

Optimization of Empowerment Strategies for Shrimp Cracker SMEs to Enhance Income and Competitiveness

Ahmad Zaky Jahisam¹, M. Arif Musthofa², Zeni Sunarti³, Erwina Kartika Devi⁴, Siti Fatimah⁵

¹ Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid Sabak; ahmadzakyjahizam@gmail.com

² Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid Sabak; 7ariefherio@gmail.com

³ Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid Sabak; zenisunarti@gmail.com

⁴ Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid Sabak; erwinaelkhalifi@gmail.com

⁵ Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid Sabak; sitifatimahsadu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the empowerment strategies implemented by the Cempaka 2 Wood-Fired Shrimp Crackers MSME in Kelurahan Mendahara Ilir, which significantly enhance income and product competitiveness in both local and external markets. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research identifies key strategies such as continuous product quality improvement through training and innovation in flavor variants and hygienic packaging, the development of integrated marketing networks combining traditional and digital platforms, managerial training for human resource capacity building, and sustainable utilization of abundant local raw materials. The study contributes novel insights into integrating product innovation tailored to modern consumer preferences and the successful transition of traditional MSMEs into digital marketing channels. Additionally, it highlights the socio-cultural role of MSMEs in preserving local identity and cultural heritage, alongside environmental sustainability through coastal ecosystem preservation. The findings provide valuable recommendations for policymakers, business actors, and stakeholders to foster sustainable MSME development that balances economic, social, and cultural dimensions, ultimately supporting inclusive local economic growth.

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Corresponding Author:

Ahmad Zaky Jahisam

Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid Sabak; ahmadzakyjahizam@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a crucial effort in developing communities to enable them to recognize and optimally utilize their inherent potential. Through the empowerment process, communities gain access to various resources, knowledge, opportunities, and skills that allow them to independently determine their future direction (Abidin, 2024; Ariyani et al., 2024). In the context of developing Micro,

Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), empowerment plays a vital role in enhancing business capacity by providing education, strengthening human capital investment, and protecting products to ensure competitiveness in the market (Hidayat, Hardi, Sucipto, & Sunarti, 2023; Ismail & Musthofa, 2024).

Conceptually, empowerment can be understood as a process aimed at providing communities with the strength and capability to enhance their potential. This enhancement primarily focuses on developing knowledge and strengthening the capital of human resources (Kurniawan, Marwendi, Yusuf, Aiman, & Tauvani, 2024; Kuswanto, Abidin, Pestano, & Ikhlas, 2024). According to Law No. 20 of 2008, MSMEs are defined as productive economic enterprises owned by individuals or business entities that can be operated independently, either individually or as business groups, encompassing various layers of the economic community (Lubis, Irfana, Purwatiningsih, Nisak, & Sari, 2024; Rahma, Musthofa, & Fatimah, 2024).

MSMEs hold a strategic role in creating employment opportunities and increasing community income. Amid occasionally unstable economic conditions, the MSME sector remains a primary driver of economic growth (Karnadjaja, 2023; Mustari, Mere, Pitri, Wibowo, & Nilfatri, 2024). The government has paid special attention by promoting the growth and development of MSMEs to absorb more labor, thereby helping reduce unemployment rates and improve overall community welfare.

Empowerment of MSMEs is a strategic step involving collaboration among the central government, local governments, business sectors, and communities to create a conducive business environment. Through such empowerment (Fia, Musthofa, & Devi, 2024; A. E. Saputra & Susanti, 2024), MSMEs are encouraged to continuously develop, become self-reliant, and possess strong competitiveness in local and national markets. Effective empowerment strategies are key to establishing MSMEs as resilient and sustainable pillars of the economy.

Beyond its role in capacity building, MSME empowerment significantly impacts increasing community income. As MSMEs grow, business opportunities broaden, employment increases, and community purchasing power improves (Munip et al., 2024; Tanjung, Anaswan, & Nisak, 2023). This condition not only affects the welfare of business actors but also promotes macroeconomic growth, ultimately strengthening regional economic resilience.

Income is one of the primary indicators of successful MSME empowerment. Income is the economic return obtained by individuals or groups as compensation for their contributions to various production factors, such as capital, labor, and other resources. This income may come from wages, business profits, land rent, or other forms of compensation received within a certain period. Stability and growth in income serve as the foundation for improving community living standards (Nuri, Junaidi, & Achmad, 2024).

