

ADVANCING SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH HOLISTIC MINISTRY OF LOCAL CHURCHES IN NORTH SULAWESI

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ABSTRACT

This study examines why local churches in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, struggle to translate their theological commitments to justice and creation care into sustained and holistic ministries aligned with sustainability principles. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, data were gathered from 178 congregants, four focus groups (n=32), and eight key informant interviews across three Protestant churches. The study identifies five issues interrelated like: (1) the gap in the operation; (2) the human resources gap; (3) the financial weakness; (4) the cultural-theological gap; and (5) the underutilized assets.. Critically, these barriers reinforce themselves, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of inertia. The study provides an empirically grounded understanding of faith-based sustainability challenges in the Global South, shifting the discourse from deficit-based to asset-based approaches. It highlights the importance of holistic interventions that simultaneously focus on theological re-education, institutional capacity, and financial innovation. Strategies such as designing stepwise ministry toolkits, establishing minor lay-coordinating roles, creating various funding sources through social enterprises or grants, and redefining ecological and social action as part of the ecclesial identity are among the recommendations. Such findings provide a replicable template for churches worldwide that seek to connect faith and sustainable action in ways that resonate with their cultures.

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INTRODUCTIONS

The 2030 Agenda and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a conceptual shift in the vision of progress, moving away from traditional economic indicators to include justice, environmental responsibility, and responsible governance. (Allen et al., 2018; Kampilong, Karauwan, et al., 2025; Krannich & Reiser, 2023) The achievement of this vision requires extensive involvement of the society, i.e., governments, businesses, civil society,

and especially faith-based organizations (FBOs), whose moral authority and community presence offer unique leverage. (Luetz & Nunn, 2023; Schliesser, 2024) Local churches are the most prominent members of the FBO, where they exist not only as places of worship but also as reliable community sources, shaping sacred practices and prepared to bring long-term, value-based change to individuals' lives. (Birher, 2025; Swithinbank et al., 2019)

This is particularly high in Indonesia, a Muslim majority country with a substantial Christian minority whose churches have traditionally functioned as school institutions, healthcare institutions, peace brokers, and, more recently, environmental protectionists. (Kariuki, 2018; Siswoko & Wahyuni, 2024) Many Indonesian congregations define holistic services as those that indicate true discipleship cannot disregard the employment of prayer and action. So, it should take up problems of poverty, injustice, and ecological damage as inseparable aspects of religious life. (Kalalo et al., 2025; Sarimbangun et al., 2024; Suoth, 2024) This aligns with the SDGs' call to integrate solutions and the concept of shalom, defined as wholeness in which people, society, and nature all flourish. (Macarthur & Macdonald, 2024; Sanou, 2012)).

Despite this strong agreement, there remains an ongoing discord that wholesome sustainability-based ministry continually faces: Getting absorbed into everyday church life. Many churches are quick to say that they want holistic services, but their programs are neither sustained nor systematic, and they are certainly not measurable or aimed at root causes. (Nanthambwe, 2024) As a result of these factors, a theory often mentioned emerges: the knowing-doing gap. Moreover, the knowing-doing gap refers to the difference between realizing what you know is right, knowing what you should know is right, and taking the right action based on that knowledge. (Greene & Shaw, 2021; Luetz & Nunn, 2023)

In addition, while the global and regional literature identifies these broad categories of barriers, there is a severe lack of empirical, contextual studies that diagnose the precise nature, relative weight, lived experience, and systemic interrelationships of these barriers in the micro-context of local Indonesian congregations. Many researchers have examined large denominational structures, national policies, and abstract theological issues. Thus, there is a significant lack of understanding of the on-the-ground realities faced by ordinary pastors, elders, and laypeople seeking to effect change in their communities. As highlighted by Allen et al. (2018), this gap in the literature translates into a gap in practice: without a precise evidence-based diagnosis, interventions are generic, imported, and likely to fail. (Allen et al., 2018) This research directly fills this gap.

In this work, I will look into the cultural and structural impediments to holistic, sustainability-based ministry. It is based on three Protestant churches in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, a place of strong faith and strong cultural identity. These churches were partners with the research team, not outsiders. We are convinced that the change can start in the very life of the congregation. The seeds of change already exist. They are resilient. They do not have to be brought in from abroad. The right solutions are developed during honest discussions with the members of the church. They manifest themselves when we acknowledge the history, gifts, and struggles of a community.

It is not only aimed at determining hindrances. It is also to discover the latent strengths. Ministry daily is full of wisdom that theory usually fails to capture. The intersection of faith and development is studied by mapping limits and capacities, which further enriches our understanding of their actual intersection. After all, these lessons are supposed to help churches in Papua Province. They aim to develop a socially engaged, sustainable, and transformative praxis. Above all, it has to be embedded in the culture, identity, and spiritual tradition of the people, rather than foreign templates.

The core of this question is a research question: *What structural and cultural challenges prevent local Indonesian churches from achieving their vision of a holistic, sustainability-oriented service? How do these challenges sustain one another, developing a cycle of stagnation?* To explore this, the paper also questions how pastors, lay leaders, volunteers, and ordinary members of their congregations approach and make sense of these challenges in their day-to-day practice. *What latent assets are available in these congregations, and can they be utilized to overcome the identified barriers: social, human, and theological? What can the findings that come out of it tell us about designing effective, context-specific intervention models?*

The Theological and Practical Imperative for Holistic Ministry

This call to holistic ministry is not a new concept; it is actually a thread woven throughout the Christian religion. It has its roots in the Hebrew term shalom, which means rich and broad peace, and constitutes the right relationship with God, with each other, and with the Earth itself. (Franklin, 1999; Nahuway, 2001) This is reminiscent of Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God as a living presence, characterized by healing, liberation, and justice for the marginalized. (Ali, 2025; Mdingi, 2022) Faith, as described all over Scripture, is never interim or spiritual, but invariably embodied, social, and based on the actual needs of people and creation. (Kalalo & Limbah, 2024; Wright,

1984). The vision is expanded by the Apostle Paul in his explanation of the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), a community with a mission not only to believe but also to perform the work of hands and feet of Christ and to care for people and communities. (Ezeoruny, 2024; Sagala, 2025)

As a result, numerous theologians and practitioners today believe that the division of faith into the spiritual and the social is not only less effective but also perverts the gospel itself. (Kalalo & Limbah, 2024; Nanthambwe, 2024).

