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Christian Religious Education Strategies for Congregational Economic Empowerment to Alleviate Poverty in GPdI Region 1, Kupang City

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Abstract
Poverty among congregation members is shaped not only by limited income but also by educational constraints, inadequate skills, weak self-confidence, and limited access to capital, mentoring, and economic networks. This study analyzed the role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in congregational economic empowerment, identified supporting and inhibiting factors, and formulated a contextual poverty-alleviation strategy in GPdI Region 1, Kupang City, Indonesia. A qualitative descriptive-exploratory single-case study with six embedded congregational units was conducted. Six purposively selected pastors or congregational leaders participated in in-depth interviews, complemented by participatory observation, documentation, and a focus group discussion; data were analyzed through data reduction, thematic coding, cross-case comparison, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that congregation members possess underdeveloped economic assets, including small businesses, practical skills, agriculture, livestock, and food production. CRE fosters work ethics, responsibility, perseverance, and productive mindsets, but its integration with economic empowerment varies across congregations. Sustainability depends on personal readiness, church leadership and management capacity, continuous mentoring, access to resources, and external collaboration. The study formulates a five-stage CRE-based socio-economic empowerment model: value and mindset formation, asset and needs mapping, skills development, mentoring and network strengthening, and economic self-reliance with social contribution. Theoretically, the study extends CRE scholarship by conceptualizing CRE as a pedagogical pathway linking faith formation with asset-based economic agency. Practically, the model offers churches a framework for shifting from temporary assistance toward participatory and sustainable empowerment.

Keywords: Christian religious education; congregational economic empowerment; poverty alleviation; sustainable empowerment; transformative church ministry

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a multidimensional problem that involves not only low income but also limited access to education, skills, productive resources, and opportunities to improve quality of life. Nehe (2020) describes poverty as a condition of limited capabilities that prevents individuals from adequately meeting their basic needs and improving their quality of life; poverty alleviation therefore requires empowerment processes that strengthen community capacity rather than material assistance alone. The problem is particularly pressing in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Province. In March 2025, 18.60% of the province's population, or approximately 1.09 million people, lived below the poverty line (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2025a), more than twice the national rate of 8.47% (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025). Kupang City recorded the lowest poverty rate in the province, at 7.57% in 2025 (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2025b); however, this aggregate figure does not capture the vulnerability of households that depend on informal and insecure livelihoods, which is the condition reported in the congregations examined in this study. These conditions are directly related to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1, No Poverty, which calls for inclusive and sustainable approaches involving various social institutions, including religious organizations that maintain close social and

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cultural relationships with the communities they serve.

Within this context, the church's responsibility extends beyond spiritual ministry to social transformation and the improvement of congregational well-being (Agoestina, 2019; Pattiasina, 2021; Zega, 2021). International studies similarly show that congregations possess spiritual, social, and physical assets that could support local economic development, yet many remain in a relief-and-welfare mode of ministry (Bowers Du Toit, 2017; Mangayi, 2018). These perspectives indicate the need for a shift from predominantly charitable approaches toward empowerment-oriented ministry that strengthens the capacity, productivity, and economic independence of congregation members.

One potential instrument for supporting this transformation is Christian Religious Education (CRE), understood not merely as the transmission of religious knowledge but as an educational process that shapes values, character, ways of thinking, and Christian practices in everyday life. Lae (2025) conceptualizes Christian education as a reflective and transformative process that connects faith with the realities of life, Sianipar et al. (2022) emphasize its anticipatory and transformative role in responding to social change, and Ratulangi (2024) demonstrates its relationship with spiritual transformation. These perspectives provide a foundation for developing CRE toward the cultivation of responsibility, work ethics, personal potential, and congregational self-reliance.

This approach is particularly relevant to the Pentecostal Church in Indonesia (Gereja Pantekosta di Indonesia, GPdI) Region 1 in Kupang City. Preliminary observations indicated economic challenges among congregation members and the absence of systematically planned and sustainable economic empowerment programs within church ministry. At the same time, congregation members possess various economic potentials, including small-scale businesses, informal trading, household-based skills, and other practical competencies. Their economic challenges are therefore related not only to limited financial resources but also to educational attainment, skills, mentoring, and access to networks that can support business development. These conditions suggest that congregational economic empowerment should be developed through educational processes that enable members to recognize their potential, improve their skills, develop productive mindsets, and strengthen their economic independence.

Previous studies can be grouped into three streams that differ in focus, method, and limitation. The first stream consists of theological and conceptual studies of holistic mission, diakonia, and the church's social calling (Agoestina, 2019; Febriana, 2020; Panjaitan, 2020; Pattiasina, 2021; Setyobekti, 2023; Tembay & Eliman, 2020; Zega, 2021). These studies provide a strong normative justification for church involvement in poverty alleviation, but they rely mainly on biblical-theological or literature-based analysis and rarely specify the educational processes through which congregation members acquire economic capacity. The second stream comprises practice-oriented and empirical studies. Wainarisi et al. (2022) documented a congregational empowerment program during the COVID-19 pandemic, while case studies from South Africa reveal that congregations often possess untapped assets and social capital but are constrained by limited capacity, weak partnerships, and a persistent relief orientation (Beukes, 2019; Bowers Du Toit, 2017; Celesi & Bowers Du Toit, 2019; Mangayi, 2018). These studies are context-rich, but they are typically single-program reports or leadership-based case studies that do not theorize the role of religious education. The third stream addresses Christian education itself (Kapu Enda, 2024; Lae, 2025; Pantan, 2025; Ratulangi, 2024; Sianipar et al., 2022). It develops transformative and humanistic frameworks but concentrates on faith formation, character, spirituality, and responses to social problems rather than on economic agency. Comparing these streams shows that normative theology, empowerment practice, and educational theory have largely developed in parallel rather than in an integrated manner.