In Kelurahan Mendahara Ilir, most residents depend on MSMEs as their primary source of income. One rapidly growing MSME in this area is the production of firewood-baked crackers and shrimp crackers. These products have become a regional hallmark and an essential part of the local economy, serving both household consumption and external markets (Fatimah, Devi, Wandu, Mun'amah, & Sarwono, 2024; Musthofa, 2024; Sya'bana, Nisak, Suryaningsih, Rukiyanto, & Hastuti, 2024). The uniqueness of these products lies in the use of firewood during production, imparting a distinct aroma and flavor that differentiate them from other crackers processed through modern methods.

The development of firewood and shrimp cracker businesses in Mendahara Ilir is supported by the abundant availability of raw materials, such as shrimp and firewood. The sufficient natural resources facilitate production processes and reduce production costs, allowing products to be marketed competitively. Maintaining traditional processing methods not only preserves product quality but also attracts consumers who appreciate authentic flavors (Kadarsih, Munip, Aminah, & Rahmy, 2023; Musthofa & Wulandari, 2024; Saryanti, Daud, Kadarsih, Munamah, & Dewi, 2024).

One well-known firewood-baked shrimp cracker business in Kelurahan Mendahara Ilir is Cempaka 2. Established in the early 1990s, this business employs several local workers. Cempaka 2 serves not only the local market but has expanded its distribution to regions such as Jambi and Batam Island. This indicates the product's strong competitiveness and its ability to grow in response to broader market demands (Hidayat, Mubyarto, Ritonga, & Sunarti, 2023; Ikhlas, Yasmin, Muharramah, & Kuswanto, 2025; Mustofa, 2023). The existence of MSME Cempaka 2 has positively impacted the surrounding community, particularly in job creation and reducing unemployment. Increasing labor absorption directly helps improve local income. This cracker industry serves as a primary livelihood source and an important driver of local economic growth.

Considering the significant contribution of firewood-baked shrimp cracker MSMEs to the income and welfare of Kelurahan Mendahara Ilir's residents, this study focuses on examining the empowerment strategies implemented to optimize income and business competitiveness. This research is essential to provide a comprehensive understanding of how empowerment can effectively elevate the local community's economy. The urgency of this study stems from the need to thoroughly comprehend the successful mechanisms and strategies of MSME empowerment, along with the challenges faced. The primary objective of this research is to identify how the empowerment strategies of Cempaka 2's firewood-baked shrimp cracker MSME can enhance income and competitiveness, while positively impacting the community in Kelurahan Mendahara Ilir. The results are expected to offer valuable recommendations for policymakers, business actors, and stakeholders in sustainably developing MSMEs.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to collect descriptive data (Mazhar, Anjum, Anwar, & Khan, 2021), consisting of non-numerical information and explanations. The qualitative approach is chosen because the research focuses on social phenomena experienced by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), particularly regarding empowerment strategies aimed at increasing the income of the Cempaka 2 Wood-Fired Shrimp Crackers MSMEs in Mendahara Ilir Subdistrict. The data obtained consist of words and language from the research subjects, observed holistically and placed within their natural context, thereby providing an in-depth understanding of the behaviors, perceptions, and motivations of the business actors. The research process is conducted systematically and in a structured manner, beginning with fact-gathering and continuing through to the analysis of the social phenomena under study.

The research design applied is qualitative descriptive, enabling the researcher to explore and interpret the facts deeply and comprehensively. This design is appropriate for understanding the social conditions and phenomena related to MSME development within the context of business empowerment, as well as its impact on income enhancement and the competitiveness of wood-fired shrimp cracker products. The study is conducted in Mendahara Ilir Subdistrict, Mendahara District, Tanjung Jabung Timur Regency, with the main participants being MSME actors from Cempaka 2 who are deemed to possess relevant knowledge and information to support the analysis and understanding of the phenomena. The location and participants are selected based on their direct relevance to the research object.

Data collection techniques include observation, interviews, and documentation, which are carried out continuously to obtain objective and valid data. Observation involves direct fieldwork to record actual conditions and the processes of production and marketing of the wood-fired shrimp crackers, with detailed notes taken using notebooks to ensure comprehensive data recording. Structured interviews are conducted with business actors to obtain in-depth and focused data, allowing the researcher to explore various important aspects related to empowerment strategies.

