



## Social Enterprise Sustainability : An Exploratory Case of Selected Private Islamic Schools in Malaysia

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### Article Information

#### Keywords

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### Abstract

Social enterprise plays a significant role in the society as it continuously delivers social value to its clients. Although considerable attention has been dedicated to the importance of sustainability in social enterprise domain, the literature revealed the lack of empirical evidence pertaining key factors of social enterprise sustainability, thus provides a strong ground for this study. Analysis from multiple-case study of private Islamic schools operating under fee-for-service social enterprise model revealed that for social enterprises to sustain, they must seek ways to have pertinent sources of fund, prudently acquire and develop their physical facilities, wisely retain the workforce, appropriately nurture the culture of altruism and finally deliver the products and/or services to the patrons in a systematic manner. We propose a framework of social enterprise sustainability which feasibly provides some direction and insights for future research agenda

### INTRODUCTION

The introduction of Brundtland Commission in the 1980s that defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) marked the emergent of the notion of sustainability. It mainly refers to the capability of maintaining something in existence (Marshall and Toffel, 2005). This broad definition implicates to the overabundance of definition of sustainability, which escalated to an extent that by the middle of 1990s there were well over 100 definitions of sustainability (Elkington, 2003). This situation has been associated by some scholars not only to the Brundtland Commission’s broad definition, which is so far-reaching, but also the difficulty faced by the organizations to determine their individual roles within the broader perspective of sustainability (Shrivastava and Hart, 1995; Stead and Stead, 1996). Nevertheless, the concept of sustainability has emerged as an important topic and widely discussed in corporate boardrooms, political arenas and academia (Mohrman and Worley, 2010).

### THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

The notion of sustainability has been investigated by scholars in various disciplines (Carter and Rogers, 2008). For instance, in engineering literature, the organizational definitions of sustainability have been more

encompassing, and have explicitly incorporated the social, environmental, and economic dimensions by defining organizational sustainability as “a wise balance among economic development, environmental stewardship, and social equity”, (Sikdar, 2003) and as including “...equal weightings for economic stability, ecological compatibility and social equilibrium” (Go'ncz et al., 2007). In the operations management literature, sustainability has been viewed and often been analyzed from the ecological and environmental perspective without explicit incorporation of the social aspects of sustainability (Daily and Huang, 2001; Hill, 2001; Jennings and Zandbergen, 1995; Longoni and Cagliano, 2011; Sarkis, 2001; Shrivastava and Hart, 1995; Starik and Rands, 1995). For example, Starik and Rands (1995) define sustainability as “...the ability of one or more entities, either individually or collectively, to exist and flourish (either unchanged or in evolved terms) for lengthy timeframes, in such a manner that the existence and flourishing of other collectivities of entities is permitted at related levels and in related systems”. Shrivastava and Hart (1995) describes sustainability as offering “the potential for reducing long-term risks associated with resource depletion, fluctuations in energy costs, product liabilities, and pollution and waste management”.

Within the business (for-profit) discipline, Weerawardena et al. (2010) argue that the organizational sustainability has been the implicit main focus of the strategic management literature over the last few decades. For example, the resource based view (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984), resource advantage theory (Hunt, 2000), the market orientation discourse (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Slater and Narver, 1995), and market driven firm paradigm (Dunphy and Griffith, 1998) inherently demonstrate the need of for-profit organizations for competitive advantage that path the way to better financial performance, thus ensuring organizational sustenance and growth.

Besides better financial performance, scholars have also integrated social factor into organizational sustainability. One of the sustainability frameworks that integrate all those three factors is the triple bottom line (TBL). The TBL was introduced by John Elkington in 1994 (Elkington, 2004) in “an attempt to create a new language to express what was perceived as an inevitable expansion of existing corporate models, from purely economic values to economic values as a part of managing sustainable conduct” (Mark-Herbert et al., 2010). The TBL proposes that organizations pursuing sustainability have to make decisions based not only on economic returns but also on environmental protection and social justice. The three elements of the TBL are profit (economic), planet (environmental), and people (socials). Elkington (1998) as cited in Marshall and Toffel (2005) suggests that all of these factors can be combined in such a way that eco-efficiency refers to optimizing economic and environmental goals; fair trade refers to economic activities conducted with particular attention to social consequences; and environmental justice refers to social equity with respect to environmental protection. The introduction of TBL has drastically increased the issue of organizational sustainability in academic literature (Mark-Herbert et al., 2010).