This comparison reveals an important gap. The integration of CRE as an educational process with congregational economic empowerment has rarely been formulated into a systematic and implementable strategy. Furthermore, Tagwirei (2023) shows that diaconal practice in Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches requires critical scrutiny amid economic hardship, yet empirical research on how Pentecostal congregations in

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Eastern Indonesia educate their members for economic agency remains scarce. Limited research has developed such a strategy on the basis of congregational needs, local economic potential, active participation, continuous mentoring, and network strengthening, particularly within GPdI Region 1 in Kupang City. This gap highlights the need for an approach that integrates the theological and pedagogical dimensions of CRE with economic empowerment, positioning congregation members not merely as recipients of assistance but as active subjects capable of improving their own lives.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the conditions and practices of CRE in congregational economic empowerment within GPdI Region 1 in Kupang City, identify the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting its implementation, and formulate a contextual and transformative CRE strategy to support economic empowerment and poverty alleviation. The novelty of this study lies in the formulation of a CRE-based economic empowerment strategy that integrates the formation of Christian values and mindsets, the mapping of congregational needs and assets, the development of economic skills, continuous mentoring, and the strengthening of collaborative networks within a participatory process. Theoretically, this study contributes to CRE scholarship by conceptualizing CRE as a pedagogical pathway that links faith formation with asset-based economic agency. Practically, it offers a strategic framework that churches can use to develop more systematic, contextual, and sustainable empowerment ministries while supporting the achievement of SDG 1.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-exploratory design using a case study approach and was conducted within GPdI Region 1 in Kupang City, Indonesia, in 2026. The descriptive component documented existing economic conditions and CRE practices, whereas the exploratory component was required because no established framework linking CRE with congregational economic empowerment was available for this context; the study therefore aimed to generate, rather than test, an empowerment model (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following Yin (2018), a single-case embedded design was adopted. GPdI Region 1 constituted the case, bounded by its shared denominational governance and its urban and peri-urban setting in Kupang City, while the six congregations served as embedded units of analysis. This logic enabled within-unit description of each congregation's practices and cross-unit comparison to identify recurring patterns and variations (Table 2). A participatory orientation was also incorporated by involving church leaders in identifying congregational economic conditions, economic potential, CRE practices, empowerment initiatives, supporting and inhibiting factors, and development strategies, and in reviewing the draft model (Sugiyono, 2022).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The study involved six key informants representing six congregations within GPdI Region 1 in Kupang City: GPdI Bukit Zaitun Sikumana, GPdI Rasul Paulus Kupang, GPdI Debora Fatukoa Kupang, GPdI Rajawali Naimata, GPdI Anugerah Naioni, and GPdI Yesus Gembala. The inclusion criteria were serving as the pastor or congregational leader of a GPdI congregation within Region 1; possessing direct knowledge and experience of members' socio-economic conditions, CRE implementation, church-based empowerment programs, and church ministry policies; and willingness to participate. The informants had served their congregations for approximately 4 to 15 years. Their characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Data sufficiency was judged using the concept of information power rather than a predetermined sample size (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power was considered adequate because (a) the study aim was narrow and focused on CRE-related empowerment practices within one regional church body; (b) the informants possessed dense and specific knowledge as the persons responsible for teaching, pastoral care, and program decisions in their congregations; (c) the analysis was supported by established concepts of transformative Christian education and asset-based empowerment; (d) the interviews were in-depth and complemented by observation, documentation, and FGD data; and (e) the analysis was cross-case, allowing each additional congregation to confirm or challenge the emerging patterns. The six informants also covered every congregation included in the study, so that each embedded unit was represented.

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Because all informants were pastors or congregational leaders, the data represent leadership perspectives on members' economic conditions rather than members' own accounts. Leaders were selected deliberately at this exploratory stage because they hold cross-household knowledge of their congregations and are responsible for designing the CRE and empowerment programs that constitute the focus of the strategy formulated in this study. However, leaders may overstate program achievements, interpret members' difficulties through pastoral or moral lenses, for example by attributing poverty mainly to motivation, and under-represent members who do not participate in church activities. To mitigate this elite bias, leaders' accounts were cross-checked against observations of church activities and program documentation, and outcomes for members are reported as informant-reported rather than as verified household outcomes. Findings concerning members' experiences should therefore be read as leaders' perceptions; this limitation is further addressed in the Conclusion.

Table 1. Characteristics of Key Informants

Informant	Church	Position/Role	Length of Ministry	Educational Background	Interview Date
P1	GPdI Bukit Zaitun Sikumana	Pastor / Congregational Leader	Approx. 8 years	S.Th. (further study in progress, as reported)	May 14, 2026
P2	GPdI Rasul Paulus Kupang	Pastor / Congregational Leader	Approx. 11 years	S.Th. (further study in progress, as reported)	July 4, 2026
P3	GPdI Debora Fatukoa Kupang	Pastor / Congregational Leader	Approx. 15 years	Not reported	June 12, 2026
P4	GPdI Rajawali Naimata	Pastor / Congregational Leader	Approx. 8 years	Doctoral degree (S3); M.Th.	June 18, 2026
P5	GPdI Anugerah Naioni	Pastor / Congregational Leader	Approx. 5 years	Not reported	July 12, 2026
P6	GPdI Yesus Gembala	Young Pastor (PdM.) / Congregational Leader	Approx. 4 years	Not reported	July 10, 2026

Source: Research interview transcripts, 2026.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, documentation, and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The research process began with a preliminary stage that included a literature review, preparation of the research instrument, and permission to conduct the study at the research sites. Individual interviews were conducted face-to-face between May 14 and July 12, 2026 (Table 1), were conducted in Indonesian, and were audio-recorded with the informants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Excerpts quoted in this article were translated into English by the authors. The interviews addressed congregational economic conditions, the implementation of CRE, existing economic potential, empowerment initiatives, supporting and inhibiting factors, the integration of CRE with economic empowerment, and strategies for further development.

