

The Role of the UIN Saizu Food Court as a Local Economic Space and a Site of Empowerment for Campus Vendors

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ABSTRACT

The existence of a food court on campus not only functions as a supporting facility for academic activities, but also plays a strategic role as a local economic space for micro-entrepreneurs. This study aims to analyze the role of the Food Court of UIN Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri (UIN SAIZU) Purwokerto in supporting economic activities and empowering campus vendors. The study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Informants were selected purposively, namely vendors directly involved in food court activities. Data were analyzed descriptively and interpretively by linking field findings to the perspectives of locality development and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD).

The findings show that the UIN SAIZU food court functions as a local economic space that provides business opportunities, additional income, and relatively stable market access for campus vendors, although most of them still regard it as a side business. Beyond its economic function, the food court also serves as a social space that strengthens relationships among vendors and generates social capital in the form of trust, informal cooperation, and solidarity. However, its empowerment role still faces several challenges, including limited facilities, weak maintenance, instability in the number of buyers during semester breaks, and minimal business and management training. From the perspectives of locality development and ABCD, the food court has significant potential to be developed into a more participatory, inclusive, and sustainable local economic space. Therefore, improvements in facility management, broader vendor participation in governance, and stronger capacity building are needed to optimize the food court's contribution to the campus local economy.

Keywords: food court, local economy, economic empowerment, campus vendors, ABCD

ABSTRAK

Keberadaan food court di lingkungan kampus tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai fasilitas pendukung aktivitas akademik, tetapi juga memiliki peran strategis sebagai ruang ekonomi lokal bagi pelaku usaha mikro. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran Food Court UIN Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri (UIN SAIZU) Purwokerto dalam mendukung aktivitas ekonomi dan pemberdayaan pedagang kampus. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan dokumentasi. Informan dipilih secara purposif, yaitu pedagang yang terlibat langsung dalam aktivitas food court. Analisis data dilakukan secara deskriptif-interpretatif dengan mengaitkan temuan lapangan pada perspektif locality development dan Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD).

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Food Court UIN SAIZU berfungsi sebagai ruang ekonomi lokal yang menyediakan peluang usaha, tambahan penghasilan, dan akses pasar yang relatif stabil bagi pedagang kampus, meskipun sebagian besar pedagang masih menjadikannya sebagai usaha sampingan. Selain fungsi ekonomi, food court juga membentuk ruang sosial yang memperkuat hubungan antar pedagang dan menghasilkan modal sosial berupa rasa saling percaya, kerja sama informal, dan solidaritas. Namun, peran pemberdayaan masih menghadapi sejumlah kendala, seperti keterbatasan fasilitas, lemahnya pemeliharaan sarana, ketidakstabilan jumlah pembeli pada masa libur kuliah, serta minimnya pelatihan usaha dan manajemen. Dalam perspektif locality development dan ABCD, food court memiliki potensi besar untuk dikembangkan sebagai ruang ekonomi lokal yang lebih partisipatif, inklusif, dan berkelanjutan. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan penguatan tata kelola fasilitas, perluasan partisipasi pedagang, dan peningkatan kapasitas usaha agar kontribusi food court terhadap ekonomi lokal kampus dapat lebih optimal.

Kata kunci: food court, ekonomi lokal, pemberdayaan ekonomi, pedagang kampus, ABCD

Introduction

Unemployment and limited employment opportunities remain important challenges in regional development, including in Kabupaten Banyumas. Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Banyumas recorded that the Open Unemployment Rate (*Tingkat Pengangguran Terbuka / TPT*) in August 2024 stood at 6.18 per cent. This figure indicates that the creation of alternative economic spaces at the local level remains highly relevant in the context of regional development. In such circumstances, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) occupy an important position because they provide employment opportunities, open up new business spaces, and sustain household economies at the local scale (BPS Kabupaten Banyumas, 2025).

Conceptually, MSMEs and the informal sector play a central role in the economies of developing countries. The World Bank affirms that the informal economy continues to constitute a substantial part of Indonesia's economic structure, while the ILO advocates a just transition from the informal economy to the formal economy through recognition, protection, and the strengthening of small-business capacity (World Bank, 2023; ILO, 2015). Accordingly, economic space for micro-enterprises cannot be regarded merely as a marginal economic activity, but must be understood as part of the broader landscape of local economic development.

One form of local economic space that has developed within educational environments is the food court. On university campuses, food courts are not merely areas of consumption, but also arenas for the circulation of capital, spaces of work, and points of encounter between small-scale business actors and campus communities. In the context of UIN Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto, the Food Court is formally managed by the *Pusat Pengembangan Bisnis* (P2B) as part of the university's catering service

provision. News reports at the time of its inauguration on 17 May 2024 stated that the food court was opened with eight tenants selected from twenty-six applicants through a beauty contest mechanism (P2B UIN SAIZU, 2026; Setyawan, 2024). This shows that the UIN SAIZU food court is not merely a spontaneous trading area, but an institutionalised local economic space.