Contrary to the organizational sustainability of for-profit businesses, the concept of sustainability for social enterprise is not merely moving the venture beyond initial investment in order to gain economic benefit. Instead, it is more complicated due to the tension between social mission and financial needs. Santos (2009) argues that social enterprise is fundamentally distinct from other forms of economic organization due to its diversion from profit motive and disengagement from competitive behaviour. Another distinction of social enterprise in comparison to business enterprise is that social enterprise strives for financial resources in order to deliver social value to its clients, whereas business enterprises aim to create increased shareholders' wealth through the delivery of superior value to its customers (Weerawardena et al., 2010). It is the creation and delivery of social value rather than personal and shareholders' wealth that drive social enterprises (Thake and Zadek, 1997).

The issue of sustainability is continuously being discussed among social entrepreneurship scholars indicating the growing concern pertaining social enterprise sustainability. Therefore, addressing the issue of sustainability of social enterprise has the potential to enrich understanding and development of sustainable business practices, and to make a distinct contribution to the sustainability discourse (Dunphy and Griffith, 1998; Weerawardena et al., 2010). In spite of the newness of the term and the concept of social entrepreneurship, the practice that employ entrepreneurial capacities to ease social problems has existed for decades (Dees, 1998; Alvord et al., 2002; Barendsen and Gardner, 2004; Okpara and Halkias, 2011). Some of the practices that specifically focused on the problems of poor and marginalized populations have succeeded in transforming the lives of thousands of people around the world (Alvord et al., 2002). Nevertheless, the literature suggests the scarcity of information pertaining to the issue of sustainability of social enterprise. It has been discussed in a fragmented manner and lacking of a well-developed discussion (Weerawardena et al., 2010). Therefore, it needs further development in order to understand how it affects the organizations and the strategies they adopt in response to it.

This paper aims to explore the key elements of social enterprise sustainability with regards to private Islamic schools. The information gathered from the multiple-case studies via various sources of evidences are expected to provide better insights pertaining sustainability of social enterprises. It is organised as follows. First, we examine the concept of sustainability from various disciplines and organizational domains including non-profit and for-profit ventures to look at the surfeit definitions and concept of sustainability being discussed in the literature. In a next step, we contextualise private Islamic schools as social enterprise based on a fee-for-service social enterprise model (Alter, 2007). We explain the use of qualitative methodology and present the results based on the analysis of both interview and observation transcripts. Based on our findings, we propose a social enterprise sustainability framework which might be beneficial for future research agenda.

### **PRIVATE ISLAMIC SCHOOLS AS SOCIAL ENTERPRISES**

An institution set-up by individuals or group of individuals, without any assistance from the government or government linked agencies, and its main purpose is to benefit the society on top of generating its own income, the institution can be considered as a social enterprise. EMES European Research Network (2006) defines social enterprises as not-for-profit private organizations providing goods or services directly related to their explicit aim to benefit the community (Defourny and Nyssens, 2008). According to Dees (1998), social enterprises are private organizations dedicated to solving social problems, serving the disadvantaged, and providing socially important goods and services that were not, in their judgment, adequately provided by public agencies or private markets. These organizations have pursued goals that could not be measured simply by profit generation, market penetration, or voter support (Mair and Marti, 2004). Tracey, Phillips and Haugh (2004) define social enterprises as businesses that trade for social purpose that combine innovation, entrepreneurship and social purpose and seek to be financially sustainable by generating revenue from trading. Social enterprises' missions prioritize social benefit above financial profit, and if and when a surplus is made, this is used to further the social aims of the beneficiary group or community (Mair and Marti, 2004). Obviously, the private Islamic schools not only match the above definitions but also fit into the model of fee-for-service social enterprise as proposed by Alter (2007) below:

“The fee-for-service model of social enterprise commercializes its social services, and then sells them directly to the target populations or "clients," individuals, firms, communities, or to a third party payer...Fee-for-service is one of the most commonly used social enterprise models among nonprofits. Membership organizations and trade associations, schools, museums, hospitals, and clinics are typical examples of fee-for-service social enterprises”

In recent years, the demand for the private Islamic schools has been rising as the parents are well assured on the capability of these schools to not only reinforce the good values but also integrate them into all walks of life (Osler and Zahida, 1995). The adoption of Islamic curriculum as their core of teaching and learning, which most parents believed that by installing good values to children from early ages would help to prevent improper conducts and in the long run reduce social illness (Wan Abdul Latiff and Yusoff, 2004). Apparently, the existence of private Islamic schools is significant and so far has been benefiting the society via Islamic integrated educational values.