The in-depth interview instrument consisted of 15 questions organized into six thematic areas. The first theme explored the economic conditions of congregation members, including their general economic situation, factors contributing to economic difficulties, and economic potential that could be further developed. The second theme examined the practice of CRE, particularly its implementation within the church and the extent to which Christian teaching addressed values related to work ethics, economic responsibility, and entrepreneurship. The third theme focused on church-based economic empowerment programs and aspects requiring improvement. The fourth theme investigated supporting and inhibiting factors affecting congregational economic empowerment. The fifth theme explored the integration of CRE and economic empowerment, including the biblical and Christian values underlying empowerment practices. The sixth theme examined development strategies, forms of mentoring, relevant stakeholders, and indicators of successful CRE-based economic empowerment. The guide was developed by the research team based on the research objectives and the literature on transformative Christian education and church-based empowerment. Key questions asked informants, for example, to describe

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the general economic situation of their members, the Christian values taught in relation to work and economic responsibility, the empowerment activities already implemented, and the indicators they would use to judge successful CRE-based empowerment. The complete interview guide is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Participatory observation was used to obtain contextual information regarding church activities and the implementation of educational and empowerment initiatives. The researchers attended church activities and recorded field notes on teaching content, participation, and the practical implementation of empowerment activities. Documentary sources were also examined to verify informants' accounts of the existence, timing, and participation of the programs reported in Table 2.

The FGD was conducted after the preliminary analysis of the interview data in order to review and validate the draft model. The discussion used a semi-structured guide covering four topics: (a) the accuracy of the preliminary findings; (b) the relevance and sequence of the proposed stages; (c) the feasibility of implementing each stage with the resources available to the congregations; and (d) the supporting conditions required for sustainability. The FGD was audio-recorded with participants' consent and documented in field notes. FGD data were coded using the same codebook as the interviews and were integrated by comparing participants' feedback with the interview-based themes, retaining confirmed elements and revising elements that participants questioned. The FGD outcomes and the resulting modifications are reported in the model subsection of the Results and Discussion.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2020; Zaluchu, 2020), operationalized through thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, transcripts, field notes, and documents were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, the data were coded using a combination of deductive and inductive logic: the six thematic areas of the interview guide served as an initial organizing frame, while codes within each area were generated inductively from informants' expressions, such as "lack of confidence," "no leader to manage," and "collective garden." Third, the initial codes were compared, merged, and grouped into sub-themes and main themes; the resulting audit trail is presented in Table 3. Fourth, a cross-case matrix (Table 2) was constructed to compare each congregation's economic context, empowerment practices, and constraints, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, differences, and relationships. Alternative interpretations, such as whether withdrawal from programs reflected low motivation or structural constraints, were explicitly considered before conclusions were drawn.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through four procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Methodological triangulation compared what informants reported in interviews with what was observed during church activities, what was recorded in program documents, and what was discussed in the FGD; reported empowerment activities were retained in Table 2 only when supported by at least one additional source. Member checking was conducted, and informants confirmed or corrected the summaries. Peer debriefing was used to review the codebook, coding decisions, and interpretations. Referential adequacy was achieved by archiving audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, photographs, and documents, and by re-checking the final interpretations against these raw materials before writing.

Ethical considerations were addressed because the study involved adult participants in non-interventional interviews, observation, and an FGD. Under the regulations of Politeknik Negeri Kupang, formal ethics-committee approval was not required for non-interventional social research involving adult participants; the study was approved and supervised by the Center for Research and Community Service (P3M) of Politeknik Negeri Kupang under Contract No. 172bs/PL23.PPK.2/PL/2026, and research permission was obtained from the leadership of GPdI Region 1. All informants received an explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time, and provided informed consent, including consent to audio recording and to the naming of their congregations. To protect confidentiality, informants are identified only by codes (P1–P6), personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, and research materials were stored securely and accessed only by the research team.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of interviews with six key informants representing six congregations within GPdI Region 1 in Kupang City, five major findings emerged regarding the relationship between CRE and congregational economic empowerment. All six informants (6/6) characterized most members as lower-middle-income households. Four congregations (66.7%) reported concrete empowerment or capacity-building activities, three (50.0%) had activities with direct productive or economic components, and two (33.3%) remained at the level of value formation, sermons, and planned initiatives. The cross-case summary of these practices is presented in Table 2, and the coding audit trail from initial codes to sub-themes and main themes is presented in Table 3. These cross-case variations provided the analytical basis for the five findings discussed in the following subsections, each of which is supported by interview excerpts and, where available, observational or documentary evidence.

Table 2. Cross-Case Summary of Congregational Empowerment Practices

Informant	Main Economic Context	Existing Empowerment/Capacity-Building Practice	Main Constraint
P1	Predominantly lower-middle income; educational and skills limitations	*Rabu Ceria*, English classes, and development of a reading facility	Limited professional mentors, external networks, and adult-oriented skills programs
P2	Lower-middle income; unemployment and limited formal education among some members	*Dapur Belo*, employment placement for school dropouts, clothing marketing	Low confidence among some members and need for adaptive business management
P3	Predominantly lower-middle income; small trading activities	Food-processing training and church bazaars	Limited initial capital and uneven participation
P4	Predominantly lower-middle income; many members work in informal sectors	Christian work-ethic formation; economic programs still at planning stage	Lack of dedicated leader, funding, and business mentoring
P5	Predominantly lower-middle income with agricultural and livestock potential	Cassava-cracker training, collective gardening, and rotating savings activities	Inconsistent participation
P6	Predominantly lower-middle/lower income; informal employment	Christian character and work-ethic formation; practical training still planned	Lack of mentors, human resources, and formal skills programs

Source: Research data (interviews, observation, and documentation), 2026.

