



Beyond International Aid: The Strategy of Local NGOs in Post-Disaster Community Economic Empowerment in Aceh

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Abstract

Following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the scale of international aid that flowed into Aceh exposed a structural problem instead of solving one. Assistance concentrated in areas that were physically accessible, while many rural communities remained underserved, producing new inequalities rather than an even recovery. This gap opened space for local civil society organizations to take on roles that neither the state nor international agencies had filled. This study examines how Forum Bangun Aceh (FBA), a Banda Aceh based local NGO, strategized community empowerment through its Economic Empowerment program between 2005 and 2019. Using a qualitative case study approach built on systematic document analysis, the study applies Friedmann's (1992) three-dimensional empowerment framework, enabling, empowering, and protecting, to trace how FBA's programs evolved over fifteen years. The findings show that FBA's strategy coherently spans all three dimensions: enabling through post-disaster recovery and disaster risk reduction education, empowering through micro credit, cooperative formation, and skills training rooted in local economic practices, and protecting through multi-stakeholder engagement and advocacy for persons with psychosocial disabilities. These findings carry two implications. Theoretically, they support the argument that empowerment interventions anchored in local value systems tend to outlast those designed externally. Practically, they offer local NGOs and policymakers a working model for sequencing recovery, capacity building, and advocacy without relying on the scale of international actors.

Keywords: Community Empowerment, Forum Bangun Aceh, Post-Disaster Recovery, Local NGO, Alternative Development

Introduction

The tsunami that struck Aceh on December 26, 2004, was one of the most destructive events ever recorded in modern Indonesian history. The waves, which reached heights of up to thirty meters, not only claimed the lives of approximately 170,000 people and devastated physical infrastructure along the coastline but also shattered the social and economic fabric of Acehnese society, which had already been severely depleted by three decades of armed conflict (BRR, 2009). These figures are more than just statistics. Behind them lie thousands of households that lost their economic foundation, children who lost their learning spaces, and communities that lost the moral compass that had long sustained their daily lives.

The international response to this disaster was of an extraordinary scale. Approximately six billion U.S. dollars flowed into Aceh through various channels, ranging from multilateral donor



agencies, international NGOs, to foreign governments, making the reconstruction of Aceh one of the largest humanitarian operations in history (Telford & Cosgrave, 2007). However, the sheer volume of aid did not necessarily translate into equitable distribution of its benefits among the population. Aid tended to be concentrated in the areas most physically affected and easiest to access, while communities in remote rural areas that also required intervention were overlooked (Irwandi in CNN Indonesia, 2014). The Governor of Aceh in 2011 even openly acknowledged discrepancies in aid distribution, noting that existing distribution mechanisms failed to reach all segments of the affected population. Recent longitudinal evidence derived from the Study of Tsunami and Aftermath Recovery dataset confirms that recovery rates across affected areas in Aceh diverged significantly from one another across both sectors and geographic zones, a pattern that speaks directly to the structural rather than circumstantial character of the distribution problem (Suriastini et al., 2023). This issue is not merely a managerial one. There is a deeper structural dimension. When large-scale aid flows only to certain segments of society, what results is not equitable recovery, but new inequalities that further complicate Aceh's socio-economic conditions (Telford & Cosgrave, 2007). It is under these conditions that the role of local civil society initiatives becomes relevant and indeed, urgent.

One of the entities that emerged from these circumstances is the Forum Bangun Aceh (FBA). Unlike most organizations involved in Aceh's recovery, the FBA was founded by members of the community who had personally experienced the impact of the disaster. They did not come from outside with an established mandate and resources but rather grew from the grassroots with a simple yet powerful philosophy: helping from person to person, focusing on the mind and the stomach as the two most fundamental pillars of a life of dignity (FBA, 2019). The mind represents education; the stomach represents livelihood. Local organizations of this kind occupied a niche that neither the international humanitarian apparatus nor the state had adequately filled, and subsequent studies of Banda Aceh's post-tsunami trajectory have underscored the indispensable role of community-based actors in integrating local knowledge into what would otherwise have been a purely technocratic recovery process (Irwansyah et al., 2024)

Interestingly, although FBA operates in an environment dominated by large organizations with far broader international networks, it has managed to consistently implement its programs for over a decade. Many local NGOs established in the post-disaster context later declined as aid flows began to dry up and global attention shifted elsewhere. The fact that FBA remains active and has even expanded the scope of its programs raises a distinct question: what strategies have enabled FBA to survive and remain relevant?

