

Faith-Based Social Innovation from the Global South: Repositioning Nahdlatul Ulama as a Global Social Innovation Hub in Polycentric Global Governance

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengembangkan kerangka kerja Global South Social Innovation Hub (GSSIH) untuk menjelaskan bagaimana organisasi berbasis agama (faith-based organizations / FBO) skala besar dapat melangkah melampaui penyediaan layanan dan bertindak sebagai infrastruktur penjemputan skala (scale-bridging infrastructures) bagi inovasi sosial dalam tata kelola global yang polisentris. Studi ini mengatasi kesenjangan yang persisten antara kajian inovasi sosial—yang sebagian besar masih dibentuk oleh pengalaman institusional Global Utara—dan riset mengenai FBO yang lebih sering menekankan penyediaan kesejahteraan, advokasi, atau diplomasi daripada kapabilitas inovasi yang berulang. Secara metodologis, artikel ini menggunakan desain riset konseptual yang menggabungkan tinjauan integratif purposive, analisis institusional, dan sintesis teori. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) diperlakukan sebagai kasus institusional ilustratif alih-alih sebagai pusat inovasi global yang divalidasi secara empiris. Sintesis ini menghasilkan tiga temuan. Pertama, legitimasi institusional dan ekosistem organisasi yang terdiferensiasi menyediakan fondasi sosial serta organisasional untuk eksperimentasi, tetapi hanya ketika otoritas dipadukan dengan akuntabilitas dan koordinasi lintas unit. Kedua, produksi pengetahuan lokal dan jaringan transnasional menciptakan mekanisme untuk mengodifikasi, menerjemahkan, serta menyebarkan solusi yang berakar pada konteks ke berbagai pengaturan. Ketiga, diplomasi pengetahuan dapat mengubah pengetahuan yang disebarkan menjadi pengaruh normatif yang lebih luas hanya jika keterlibatan eksternal tetap bersifat resiprokal, berbasis bukti, dan terhubung dengan pembelajaran internal. Temuan-temuan ini diintegrasikan ke dalam siklus empat tahap—pendaratan/penanaman (embedding), penghasilan (generating), penyebaran (circulating), dan pelegitimasi (legitimizing)—serta dioperasionalkan melalui enam proposisi yang dapat diuji. Keaslian artikel ini terletak pada penempatan kembali FBO Global South sebagai infrastruktur pengetahuan dan inovasi potensial, sekaligus merinci kondisi institusional serta moda kegagalan yang membedakan kapabilitas hub sejati dari skala organisasi,

internasionalisasi simbolis, atau diplomasi yang berpusat pada elit. Kerangka kerja ini menawarkan agenda perbandingan untuk penelitian empiris di masa depan serta alat diagnostik bagi organisasi yang berupaya memperkuat kapasitas inovasi yang tertanam secara sosial.

Kata Kunci: organisasi berbasis agama; Global South; inovasi sosial; Nahdlatul Ulama; tata kelola global polisentris; diplomasi pengetahuan

Abstract

This article develops the Global South Social Innovation Hub (GSSIH) framework to explain how large faith-based organizations (FBOs) can move beyond service delivery and become scale-bridging infrastructures for social innovation in polycentric global governance. The study addresses a persistent gap between social innovation scholarship, which remains strongly shaped by Global North institutional experiences, and FBO research, which has more often emphasized welfare provision, advocacy, or diplomacy than recurrent innovation capability. Methodologically, the article uses a conceptual research design combining a purposive integrative review, institutional analysis, and theory synthesis. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is treated as an illustrative institutional case rather than as an empirically validated global innovation hub. The synthesis produces three findings. First, institutional legitimacy and a differentiated organizational ecosystem provide the social and organizational foundations for experimentation, but only when authority is coupled with accountability and cross-unit coordination. Second, local knowledge production and transnational networks create a mechanism for codifying, translating, and circulating contextually grounded solutions across settings. Third, knowledge diplomacy can convert circulated knowledge into broader normative influence only when external engagement remains reciprocal, evidence-based, and connected to internal learning. These findings are integrated into a four-stage cycle - embedding, generating, circulating, and legitimating - and operationalized through six testable propositions. The article's originality lies in repositioning Global South FBOs as potential knowledge and innovation infrastructures while specifying the institutional conditions and failure modes that distinguish genuine hub capability from organizational scale, symbolic internationalization, or elite-centered diplomacy. The framework offers a comparative agenda for future empirical research and a diagnostic tool for organizations seeking to strengthen socially embedded innovation capacity.

Keyword: faith-based organizations; global south; social innovation; Nahdlatul Ulama; polycentric global governance; knowledge diplomacy

Introduction

Transboundary problems such as climate change, humanitarian displacement, food and health insecurity, digital inequality, and declining institutional trust increasingly exceed the problem-solving capacity of single

governments or market actors. Global governance has therefore become more plural, networked, and contested. Research on non-state climate governance, regime complexes, governance through global goals, and institutional networks shows that authority is distributed across multiple centers rather than monopolized by a single sovereign actor (Keohane & Victor, 2011; Bäckstrand et al., 2017; Biermann et al., 2017; Kim, 2020). This shift creates a practical and theoretical need to identify which non-state actors can generate credible solutions, organize collective learning, and move knowledge across local, national, and transnational scales.