Table 3. Thematic Coding Audit Trail: From Initial Codes to Main Themes

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Examples of Initial Codes	Informants (n/6)
1. Economic vulnerability with underdeveloped assets	Predominantly lower-middle-income households	unstable employment; informal work (small traders, construction workers, drivers, parking attendants, motorcycle-taxi drivers)	P1–P6 (6/6)
	Educational and human-resource constraints	low motivation to continue education; incomplete junior/senior high school; limited self-development	P1, P2, P3, P4 (4/6)
	Psychological and behavioral barriers	low self-confidence; embarrassment; expectation of instant results; withdrawal after initial enthusiasm	P2, P3, P5 (3/6)
	Limited access to capital, mentoring, and networks	lack of initial capital; no professional mentors; limited external networks; lack of funding	P1, P3, P4, P6 (4/6)

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	Local economic assets	cooking, carpentry, welding; food production; small-scale trade; livestock, vegetables, land; furniture making	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6 (5/6)
2. Functions of CRE	Moral formation and work ethic	faith accompanied by work; diligence; responsibility; biblical image of the ant; productive use of time	P1–P6 (6/6)
	Experiential and exemplary learning	pastor's demonstration of livestock farming, polybag vegetable cultivation, and cassava-cracker production	P5 (1/6)
	CRE linked to productive programs	teaching on work connected to culinary production, job placement, and marketing	P2 (1/6)
	No dedicated economic CRE program	no entrepreneurship teaching; ministry centered on sermons and worship; workshops still planned	P4, P6 (2/6)
3. Forms of empowerment	Educational capacity building	Rabu Ceria; English classes; reading facility	P1 (1/6)
	Productive and entrepreneurial empowerment	Dapur Belo; employment for school dropouts; clothing marketing; food-processing training; church bazaars	P2, P3 (2/6)
	Community-based resource use and mutual support	cassava-cracker training; collective garden; rotating savings	P5 (1/6)
	Planning stage only	planned catfish farming; planned skills workshops	P4, P6 (2/6)
4. Determinants of sustainability	Individual readiness	motivation; confidence; consistency; sense of ownership	P2, P3, P5 (3/6)
	Institutional capacity	no leader to manage; start-up capital; business management; market and digital competition; six-monthly evaluation	P2, P3, P4, P5 (4/6)
	External ecosystem	employment agencies; certified vocational training; government and business partners; external mentors	P1, P2, P3, P6 (4/6)
5. Model components	Strategies and indicators of success	values first; needs and asset mapping; skills training; mentoring; partnerships; consistency, confidence, business growth, household welfare, contribution to church and community	P1–P6; FGD

Source: Thematic analysis of interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, 2026. Counts indicate the number of informants whose data contributed to each sub-theme and are reported to show the distribution of evidence, not statistical frequency.

Economic Vulnerability Coexists with Significant but Underdeveloped Congregational Assets

A consistent pattern across all six congregations was the predominance of lower-middle-income or economically vulnerable households. Although the specific circumstances varied, all six key informants characterized the economic condition of most congregation members as relatively limited. Economic vulnerability was reflected in unstable employment, dependence on informal occupations, restricted access to formal employment, and limited capacity to develop sustainable sources of income. In several congregations, members worked as small traders, construction workers, drivers, parking attendants, motorcycle-taxi drivers, and other informal workers. This pattern indicates that economic vulnerability within GPdI Region 1 cannot be understood merely as a problem of current income but as a broader problem of limited opportunities and productive capacity.

Three interconnected sources of vulnerability emerged from the interviews. The first concerned education and human-resource capacity. P1 reported that limited motivation to continue education and weak encouragement toward self-development restricted young people's ability to obtain employment or establish independent businesses. P2 similarly identified incomplete junior and senior high-school education among some members as a barrier to formal employment. P3 also associated limited educational attainment with reduced employment opportunities, whereas P4 emphasized that the problem extended beyond formal education to the ability of congregation members to develop themselves and access better employment. Thus, education functioned not simply as a formal qualification but as part of a wider capacity problem involving knowledge,

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skills, and the ability to identify opportunities.

The second source of vulnerability was psychological and behavioral. Several informants described low self-confidence, limited initiative, inconsistent participation, and an expectation of immediate results as barriers to economic improvement. P2, for example, observed that some members possessed abilities but lacked the confidence to develop or communicate them, while P5 noted that some members initially participated enthusiastically in economic activities but later withdrew. These findings suggest that economic empowerment requires not only material inputs but also changes in confidence, persistence, and perceptions of personal agency.

The third dimension involved limited access to resources. Initial business capital, professional mentoring, technical expertise, and access to wider networks were repeatedly identified as constraints. P3 reported that initial capital limited the development of food-production activities, while P6 described congregation members who possessed skills in livestock farming, furniture making, and carpentry but lacked sufficient financial resources to expand these activities.

Importantly, these vulnerabilities coexist with considerable local assets. The congregations possess diverse forms of economic potential, including small-scale trading, food production, carpentry, welding, furniture making, livestock farming, vegetable cultivation, and household-based skills. P5 specifically identified cattle and pig farming, vegetable cultivation, available land, and improved household water access as locally relevant resources. P4 identified existing small-scale trade in vegetables, coconuts, and street-vending activities, while P2 identified cooking, carpentry, and welding skills that could be strengthened through vocational training and certification. These data indicate that the central problem is not the absence of productive potential, but the inability to convert existing assets into sustainable economic capacity.