In Malaysia, the number of private Islamic schools continues to increase, specifically the private Islamic schools (Bakar, 1996; Perangkaan Pendidikan Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2006-2010). Despite the rapid growth and expansion of private Islamic schools, the issue of survival and sustainability of private Islamic schools has been the main concern among many parties including the government. Recent reports in local newspapers revealed sustainability related issues faced by private Islamic schools (e.g. Utusan Malaysia dated 5 August 2011 reported that one of the private Islamic schools in the northern state of Malaysia has been utilizing students not to beg for money, instead, they are selling products which according to them is an entrepreneurial act done to cover schools expenses of RM 40,000.00 a month. In Sinar Harian dated 29 October 2012, an article entitled “Keperitan sekolah tahfiz kumpul dana” revealed the struggle of private Islamic school to obtain funding so that it can continue its operation. Another article in Sinar Harian dated 16 July 2013 entitled “Dilema dua sekolah agama” exposed the financial problems faced by two Islamic schools in Selangor that halted the development of the school which directly affected the learning process).

The situation was disquieting among the public that it has grabbed the government's attention. The Minister in the Prime Minister's Department has urged the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) to have Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with these schools to provide the certification required by the Malaysia Qualifications Agency (MQA) of Ministry of Education (MOE) as reported by Bernama News, 13 January 2013. The most recent news published in a special insert by Sinar Harian dated 12 May 2014 revealed the struggle of Islamic schools to manage the increasing demand from parents for Islamic education. It was reported

that some schools had to utilize 40 footed cabins, and even worse converted the garbage house into classrooms as there were not enough classrooms to accommodate the students. The scenario that is happening clearly indicates the pressing need of the institutions to sustain and continue to serve its target group amidst diminishing traditional sources of funding (government) and increased competition for these resources (Johnson, 2000).

## METHODOLOGY

As the main purpose of this research was to explore key elements of social enterprise sustainability among private Islamic schools, this study is considered exploratory in nature and qualitative in approach. The qualitative methodology is deemed appropriate when the research is exploratory, variables are unknown and/or underdeveloped, context is important, and lack of theory base. The participants of this multiple-case study were the owners and/or operators of Islamic (Islamic) private schools. The convenience purposive sampling was employed whereby the participants were selected as they fit the characteristics of the issue being investigated. It saves time, money, and effort, but it is the least credible (Patton, 1990). This technique was chosen due to the time limitation. The participants were selected from different categories of private Islamic schools. The selection process was conducted purposively in order to acquire preliminary data for each category of schools.

In order to gather the required data, open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face with nine owners and/or operators from various categories of the schools. Specifically, in deciding the number of participant, the researcher based his justification on Eisenhardt (1989) that suggests a range of four to ten cases necessary for the development of theory from case studies. In order to guide the conversation, an interview protocol was developed and used during the interviews to gain insights and discover owners/founders definitions of the meaning of school's sustainability as well as the perception on the vital elements needed to sustain. The protocol in semi-structured interviews would serve as a guide, a foundation on which the interview is built but one that allows creativity and flexibility to ensure that each participant's story is fully uncovered (Flick, 2002).

The interviews conducted were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and later were verified against the audio to ensure the accuracy of the transcription for each of the participants (Kvale, 1996). The author used the computer-aided qualitative data analysis software i.e. Atlas.ti to do the coding and scrutinize the data for themes, ideas and categories (Taylor and Gibbs, 2010). The transcript was read several times and the text was separated and organized into meaningful units of information. As the research aims to explore the key influential elements of social enterprise sustainability, thus, coding was done to highlight the most "popular" items perceived as major elements of sustainability.

## RESULTS

Despite of diverse responses given by the participants with regards to social enterprise sustainability, several themes and sub-themes emerged from the analysis of transcripts of in-depth interviews and observations as presented in Table 1.

Based on the analysis, the themes were organized into five categories with several significant sub-themes included in each category.

### 1. *Financial*

The results from individual case as well as across the cases indicate that owners' contribution, donations and endowment were three main sources of initial fund. These three sources were also main sources of operating fund for majority of the school in addition to school fees, earned income and alms.

### 2. *Physical development*

Across the nine cases, majority of the schools acquired the land via three avenues namely endowment, philanthropic donations and owners' own contribution. As for physical development, there were three other additional sources utilized for physical development which include bank loan, school fees and earned income. Majority of the schools were experiencing physical scalability as a result of growing number of students.