Even so, campus food courts are often understood only as facilities that support the comfort of the academic community. Such a perspective tends to overlook their role as local economic spaces that sustain the livelihoods of small vendors. Yet for vendors, a space such as this is not only a place to sell goods, but also an arena for building a customer base, expanding social networks, and sustaining business continuity. It is therefore important to examine the food court not only from the standpoint of consumers or facility management, but also from the perspective of local economic community development.

This study emerges from that gap. Existing studies on food courts generally focus on consumer behaviour, customer satisfaction, price, or service quality, whereas studies that interpret food courts as local economic spaces and arenas of vendor empowerment remain limited. Accordingly, this study is directed towards answering the following question: how does the UIN SAIZU Food Court function as a local economic space for campus vendors, and to what extent does it support their process of economic empowerment?

Theoretical Framework

Local Economic Space

A local economic space may be understood as an arena in which production, distribution, and consumption activities take place on a limited scale, grounded in social relations, community needs, and local opportunity structures. In this sense, economic activity does not occur within a

neutral space, but is embedded in the relationships among actors, place, and access to resources. A campus food court may be understood as a local economic space because it serves as a point of encounter between micro-business actors and the campus community as its primary consumers. It functions both as a transaction space and as a site for the daily reproduction of small-scale economic activity.

Locality Development

The locality development approach is rooted in the model of community organisation developed by Rothman. This model emphasises citizen participation, cooperation, the strengthening of local leadership, and the development of community capacity to solve its own problems (Rothman, 2008). Within this framework, local space is seen not merely as a physical location, but as a social arena in which relationships, interests, and communal solidarity are constructed. Accordingly, a food court may be read not simply as an economic facility, but as a community space with the potential to foster participation, a sense of ownership, and collective management.

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

The ABCD approach introduced by Kretzmann and McKnight emphasises that community development should begin from the assets already possessed by a community, rather than from a catalogue of deficiencies or problems (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Mathie and Cunningham (2003) further argue that ABCD transforms how communities are perceived: from “clients” defined by deprivation into “citizens” who possess assets, capacities, and potential that can be organised for collective development. In the context of a food court, vendors should not be understood as weak and dependent actors, but rather as a community already endowed with individual, social, physical, and institutional assets that can be strengthened.

The Informal Sector, MSMEs, and Social Capital

In general, food court vendors occupy a space between the informal and semi-formal sectors. They operate on a small scale, with limited capital, simple management, and a relatively high dependence on daily customer flows. In such a situation, social capital becomes a crucial resource. Putnam (2000) defines social capital as the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. For a community of vendors, social capital may take the form of mutual trust, solidarity, information-sharing, and informal cooperation that supports the continuity of everyday business activities.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because the study aims to understand in depth the socio-economic reality of food court vendors from their own perspective. A case study was used because the research object is highly specific, namely the UIN SAIZU Food Court as a single local economic space with distinctive institutional characteristics.

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to directly examine vendors’ economic activities, facility conditions, patterns of interaction among actors, and the general atmosphere of the food court. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to explore more deeply the experiences of vendors, including their income, business challenges, relationships with other vendors, and their views on the existence of the food court. Informants were selected purposively, namely vendors directly involved in food court activities and considered sufficiently knowledgeable about the business dynamics at the research site. Documentation was used to complement the data, particularly with regard to the official status of the food court, its

management, and the broader institutional context of the university.

Data were analysed through reduction, display, and conclusion drawing as formulated by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). This framework was used so that field data could be organised systematically and interpreted analytically rather than merely descriptively.

Findings and Discussion

The UIN SAIZU Food Court as a Local Economic Space

The findings show that the UIN SAIZU Food Court plays a tangible role as a local economic space within the university environment. The food court provides a relatively strategic place of business for vendors because it is located within an environment that offers a potentially stable market, namely students, lecturers, education staff, and campus visitors. Vendors are provided with basic facilities in the form of vending space, tables, electricity, and water, giving them greater security of business space than they would have if they had to trade informally outside the campus.

Most informants described their business at the food court as a supplementary source of income rather than their primary livelihood. This finding illustrates the flexible and adaptive character of micro-enterprise activity. Vendors utilise campus space to strengthen household economies without having to depend entirely on a single form of livelihood. From the perspective of locality development, this suggests that a local space such as the food court can serve as a significant alternative economic strategy for small-scale business actors.

However, the economic function of the food court does not lie only in the value of income generated. Its existence also opens up a new structure of economic opportunity. Because the business space is institutionally managed by the university, vendors gain direct access to a

relatively stable consumer base during periods of academic activity. In this sense, the food court functions as a local economic space that connects micro-business actors with the campus consumption ecosystem.

The Food Court as a Social Space and Generator of Social Capital

In addition to functioning as an economic space, the food court also serves as a social space. Interview findings indicate that relationships among vendors tend to be harmonious and cooperative. They know one another, respect one another, and in certain situations assist one another. This shows that the food court does not place vendors solely within relations of competition, but also within relations of mutuality.