This puzzle is the starting point for this article, which traces the deliberate strategy FBA has built over the past decade and a half. Specifically, this article examines the strategies implemented by Forum Bangun Aceh in achieving community empowerment through its Economic Empowerment program during the period from 2005 to 2019. Formally, the research question guiding this inquiry is: to what extent does FBA's Economic Empowerment program reflect the three dimensions of Friedmann's (1992) empowerment framework, namely enabling, empowering, and protecting, and what does this reveal about the conditions under which a locally grounded NGO sustains itself well beyond the initial wave of post-disaster funding?

Scholarship on community empowerment has long moved past a narrow economic definition. Friedmann (1992) frames empowerment as a process that combines access to material resources with the capacity to participate in decisions that shape one's own life, a view echoed by Chambers (1994) and later refined by Christens (2012) into more operational community level indicators. In this article, community empowerment refers specifically to this multidimensional process, encompassing what Friedmann calls enabling, the creation of conditions that allow a community's potential to grow; empowering, the provision of concrete capacity and resources such as capital, skills, and networks; and protecting, the strengthening of a community's bargaining position against both state and market power. This three part framework is used as the analytical tool throughout this study, distinguishing it from approaches that measure empowerment purely through income or asset ownership. A recent systematic review of twenty-one community empowerment programs across different development settings found that those which failed to involve communities in program co-design consistently produced narrower and less sustainable outcomes than those which treated community participation as constitutive of

the empowerment process itself (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024), lending further weight to the analytical value of the three-dimensional framework applied here.

Methodologically, this study takes the form of a qualitative case study built on document analysis, drawing on FBA's own program documentation, beneficiary testimonials, and verified media reporting on the organization's activities between 2005 and 2019. Research on local NGOs in post-tsunami Aceh has so far tended to focus on evaluating institutional capacity or the quantitative effectiveness of aid distribution (Smillie & Minear, 2004). A notable exception is Suriastini et al.'s (2023) application of the Disaster Recovery Index to early post-tsunami data in Aceh, which demonstrates that even at the aggregate level the recovery landscape was marked by sectoral and geographic variation that existing scholarship had not yet systematically captured. Studies that delve into the strategic dimensions and local values underpinning program sustainability remain relatively limited, and it is this gap that the present article seeks to address. Understanding how a community rooted organization like FBA translates an abstract framework into a working, sustained program carries value beyond Aceh itself, offering a reference point for local NGOs elsewhere that must navigate the same tension between donor dependency and rootedness in community values. The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on community empowerment and local NGOs operating in post-disaster settings in more depth, followed by a discussion of the research method, the findings organized according to Friedmann's three dimensions, a discussion of what those findings mean theoretically and practically, and finally the conclusion.

Literature Review

The concept of community empowerment did not emerge in a vacuum. It arose as a critique of conventional development models that for decades dominated global development discourse and practice, particularly those rooted in a modernization paradigm that prioritized aggregate economic growth as the primary goal (Chambers, 1994). Such models often treated communities as objects of development rather than as subjects with agency over their own lives. This critique has grown more empirically grounded in recent years: a review of twenty-one community empowerment programs found that top-down initiatives driven by external institutions consistently fell short on participatory engagement, producing outcomes that were narrow in scope and fragile in duration (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024).

Friedmann (1992), in his influential work, *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*, offers a different framework. According to him, genuine empowerment cannot be measured solely by increased income or access to basic services; rather, it must include strengthening communities' capacity to participate in decision-making processes concerning their own lives. Empowerment in this sense is political, in the sense that it requires a redistribution of power between those who have long dominated the development process and those who have long been its passive recipients.

Noor (2011) summarizes Friedmann's framework into three interrelated operational dimensions. First, enabling, which involves creating the conditions and environment that allow communities to develop their potential. The underlying assumption is that every community member possesses developable capacity; the role of empowerment agents is to create space for that capacity to grow. Second, "empowering," which involves concretely strengthening community capacity through access to development resources such as capital, technology, information, and socio-economic networks. Third, "protecting," which entails advocating for the interests of vulnerable groups and strengthening communities' bargaining positions when facing state power or market forces. Recent review-level evidence supports the continued analytical utility of this three-dimensional typology, finding that programs which explicitly address all three dimensions rather than concentrating solely on enabling or empowering are more likely to produce durable and equitable outcomes across diverse community contexts (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024).