### 3. *Human*

Cross case results indicate that four schools hired only qualified teachers, three schools hired fifty percent of qualified teachers and two schools disregard teachers' qualification. Concerning the salary, majority of the schools pay considerably low salary to their teachers as compared to teachers in government schools. Nevertheless, low salary did not impede the loyalty of these teachers as majority of them were loyal to their schools. Most of the schools participating in this research maintained a fairly low teacher-to-student ratio albeit having an increasing number of students every year.

4. *Altruism*

Obviously, seven out of nine cases indicated that altruism was one of the important themes in the study. The cross-case results highlighted the non-profit motive of the founders who started the school without any profit-making intention. It was further supported by another finding that indicates the willingness of the staff and teachers to stay with the schools regardless of their relatively low salary. These people's motive were non-monetary driven and is considered as purely altruistic.

5. *School system*

Five out of nine cases highlighted the school system is influential in the sustainability of the school. The system encompasses subthemes such as overall quality, the religious values uphold by the schools' community, teaching approach and management best practices.

TABLE 1

VARIOUS THEMES AND SUB-THEMES EXTRACTED FROM INDIVIDUAL AND CROSS CASES.

Themes and Sub-themes	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6	Case 7	Case 8	Case 9
<b>Financial</b>									
<i>Initial fund</i>									
Own	X	X	X	X		X	X		X
Donations		X	X	X	X			X	X
Endowment		X	X	X	X				X
<i>Operating fund</i>									
Owners	X	X				X	X		
Fees	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Donations		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Endowment			X	X	X				
Alms					X			X	
Earned income	X		X	X	X		X		X
<b>Physical</b>									
<i>Land acquisition</i>									
Owners	X	X		X					
Donations		X	X	X				X	X
Endowment		X	X	X	X				X
<i>Development</i>									
Owners	X					X	X		
Bank Loan	X								
Donations		X	X	X	X			X	X
Endowment		X	X	X	X				X
Earned income				X	X				X
Fees	X		X	X		X	X	X	
<b>Scalability</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Human</b>									
<i>Employee</i>									
Qualified	X	X	X	X1/2		X1/2	X	X1/2	
<b>Salary</b>									
Low	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Medium to High									
<b>Loyalty</b>									
Loyal	X1/2	X	X	X	X	X1/2	X1/2	X	X
High turnover		*X							
<b>Teacher-student ratio</b>									
Low	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Medium to High									
<b>Altruism</b>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>School system</b>									
Overall Quality	X					X			
Religious value		X				X	X		
Teaching Approach						X	X	X	
Best Practices						X			

Note: a) X indicates the occurrence of the themes, b) X1/2 in Human themes represents 50% of the employees, and c) \*X indicates that the turnover for the case was high prior to salary review.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Previous research indicated that the sustainability for social enterprise is different from for-profit enterprise due to non-profit motives and disengagement from competitive behaviour (Santos, 2009). It mainly revolves around the financial aspect and the ability to endure which refers to time period of more than five years of being in existence as well as being able to continue to deliver social benefits to its constituency (Dudnik, 2010; Weerawardena et al., 2010).

This study revealed that sustainability of private Islamic schools can be achieved financially by making certain of both initial and operating fund in which they acquire via donations, endowment, school fees, earned income, alms as well as owners' contributions. In addition, the physical aspects of the schools were also vital to its sustainability. The findings disclosed that endowments, philanthropic donations and owners' contributions were the most utilized pertaining to land acquisition. The expansion and physical development of the school were accomplished using three other additional sources including bank loan, school fees and earned income.

In terms of human aspects, the findings revealed that teachers' loyalty is crucial for schools' sustainability. Despite low salary, teachers remained loyal to schools as a result of a conducive teaching and learning environment; composed of a considerably low teacher-to-student ratio and fairly good physical facilities, and various privileges such as courses and trainings, free meals, financial assistance to further study, and etcetera. In addition, the element of altruism was another element revealed by the findings. The purely altruistic, non-monetary driven values hold up by the owners and teachers of private Islamic schools were significant to sustainability of the schools. This is consistent with the Dana (1998) who argues that entrepreneurs with Islamic convictions, culture and norms possess long term vision which surpasses the profitability intent. Lastly, the findings unveiled the importance of the school system constituted of schools' overall quality, the religious value upheld by the owners and teachers, the teaching approach and management best practices. Figure 1 illustrates social enterprise's sustainability elements for private Islamic schools operating under the "fee-for-service".

