necessary for a successful business. Fourth, funding, initial capital assistance or access to credit that can be used to start or grow a business. Fifth, networking, an opportunity to connect with partners, investors, or business communities that can support participants' businesses.

Participants have the freedom to choose the type of business they want to start based on their interests, skills, and the market opportunities they identify. The PENA program does not specify what type of business to operate, but provides full support for any type of business chosen by the participant (Muntingah, Interview, 2024).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

To conclude, the community empowerment program for beneficiaries managed by the Ministry of Social Affairs is Nusantara Economic Heroes (*Pahlawan Ekonomi Nusantara - PENA*) which aims to help families who are currently the beneficiaries of cash transfer to make them more financially independent. People who participate in this program will receive in-kind assistance of worth 5-6 million needed for their business. The PENA program aims to reduce people's dependence on social assistance.

The empowerment by the PENA program includes first, the PENA program fosters the independence of its participants by encouraging the ownership of participant authority in operating their businesses. Second, PENA participants have high self-confidence that they are able to manage the business independently. Third, PENA participants have high confidence that the PENA program will bring changes to their social and economic conditions. Fourth, PENA participants see that they are given a great opportunity to independently choose the business they will operate. Fifth, PENA participants are fully responsible for the sustainability of the business they start through the PENA program. And finally, PENA program participants get the support needed to start and continue the business of their choice.

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