Documentation complements the research data by collecting relevant written documents such as business records, reports, and archives that enrich data analysis.

Data analysis follows the Miles and Huberman model, comprising three main stages: data reduction, data display, and verification or conclusion drawing. Data reduction involves filtering and summarizing important information, focusing on the main topics, and eliminating irrelevant data, which results in a more structured and understandable analysis. The reduced data are then presented in a clear and systematic descriptive narrative to provide readers with a comprehensive overview. Verification is conducted to ensure the alignment of research findings with field facts, while also generating deeper insights and possibly uncovering new findings. Data validity is strengthened through the member check technique, wherein interview results and research findings are re-confirmed with informants to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the obtained data.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mendahara Ilir Subdistrict possesses a rich and unique history, beginning with the naming of the area after the Tembikar River, which divides the region into two parts: the upstream area in the north and the downstream area in the south. The first settlement was established around 1950 by migrants from Eastern Malay communities who chose the river estuary as their location to support their primary livelihood as fishermen. Over time, the population of this area became increasingly heterogeneous with the presence of ethnic groups from various regions, including Chinese, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Java, and several parts of Sumatra. Initially, the community relied heavily on marine resources; however, as time progressed, they began to develop agricultural and plantation sectors to meet family food needs. Population growth fluctuated but showed a significant increase starting in the 1970s. Administratively, the area underwent a transformation from a traditional village led by a datuk penghulu to a formal village during the village government reform era, and eventually in 2008 it was designated as a subdistrict (kelurahan) under the leadership of a lurah, reflecting its integration into the urban governance system (Nurjali, Nisak, Wulandari, & Mun'amah, 2023; Susanto, Putra, & Nisak, 2024).

Geographically, Mendahara Ilir Subdistrict is located on the eastern coast of Jambi Province, covering an area of approximately 10,540 hectares. Its strategic position at the estuary of the Batanghari River and its direct border with the Berhala Strait endows it with abundant coastal natural resources, including mangrove forests which are critical for coastal ecosystem conservation and shoreline protection against abrasion. The landscape is diverse and holds significant potential for the development of coastal-based ecotourism, which could attract tourists through the scenic beauty of the sea and biodiversity. The local community's retention of maritime cultural heritage adds value to the development of the local economy, particularly through fisheries, marine industries, and creative industries based on local resources such as seafood processing and handicrafts. Given its geographic conditions, Mendahara Ilir is important not only from an ecological and conservation perspective but also as a center for sustainable economic and tourism development (Devi, Ma'ani, & Wahab, 2023; Syariah, 2024).

From a demographic standpoint, Mendahara Ilir Subdistrict has a population of 7,566 individuals distributed across 1,844 households, with approximately 3,609 males and 3,957 females. This considerable population size represents a potential human resource base to support community-based economic development, particularly in informal sectors such as fisheries, agriculture, and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Nevertheless, this population growth also presents challenges, especially in the provision of infrastructure, education, healthcare, and skills training. Therefore, effective demographic management and the enhancement of human resource quality through both formal and non-formal education are essential to optimize the demographic dividend.

Additionally, family planning management and healthcare services are crucial to control population growth properly and thereby improve the overall quality of life (Fajri, Abidin, & Lestari, 2024).

In terms of socio-cultural and economic aspects, the community of Mendahara Ilir is known for its heterogeneity, dominated by the Malay ethnic group with a majority Muslim population, which significantly influences lifestyle patterns and social values in the region. Awareness of the importance of education continues to rise, evidenced by an increasing number of young people pursuing higher education, although challenges related to school dropout rates have been encountered in the past. Religious education also plays a vital role in character formation, consistently taught both at home and in local religious institutions (Djaja et al., 2023; Kuswanto, Fajanela, & Abidin, 2024). The livelihood system is diverse, ranging from civil servants, fishermen, and farmers to workers in micro and small enterprises. Although the number of formal employees remains relatively small, this occupational diversity reflects the community's adaptability in managing local potential. Efforts to simultaneously improve the quality of formal and non-formal education represent a key strategy to strengthen workforce competitiveness while maintaining cultural and spiritual values, thereby supporting the sustainable socio-economic development of Mendahara Ilir Subdistrict.