From an ABCD perspective, the positive social relationships among vendors represent an important form of social asset. Trust, communication, and solidarity among vendors can provide the foundation for building stronger cooperation, for example in maintaining cleanliness, sharing information, or collectively strengthening their position. At this point, the food court is not merely a space of economic transaction, but a site for the formation of social networks that sustain business continuity.

Even so, this social capital still operates informally. It has not yet been organised into a vendor forum or group that plays a meaningful role in the governance of the food court. In other words, social capital is already present, but it has not yet developed into institutional capital that could strengthen the position of vendors more strategically.

The Role of Facilities in Supporting Vendor Activity

The field findings show that facilities play a strategic role in sustaining vendor activity. Basic facilities such as vending space, tables, electricity, and water constitute important physical capital for business continuity. Within

the ABCD framework, such facilities are physical assets that provide the operational foundation for vendors.

However, this study also found that the quality of facilities is not yet fully adequate. Vendors pointed to problems such as murky water quality, limited seating, and the absence of nearby supporting facilities such as toilets and prayer spaces as tangible constraints. These shortcomings affect the comfort of vendors as well as that of customers. In the context of food businesses, the quality of supporting facilities directly influences consumer experience and the sustainability of transactions.

Another problem concerns the inconsistency of facility maintenance. According to vendors, improvements to facilities were more frequently undertaken during the initial operational phase, but were not subsequently maintained on a routine basis. This indicates that institutional support for physical assets has not yet been accompanied by a sustainable maintenance system.

Vendor Participation in the Management of the Space: Still Limited

One important finding of this study is that vendor participation in the management of the food court remains relatively limited. Vendors function primarily as users of the facility and operators of economic activity, rather than as actors meaningfully involved in decision-making regarding the management of the space. They have not yet been given sufficient room to participate in facility planning, management evaluation, or the drafting of shared operational rules.

From the perspective of locality development, this situation suggests that the food court has not yet fully evolved into a participatory community space. In fact, vendor participation in management could strengthen their sense of ownership over the space, improve governance quality, and create opportunities for the

emergence of local leadership among the vendors themselves.

The Form of Empowerment That Has Emerged: Individual Rather Than Collective

The most visible form of empowerment at the UIN SAIZU Food Court is individual economic empowerment. Vendors make use of the available space to run businesses, earn supplementary income, and expand their access to the market. To a certain degree, this demonstrates that the food court has opened up genuine economic opportunities.

However, this form of empowerment still operates predominantly at the individual level. Vendors have not yet been adequately facilitated in building collective capacity, for instance through training, group organisation, or managerial strengthening. The absence of business and management training constitutes one of the main obstacles. As a result, businesses continue to operate based on practical experience, but have not yet developed into more professionally and strategically managed enterprises.

Main Challenges: Facilities, the Academic Calendar, and Business Capacity

This study identifies three principal challenges. First, the inadequacy of facilities and the inconsistency of their maintenance. Second, the instability in the number of customers, which is heavily affected by the academic calendar. When students are on holiday, customer numbers decline sharply and vendor income correspondingly weakens. Third, the absence of adequate business and management training makes it difficult for vendors to develop their business capacity in a more systematic way.

These three challenges indicate that while the food court is indeed important as a local economic space, it has not yet fully functioned as a strong space of empowerment. If the food court is to serve as a genuine arena of economic empowerment, more targeted intervention is

needed in relation to governance, facilities, and vendor capacity.

Conclusion

The UIN SAIZU Food Court functions as a local economic space that provides small vendors with opportunities to earn supplementary income and run businesses within the university environment. Its existence shows that the university is not only an academic space, but also an economic space that connects the consumption needs of the academic community with the livelihoods of micro-business actors.

Beyond its economic function, the food court also operates as a social space that fosters harmonious relationships among vendors. Good relations, informal cooperation, and a sense of togetherness among vendors indicate the presence of important social capital for business continuity. From the perspective of ABCD, such social capital constitutes a valuable community asset that can form the basis for strengthening the vendor community.

Even so, the empowering role of the food court continues to face several limitations. Physical facilities remain inadequate, maintenance is inconsistent, customer numbers are highly dependent on the academic calendar, and vendor capacity strengthening through training remains minimal. In addition, vendor participation in food court management is not yet sufficiently strong. Thus, while the UIN SAIZU Food Court has already functioned as a local economic space, it has not yet fully developed into a participatory and sustainable space of economic empowerment.

Recommendations

The management should improve the quality of facilities and ensure their regular maintenance, particularly with regard to water quality, seating, cleanliness, and the availability of accessible supporting facilities such as toilets

and prayer spaces.

More meaningful participatory space should be opened for vendors in the management of the food court, for example through a vendor forum, routine evaluation mechanisms, or a communication platform between vendors and management.

The university should also organise simple yet relevant training for vendors, such as financial management, customer service, hygiene in culinary businesses, and marketing strategies.

Efforts to strengthen the vendor community should aim to ensure that the existing social capital does not remain merely an informal relationship, but develops into a collective capacity capable of supporting the economic sustainability of vendors within the campus environment.

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