This finding supports Nehe's (2020) multidimensional understanding of poverty and is consistent with Wainarisi et al. (2022), who emphasize that empowerment requires capacity building and access to resources. The present study extends these perspectives by showing that an asset-based orientation (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003) is particularly relevant in church communities. Rather than beginning with what congregation members lack, empowerment can begin by mapping what they already possess: skills, land, social networks, occupations, family resources, and local economic opportunities. A contextual difference is also evident. In the township churches studied by Mangayi (2018, 2024), the assets emphasized were largely institutional, such as land, buildings, and the church's social capital, whereas the assets identified in GPdI Region 1 were predominantly household-level skills and livelihoods. Asset mapping in this context must therefore take place at the level of members and families rather than church property. Poverty alleviation should accordingly be framed not primarily as the distribution of assistance but as the transformation of existing assets into productive capacity.

Christian Religious Education Functions as Moral Formation, Mindset Transformation, and an Entry Point to Economic Agency

The second major finding concerns the function of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in shaping economic attitudes and behavior. Across the six interviews, CRE was consistently associated with values such as diligence, responsibility, perseverance, productive work, independence, and the responsible use of personal abilities. However, the findings reveal an important distinction between CRE as moral-spiritual instruction and CRE as an integrated socio-economic educational practice.

At the most basic level, Christian education was delivered through sermons, biblical teaching, worship, pastoral guidance, and congregational formation. P1 emphasized that congregation members should not passively wait for divine blessing but should accompany faith with work and effort. P4 similarly reported frequent teaching about diligence, responsibility, and learning from the biblical image of the ant. P6 associated spiritual transformation with changes in daily behavior, reporting that some members who had previously spent considerable time in unproductive activities had begun to devote more time to work and earning a livelihood. This indicates that CRE may generate economically relevant outcomes indirectly by influencing character, discipline, and the use of time.

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This emphasis is significant in a Pentecostal context, where the expectation of divine blessing occupies a central place in congregational spirituality. Rather than rejecting this expectation, the informants reinterpreted blessing as something that accompanies, rather than replaces, diligent work. This reinterpretation represents a context-specific contribution of CRE in GPdI congregations: it addresses a potential tendency toward passive waiting for blessing, which is less prominent in studies of mainline Protestant diakonia (Febriana, 2020; Zega, 2021).

The interviews also show that some congregations have moved beyond moral instruction toward experiential learning. P5 provides a particularly important example. Christian teaching was accompanied by direct demonstrations of livestock farming, vegetable cultivation in polybags, and cassava-cracker production. The underlying educational process therefore involved not only hearing Christian teaching but observing and practicing productive behavior. P5 explicitly viewed personal example as part of Christian education: congregation members were encouraged to see that working, producing, and developing available resources were consistent with Christian life.

A second practical orientation emerged in P2's congregation, where CRE was linked with productive church programs. Christian teaching about work and responsibility was connected to culinary production, employment placement, and commercial activities. In this setting, the role of the church extended from communicating values to directing, educating, mentoring, and opening opportunities for congregation members. CRE therefore functioned as a bridge between spiritual formation and economic agency.

Nevertheless, this integration remains uneven. P4 explicitly stated that his congregation had not yet developed a specific CRE program focusing on economic empowerment; entrepreneurship and economic training remained largely absent from existing teaching. P6 similarly reported that ministry remained centered on sermons and worship, while practical skills workshops were still being planned. In contrast, P2 and P5 demonstrated a more explicit connection between teaching, example, training, and productive activity. These differences are significant because they show that the transformative potential of CRE depends on whether theological values are translated into educational processes and concrete opportunities.

This finding is consistent with Kapu Enda (2024), who conceptualizes Christian education as transformative when it connects faith with lived realities, and complements Pantan (2025), who emphasizes the humanistic and transformative role of Christian education. However, the GPdI cases also differ from these frameworks in an important respect. Whereas transformative Christian education is usually located in formal teaching and learning settings, the most economically consequential forms of CRE in this study occurred outside formal teaching, through the pastor's personal demonstration (P5) and through church-run production (P2). A partly unexpected finding further qualifies the role of formal qualification: P4, a pastor with doctoral-level theological education, reported that his congregation had not yet developed economic programs, indicating that advanced theological training does not automatically translate into economic-pedagogical capacity. The present study therefore identifies a socio-economic dimension of transformation in which work ethics, responsibility, self-development, and stewardship become economically relevant only when they are translated into practical learning and productive participation.

Thus, the contribution of CRE to poverty alleviation should not be interpreted as a direct causal claim that religious teaching automatically increases income. Rather, the evidence indicates a more defensible pathway: Christian values shape mindset and character; mindset influences willingness to learn and participate; education and mentoring build capacity; and increased capacity creates greater opportunities for productive economic action. This sequence provides a more precise explanation of how CRE can contribute to economic empowerment.

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Congregational Empowerment Is Moving from Spiritual Encouragement toward Education, Production, Employment, and Market Participation

The third finding shows substantial variation in the operationalization of empowerment across the six congregations. Four of the six congregations reported concrete empowerment or capacity-building activities, while two remained primarily at the level of spiritual formation and planned economic initiatives. More specifically, three congregations had already developed activities with direct productive or economic components.

The findings reveal three broad forms of empowerment. The first is educational capacity building. At GPdI Bukit Zaitun Sikumana, this included Rabu Ceria (literally "Cheerful Wednesday"), a mid-week church activity for younger members, supplementary English instruction, and the development of a reading facility. P1 reported that these activities increased learning interest and that several participating students were subsequently admitted to SMA Taruna, which are semi-military boarding senior high schools with competitive selection, and to accelerated classes. Because these outcomes are informant-reported and may also reflect family support and the students' own abilities, they are interpreted as indications of increased educational aspiration rather than as effects caused by the church programs. Although such programs do not produce immediate household income, they represent a long-term investment in human capital, which is important because low educational attainment emerged elsewhere in the data as a major source of economic vulnerability.