It is impressive that such an ancient combined vision has a resonant companion in the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 17 goals (169 in total) acknowledge that poverty, climate change, health, justice, and peace cannot be discussed separately. (Albu, 2023; Kampilong, Rattu, et al., 2025). This type of system understanding reflects the completeness of the gospel. Faith communities are important to the SDGs not only because they have the capacity to assist, but also because they are so-called moral communities that cultivate the very virtues that can bring about sustainable change: compassion, justice, creation care, and solidarity, as Schliesser (2024) notes. In a world exhausted by temporary fixes and empty promises, churches have something irreplaceable to offer: not a program, but a way of seeing. It is a vision shaped by hope that refuses to fade, held together by love that acts, and oriented toward the well-being of all—not just for the moment, but for generations to come. (Marx, 2023; Short et al., 2024)

Structural Barriers Amid Scarcity and Institutional Deficit

There is a growing consensus among scholars that faith-based development is most challenged by structural constraints and not a lack of goodwill. Allen et al. (2018) examined the early implementation of the SDGs in various countries. They discovered that local religious actors are usually able to have a clear vision. However, they do not have the institutional capacity to design, administer, or even evaluate complex, long-term health, education, or environmental justice programs. This is particularly acute in churches that rely on volunteers and thus operate without professionals. According to Nanthambwe (2024), it is a capacity crunch. His term captures the tension between the community's high expectations and the scarcity of organizational resources, a trend seen in South Africa and elsewhere.

This is further aggravated by financial instability. In the Global South, the majority of local churches depend on weekly donations by their members. Such contributions are in reaction to short-term demands, not long-term planning. Unpredictable revenue undermines long-term programming. (Boimau et al., 2024; Christanti et al., 2023; Kachumi et al., 2025) It deteriorates investment in retraining, surveillance, or adaptive management. According to Kariuki (2018), churches thus resort to short-term strategies, such as disaster relief or seasonal charity, while long-term strategies are not developed. Christanti et al. (2023) conclude that even theologically strong projects are disintegrating and are unlikely to succeed without predictable funding. Allen et al. (2018) complement this dependency by stating that financial precarity also contributes to reliance on external donors. (Allen et al., 2018; Christanti et al., 2023)

Cultural and Theological Barriers in the Shadow of the Sacred-Secular Divide

While structural barriers are evident, researchers find that the more significant barriers are the cultural and theological assumptions of church communities. The article by Swinbank et al. (2019) examined British Christians' perceptions of sustainable living. They discovered that religion can motivate environmental action. A dualistic worldview among believers can also impede it. It is a very rigid division between the sacred and the secular; between prayer, worship, and evangelism on one hand, and, on the other, aspects of the environment, social justice, or civic activity. Spiritual activities are considered the church's true mission. The material or systemic interventions are usually considered secondary, optional, and even inappropriate. (Kalalo et al., 2025)

This religious conservative separation is not accidental. It represents historic trends in Christian thought. That tradition was a continuation of post-Enlightenment Western theology, which left religion to individual belief and transferred the life of the State to secular authority. (Birher, 2025) The tradition lives on in the vernacular of the congregation. Ordinary expressions such as "The church should save souls, not build toilets" or "That is the job of government, not ours" tell of a theological explanation of disengagement. These opinions make congregations less supportive of integrated development work. They reduce the number of volunteers and limit funding for holistic programs. (Swithinbank et al., 2019)

Recent scholarship contends that this barrier cannot be overcome solely through technical solutions. Luetz and Nunn (2023) argue that caring and searching for justice do not make the gospel a distraction. These are the fundamental statements of Christian discipleship. Pembroke (2025) notes that the transition to this paradigm cannot

be achieved solely through program changes. It requires theological realignment and cultural transformation, even among the faith communities themselves. (Luetz & Nunn, 2023; Pembroke, 2025)

The Indonesian Context Amid Potential and Paradox

Indonesia provides a unique setting for faith-based development. Pancasila is a national ideology that encompasses the belief in the One God and social justice for all the people of Indonesia. According to Smith (2018), this model theoretically harmonizes religion with the welfare of the community in Indonesia. (Smith, 2018) Many Indonesian churches are close to the community. They have been known to give support to education and health care. (Mike, 2025)

Nonetheless, researchers observe a discrepancy between potential and practice. Smith (2018) records environmental projects of various religions in the country. He discovers that ecological values tend to motivate people or small organizations. Nevertheless, institutional priorities are rarely influenced by these values. The needs of the community are rarely found in church budgets, leadership agendas, and strategic plans. What ensues is disjointed rather than systematic action.

The current literature on the Indonesian churches is biased. The majority of studies focus on large actors such as national denominations or church-affiliated NGOs. Others are concerned with the policy, partnership, or macro-level programs. (Kariuki, 2018; Siswoko & Wahyuni, 2024) They are not very interested in the local congregational life. Few explore how pastors, elders, and lay members negotiate resource limitations, contradictory pressures, or the task-oriented work of demonstrating faith in practical terms.

This knowledge gap in the literature limits understanding of how faith is translated into sustainable practice, or the lack thereof. An analysis of church-based development is abstract and fails to consider reality at the grassroots level. They do not pay much attention to the interaction of structural, cultural, and theological forces that influence ground-based outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Philosophical Underpinnings

The current study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. (Creswell & Clark, 2017) A quantitative survey was used to determine the prevalence of salient barriers. At the same time, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted to understand how these barriers are experienced, why they persist, and the relationships between them within everyday ecclesiastical contexts. Originating from a practical epistemological stance, this methodology anticipates the research question concerning the orthodoxy of its approach. It integrates statistical and narrative information to capture the multifaceted nature of issues related to holistic ministry in local churches.