The Kerupuk Udang Kayu Api Cempaka 2 business in Kelurahan Mendahara Ilir was established in 1990 by Mrs. Siti Aminah together with her four siblings. Its strategic location on the coast, with abundant fresh shrimp availability, serves as the primary asset enabling consistent production. "We utilize abundant local raw materials, so the production process has never been disrupted," explained Mrs. Mulyati, the UMKM owner, in an interview on April 20, 2025. The traditional technique of using firewood for drying is a distinctive characteristic that differentiates this product in the market while also preserving local culture.

Improving product quality is the main focus of this UMKM's empowerment efforts. Regular training on processing techniques, quality control, and innovations in flavor variations and hygienic packaging has enhanced market appeal. Field observations indicate that these innovations have directly contributed to increased product sales, reaching both local and external markets. According to observations on November 15, 2024, the geographical position of Kelurahan Mendahara Ilir as a coastal area further strengthens production potential, supported by the community's inherited skills in shrimp cracker processing.

Developing marketing networks is a key strategy in empowering UMKM Cempaka 2. The business has established partnerships with local traders, traditional markets, souvenir shops, and digital platforms. Expanding marketing activities has successfully increased sales volume and product recognition in broader markets. "Collaborations with various parties make it easier for us to expand market reach," stated Mrs. Mulyati. Additionally, management training is provided to entrepreneurs and employees to improve professionalism and operational efficiency.

Sustainable utilization of local raw materials is a major advantage of this UMKM. The abundance of fresh shrimp from the coastal area of Mendahara Ilir supports efficient production processes and maintains the product's distinctive flavor. This approach also strengthens the involvement of local fishermen and fisheries actors within the value chain, providing direct economic benefits to the community. Observations on April 20, 2025, demonstrated how leveraging natural potential contributes to reducing production costs and improving community welfare.

The presence of UMKM Kerupuk Udang Kayu Api Cempaka 2 significantly impacts the income and welfare of Mendahara Ilir residents. The absorption of local labor creates job opportunities for women and youth, simultaneously reducing unemployment in the area. Government support and collaboration between business actors and the community have resulted in a conducive business ecosystem. As stated by a local official, "Synergy between the government and UMKM is crucial in driving local economic growth." Beyond economic aspects, the preservation of cultural values and local identity through this product further strengthens the community's pride in their heritage.

This study found that the empowerment strategies for the Shrimp Cracker MSMEs in Kayu Api and Cempaka 2 are highly focused on improving product quality through continuous training and product innovation. These findings align with previous research by (Hudnurkar, Ambekar, Bhattacharya, & Sheorey, 2023), which confirmed that ongoing training can significantly enhance the quality of MSME products. However, the findings in Mendahara Ilir Village add a new dimension by integrating innovations in flavor variants and packaging as key market attractions, a topic that has been scarcely addressed in the literature. This success indicates that product development, which adapts to modern consumer needs, can expand the market and increase MSMEs' competitiveness, while simultaneously directly improving community income (Dewi & Febrianto, 2023; Munip, 2024).

In addition to product quality, this study highlights the importance of strengthening sustainable marketing and distribution networks. The Shrimp Cracker MSMEs in Kayu Api and Cempaka 2 rely not only on local networks but also utilize digital platforms for marketing. This finding complements the study by (Muhammad, Adalier, & Adeshola, 2025), which emphasized the role of e-commerce in MSME empowerment, but it provides new empirical evidence through the case of traditional MSMEs successfully transitioning to digital marketing. This demonstrates that the collaboration of conventional and digital marketing can create a resilient and relevant business ecosystem in the digital economy era, positively impacting sales volume and business actors' welfare.

Regarding human resource management, the study found that managerial training covering administration, finance, and marketing serves as one of the pillars of MSME empowerment. This finding is consistent with the human resource empowerment theory proposed by (Atiase, Wang, & Mahmood, 2023; Hernita, Surya, Perwira, Abubakar, & Idris, 2021), which states that managerial capacity can enhance the efficiency of small businesses. However, this study expands the understanding by demonstrating the social impact of HR training that not only increases professionalism but also opens new employment opportunities and empowers local labor, particularly women and youth. Thus, MSMEs do not only function as production centers but also as agents of social empowerment that strengthen community economies.