The second form is productive and entrepreneurial empowerment. GPdI Rasul Paulus Kupang developed *Dapur Belo*, through which congregation members were involved in food production for office orders. The church also facilitated employment for young people who had dropped out of school and supported clothing marketing through existing networks. GPdI Debora Fatukoa similarly provided practical food-processing training involving young people and women. Products such as moringa pudding, cakes, banana nuggets, and Manadonese dishes were subsequently sold through church bazaars. According to P3, these activities provided participants with entrepreneurial experience while simultaneously contributing to church activities.

The third form is community-based resource utilization and mutual support. At GPdI Anugerah Naioni, empowerment included individual cassava-cracker training, collective gardening, and a rotating savings activity. The collective garden is particularly noteworthy because each family was expected to send at least one representative to participate, while the products were distributed according to agreed arrangements. P5 also reported that approximately two households had begun applying what had been taught, although other participants discontinued their involvement. This result provides an important indication that empowerment outcomes are already visible at a small scale, while simultaneously demonstrating the challenge of maintaining participation over time.

These empirical variations suggest that church-based empowerment is not a single program but a continuum extending from education → skills development → production → employment facilitation → marketing and mutual economic support. The three direct economic cases-P2, P3, and P5-also demonstrate that empowerment can be initiated using relatively modest resources rather than waiting for large institutional investments.

This pattern supports Tambunan (2019), who argues that the church's response to poverty should enable economically vulnerable people to participate actively in changing their own circumstances. It also aligns with Zega (2021), who distinguishes empowerment-oriented diakonia from temporary assistance, and with Cicilia (2021), who emphasizes participation and the development of personal talents. The GPdI cases, however, differ from the pattern reported by Bowers Du Toit (2017), who found that most South African congregations remained in a relief-and-welfare mode. Here, half of the congregations had already initiated productive activities with modest resources, suggesting that close relational proximity between pastors and members may facilitate the initiation of productive activities, although these activities remained small in scale and fragile in continuity.

The empirical refinement offered here is sequential. In the observed cases, empowerment progressed where members could learn, practice, produce, access opportunities, and market their outputs, and it stalled

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where one link in this sequence, most often leadership or continued participation, was missing. The decisive change was therefore not from "giving money" to "giving training," but from treating members as recipients to involving them as actors in productive processes.

Sustainability Is Determined by the Interaction of Personal Readiness, Institutional Capacity, and External Ecosystems

The fourth finding concerns why some empowerment initiatives progress while others remain limited or discontinue. Across the cases, the enabling and inhibiting factors can be organized into three interconnected levels: individual readiness, institutional capacity, and external support.

At the individual level, motivation, confidence, consistency, and a sense of ownership were decisive. P2 reported that low confidence and embarrassment prevented some members from developing their potential, while continuous mentoring helped strengthen their willingness to participate. P3 identified unequal motivation and expectations of instant results as obstacles. P5 found that some participants were initially enthusiastic but failed to remain involved, whereas a sense that the program "belonged to everyone" encouraged stronger participation. Importantly, the congregation conducted evaluation meetings every six months to review participation problems.

At the institutional level, leadership emerged as a critical variable. P4's experience provides a clear counterexample: a planned catfish-farming initiative failed to develop because no leader was available to manage it. P4 therefore considered a capable leader who could manage a business and mentor members essential to the success of future empowerment programs. The finding is important because it demonstrates that good intentions alone do not produce sustainable programs; organizational leadership, management, accountability, and technical competence are equally necessary.

Capital and business-management capacity were also recurring constraints. P3 identified limited start-up capital as a barrier to expanding productive activities. P2 emphasized that church-supported enterprises must adapt to contemporary market competition, including competition from digital marketplaces. This suggests that future empowerment programs require not only vocational skills but also financial literacy, marketing, digital literacy, product development, and business-management competencies.

At the ecosystem level, the churches consistently recognized the importance of partnerships. P1 proposed collaboration with employment agencies, international networks, and professional instructors. P2 highlighted cooperation with employment institutions for certified vocational training. P3 recommended collaboration with government agencies, business actors, and institutions capable of supporting skills and capital. P6 similarly identified external mentors as necessary because the congregation lacked internal trainers.

As an interpretive synthesis rather than a tested functional relationship, these findings suggest that the sustainability of empowerment is more likely when personal readiness, institutional capacity, and a supportive external ecosystem are present simultaneously. In the cases examined, weakness in any one of these conditions was associated with stalled or discontinued initiatives, as illustrated by the absence of a program manager in P4's congregation and inconsistent participation in P5's.

This extends Nugroho (2017), who emphasizes both capacity development and access to resources, and reinforces Febriana (2020) and Beukes (2019), whose work suggests that church ministry and the church's social capital should contribute to sustainable capacity rather than short-term dependency. Celesi and Bowers Du Toit (2019) likewise show that partnerships between congregations and development organisations are central to holistic praxis. The present study adds that, for congregations with limited internal expertise, partnership is not an optional enhancement but a precondition: four of the six informants (P1, P2, P3, and P6) identified external trainers, institutions, or agencies as necessary because their congregations lacked internal trainers or certification capacity. Sustainability therefore requires a transition from isolated church activities toward an empowerment ecosystem involving congregation members, church leadership, families, government agencies, training institutions, professionals, businesses, and market networks.

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Accordingly, training should not be treated as the endpoint of empowerment. A more sustainable sequence requires needs assessment, appropriate training, supervised practice, mentoring, access to productive resources, market connections, periodic evaluation, and opportunities for participants to assume responsibility for the continuation of their activities.