The research was conducted in three Protestant churches on the Minahasa side of North Sulawesi —a province with a dense Protestant population, a long history of church community outreach, and a diverse socioeconomic milieu. All these situational features make the place ideal for studying how local congregations cope with the challenge of a holistic ministry that is sustainably anchored. The three churches were selected based on the purposive sampling, we selected them according to the following factors: (1) apparent desire to develop or improve their holistic ministry; (2) a representation of medium-sized congregations (average of 150-300 active adult members) to make the results applicable to the majority of local churches, not only mega-churches and small chapels; (3) having already demonstrated the desire to engage in an authentic, long-term research partnership, with access and feedback; and (4) a specific variety of experience in engaging with social or environmental.

The respondents were chosen from two groups to receive a variety of opinions. Congregants (Quantitative Sample): 178 members of the three churches participated in the structured questionnaire. The sample was sampled through stratified convenience sampling so that it could be representative in terms of the following factors: age (young 18-35, adults 36-60, older age 61-100), gender (male, female), and years of membership (less than 5 years, 5-15 years, over 15 years).. This strategy was meant to help get a wide range of congregational views. Two hundred questionnaires were sent, and the response rate was very high at 89, indicating high engagement and trust. Key Informants (Qualitative Sample): 4 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 32 participants. FGDs were also intended to be homogenous by role so that a free and focused discussion would occur between members of peer groups: FGD 1:

Pastors and Church Elders (n=8), FGD 2: Social Commission Leaders and Active Volunteers (n=8), FGD 3: General Lay Members (long-term, active participants) (n=8), FGD 4: Youth Leaders and Young Adult Members (n=8).

Moreover, key informants who held strategic roles and were highly knowledgeable about the institution, namely, the three head pastors of the involved churches and the five chairs of the social or community service commissions of those churches, were interviewed in depth using a semi-structured approach. Such people were chosen since they are the primary decision-makers and executors of the church programs.

The research began with administering a 25-item questionnaire in Bahasa Indonesia to 178 congregants across three churches. It encompassed four topics: fundamental demographics; perceived holistic (e.g., staffing, funding) and cultural (e.g., theological dualism) barriers; perceived church assets and readiness; and evaluations of perceived church resources and preparedness on a 5-point Likert. The tool is strongly internally consistent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$) following piloting with 15 members of a comparable congregation. Trained assistants administered the questionnaire as part of the services and small-group sessions, and assisted participants (ageing and disabled) as required.

An investigation at the second level followed this: the focus group discussions (FGDs). The FGDs focused on group experiences, problems, and processes within the holistic ministry, while the interviews addressed individual leadership journeys, institutional constraints, and reform proposals. All the interview guides were reviewed by two Indonesian theologians and a local development professional for content validity and cultural appropriateness. The principal investigator conducted all sessions in Bahasa Indonesian because he was a native speaker and a trained theologian. In line with the participants' informed consent, it was in writing. Each session lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and was taped, accompanied by a comprehensive field note that included non-verbal expressions, tone of affect, and background information.

RESULTS

The mixed-methods approach developed a balanced, diverse understanding of the issues churches struggle with. The results are categorized under five major themes of barriers identified through triangulation. In both cases, we provide the survey results (including prevalence rates and patterns) and enrich them with interview and focus group voices, using real quotes and thematic insights. At the end of each section, a short synthesis is provided that relates the aggregate evidence to the overall scholarly discussion.

Table 1. Perceived Structural and Cultural Barriers to Holistic Ministry (N = 178)

Barrier Category	Key Item	Agree	Mean/SD
Gap	Operational	Our church needs a clear, practical guide to connect spiritual teachings with real action on social and environmental issues.	92%
	Human	We struggle because we do not have enough trained or dedicated people to carry out holistic ministry.	78%
Resource Constraints	Financial	Because our funding is unpredictable, we cannot plan long-term programs for community or environmental care.	85%
	Cultural-Theological Divide	The church's main job is spiritual; social or environmental work is secondary or not really its role.	41%
Assets	Instability	Our church has unused strengths—such as skilled members, community ties, and values like stewardship—that could support more integrated ministry.	68%
	Underutilized		

A survey of 178 congregants provided a clear picture of the challenges churches face and ranked the most common challenges. The most significant issue was financial instability, as the respondents strongly agreed that predictable funding is almost impossible for long-term planning (mean score = 4.50). In the following positions, the

absence of practical advice as to the way of linking faith and action (mean = 4.30) and the lack of trained or committed individuals (mean = 4.10) were noted.

Interestingly, whereas the majority (87.50%) regard the holistic ministry as a subset of their calling, a significant minority (41 %) continues to believe that the church has a spiritual role to play and social or environmental ministry is secondary or even extraneous (mean = 2.80; higher agreement in this instance indicates greater resistance to holistic ministry). Meanwhile, a large majority, 68%, acknowledge that their churches already have valuable but untapped resources, including capable members, community networks, and theological values such as stewardship, which can further integrate ministry (mean = 3.90).

Theme 1: The Operational Gap -We Have the Why, But Not the How.

The questionnaire revealed a strong, moving desire for practical help. In response to a question about whether its church requires a clear, practical guide to bridge spiritual teachings with their application to social and environmental challenges, 92% of respondents indicated that such a guide was necessary. The percentage of those who strongly agreed was 67 per cent, and another 25 per cent agreed. Using their own words, several of them shared how they had a strong passion not only to believe but also to know how to live out their faith in ways that would heal communities and care about creation. Only 8 per cent of respondents were neutral (7 per cent) or disagreed (1 per cent) on this matter. The mean score of this item was 4.3 out of 5, and the standard deviation was low (SD = 0.6), meaning that there was a high level of agreement and little difference between samples. This was rated the second-highest among all items on barriers, surpassed only by financial instability. This statistical urgency was also brought out in the qualitative data.