What makes Friedmann's framework relevant to the Aceh context is its emphasis on the political and cultural dimensions of empowerment. Friedmann (1992) argues that empowerment that addresses only economic aspects without considering the community's political bargaining power and the cultural values underpinning community life will only yield fragile and

unsustainable change. This argument aligns with Alkire's (2002) view, which asserts that the cultural dimension is a crucial component of well-being that cannot be substituted by economic indicators alone.

The role of NGOs in post-disaster recovery is a topic that has been extensively explored, though the conclusions are not always unified. Smillie and Minear (2004) demonstrate that the international humanitarian system tends to operate according to a logic of efficiency that prioritizes the scale and speed of aid delivery, yet often overlooks the sensitivities of the local context. Consequently, large-scale aid has the potential to create economic and social distortions within recipient communities. Evidence from Aceh's own post-tsunami experience reinforces this concern: longitudinal data from the Study of Tsunami and Aftermath Recovery confirm that the social and livelihood sectors, those most readily supported by existing community networks rather than by externally coordinated interventions, recovered more rapidly than sectors that depended heavily on the humanitarian system's coordination apparatus (Suriastini et al., 2023), suggesting that the efficiency logic structuring that apparatus did not serve all recovery domains equally.

Telford and Cosgrave (2007), in their evaluation of the international response to the 2004 tsunami, identified a similar pattern. The imbalance in aid distribution in Aceh was largely due to the lack of capacity within the coordination system to comprehensively map needs and integrate local knowledge into the planning process. This is where local organizations possess a comparative advantage that international actors lack: they know the terrain, know the people, and understand the values that are alive within the communities they serve. Later scholarship on Aceh's recovery corroborates this from two complementary angles. Suriastini et al. (2023) document how uneven recovery patterns persisted at the sector level precisely in areas where coordination systems could not draw on pre-existing community knowledge networks. Irwansyah et al. (2024) add to this by demonstrating that effective integration of local knowledge into disaster mitigation was among the most critical factors distinguishing Banda Aceh's eventual resilience-building trajectory from the failures that characterized the immediate post-disaster period.

Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley (2004) offer a sharper perspective. They argue that local NGOs do not merely function as extensions of the global development agenda but also have the potential to serve as spaces for creative resistance against development logic that does not align with the needs and values of local communities. In the context of Aceh, with its strong cultural identity, this argument feels particularly relevant. Research on NGO-government collaboration in the Indonesian context gives this argument a more concrete institutional texture. Sumiyana et al. (2022), studying NGO-government partnerships across several regencies in Yogyakarta Province, find that the most effective local NGOs are those whose leadership operates in an integrative rather than transactional mode, actively bridging institutional cultures rather than simply delivering services within government frameworks. Hummel and Kusumasari (2024) arrive at a complementary finding, showing that local NGOs in Indonesia which navigate resource dependence relationships strategically rather than deferring to them are significantly better positioned to sustain their own programmatic agendas over time.

One aspect that distinguishes FBA from many other NGOs operating in Aceh is its commitment to integrating local values into its program design. In his study on community-based empowerment, Christens (2012) argues that successful empowerment interventions are those that build upon existing value systems and practices, rather than replacing them with systems considered more modern but foreign from the community's perspective. In the context of Aceh, one local value relevant to community economic practices is the trust-based profit-sharing system that has long been practiced in the local community's agricultural and livestock activities. Chambers (1994) emphasizes that a truly participatory development approach must start from the knowledge and practices already present within the community, not from an external design that is then forced upon the community. FBA appears to understand this principle well. This observation resonates with more recent scholarship on Banda Aceh specifically. Irwansyah et al. (2024) find that post-tsunami interventions in the city that positioned community knowledge as an asset to be built upon, rather than a barrier to be overcome, were more effective at producing durable recovery outcomes than those designed around purely external protocols. Dushkova and

Ivlieva's (2024) broader review corroborates this pattern, finding that programs in culturally distinct communities consistently achieved better sustainability indicators when they worked with pre-existing local knowledge systems rather than alongside or in spite of them.

Methods

Research Design

This article employs a qualitative case study design, focusing on Forum Bangun Aceh (FBA) during the period 2005 to 2019. A case study design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth analysis of strategies and processes that quantitative approaches cannot adequately capture, particularly when the object of study is a single organization observed across an extended timeframe (Yin, 2014). FBA was selected purposively, on the basis that it represents a local NGO that has sustained a coherent empowerment program for more than a decade, a trait that makes it a productive case for examining the long-term mechanics of community empowerment strategy.

