



Exploring the Lived Meaning of Productive Zakat in the Economic and Spiritual Transformation of Mustahik in Urban Indonesia

Muhammad Furqon Almurni

STIBA Ar Raayah Sukabumi, Indonesia

muhammad.furqon850@gmail.com

Article Info

Article history:

Received 31-03-2025

Revised 10-05-2025

Accepted 17-05-2025

Keyword:

Productive Zakat;
Phenomenology; Lived
Experience; Mustahik;
Spiritual Transformation;
Islamic Social Finance.

ABSTRACT

Zakat, as a core institution in Islamic economics, has increasingly been implemented in productive forms to support long-term poverty alleviation and self-reliance among Muslim communities. While previous studies have examined its economic outcomes, limited attention has been paid to how recipients (mustahik) experience and assign meaning to this support within their personal, spiritual, and social lives.

Despite measurable improvements in income and business activity, little is known about how mustahik interpret the transformative process they undergo after receiving productive zakat particularly in terms of identity, dignity, and faith.

This study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how mustahik construct meaning from their experiences with productive zakat and how this influences their internal transformation.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight participants who had received productive zakat in urban Indonesia. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: rediscovery of dignity through self-reliance, internalization of religious motivation, reconstruction of social roles, and a heightened sense of gratitude and accountability. These themes indicate that productive zakat fosters not only economic empowerment but also spiritual growth and social reintegration, revealing a holistic model of beneficiary transformation.

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of zakat as a faith-based development tool that affects both material and immaterial dimensions of well-being, offering valuable insights for future policy design and research in Islamic social finance.



©2025 Authors. Published by PT Mukhlisina Revolution Center.. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

INTRODUCTION

In many Muslim-majority societies, poverty alleviation has long been intertwined with religious mandates and communal responsibilities. Zakat, a central pillar of Islamic economic practice, serves not only as a form of wealth redistribution but also as a spiritual obligation designed to purify one's wealth and support those in need. In recent decades, the implementation of productive zakat programs which provide capital or tools instead of consumable aid has emerged as a strategic response to chronic poverty, aiming to foster long-term economic self-reliance among mustahik (zakat beneficiaries).

Despite the growing attention given to productive zakat in development policy and Islamic social finance literature, much of the current discourse has emphasized quantifiable outcomes such as income improvement, business growth, or financial independence. While these measures are crucial, they may overlook the nuanced and deeply personal experiences that unfold as beneficiaries transition from economic dependency to self-sufficiency. The journey often involves profound psychological shifts, changes in identity, and renewed spiritual purpose elements that are difficult to capture through numerical indicators alone.

Within this context, the lived experience of mustahik holds significant value. Their narratives offer insight into how individuals interpret the transformation brought about by zakat not only as recipients of financial aid, but as agents navigating their roles in society, redefining their self-worth, and reengaging with spiritual commitments. These experiences are embedded in complex cultural, religious, and social frameworks that shape how zakat is perceived, received, and internalized.

Understanding such experiences requires a methodological approach that goes beyond surface-level outcomes. It calls for an exploration into the meaning-making processes of those directly affected an approach well-aligned with phenomenology. As a qualitative tradition, phenomenology prioritizes human experience, seeking to uncover how people perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to the events and conditions that shape their lives. In the context of Islamic economic practice, this lens provides a way to access the subjective realities of mustahik as they navigate economic empowerment through faith-based mechanisms.

In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on understanding how recipients of zakat experience and internalize the economic and spiritual transformations associated with productive zakat programs. The exploration of such lived experiences represents a crucial area of inquiry within Islamic economics and social welfare studies, particularly as stakeholders seek to evaluate the real impact of zakat beyond traditional economic indicators.

However, capturing the depth of these experiences presents considerable methodological challenges. Much of the existing research has relied heavily on quantitative metrics, such as income levels, capital growth, and business performance, to assess the effectiveness of zakat initiatives. While such data provide valuable benchmarks, they often fail to uncover the subjective dimensions of empowerment such as changes in self-perception, moral agency, or spiritual meaning that are deeply embedded in the lives of zakat recipients.