In all discussions and interviews with the focus groups, participants consistently expressed frustration and even distress over the lack of practical frameworks. This distance between theological belief and action has been termed a root of religious paralysis in the literature. One of the head pastors, obviously aggravated, said, *"Look, we are not short of vision or biblical mandate. We preach every Sunday on loving our neighbors, looking after the widow and orphan, and taking care of the creation of God. The thing is, by the time the sermon ends and the committee meets on Tuesday night, we are all lost. This process lacks a guidebook. We lack a step-by-step procedure for this. We do not even have a simple checklist or project management template that reflects our values. We are flooded with intentions for how to do things, but we are hungry and lack the practical means to carry them out. We need a road map, Pastor, and no other inspiring vision statement"* (Pastor, Church A)

Furthermore, one of the church leaders of the social commission, who coordinates its disjointed outreach efforts, said in an exasperated monotone: *"What is actually meant by holistic ministry?" Today, it is mainly used to describe the practice of placing an initially empty rice collection box in a location where it will be picked up during harvest and then distributing it to low-income families during the Christmas season. It is charity — not enlightening, but responsive. We want to go farther, we want to go farther, she said, hoping and urgently. We envision a community garden that addresses year-round food insecurity, a small loan service to empower single mothers, and cooperation with the local school to offer after-hours tutoring. However, we cannot merely have good ideas; we need a tool to put them into action. We do not, though, know how to start these projects. Whom should we consult? What permits are required?"* How can one evaluate success? What should one do to take sustainability beyond first passion? Though the reason is apparent, the process is not simple. In this case, the role of the social commission chair is to involve the community in all activities that interest the church. In this context, the social commission leader is responsible for enlisting the community in activities that will assist the church.

Triangulation and Interpretation: The quantitative information (yielding 92% agreement, mean 4.3) provides significant, generalizable data indicating that this operational gap is extensive and almost universal across the congregations under study. It is not a technical question but rather a general complaint about daily life. However, the qualitative data provides the necessary complexity of insight, revealing that the issue is not a lack of motivation, theological knowledge, or new concepts, but rather a fundamentally methodological and operational problem with the study. What the congregations demand are methods that are practically usable, contextually relevant, and easy to use. This was rightly stated by one of the participants: *"Daybooks have been hard with us, but we would have liked to have had a cookbook for the holistic ministry."* This hugely upholds and perpetuates the theoretical stand of Luetz and Nunn (2023) that the interaction between spirituality and sustainable development is "thorny and disregarded. They

note that the theoretical relationship is acknowledged, though not put into practice. This paper reveals that insufficient attention at the local, grass-roots congregational level results in a lack of operational expertise, leading to incapacitation. The data strongly indicate that any future model or intervention must emphasize usability, operational practicality, and contextuality, rather than sophisticated theoretical construction or abstraction. The model should serve as a "how to" manual rather than a "why to" semantic treatise.

Theme 2: Structural Constraints — The Twin Burdens of Scarcity

This theme comprises two fundamental, inseparable sub-themes: the limitations of human and financial resources. The statistics show that there are not only logistical problems but also systemic limitations that significantly affect the availability and scope of such programs.

Human Resource Limitations: The Crisis of Capacity.

Quantitative Results. When the Respondents were asked about significant problems in implementing holistic services based on a prearranged list, 78% reported that a lack of trained and devoted personnel was a Preeminent problem. This ranked second on the list of most-mentioned barriers, after financial constraints. Bearing this observation, the average score of the negatively phrased statement, that is, our church has enough trained and available people to plan and manage long-term social or environmental programs, was significantly low at 2.1 out of 5 (SD = 0.9), which implies that there was a considerable lack of agreement among the participants.

Qualitative Elaboration: During the interviews and FGDs, it became apparent that the burden of any social or environmental initiative always falls on a limited, already overburdened group of volunteers or staff members who have numerous roles in the church, and many hold full-time jobs outside the church. This causes burnout, programmatic neglect, and long-term sustainability issues. An older adult, also a schoolteacher, confessed to feeling visibly exhausted.

"I sit on the finance committee, help organize the annual youth retreat, am part of the building maintenance team, and now the pastor has asked me to 'lead' this new 'holistic development initiative' as I once organized a clothing drive. I love the church, but I am so stretched that I am transparent. I have a demanding job during the week. How can I do justice to this? I have not been trained in community development, project management, or any other field. I am just a guy who said 'yes too many times.'" (Elder, Church C)

A head pastor corroborated this systemic issue, highlighting the lack of dedicated roles:

"We do not have a 'Director of Holistic Ministry' or even a part-time coordinator. It is never mandatory; rather, it is an additional responsibility one has to add to their already overflowing plate. The social commission is typically the commission, and these are great people, but they are volunteers, have day jobs, she said. Nonetheless, this solution is not long-term. This results in burnout, and if one burns out or migrates, the whole initiative is ruined. It requires specific capacity, but we can manage with one individual on a part-time basis, whose main occupation is this. (Pastor, Church A)

Triangulation and Interpretation: The high percentage (78%) is used to gauge the pervasiveness of this problem, whereas the low mean score (2.1) gauges the depth of the perceived deficit. The human cost was revealed in the qualitative anecdotes: the exhaustion, the self-doubt, the weakness of ministries bound together by overworked and rarely seen volunteers. This resonates with the global finding of Allen et al. (2018) that local players often lack the technical capacity to undertake complex, long-term projects. Nevertheless, this research provides an important addition to the local picture: in the church, the capacity gap concerns not only the skills or the training—it concerns the structure and the clarity as well.