Sustainable raw material management is a major advantage identified in the Shrimp Cracker MSMEs in Kayu Api and Cempaka 2. This study underscores the importance of utilizing the abundant potential of local natural resources, namely fresh shrimp from the Mendahara Ilir coast, which enables production efficiency and the preservation of authentic flavors. This aligns with research by (Yusuf, Maina, & Darodjat, 2024), which highlights sustainable raw material management as a key factor in the success of fisheries MSMEs. However, this study reinforces the argument by adding the aspect of coastal ecosystem preservation as part of an environmentally conscious business strategy, a novelty emphasizing the synergy between business and natural resource conservation.

Local community awareness in supporting domestic products and regional specialties constitutes a significant finding that reflects strong social capital for MSME sustainability. The phenomenon of consumer loyalty toward shrimp crackers and kletek as traditional snacks and souvenirs demonstrates a shift in local consumer behavior that increasingly values cultural heritage and authentic products. This contrasts with previous findings by (Sun & Chen, 2024), which showed low consumer loyalty to local products in other regions. This finding marks an important advancement in local economic empowerment based on cultural wisdom that not only impacts the economy but also reinforces community identity and pride (A. A. Saputra, 2023).

The role of government in providing training facilitation, business management assistance, and capital support has proven to be a major supporting factor in the success of these MSMEs. This study supports the MSME empowerment policy theory by (Ibrahim Abdelhalim Ibrahim, 2022), which emphasizes the importance of government roles in sustaining small businesses. However, field findings reveal a more harmonious synergy between the government, business actors, and the community, creating a conducive and sustainable business ecosystem. This successful collaboration

exemplifies practical ways government policy support can be effectively implemented to assist community-based MSMEs.

The impact of MSMEs on increasing income and local labor absorption is also a key focus. This study reveals that the Shrimp Cracker MSMEs in Kayu Api and Cempaka 2 provide stable and decent employment opportunities for the community, including women and youth. These findings enrich local economic empowerment studies by Nugroho (2019), which showed the role of MSMEs in reducing unemployment. However, this study emphasizes a broader social empowerment aspect, illustrating how MSMEs strengthen solidarity and social bonds among residents through collective involvement in production and marketing processes, a socio-cultural dimension rarely explicitly addressed in previous MSME research.

Finally, this study confirms that the Shrimp Cracker MSMEs in Kayu Api and Cempaka 2 are not merely economic entities but also agents of cultural preservation and sustainable social empowerment. By maintaining traditional wood-fire production methods alongside product innovation, these MSMEs combine economic and cultural values that impact local identity strengthening and cultural tourism promotion. This is a novel finding that significantly contributes to the MSME empowerment literature with a local wisdom approach. Overall, the strong synergy among the community, business actors, and government generates multidimensional positive impacts, ranging from economic strengthening to socio-cultural development, which can serve as a model for MSME empowerment in other regions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study successfully identified the empowerment strategies implemented by the Cempaka 2 Wood-Fired Shrimp Crackers MSME in Kelurahan Mendahara Ilir, which significantly enhance both income and product competitiveness in local and external markets. The main empowerment strategies found include improving product quality through continuous training and innovations in flavor variants and hygienic packaging, developing marketing networks that combine traditional and digital methods, managing human resources through managerial training, and sustainably utilizing local raw materials to support production efficiency and preserve authentic flavors. This research presents novelty in integrating product innovations tailored to modern consumer needs, particularly in flavor variants and packaging, areas rarely discussed in previous literature. Moreover, the use of digital platforms as part of the marketing strategy of a traditional MSME provides new empirical evidence of a successful transition to the digital economy era. The study also introduces a socio-cultural dimension in MSME empowerment, highlighting the role of MSMEs as agents of cultural preservation and local identity strengthening through traditional production methods combined with modern innovations. The aspect of coastal ecosystem preservation as part of an environmentally conscious business strategy is also a novel contribution to the literature on natural resource-based MSME empowerment.

The findings offer important recommendations for policymakers, business actors, and other stakeholders to develop MSME empowerment models that align economic, social, and cultural aspects. The government is encouraged to continue supporting MSMEs through training, market access facilitation, and multisectoral collaboration to create a conducive and sustainable business ecosystem. For MSME actors, it is crucial to adopt product innovations and digital marketing without neglecting local wisdom and sustainable natural resource management. Socially, MSME empowerment can strengthen community solidarity and reinforce cultural identity, ultimately supporting inclusive and sustainable local economic growth. This empowerment model can serve as a reference for MSME development in other regions with similar characteristics.

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