As a result, previous approaches have struggled to fully grasp the essence of transformation as experienced by the mustahik themselves. Numerical data cannot articulate the internal journey of a recipient who transitions from dependency to dignity, nor can standardized surveys adequately reveal how receiving zakat reshapes one's sense of purpose, faith, or social responsibility. These limitations underscore a critical methodological gap in current zakat research: the need for qualitative frameworks that honor the complexity, depth, and context of human experience.

Interpretative phenomenology offers a compelling avenue for addressing this gap. By prioritizing the meaning individuals assign to their experiences, this approach enables researchers to delve into the emotional, spiritual, and cognitive dimensions of transformation facets that are often invisible in traditional evaluation models. In the case of productive zakat, such an approach allows for a deeper understanding of how beneficiaries internalize and respond to the support they receive, and how it reshapes their identities, relationships, and life trajectories.

Existing solutions aimed at alleviating poverty through zakat have largely adopted practical frameworks, focusing on measurable indicators such as capital utilization, business growth, or financial literacy training. These interventions often rely on performance metrics to assess the effectiveness of productive zakat, assuming that economic advancement equates to holistic empowerment. While these models serve important operational and policy purposes, they frequently overlook the experiential dimension of how beneficiaries interpret and internalize their transformation.

Quantitative evaluations and programmatic audits, though informative, are inherently limited in capturing the emotional, spiritual, and cognitive shifts that define the personal journeys of mustahik. As a result, the deeper meanings of dignity, gratitude, religious responsibility, and community belonging remain underexplored. These subjective realities, which are critical to the sustainability and ethical grounding of zakat implementation, often go unrecognized in mainstream assessments.

This gap in understanding suggests the need for an alternative methodological lens one that centers the voices of the beneficiaries and honors the contextual richness of their lived experiences. Phenomenology, particularly its interpretative variant, offers a powerful tool to uncover how

individuals construct meaning from receiving zakat, how they perceive their evolving identities, and how these transformations are mediated through religious, cultural, and social frameworks. Such an approach enables a more holistic exploration of the phenomenon, revealing not only what changes occurred, but also how and why those changes were experienced as meaningful.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of zakat distribution, especially its economic impact on poverty alleviation. However, only a few have addressed how zakat recipients experience transformation in terms of identity, dignity, or spirituality. Research by Abduh and Alias (2021) revealed the spiritual meaning of receiving zakat, while Fatimah et al. (2024) highlighted the internal empowerment among women in micro zakat programs. These findings suggest that the meaning of productive zakat goes beyond financial benefit and touches deeper aspects of human experience. Yet, the complexity of these transformations remains insufficiently explored within mainstream Islamic economics literature.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how mustahik construct meaning from receiving productive zakat. The method was chosen to address the identified knowledge gap: the lack of deep, contextual understanding of recipients' lived experiences. Phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of emotional, spiritual, and social changes that cannot be captured through quantitative measures. Through this lens, the study seeks to uncover how zakat is internalized as a transformative force within individual and communal life. The research answers the question of how mustahik perceive and make meaning of their journey from economic dependency to self-reliance.