Many volunteers are not only poorly equipped or neglected in their positions but also not adequately supported in their ministry, and they are overloaded in too many areas. This means that training cannot be all that is required, though training is essential. It also requires a careful and deliberate renewal of the institution itself: the establishment of small positions of responsibility and of necessity limited positions within the life of the church, with encouragement and actuality in them, lest the holistic ministry be left to burnout, but built into the life of the community with care and continuity.

Financial Resource Limitations: The Tyranny of Uncertainty

Quantitative Results: The most important and pressing factor was financial insecurity. An impressive 85 per cent of the respondents either (28 %) Agreed or (57 %) Strongly Agreed with the following statement: The

unpredictable and unstable nature of how our church is funded does not allow us to plan or implement any long-term social or environmental programs. This item had the highest mean score among all items addressing barriers, with a score of 4.5 out of 5 ($SD = 0.5$), indicating an extremely high level of consensus and concern. Moreover, as respondents noted, when it comes to funding the social or community activities in your own church, what will be the PRIMARY source of funds? 91% of those surveyed responded with Spontaneous, unsolicited donations by church members. The percentage of the answers is as follows: 3% from Grants from external organizations (NGOs, foundations), 2% from Income from church-managed social enterprises or businesses, and 4% from the allocated budget of the church general fund.

Qualitative Elaboration: The theme of reliance on unpredictable, spontaneous incomes was universal and strongly experienced in the qualitative data. It has been termed the root cause of short-termism and strategic paralysis in the military sector. This fact was explained to naked clarity by a church treasurer, who was in charge of the scanty resources of the church:

Be frankly honest, I told him *Our budget for any social work — whether it is helping a family with medical bills, supporting a student, or buying seeds for a community garden — is whatever is left over after we pay the non-negotiables: the electricity bill, the water bill, the pastor's highly modest stipend, the costs for the Sunday service (bread, wine, hymnals), and the annual youth group retreat. It is impossible. We live hand-to-mouth and month-to-month, and we have no idea how to plan a three-year agricultural training program when we do not know if we will have money next month to buy fertilizers. We are forced to be reactive rather than proactive. We can only respond to crises, not prevent them.*" (Treasurer, Church A)

A social commission leader lamented its impact on ambition.

"We had this great idea for a literacy program for mothers in the village. We found that a retired teacher volunteered. We received donations from a small room in the building. However, we needed books, materials, and perhaps a small stipend for the teacher's transportation. We asked the finance committee, and they said, 'Bring us a proposal.' However, how does one write a proposal for something that has no guaranteed funding? We gave up. The idea died as of money — or rather, the lack of a predictable way to get it." (Social Commission Leader, Church C)

Triangulation and Interpretation: This represents the most pronounced and universally defined structural impediment expressed by a quantitative measure (85% agreement, mean average of 4.5). The fact that the church is essentially 91% dependent on spontaneous giving for its revenue illustrates a profound weakness: the disparity between how its resources are procured and what sustainable, long-term ministry actually demands. Without normal resources, leaders are unable to plan, take calculated risks, or dream beyond the present. 'We are never working forward to tomorrow,' as one minister has said, 'but reacting to the needs of the day.' Such financial unpredictability is not merely restrictive to budgets; its implications are stifling as regards vision and creativity, driving even the most enthusiastic congregations into survival mode. This observation alerts to the urgent need for new and sustainable funding policies fashioned for the environment of the local church type.

According to Siswoko and Wahyuni (2024), possible options would encompass establishing small-scale, church-based social enterprises, e.g., a bakery, printing service, or guesthouse, to make their social programs profitable, establishing formal collaborations with NGOs to contribute funds towards particular projects, or building internal capacity to submit successful grant applications to foundations. The important point is to shift the charity model (or, somewhat, the reliance on impulsive generosity) into the investment model (strategic planning and diversified sources of revenue).

Theme 3: The Cultural Divide -That is Not Our Job: The Cultural Continuation of the Sacred-Secular Dichotomy.

Quantitative Findings: The deep-rooted cultural and theological aspects of female ordination that remain may have been the most eye-opening revelation. When given the statement, the leading and most prominent is the spiritual (e.g., worship, prayer, evangelism, saving souls), primary duty of the church, and social or environmental action (e.g., poverty alleviation, environmental protection, justice advocacy) was secondary, optional, even extrinsic; other respondents strongly agreed by 41%. On the other hand, 59% did not agree (45%) or vehemently not (14%) with this. The average of this item was 2.8 out of 5 ($SD = 1.1$), which implies that the resistance to the premise of holistic ministry was relatively high (albeit in a minority). This resistance was not distributed uniformly; it was significantly

greater among older congregants (above 60 years) and those who had been members of the church for most of their lives (more than 20 years).

Qualitative Elaboration: It was not the abstract resistance; it was vocal, strongly supported, and, in many cases, justified in terms of theology in FGDs and interviews. Certain members of the congregation gave opinions that clearly defined the role that their church played in society.

I feel bad, but I must say what I think. Why must the church be engaged in the construction of public toilets or the instruction of farmers? This is obviously the task of the government or a special NGO. It is our role as a church to save souls, preach the gospel, and equip people to live in eternity in heaven. This is the Church command given to us. Getting enmeshed in worldly matters distracts us from what we are good at. (Male Congregant, 55, Church B)

One of the participants appealed to a scripture to justify the dualistic perspective by saying:

"The Bible is clear. Jesus himself expressed it when he said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Focusing too much on healing this broken world through politics, the green agenda, and social movements can make us forget our spiritual agenda. We will be like any other NGO, not a church. We need to look at eternity and not at solutions that are temporary or earthly. We need not worry about the world; it is the work of the world to take care of the world, and we are to refer people to Christ (Female Congregant, 62, Church C).

Some leaders acknowledged this as a significant internal challenge.