Data Source

Data for this study were drawn from four types of documents. The first is official program documentation and activity reports published on FBA's own website, which provide the most direct account of the organization's program design and implementation. The second is testimonial narratives from program beneficiaries, also published by FBA, which offer insight into how empowerment interventions were experienced at the individual level. The third is verified online media coverage of FBA's activities, used to cross check and contextualize claims made in FBA's own documentation. The fourth is academic literature on community empowerment and post-disaster reconstruction in Aceh, used to situate FBA's strategy within the broader scholarly conversation on empowerment and local civil society.

Data Collection

Document collection proceeded in three stages. First, all program pages, activity reports, and beneficiary stories publicly available on FBA's official website were compiled, covering the full period from FBA's establishment in 2005 through 2019. Second, this corpus was cross referenced against online news archives using FBA's name and the names of its programs as search terms, to identify independent media coverage that could corroborate or add context to FBA's self-reported activities. Third, documents were screened for relevance to the Economic Empowerment program specifically, since FBA also runs initiatives outside this program that fall beyond the scope of this article. Documents that passed this screening were compiled into a single corpus and read in full prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

The compiled corpus was analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Friedmann's (1992) three-dimensional empowerment framework as a coding structure: enabling, empowering, and protecting. Documents were first read to identify discrete programs and initiatives described within them. Each program was then coded according to which dimension it most directly represented, with several programs coded under more than one dimension where the underlying activity clearly served multiple functions at once. Codes were then grouped into themes that form the basis of the Findings section. Because this study relies on a single researcher's coding rather than multiple coders, rigor was supported through triangulation across the four document types described above, so that claims appearing only in FBA's self-published material were treated with appropriate caution unless corroborated elsewhere.

Limitation

This study has limitations that must be acknowledged. Since all data is derived from secondary sources, this study cannot capture the direct perspectives of program beneficiaries or FBA staff themselves. The available data also consists largely of documentation produced by FBA itself, which inherently tends to highlight positive achievements. Further research using primary data,

such as in-depth interviews or participatory observation, will be necessary to produce a more comprehensive evaluation.

Findings

Based on the document analysis conducted, it was found that the Forum Bangun Aceh's strategy for achieving community empowerment can be mapped into three main dimensions that align with Friedmann's (1992) framework. This mapping is shown in Table 1 below:

Tale 1: Mapping of Achieving Community Empowerment

Dimension	Program / Sub-Program	Period
Enabling	Post-disaster recovery and Direct Help	2005-2009
Enabling	Integration of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) through educational curriculum	2010-2019
Enabling	ACCMH (Aceh Comprehensive Community Mental Health)	2015-2019
Empowering	Micro Loans dan the creation of Community Union	2008-2019
Empowering	Skills training (thatched roofs, bluet, etc.)	2010-2019
Empowering	FBA Learning Centre dan <i>Rumoh Belajar</i>	2012-2019
Protecting	Cooperative Annual General Meeting with Stakeholder Participation	2013-2019
Protecting	Disability Inclusion Training for Government Officials	2018

Since its establishment in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, FBA began its activities at the most fundamental level which restoring the living conditions of communities devastated by the disaster. FBA implemented disaster response programs that included the distribution of direct aid and recovery efforts across various districts in Aceh Province (FBA, 2019). This was not merely a matter of distributing supplies. The recovery in question encompasses efforts to restore the community's basic capacity so that they can once again be in a position to thrive.

Over time, this enabling strategy has evolved beyond emergency response. FBA began integrating Disaster Risk Reduction programs into its curriculum, including in early childhood education programs. Children, as the most vulnerable group in disaster situations, are the primary focus of these efforts. FBA ensures that early childhood schools under its influence have disaster preparedness mechanisms and empowered school leadership (FBA, 2019). This step reflects the understanding that enabling is not just about recovering from the past, but also about building community capacity to face the future.

One of FBA's most innovative enabling initiatives is the ACCMH (Aceh Comprehensive Community Mental Health) program, implemented in collaboration with the international NGO CBM. This program focuses on social rehabilitation for communities experiencing psychosocial disabilities, initially targeting tsunami survivors but later expanded to include individuals with mental health conditions in general (FBA, 2019). This acknowledges that the conditions necessary for development are not merely physical and economic but also encompass the dimension of mental health. Without psychosocial recovery, economic empowerment interventions will rest on an unstable foundation.