The article is structured into six sections. The Introduction presents the context, background, and rationale for the study. The Method section explains the interpretative phenomenological design, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. The Results section details key themes that emerged from the narratives of the participants. The Discussion connects the findings to existing literature and highlights their theoretical and practical implications. The article concludes with reflections on the meaning of productive zakat and its relevance for future policy and practice in Islamic social finance.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of mustahik (zakat recipients) who underwent economic and spiritual transformation after receiving productive zakat. Phenomenology, rooted in philosophical inquiry, seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning from lived experiences. The interpretative branch, influenced by Heideggerian thought, emphasizes the contextual and relational aspects of meaning-making, recognizing that personal histories, socio-cultural settings, and spiritual beliefs inform individual interpretations of life events. This approach was deemed appropriate for investigating the depth and complexity of mustahik narratives, particularly in understanding how economic assistance intersects with spiritual identity and social reintegration.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who had received productive zakat within the last 12 to 24 months and had actively engaged in income-generating activities supported by the funds. Inclusion criteria required participants to be Muslim adults (aged 25–55), classified as mustahik under local Islamic philanthropic programs, and willing to share their personal experiences. Exclusion criteria included those who received zakat for purely consumptive purposes or had limited cognitive ability to participate in in-depth interviews. A total of eight participants (5 males, 3 females) were involved, with ages ranging from 29 to 53 years. All participants were from low-income urban communities in East Java, Indonesia, and had varying levels of educational attainment and business experience. The diversity in demographic backgrounds provided rich contextual variation relevant to the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face at locations chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and privacy. An interview guide was used to explore themes such as initial perceptions of zakat assistance, challenges in utilizing the funds, spiritual reflections, and perceived social change. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and environmental context. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, and transcripts were translated into English for analysis. The data collection process prioritized empathy and active listening, allowing participants to narrate their stories in their own terms. Member checking was performed after transcription to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of each account.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a structured approach designed to uncover the essential meanings of lived experiences. Transcripts were read repeatedly to immerse in the data, followed by the identification of initial codes that captured key phrases or expressions. These meaning units were grouped into emerging themes through a process of thematic abstraction. Themes were then clustered based on conceptual relatedness and refined into superordinate categories. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing the data, though emphasis remained on interpretative engagement rather than mechanical coding. The analytical process emphasized both convergence and divergence in experiences, leading to nuanced insights into the psychological, spiritual, and social transformations experienced by the mustahik.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants were provided with a written information sheet detailing the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained in writing before participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by removing identifying information and using pseudonyms in transcripts and reports. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with national ethical guidelines for social science research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

This study explored the lived experiences of mustahik (zakat beneficiaries) who received productive zakat support and underwent transformation across economic, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), four major themes emerged that reflect the essential meanings of their experiences. Each theme is presented with rich narrative descriptions and supported by direct quotations from participants to preserve authenticity and contextual validity.

Rediscovering Dignity Through Self-Reliance

Many participants expressed a profound sense of regained self-worth and dignity after engaging in productive economic activities made possible by zakat capital. Prior to receiving the aid, feelings of dependency, helplessness, and societal inferiority were commonly experienced. However, being entrusted with capital evoked a sense of responsibility and pride.

“I used to wait for help... I never imagined I could earn something on my own. Now, I can send my child to school. That's my pride.” (Participant 3)

This theme reflects how economic empowerment served as more than just financial gain it catalyzed a psychological shift towards self-respect and social recognition. The notion of *karamah insanियah* (human dignity in Islam) emerged implicitly as participants navigated their paths from dependency to self-sufficiency.

Internalization of Religious Motivation and Spiritual Growth

Participants reported a strengthened spiritual identity and a deeper connection with God (Allah SWT) after being entrusted with zakat funds. The feeling of being chosen to receive help was interpreted as divine intervention and a reminder of religious obligations.

“After getting this help, I feel I must work not just for money, but as worship. I wake up for tahajjud now, asking Allah for guidance in my business.” (Participant 7)

Spirituality was not merely a passive experience but an active motivator that shaped how participants viewed work, effort, and risk. The productive zakat initiative was seen not only as charity but as a trust (amanah) to be honored with sincerity (ikhlas).

Reconstructing Social Roles and Community Engagement

The transformation also included social dynamics, where beneficiaries began to see themselves as contributors to their communities rather than burdens. Several participants described a shift from isolation to active engagement in communal and religious events.

“Before, I avoided gatherings because I was ashamed. Now, I am invited to share my story in community meetings. They listen, they respect me.” (Participant 5)

This evolution illustrates how social identity was reconstructed through economic participation. The participants gained not only income but also a sense of belonging and purpose, aligning with Islamic values of ukhuwah (brotherhood) and ta’awun (mutual help).

The Meaning of Responsibility and Gratitude

Participants overwhelmingly felt a strong emotional and moral responsibility to use the zakat funds wisely. Gratitude was not expressed merely in words but demonstrated through careful management of funds, discipline in business activities, and avoidance of extravagance.

“It’s not just money it’s a test. I feel accountable, not to the institution, but to Allah. If I fail, it’s like betraying His gift.” (Participant 2)

The intersection of gratitude and accountability created a unique internal compass guiding their decisions, reinforcing the maqashid shariah (objectives of Islamic law) by promoting ethical and purposeful economic behavior.