A Contextual Christian Religious Education-Based Socio-Economic Empowerment Model

The integration of the preceding empirical patterns resulted in a contextual CRE-based socio-economic empowerment model for GPdI Region 1 in Kupang City, which is presented in Figure 1. The model is not proposed as an experimentally validated causal model, but as an empirically grounded framework derived from the patterns, needs, resources, barriers, and strategies identified across the six congregational cases and reviewed in the FGD.

The model begins from the finding that economic vulnerability cannot be addressed solely through financial assistance. The field data show that educational limitations, skills, mindset, access to opportunities, mentoring, and institutional support interact with economic conditions. Accordingly, the model places human formation before economic intervention, reflecting the informants' consistent emphasis that values and character should be formed before members are directed toward business development or employment (P1, P4, and P6).

The first stage is Christian value and mindset formation. CRE provides a foundation of diligence, responsibility, honesty, perseverance, independence, and responsible use of talents. The aim is to strengthen the internal readiness of congregation members to participate in change rather than remain passive recipients of assistance.

The second stage is mapping needs, assets, and economic potential. The six cases demonstrate that congregation members are heterogeneous. Younger members may require education, language skills, and preparation for future employment, while adults may need vocational training, business development, agriculture, livestock production, or marketing assistance. The model therefore rejects a one-size-fits-all empowerment program.

The third stage is skills and economic-capacity development. Training must correspond to the resources identified at the second stage and may include vocational skills, entrepreneurship, food processing, agriculture, livestock production, financial literacy, marketing, and digital business competencies. This sequencing follows from the cross-case evidence that the more productive initiatives (P2, P3, and P5) were built on skills and resources that members already possessed, such as cooking, food processing, land, and livestock.

The fourth stage is continuous mentoring and network strengthening. This is particularly important because the findings show that participants may withdraw, lack confidence, face capital constraints, or be unable to translate training into sustainable activities. Churches therefore function not necessarily as the sole providers of economic expertise but as facilitators connecting congregation members with government institutions, training agencies, business networks, professional mentors, and markets.

The fifth stage is economic self-reliance and social contribution. Success should not be assessed solely through increased income. Informants identified broader indicators such as consistency in productive activities, increased self-confidence, development of small businesses, responsible work behavior, greater participation, better use of available resources, improved household welfare, and the capacity to contribute to the family, church, and surrounding community. Taken together, these indicators define the outcome of the model as increased independence, economic capacity, changes in mindset, and greater contribution to family and society.

The five stages should therefore be interpreted as an interconnected cycle rather than a linear training program. Christian formation establishes values; asset mapping identifies direction; training develops capacity; mentoring and networks maintain continuity; and the resulting independence generates new resources, experience, and social contribution that can strengthen subsequent cycles of congregational empowerment. The sustainability of this process depends on church leadership, family support, external collaboration, human and financial resources, and periodic monitoring and evaluation, which are represented as the supporting system of

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the model in Figure 1.

The draft model was reviewed in the FGD described in the Methods section. The discussion focused on the relevance and sequence of the proposed five stages, the feasibility of implementing each stage using the resources available to the congregations, and the supporting conditions required for sustainability. Because this review involved leadership-level stakeholders who also supplied much of the interview data, it constitutes stakeholder-based validation of the model's relevance and feasibility rather than an independent test of its effectiveness; implementation testing remains a task for future research.

This framework extends previous studies by integrating elements that have often been discussed separately. Sianipar et al. (2022) establish the transformative orientation of Christian education; Pattiasina (2021) and Zega (2021) highlight empowerment as part of the church's response to poverty; Wainarisi et al. (2022) emphasize participation and capacity building; and Mathie and Cunningham (2003) show that community-driven development begins with existing assets. The present study combines these dimensions into an empirically grounded process connecting faith formation, asset identification, capacity building, mentoring, network development, and economic self-reliance.

The novelty of the model therefore lies not simply in asserting that churches should participate in poverty alleviation, but in defining how Christian Religious Education can function as the educational foundation of a structured socio-economic empowerment process. In this model, congregation members are repositioned from recipients of church assistance to active participants who identify their assets, build competencies, engage in productive activity, develop networks, and gradually strengthen their own economic independence.