If enabling dimension creates the foundational conditions, then empowering is about filling those conditions with concrete and measurable capacity. In its Economic Empowerment program, FBA implements this dimension through a combination of three main instruments: microcredit, skills training, and the formation of cooperatives.

The case of Mirna from Gampong Pante Rawa, Sukamakmur District, Banda Aceh provides the clearest illustration of how this combination of instruments works in practice. Mirna is a young woman with a disability who was reached by FBA in 2018 through a community assessment process involving the local village head and her family. FBA not only provided Mirna with business capital but also offered training in weaving rumbia thatch roofs and provided ducklings (FBA, 2019). What is striking about this intervention is not just the instruments themselves, but

their alignment with the local value context: thatched roofs are part of the pre-existing economic knowledge of the local community. FBA did not introduce foreign skills, but rather formalized and strengthened skills that were already alive within the community.

Mirna later joined KSM Inklusi, one of the community-based savings and loan groups formed by FBA. In a statement quoted by FBA, Mirna refers to her ducks with a strong sense of ownership: “nyoe itek lon, jadi lon keudro yang harus bie umpen keu itek itek nyou,” which means “these are my ducks, so I myself must feed them” (FBA, 2019). The sentence is short, yet its meaning is profound: true economic agency is not merely realized when someone owns an asset, but when they feel a sense of responsibility for that asset as part of their economic identity.

In the educational dimension, this empowering strategy is manifested through the FBA Learning Center. This institution does not merely provide access to formal education but designs sub-programs tailored to the specific needs of the local community. The Rumoh Belajar sub-program, for example, is designed for children from low-income families and orphans. Its curriculum does not strictly follow government standards but integrates locally-based creative skills such as bluet-making—a craft involving weaving coconut leaves, which is part of the traditional handicraft heritage of the Acehnese people (FBA, 2019).

The “protecting” dimension within Friedmann’s framework relates to efforts to safeguard the interests of vulnerable groups by strengthening their participation in decision-making processes. FBA implements this strategy through two complementary mechanisms: engaging stakeholders in community forums, and direct advocacy with the government.

The Asy-Syifa Cooperative’s Year-End Meeting in East Aceh Regency is a concrete example of the first mechanism. This annual cooperative meeting, which is typically attended only by internal members, was deliberately designed by FBA to bring together the FBA director, the Head of the East Aceh Cooperative and MSME Office, the Idi Rayeuk Subdistrict Head, and the Keutapang Mameh Village Head in a single forum with 36 cooperative members (FBA, 2019). The design of such a meeting reflects a deliberate “protecting” strategy: the community does not merely report achievements to the government but introduces their cooperative’s operational mechanisms as an alternative solution to local issues of unemployment and microenterprise financing. The results are tangible: the Asy-Syifa Cooperative has disbursed microenterprise financing totaling 170 million rupiah to 30 members.

The second mechanism was implemented through inclusion training organized by FBA in 2018 in Pidie and Aceh Besar districts. The target of this training was not people with disabilities themselves, but cross-sectoral stakeholders within the Aceh government (FBA, 2019). By raising awareness among decision-makers, FBA seeks to create institutional conditions that are more responsive to the needs of groups that have long been marginalized in development discourse. This strategy reflects the understanding that sustainable empowerment cannot operate solely at the community level but must simultaneously drive change at the policy level.

Discussion

Returning to the question that opened this article, what explains FBA’s ability to sustain its empowerment work well beyond the initial wave of post-disaster funding, the analysis points to one recurring pattern: FBA does not merely engage in empowerment but does so in a way that avoids the common pitfalls that often plague conventional empowerment programs. The first pitfall is what might be called empowerment without context. Many empowerment programs, especially those designed by external actors, operate under the assumption that empowerment tools that work in one place can simply be transferred to another. FBA avoids this pitfall in a fairly consistent manner: nearly every tool they employ, from the selection of skills to be taught, the types of commodities chosen as business capital, to the cooperative mechanisms developed, draws upon what already exists and is familiar within the community’s way of life (Christens, 2012). Thatched roofs, ducks, and bluet are not arbitrary choices. They are part of the local economic and cultural ecosystem that has been in place for a long time. This consistency with local practice appears to be constitutive of FBA’s model rather than incidental to it. Dushkova and Ivlieva (2024) find, across their review of twenty-one empowerment programs, that those which demonstrated the deepest integration with pre-existing community knowledge were the most likely to outlast the withdrawal of external funding, because the community’s own knowledge

base served as an ongoing resource rather than something that needed to be externally maintained