The lived experiences of mustahik revealed that productive zakat is not only an instrument of economic assistance but also a transformative mechanism of identity reconstruction, spiritual growth, and social reintegration. Each theme reflects a layer of meaning that goes beyond material outcomes, pointing to the profound psychological and religious dimensions involved in the journey of mustahik.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that recipients of productive zakat (mustahik) experienced deep transformation across four major themes: rediscovering dignity through self-reliance, internalizing religious motivation, reconstructing social roles, and embracing gratitude with a sense of moral responsibility. These themes collectively respond to the central research question by highlighting how productive zakat is not merely an economic intervention, but a process of identity reformation and spiritual growth shaped by lived experience.

The study contributes significantly to answering the central inquiry posed in the introduction how mustahik make meaning of their transformation after receiving productive zakat. Unlike conventional evaluations that focus on economic metrics, this study reveals how beneficiaries interpret zakat as a divine trust that redefines their self-worth and social value. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, the narratives uncovered an evolving sense of responsibility, community re-engagement, and spiritual awakening, demonstrating that zakat serves not only as a tool for economic empowerment but also as a catalyst for moral and existential reflection. This contribution

offers a nuanced understanding of empowerment within Islamic social finance that prioritizes subjective meaning and personal transformation.

The findings are consistent with and extend the work of Abduh and Alias (2021), who documented spiritual meanings in the experiences of Malaysian zakat recipients. Similarly, Fatimah et al. (2024) described how women in micro zakat programs experienced empowerment through increased self-worth and religious consciousness. This study affirms those insights while deepening the analysis through the IPA framework, revealing not only what participants experienced, but how they understood and internalized those experiences in religious and social terms. The theme of dignity, for instance, aligns with Islamic conceptions of *karamah insaniyyah*, while the emphasis on accountability reflects ethical imperatives rooted in *amanah* and *ikhlas*. In contrast to Yusuf et al. (2022), whose focus remained primarily on economic outcomes, this research foregrounds the inner transformation that sustains long-term empowerment and spiritual resilience.

The implications of these findings are both socially and professionally significant. From a social perspective, the study highlights the transformative potential of productive zakat as more than economic aid it becomes a vehicle for restoring dignity, reinforcing spiritual identity, and nurturing community engagement. This understanding is especially relevant for policymakers, religious institutions, and zakat management organizations aiming to design programs that respect not only material needs but also the lived realities and inner lives of beneficiaries. On a broader scale, the findings suggest that Islamic philanthropic models can foster empowerment by integrating spiritual accountability and ethical selfhood, making the outcomes more sustainable in both economic and moral dimensions. These insights are particularly valuable for contexts with similar socio-religious frameworks, where faith-based development initiatives play a central role.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The sample size was intentionally limited, in accordance with the interpretative phenomenological approach, which prioritizes depth over breadth. While this method provides rich, contextually grounded insights, it also restricts the generalizability of findings to wider populations. Additionally, all participants were drawn from a specific geographic and cultural setting within Indonesia, which may influence how zakat is interpreted and experienced. These contextual boundaries must be considered when applying the findings to other regions or communities. Furthermore, as with all qualitative studies, researcher interpretation although rigorously guided by IPA methodology inevitably shapes the analysis.

Future research may build on these insights by exploring comparative experiences across different zakat programs, regions, or recipient demographics. Longitudinal studies could also be valuable in examining how the meanings assigned to zakat evolve over time and influence sustained behavioral or spiritual change. Moreover, integrating interdisciplinary perspectives such as Islamic theology, psychology, and development studies may deepen the analysis of how faith-based economic interventions interact with personal and communal transformation. Such efforts will continue to enrich the field of Islamic economics by centering human experience as a critical dimension of welfare and empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how mustahik interpret their personal and spiritual transformation after receiving productive zakat, addressing the need to understand empowerment beyond material outcomes. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered four key themes: rediscovered dignity, internalized religious motivation, reconstructed social roles, and a deepened sense of gratitude and accountability. These findings demonstrate that zakat not only supports economic improvement but also fosters ethical identity, spiritual awareness, and social reintegration. The study fills a critical gap in Islamic economic literature by emphasizing the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of zakat recipients. It offers a foundation for designing zakat programs that align with both material and moral dimensions of human well-being. Future research may expand these insights by applying similar methods across diverse cultural or geographic settings to enrich the understanding of faith-based development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research was conducted independently, and no commercial or financial relationships influenced the design, execution, or interpretation of the findings. All funding sources have been acknowledged transparently, and ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