"It is a constant battle. I preach about justice and stewardship, but I know there is a group in the congregation who thinks I am straying from the 'pure gospel.' They do not say it to my face, but I hear whispers about them. They do not donate to social funds either. They do not volunteer for community projects. They sincerely believe that the government is sidetracking them. Changing this mindset is harder than raising money or finding volunteers." (Pastor, Church A)

Triangulation and Interpretation: The quantitative results (41% holding a dualistic view) provide a sobering and measurable level of the cultural barrier in the congregations. This is not just an opinion of the fringes, but it is believed by a substantial minority, particularly the older members, and it has actual power. The resistance is cultural and is based not on the lack of funds or logistics but on a theological picture of the world that sharply divides the spiritual sphere of life and action on social or environmental bases. According to Swithinbank et al. (2019), these sacred-secular divides often prevent faith communities from fully accessing the needs of the world.

Nevertheless, this tension also refers to an important opportunity. The need, as implied by Suoth (2024), is for theological re-education, which restores the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God as one that, in addition to spiritual salvation, entails the healing of creation (Wright, 2010). The gospel is not independent of social and ecological participation, as they are two inseparable aspects.

This will require time and a painstaking process to proceed: a series of sermons in which justice and stewardship play the central role in teachings, adult education in which members of the congregation can be taught how to accept the Scripture in its entirety, and a chance to hear how integrated ministry transforms lives in the community. The programs will not change, but the rejuvenated accounts will see the church view its entire mission as a whole person, a whole community, a whole creation, and a single sacred calling.

Theme 4: Underutilized Assets -The Gold in Our Own Backyard.

Overall, Quantitative Findings: The study revealed important but underused resources among the congregations despite the high barriers. In response to the question, how much do you agree with the following statement: Our church has untapped resources - skilled people (e.g., teachers, engineers, farmers), good community networks, or powerful theological values (e.g., stewardship, justice) that can be used to help it have a holistic ministry, 68% of the respondents answered, agreed (45%), Strongly Agreed (23%). The average of this item was 3.9/ 5 (SD = 0.8). Nevertheless, an interesting 32% either disagreed (25%) or were neutral (7%), implying that this possibility does not receive universal recognition or appreciation, especially among those adhering to the sacred-secular dichotomy.

Qualitative Elaboration: In the FGDs, particularly among the youth and lay members, participants were able to identify specific and concrete assets that were dormant. These are human capital (relevant skill professionals), social capital (large, trusting community networks), and the theological capital (concepts already found in sermons and teachings). One of the young adult leaders, with his frustrated potential, was able to say the following:

"It is so frustrating! We have so much talent and passion for the pews. We have engineers who can help design water systems, teachers who can run literacy programs, farmers who know sustainable techniques, and businesspeople who can help market social enterprises. We have an energetic youth group that wants to make a difference in the world. However, no channels were available. No one is organizing the data. No one connects our skills to a clear mission or to a specific project. We need leadership to see us, to believe in us, and to give us a platform." (Youth Leader, Church A)

A pastor acknowledged the theological assets but admitted the failure to operationalize them:

"We talk about stewardship every harvest season. We preach about it. We sing hymns about it. Nevertheless, it stops there. We do not have a program to teach sustainable farming practices to our farmer-members. We do not manage our church land using organic methods, as in a demonstration plot. We do not have a 'creation care' team that audits our church's energy use. The value is in our theology, but the practice of embodiment is lacking in our lives. It is like having a powerful engine but no wheels." (Pastor, Church C)

Triangulation and Interpretation: The triangulated positive quantitative score (3.9) and the majority response (68%) indicate a strong latent potential of the building. The qualitative results provide a promising fact: the churches already possess invaluable resources, such as talented members, good relationships, and deep theological beliefs, which can be used to generate a holistic ministry. This changes the focus from what is wanted to what can be, rather than what he or she can do instead of what he/she can get.

The problem is not a lack; rather, it is how to organize it: how to make it easy, purposeful, and mobilized, and how to recognize, match, and mobilize it. The future of this direction does not lie in inventing new systems but in the clever management of existing ones, with a significant opportunity for low-cost, high-impact change.

Theme 5: Synthesis The Interdependence of Barriers.

To evaluate how barriers contribute to each other, we conducted some basic correlation tests on important survey questions. Two patterns stood out.

To start with, smaller church services with fewer trained individuals were much more likely than larger churches to report a desperate need for practical, straightforward guidance ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating how staffing shortages further confuse operations. Second, the belief that the church is not social but spiritual meant that the views of those who subscribed to this belief were significantly less inclined to give in the long term to social or environmental work ($r = -0.68$, $p < 0.01$), proving that theological perspective is a direct influence on giving behaviors.

Interviews and focus groups were able to bring these numbers to life and paint a clear picture of a vicious circle where, without trained leaders, the churches cannot act; without a shared vision, they will not fund action, and without resources or clarity, even willing volunteers burn out full of resources and the status quo intact. For example, a pastor vividly described this interconnectedness as follows:

"It is a self-perpetuating cycle, a system of inertia." It starts with theology — some members do not believe that this holistic stuff is substantively the church's job [cultural barrier]. Because they do not believe it is core, they will not donate money to it, a financial barrier. Because we have no dedicated, predictable funding, we cannot hire or even properly train anyone to lead it [HR barrier]. As we have no trained, dedicated staff, we cannot design or implement a coherent and effective program [operational gap]. When the program is ad hoc, poorly run, or fails, it reinforces the belief among sceptics that 'See? We told you that this was not our job; we are not good at it [cultural barrier]. The cycle continues, and nothing changes.'" (Pastor, Church C)

An elder added:

"The lack of a clear plan [operational gap] makes it hard to get people excited or to ask for money [financial barrier]." Without money, you cannot get the right people [HR barrier]. Without the right people, a good plan cannot be made [operational gap]. It is a circle, and we are stuck in it." (Elder, Church B)

Triangulation and Interpretation: The statistical correlations provide empirical, quantitative evidence for the qualitative observation of a "vicious cycle." This systemic view is the most salient insight of this study. This means that interventions targeting only one barrier in isolation—for example, providing a beautiful operational manual (addressing Theme 1)—are highly likely to fail if other barriers (e.g., lack of funding, cultural resistance, and no trained personnel) are not addressed simultaneously.