The second pitfall is short-term empowerment. Many empowerment programs are designed with a project logic that has a clear endpoint and is measured based on immediate outputs. FBA demonstrates a different pattern. Over the fifteen-year period covered by this study, a shift in focus is evident, not a revolutionary one, but an evolutionary one: from disaster recovery to economic empowerment, then to psychosocial rehabilitation, and finally to advocacy for inclusive policies. This shift is not a sign of inconsistency, but rather evidence that FBA is sufficiently responsive to the changing needs of the communities it serves (Alkire, 2002). A recent study on local NGO sustainability in Ghana offers an instructive parallel to this evolutionary pattern: Kumi et al. (2025) find that the most sustainable local NGOs are not those with the largest financial reserves or the most specialized mandates, but those with the strongest capacity to form and maintain meaningful partnerships across institutional boundaries as community needs change. FBA's fifteen-year trajectory reflects a recognizably similar logic, with each programmatic shift corresponding to a deepening rather than an abandonment of its foundational community orientation

The third pitfall is empowerment without a voice. Many economic empowerment programs stop at the distribution of capital and skills training, without addressing the more political dimension of empowerment, namely the community's ability to speak and be heard in the processes that determine their lives. FBA's protecting strategy directly addresses this weakness. By bringing government stakeholders into cooperative forums and training bureaucrats to be more attuned to the needs of marginalized groups, FBA operates on two levels simultaneously: strengthening the community's voice while building the capacity of government officials to listen.

One result of this analysis is worth flagging as somewhat unexpected. Much of the literature on the post-tsunami humanitarian system, including Smillie and Minear's (2004) account cited earlier, describes a structural tendency for local actors to be confined to an implementation role while agenda-setting and policy access remain concentrated among international agencies and government bodies. Given this pattern, one would expect a local NGO of FBA's size to have a comparatively underdeveloped protecting dimension, since building relationships with government stakeholders typically requires a level of institutional standing that grassroots organizations rarely possess. FBA's record runs somewhat against this expectation. The fact that FBA was able to draw district level government officials into its cooperative forums and run inclusion training directly aimed at bureaucrats suggests that the protecting dimension is not necessarily contingent on an organization's scale or international affiliation, but can instead be built incrementally through sustained, localized relationship building. This finding sits in some tension with accounts that treat the marginalization of local actors as a near structural constant, and it suggests that this marginalization may be less fixed than the literature sometimes implies.

Equally noteworthy is how FBA, as a local NGO, has successfully positioned itself independently within the already densely populated international humanitarian ecosystem in post-tsunami Aceh. Smillie and Minear (2004) note that one chronic weakness of the international humanitarian system is its tendency to dominate local spaces and marginalize the capacity of local actors. FBA serves as an antithesis to this dynamic: rather than relying on the agendas and resources of international actors, they selectively utilize them, such as through the partnership with CBM in the ACCMH program, while maintaining a values-based orientation and an agenda rooted in the community itself.

The capacity to sustain this balance is far from automatic, and the Indonesian context makes it particularly difficult. Hummel and Kusumasari (2024) show that NGO-government collaboration in Indonesia is frequently shaped by power asymmetries that push local organizations toward excessive deference to government priorities, while Suriastini et al.'s (2023) longitudinal data on Aceh suggest that the communities most underserved during the recovery period were precisely those whose local organizations lacked the relational capital to resist such pressures. FBA's selective engagement with international partners while maintaining an internally driven value system represents a deliberate and consequential navigation of exactly this tension

This leads us to a broader argument regarding alternative development models. Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley (2004) argue that local NGOs that are truly rooted in the community have the capacity to transcend an implementation role and become genuinely transformative agents of change. FBA appears to be following this path, albeit on a scale that remains limited to the Aceh context. Recent scholarship on local NGO effectiveness gives this observation a structural dimension that extends beyond the Aceh case. Kumi et al. (2025) argue that local NGOs which develop strong external relationship capacities, defined as the ability to attract and maintain partnerships without becoming institutionally dependent on them, are significantly more likely to sustain programmatic coherence over the long term than those which rely primarily on financial or staffing capacity. Read alongside Sumiyana et al.'s (2022) finding that integrative leadership in Indonesian NGO-government partnerships produces measurably better program outcomes than transactional collaboration, the FBA case begins to look less like an idiosyncratic exception and more like a model that the broader local NGO literature is only now developing the vocabulary to describe.