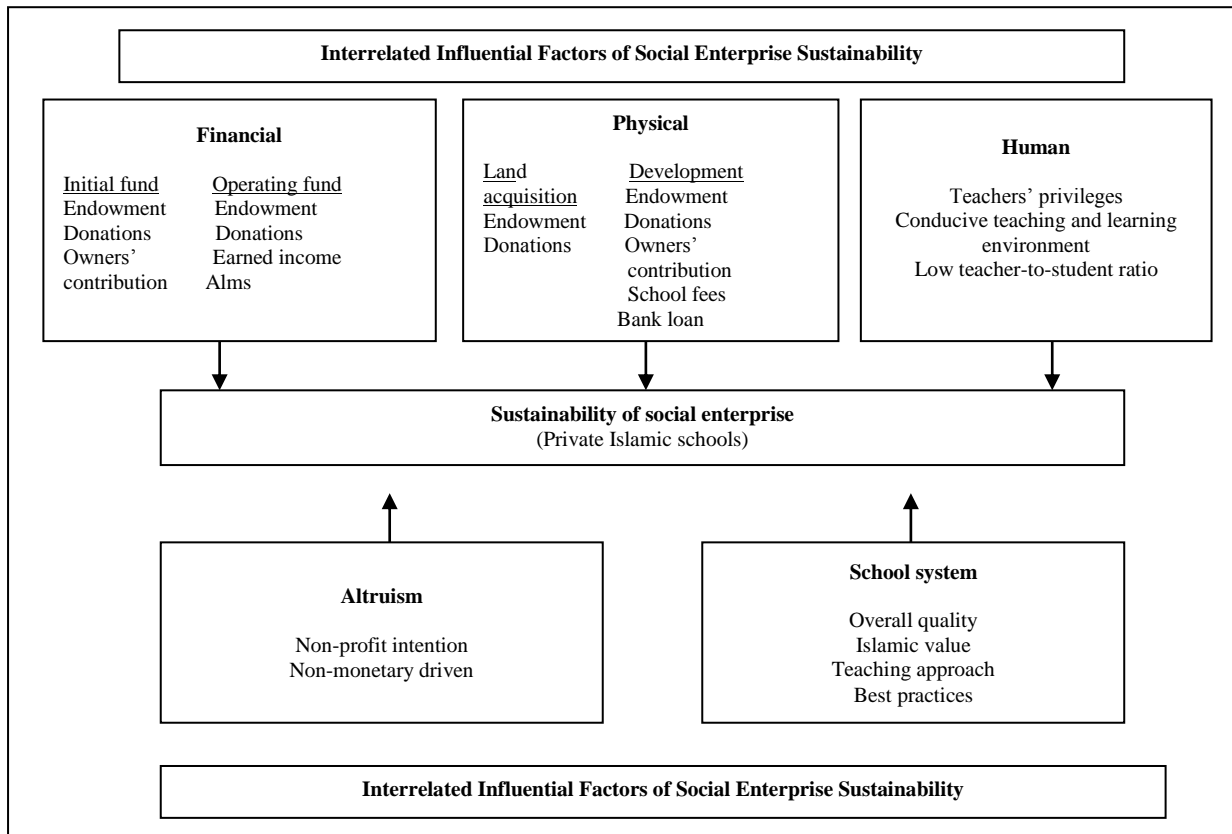
#### **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This research possesses a few limitations despite its significant implications towards better understanding of the key elements influencing social enterprise sustainability. The unit of analysis or the case in this study was restricted to private Islamic schools located only in central and northern region of Malaysia due to the time and cost constraint. Key elements of sustainability may be viewed differently by owners and/or operators of the schools in other regions such as eastern and southern region of Malaysia due to different social and community values upheld by the society that live in different region in Malaysia as well as their personal experiences in the organization, which may have differed from others in the similar context.

The future research may expand across all regions in the country with diverse socio cultural values upheld among the society in order to have a broader view of findings that closely represents the population. It should also be extended beyond educational-based social enterprises to other sectors to broaden the perspective with regards to sustainability. Certainly, broader qualitative (e.g. focus group) and quantitative (e.g. survey) research is required to better represent the population in the state or even in the country. Nevertheless, it has achieved its intended purpose of which to explore the key factors of social enterprise sustainability.

FIGURE 1

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE'S SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK FOR PRIVATE ISLAMIC SCHOOLS



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