Barriers are not independent variables; they are interlocking components of a complex adaptive system (local church) that maintains itself (inertia) through interaction. This leads to a distinct reality that can only be observed: patchwork solutions cannot snap the chain. It is a holistic, interdependent response that will have to meet with holistic responses to meet more than one dimension at once: realizing structural capacity (by training and discovering creative financing), changing cultural attitudes (by rethinking theology and rethinking the imaginative way of sharing the story), and practical guidance (by simple tools and manageable steps). Instead of a checklist of steps, the way forward is more like looking after a living system: one part helps and influences the others, and the actual change is effected when they are allowed to develop together.

Discussion

This paper presents a rough, theory-driven empirical examination of the factors that are preventing the adoption of sustainability-based ministry by local churches in Indonesia. Beyond general theories, it validates, deepens, and sometimes opposes current studies with concrete, definite, and highly contextualized information. These contributions are discussed in the following text, considering the results in relation to the overall literature and their implications on the real world.

Beyond Theory to Practice: The Primacy of the Operational Gap.

Taken together, these outcomes make a crucial observation: the so-called operational gap is not a small hurdle, but it is almost a universal stumbling block that puts congregations in a deadlock. The conflict between faith and sustainable development is both entangled and ignored. However, this paper demonstrates a lack of focus in action, reflecting deep, state-free perplexity about how to convert spiritual beliefs into practical, mundane actions. Churches are not resistant, but do not have clear and practical ways ahead. The reason why churches are not deficient in theological motivation is that they lack a deficiency in methodological capacity. They are drifting in why, and dying of how.

These results undermine the perception, implicit in the development literature in some cases, that merely justifying theological reasons or raising awareness (Swithinbank et al, 2019) is sufficient to influence the desired action. This means that for local congregations, these solutions do not require additional sermons on justice or more SDGs workshops. However, they lack accessible, contextualised, easy-to-use, and straightforward tools and structures. This not only corresponds to but also criticizes the Nanthambwe (2024) study, which reported successful church partnerships in South Africa but may have underestimated the difficulty of initiating such partnerships without first having the ability to operate. This paper posits that before the church, NGOs, or government collaborate, there is often a need for internal capacity building in fundamental project design, management, and evaluation. The future research and practice implications are clear: further model development should prioritize practical usability, step-by-step instructions, and context orientation over theoretical knowledge. One of the respondents longed to have a cookbook, but not a philosophy book.

Vicious Cycle of Scarcity: Human, Financial Resources.

In the global study, structural obstacles (both human and financial) have been mentioned (Allen et al, 2018; Siswoko & Wahyuni, 2024). This paper, however, offers a valuable perspective by considering how these barriers are introduced and sustained in the unique cultural and organizational context of local Indonesian churches. The study indicates that it is not the deficiency of skills among the human resources, but rather the deficiency of skills, commitment, and the absence of role definition. The reliance on overworked volunteers to provide the necessary skills is not only a symptom of a budget problem but also a deeper issue with how they conduct their ministry in general.

According to the work by Allen et al. (2018), this paper demonstrates that actual capacity building entails not only training but also development and attentive, planned institutional innovation. In defining specific, yet not necessarily high-profile, roles (e.g., part-time coordinators, supported lay leaders) and developing straightforward mechanisms to recruit, educate, and maintain those who serve, it is necessary to ensure effective implementation. This is also among the key lessons of this study. Unless this occurs, those who intend to hire the best individuals will tend to become burned out, rather than the good-intentioned people whose goodwill they aim to support. The big picture consequently reveals that this is more organizational development than personal training. The nearly exclusive dependence on spontaneous donations (91%) and the resulting paralysis of strategy highlight the threat posed by Siswoko and Wahyuni (2024) regarding the unsustainability of charity models.

Nevertheless, the research maintains its narrow focus and concentrates more on the problem itself (85% regard it as serious), delivering a more comprehensive effect through the narrative structure of qualitative studies. They claim that financial innovation should occur and is imperative rather than optional. What this implies is that the models that rely on the contributions of the members and significant grants from other organizations have faced significant criticism. The proposal is to create a diversified funding portfolio, not only relying on contributions from members but also including social enterprises that raise money and implement the fundamentals of a holistic ministry (i.e., an organic garden of the church, which grows food, offers jobs, and provides environmental education). This would be a tremendous step forward in terms of dependency, moving toward autonomy and self-sustaining.

The Deep Roots of Resistance: Confronting the Sacred-Secular Dichotomy

The fact that approximately 41% of congregants hold the sacred-secular dichotomy as a tenet of belief tendencies is possibly the most troubling and emphatic finding present in this study. This concurs with the statement made by Swithinbank et al. (2019) that faith can be both a hindrance and a motivator, but it is demonstrated with greater empirical depth and precision. Qualitative data suggests that this is not just a surface misunderstanding but rather a theological belief rooted in deep conviction supported by exegesis of judiciously selected biblical texts, including, for example, John 18:36. This finding is a straight challenge to the optimistic belief that the holistic ministries are a natural and unproblematic outcome of the Christian faith. This demonstrates that, for an uncontroversial minority, they represent theological variation. This finding has several implications for this study. It demonstrates that overcoming this barrier requires more than improved communication or a more diverse range of success stories; it requires a sustained process of theological re-education and cultural change.