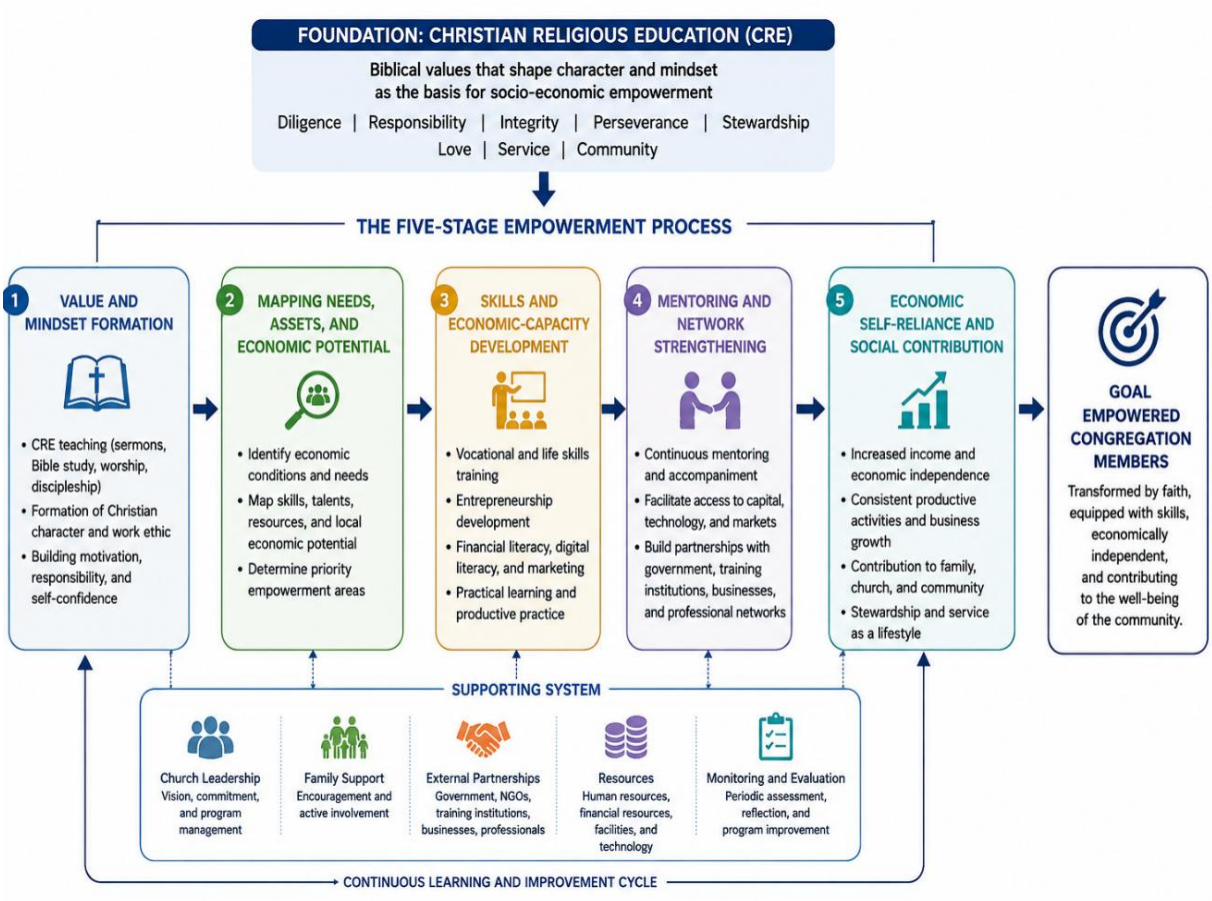


Figure 1. Christian Religious Education-Based Socio-Economic Empowerment Model for Congregation Members in GPdI Region 1, Kupang City
Source: Developed from the empirical findings of the study.

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CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that congregational economic vulnerability in GPdI Region 1, Kupang City, is multidimensional and cannot be explained solely by limited income. Educational constraints, inadequate skills, weak self-confidence and consistency, limited access to capital, insufficient professional mentoring, and restricted economic networks interact in shaping the economic conditions of congregation members. At the same time, the congregations possess substantial but underdeveloped assets, including small-scale businesses, practical skills, agriculture, livestock activities, food production, and other locally relevant economic resources. These findings indicate that poverty alleviation within the church context should move beyond temporary assistance toward an empowerment approach that identifies, strengthens, and transforms existing congregational assets into sustainable productive capacity.

Christian Religious Education plays a strategic role in this process by providing a foundation for work ethics, responsibility, perseverance, independence, and the responsible development of personal potential. However, its transformative contribution becomes more evident when spiritual and moral formation is connected with experiential learning, practical skills development, productive activities, mentoring, and access to economic opportunities. The different practices identified across the six congregations also demonstrate a gradual transition from predominantly sermon-based and charitable ministry toward educational, productive, participatory, and empowerment-oriented approaches. The sustainability of such initiatives depends on the interaction between individual readiness, institutional leadership and management capacity, continuous mentoring, access to resources, and collaboration with external stakeholders.

The principal novelty of this study lies in the formulation of a contextual Christian Religious Education-based socio-economic empowerment model consisting of five interconnected stages: Christian value and mindset formation; mapping congregational needs, assets, and economic potential; developing practical and economic capacities; strengthening continuous mentoring and collaborative networks; and promoting economic self-reliance and social contribution. Scientifically, the model expands the scope of Christian Religious Education beyond spiritual and pedagogical formation by positioning it as an educational foundation for socio-economic transformation. Practically, it provides churches with a structured framework for developing empowerment ministries that are contextual, participatory, asset-oriented, and sustainable, while contributing to broader poverty-alleviation efforts and the achievement of SDG 1, *No Poverty*.

This study has several limitations. First, it relied on six key informants who were pastors or congregational leaders within one GPdI regional context. The findings therefore reflect leadership perspectives; members' own experiences of poverty, their reasons for participating in or withdrawing from programs, and household-level outcomes were not examined directly. This may introduce elite bias, for example by emphasizing motivational explanations of poverty or by overstating program achievements, although triangulation with observation and documentation was used to reduce this risk. Second, the findings are specific to urban and peri-urban Pentecostal congregations in Kupang City and should not be generalized to all church communities. Third, the model was validated through stakeholder review rather than through implementation testing. Future studies should involve congregation members directly through interviews, FGDs, or household surveys, including members who do not participate in church programs; apply the model in different ecclesiastical and socio-economic contexts; and examine its implementation longitudinally to evaluate changes in skills, productive participation, household economic self-reliance, and program sustainability. Such investigations would strengthen the empirical basis of the model and clarify its applicability as a broader framework for faith-based community empowerment.

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Author Contributions
Andrea Elfata Ratulangi; Conceptualization, Methodology, Data analysis, Writing, original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, and Funding acquisition. Yanti Secilia Giri; Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, and Writing, review and editing. Rivaldy Adriyosim Babu; Investigation, Data analysis, Validation, and Writing, review and editing. Robi Adison Kause; Investigation, Resources (facilitation of field access to GPdI Region 1 congregations), Validation, and Writing, review and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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