These findings should nonetheless be interpreted with some caution. Because the analysis relies heavily on documentation produced and curated by FBA itself, what is described here as a deliberate, coherent strategy may also partly reflect a retrospective narrative that the organization has constructed around its own work, a tendency common to self-reported organizational data. The consistency observed across FBA's programs may be somewhat sharper in this account than it was in practice. With that caveat in mind, the case nonetheless points toward a more general hypothesis worth testing in other post-disaster settings: local NGOs whose interventions are deliberately anchored in pre-existing community practices and value systems are more likely to sustain their programs over the long term than those whose program design originates primarily from external actors.

Taken together, these findings carry implications at several levels. Theoretically, the FBA case suggests that Friedmann's (1992) three dimensions need not be implemented simultaneously to be effective, and that their sequencing, moving from enabling to empowering before fully developing protecting, may itself be a viable empowerment strategy worth incorporating into the framework's application. Practically, the case offers a working template for local NGOs operating with limited resources: rather than attempting all three dimensions at once, organizations might achieve more sustainable outcomes by building each dimension as community trust and institutional standing accumulate over time. For policymakers and donors, the case suggests that funding structured around short, output driven project cycles may be poorly suited to organizations like FBA, whose value lies precisely in their capacity to evolve gradually alongside the communities they serve. Future research would benefit from primary data collection, particularly in-depth interviews with FBA's beneficiaries and staff, to verify whether the strategic coherence identified through document analysis here is also recognized and experienced by those on the receiving end of the organization's programs. Comparative case studies involving other local NGOs operating in post-disaster Aceh would also help establish whether the pattern observed in FBA is idiosyncratic to this organization or reflects a broader strategy available to locally grounded civil society actors more generally. The broader implications of this study connect to an emerging consensus in the NGO effectiveness literature. Dushkova and Ivlieva (2024) conclude their review by identifying a persistent knowledge gap around the conditions under which empowerment programs produce sustainable outcomes, and Kumi et al. (2025) argue that closing this gap requires sustained longitudinal attention to local NGOs operating outside the typical donor-driven project cycle. The FBA case, extending as it does across fifteen years and three analytical dimensions, contributes precisely the kind of empirical material that this literature identifies as missing.

Conclusion

This article argues that Forum Bangun Aceh's strategy for achieving community empowerment through its Economic Empowerment program from 2005 to 2019 has consistently aligned with the three dimensions of empowerment formulated by Friedmann (1992): enabling, empowering, and protecting. These dimensions are not implemented in isolation but rather support one another, forming a coherent strategic ecosystem.

Enabling is manifested through post-disaster recovery, which subsequently evolved into the integration of DRR and psychosocial rehabilitation. Empowering is realized through the provision of microcredit, the establishment of cooperatives, and skills training rooted in local economic values. Protecting is implemented through the active engagement of government stakeholders in community forums and advocacy for people with psychosocial disabilities.

More important than alignment with this theoretical framework are the substantive lessons that can be drawn from the FBA experience. First, the sustainability of empowerment programs depends heavily on the extent to which interventions are rooted in the values, knowledge, and needs that exist within the target community itself. Second, genuine economic empowerment cannot stand alone without political empowerment—that is, the community’s ability to participate in and influence decisions affecting their well-being. Third, local civil society organizations like FBA possess a comparative advantage that international actors lack: a deep understanding of the context, values, and dynamics of the communities they serve.

This study certainly has limitations that need to be addressed. Data derived entirely from secondary sources limits the analysis’s ability to capture the perspectives of beneficiaries directly. Further research involving in-depth interviews with FBA’s supported communities and field observations would yield a more comprehensive understanding of how the impacts of this empowerment are experienced at the individual and family levels.

Ethics approval

The study was conducted in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki. As this research is based entirely on publicly available secondary data and no primary data collection involving human subjects was conducted, formal ethics approval was not required.

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Competing interests

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Underlying data

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence Use

AI-based language models were employed to assist with language refinement, improving grammar, sentence structure, and readability of the manuscript. We confirm that all AI-assisted processes were critically reviewed by the authors to ensure the integrity and reliability of the results. The final decisions and interpretations presented in this article were solely made by the authors.

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