Methodologically linking social and ecological impact with core biblical texts such as creation, incarnation, resurrection, and the kingdom of God, demonstrating that these core biblical doctrines are intrinsic to the gospel rather than an add-on (Suoth, 2024; Wright, 2010). - Testimony showing the stories of those found impacted through holistic ministry so that the abstract becomes concrete and personal. Inclusive dialogue, providing safe spaces for those with the dualistic viewpoint to express their views and be heard rather than dismissed or ostracized. Leadership modelling: Pastors and elders must continually model and seek to prioritize holistic actions in their lives, as well as in the budgets and calendars of the church. This process will take place over the long term and will not be a quick fix to the problem. It will need patience, perseverance, and some Biblical theological undergirding.

Mobilizing Latent Potential: From Deficit to Asset-Based Approach

One of the most vivid findings, accepted by 68 % of the participants, is that churches already have many unused resources. This shift from lack to possibility aligns with the framework of asset-based community development (ABCD): lasting change occurs from the inside out rather than from the outside in (Kalalo et al., 2025).

Three resources are notable: the human capital (skilled members), social capital (trusted networks), and the theological capital (values of stewardship and justice). The situation is not a lack of something, but rather an activation. Churches require straightforward methods of:

1. Un-map what they possess- skills, passions, and resources.
2. Bringing opportunities and people together via a project board or skills bank.
3. Action empowerment: Small grants, mentorship, or support for light projects.

Not only is this more sustainable, but it is also profoundly empowering because it gives local people the responsibility to spearhead the change they believe in.

Moving towards a Systems Approach: The Cycle of Inertia.

The main point made in this study is that the obstacles churches face are not isolated; they sustain each other, creating a self-perpetuating system of inertia. Thus, one-fix solutions do not work in most cases. Sustainable transformation would demand a multi-faceted, multi-level approach that would deal with theology, structure, and practice.

This can be a practical diagnostic tool for church leaders: when a new initiative fails, it is rarely due to a single factor. A whole package launch must incorporate -

1. religious underpinning (e.g., sermon series on faith and justice),
2. financial planning (special budget and sustainable fundraising),

3. increased acuity (established roles and trained volunteers), and

4. real-world examples (easy, step-by-step tutorial).

To development partners, NGOs, donors, and agencies, it will require shifting their thinking from delivering to walking alongside churches as co-learners, rather than as fixers. The support must be long and flexible, based on respect for the local theology and culture, to enable congregations to develop their own integrated response. Rather than dictating actions to churches, external agents may provide conditions of space, time, and trust in order to facilitate an experience that fractures the cycle, allowing churches to create their own internally generated prophetic understanding of transformation.

Contribution to Theory and Practice

This study contributes to the research by offering five important insights through reviewing what occurs in the local churches, basing them on both faith and facts.

1. Empirical knowledge: The study fills a critical gap in knowledge with an exceedingly bizarre portfolio of data regarding what is compromising the holistic ministry in Indonesian Churches.
2. Methodological balance: It will combine the trends of questionnaires and personal experience, which will ensure the breadth and depth of the problems.
3. Systematic insight: It demonstrates the interdependence of barriers (financial, structural, and theological) on each other, such as to provide a vicious circle of inertia that even simple cures will not cure.
4. Practical relevance: It represents practical asset-based strategies that can be practiced in the local context and are based on what already exists in the churches.
5. Theological honesty: It accepts that what people say they believe in results in what they do and that the renewal of ministry is the re-examination of what it is appropriate to do in the light of faith.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to articulate the reasons why most local Indonesian churches, despite their abundance of faith, precise biblical demands for justice, and commitment to their calling, find it challenging to adopt holistic ministries focused on sustainability. It is not due to a lack of willingness or resources, but rather a system of systemic problems: of a paralyzing chasm between vision and action, chronic lack of trained people, inert resources, and a deep-seated conviction (in older members especially) that there are two distinct worlds, the world of spiritual work and the world of social work.

These issues do not exist in isolation, but they are mutually sustaining and create a net of inertia that is crippling the churches in short-term charity at the cost of long-term change.

Breaking this cycle will need more than quick-fix remedies. It will need an integrated, holistic approach which:

- gives practical step-by-step directives on translating faith into action.
- provides human development through lay leadership training and modest coordinating roles.
- gives sustainable funding through social entrepreneurship or readiness for grants.
- gives theological renewal in seeing the care of people and planet not as a deviation but as central to the gospel.

Though these things were seen mainly in three churches in north Sulawesi, their relevance extends far beyond that. Churches throughout the South, struggling with spirituality and SDGs, are likely to face similar tensions. This is not just a local story but a widely shared opportunity to grasp and a challenge for the church everywhere to live out its calling to be God's life-giving presence in God's broken but beautiful world. The widespread nature of these non-isolated-but-complex problems (and the consequent need for holistic solutions) is likely to lead to challenges.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitations of this study include its small, purposive sample of three churches in one Indonesian region, which, if richly elaborated qualitatively, contributes to limited statistical generalizability. Future studies should

investigate the transferability of these findings across church types (e.g., Catholic, Pentecostal), other regions (Java, Papua), and other Global South arenas to discover context-specific dynamics.

The cross-sectional design gives only a snapshot of the situation at a given moment. Longitudinal studies following the development of churches over a period of years would show how barriers change, which problems are being dealt with effectively, and how the momentum can be maintained beyond the inertia of the first interventions.

Further, this study attempts to put forward only the internal points of view from various churches. It would be most beneficial to include external voices, such as those from the community (both served and unserved), local authorities or officials, and NGO partners, to provide a wider understanding of the role the church plays within society and the impact it makes.

Most vital of all, the next step is to move from diagnosis to action. Participatory action research provides the best way forward, offering the church not only as subjects but also as co-researchers in inventing practical, evidence-based models that will turn the fruits of this research into victories for all. The ultimate aim should not be the acquiring of knowledge per se, but equipping the local churches through practical research to engage in a real way the bridge between faith and action, to stimulate their latent potential and to become not only churches of care, opportunities for concrete hope for the immediate community, but also churches resilient enough and motivated to be key role players in issues of justice sphere, in a world wide dimension.

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