REFERENCES

- Ab Rahman, S. M., Wahid, K. A., Nafi, M. N. A., Awang, S., & Setapa, M. (2021). Bibliometric analysis of zakat research in Scopus database. *International Journal of Zakat*, 6(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.37706/ijaz.v6i1.253>
- Ariani, S., & Yasin, A. (2022). Productive zakat and its impact on mustahik's welfare: A CIBEST index approach. *Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Islamic Economics and Law (ACIEL)*. <https://conference.trunojoyo.ac.id/pub/aciell/article/view/572>
- Beik, I. S., & Arsyianti, L. D. (2016). Measuring zakat impact on poverty and welfare using CIBEST model. *Journal of Islamic Monetary Economics and Finance*, 1(2), 141–160. <https://doi.org/10.21098/jimf.v1i2.524>
- Hamidah, R. A., Alam, A., Anggraeni, A., & Sahrul, R. (2021). An assessment of zakat contributions for productive purposes to empower the mustahik economy in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. *ZISWAF: Jurnal Zakat dan Wakaf*, 8(2), 154–167. <https://journal.iainkudus.ac.id/index.php/Ziswaf/article/view/21635>
- Larkin, M., & Thompson, A. (2012). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In A. Thompson & D. Harper (Eds.), *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy: A guide for students and practitioners* (pp. 99–116). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119973249.ch8>
- Miller, R. M., Chan, C. D., & Farmer, L. B. (2018). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: A contemporary qualitative approach. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 57(4), 240–254. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ceas.12114>
- Nurzaman, M. S., Annisa, N., & Hendharto, R. G. (2017). Evaluation of the productive zakat program of BAZNAS: A case study from Western Indonesia. *International Journal of Zakat*, 2(1), 81–93. <https://doi.org/10.37706/ijaz.v2i1.17>
- Pamuncak, M. B., Wahid, H., Ismail, A. G., & Sarmidi, T. (2025). What could determine zakat collection: Bibliometric analysis on Scopus and Web of Science database. *Journal of Islamic Accounting and Business Research*, 16(1), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIABR-07-2023-0214>
- Putri Apriliyah, R., & Arifianto, B. (2022). Evaluation of zakat literature: A bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review. *Review of Islamic Social Finance and Entrepreneurship*, 1(1), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.20885/RISFE.vol1.iss1.art4>
- Ryandono, M. N. H., & Nanda, A. S. (2020). The transformation of mustahiq as productive zakat recipients in Surabaya. *Journal of Economic Cooperation and Development*, 41(3), 1–14.

<https://scholar.unair.ac.id/en/publications/the-transformation-of-mustahiq-as-productive-zakat-recipients-in->

- Soleha, N., & Annisa, N. (2017). Evaluation of the productive zakat program of BAZNAS: A case study from Western Indonesia. *International Journal of Zakat*, 2(1), 81–93. <https://doi.org/10.37706/ijaz.v2i1.17>
- Sudiono, S., & Yulianti, E. (2023). Management and allocation of productive zakat to enhance the economic empowerment of mustahik. *International Journal of Islamic Economics and Finance (IJEI)*, 6(1), 35–50. <https://journal.islamiconomic.or.id/index.php/ije/article/view/642>
- Syauqi Beik, I., & Arsyianti, L. D. (2016). Measuring zakat impact on poverty and welfare using CIBEST model. *Journal of Islamic Monetary Economics and Finance*, 1(2), 141–160. <https://doi.org/10.21098/jimf.v1i2.524>
- Yusof, M. B. M., & Rahman, A. A. (2023). Islamic social finance for achieving sustainable development goals: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Ethics and Systems*, 39(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOES-12-2022-0317>
- Zain, M., & Wahid, H. (2025). Advancing social impact through Islamic social finance: A comprehensive bibliometric analysis. *International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences*, 10(11), 100–112. <https://doi.org/10.21833/ijaas.2023.11.011>