A first cluster of scholarship addresses social innovation. Foundational studies define social innovation as new activities, services, practices, or institutional arrangements that respond to social needs and create value primarily for society (Mulgan, 2006, 2012; Phills et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2010). Later work emphasizes scaling, relational change, institutional transformation, and the interaction of micro-, meso-, and macro-level processes (Westley & Antadze, 2010; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; van Wijk et al., 2019; Pel et al., 2020). Yet the field's canonical cases and enabling assumptions continue to be strongly associated with Global North ecosystems of philanthropy, social enterprise, innovation labs, and formal research institutions. Global South studies complicate this picture by showing that innovation also emerges through scarcity, informality, local knowledge, and hybrid institutional arrangements (Srinivas & Sutz, 2008; Cozzens & Sutz, 2014; Bucio-Mendoza & Solis-Navarrete, 2024). The unresolved problem is not whether innovation exists in the Global South, but how locally embedded innovations become cumulatively documented, governed, and recognized as transferable knowledge.

A second cluster concerns faith-based organizations. Development studies have long shown that FBOs possess dense community networks, moral legitimacy, humanitarian reach, and the ability to deliver education, health, welfare, and relief where state capacity is limited or socially distant (Berger, 2003; Clarke, 2006; Haynes, 2007). More recent research recognizes religion as a transnational and diplomatic resource, including through religious soft power, second-track diplomacy, and cross-border civil-society partnerships (Mandaville, 2023; Nubowo, 2023; Basid et al., 2024; Ridwan et al., 2025). Nevertheless, much of this literature evaluates what religious organizations deliver or represent, rather than whether they possess a recurrent organizational capability to sense problems, experiment, codify learning, adapt practices, and scale them across contexts. FBOs therefore remain under-theorized as producers of innovation and knowledge, especially in Global South settings where religious organizations may have

institutional reach comparable to major public or development infrastructures.

A third cluster links polycentric governance, network governance, and knowledge diplomacy. Polycentric governance explains how multiple autonomous but interacting decision centers can generate experimentation, learning, and mutual adjustment in complex systems (Ostrom, 2010; Nagendra & Ostrom, 2012). Global governance research extends this insight through regime complexes, cross-sectoral governance, and governance through goals (Boas et al., 2016; Kanie & Biermann, 2017; Kim, 2020). Network-governance scholarship further shows that collaborative value depends on trust, coordination, goal consensus, and governance arrangements suited to network size and complexity (Jones et al., 1997; Powell et al., 2005; Provan & Kenis, 2008). Knowledge diplomacy adds a cross-border mechanism: reciprocal exchange in education, research, and innovation can generate relationships and influence that differ from one-directional soft-power projection (Knight, 2015, 2022). These literatures open conceptual space for FBOs as governance nodes, but they do not yet explain how community-embedded religious authority is converted into an innovation capability capable of traveling across scales.

The three clusters reveal an actor gap, a mechanism gap, and a scale gap. The actor gap arises because mass-based FBOs from the Global South are largely absent from mainstream social innovation typologies. The mechanism gap arises because FBO studies identify legitimacy, service networks, transnationalism, and diplomacy but rarely specify how these assets become a recurrent learning and innovation system. The scale gap arises because polycentric-governance theory recognizes diverse non-state actors without sufficiently explaining how locally rooted knowledge is codified, translated, circulated, and converted into broader normative influence. Decolonial and Epistemologies-of-the-South perspectives sharpen this problem by showing how Global South practices are often treated as local implementation rather than as sources of theoretically consequential knowledge (Mignolo & Escobar, 2010; de Sousa Santos, 2016; de Sousa Santos & Meneses, 2019).

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is used in this article as an illustrative institutional case for examining these gaps. NU combines a long-standing pesantren-based religious tradition with a differentiated organizational field that includes education, philanthropy, women's and youth organizations, community-development bodies, and overseas special branches. Scholarship on NU documents its historical embeddedness, organizational transformation, transnational networks, and international partnerships (Bush, 2009; Afkar & Sundrijo, 2023; Ali, 2026; Loo & Suryana, 2024). These features make NU analytically useful, but they do not by themselves prove that the organization

already functions as a global social innovation hub. The distinction between institutional assets and demonstrated innovation capability is therefore maintained throughout the article.

This study aims to develop an integrated framework that explains: (1) which institutional dimensions enable a large Global South FBO to develop into a social innovation hub; (2) how these dimensions connect local problem solving with transnational circulation; and (3) under what conditions global visibility becomes substantive knowledge contribution rather than symbolic internationalization. The central argument is that faith-based social innovation becomes globally consequential only when five capacities - institutional legitimacy, institutional ecosystem, local knowledge production, transnational networks, and knowledge diplomacy - are coupled into a recurrent learning cycle. No single dimension is sufficient on its own.

Three concepts organize the analysis. First, a social innovation hub is defined here not as a physical incubator or a single successful project, but as an organizational configuration that repeatedly connects problem sensing, experimentation, evidence generation, codification, adaptation, and scaling. This definition builds on relational and institutional understandings of social innovation rather than project-centered novelty alone (Mulgan, 2019; van Wijk et al., 2019; Pel et al., 2020). Second, a Global South FBO refers to a religiously grounded organization whose legitimacy and problem-solving practices are embedded in social contexts marked by different institutional histories, knowledge hierarchies, and resource conditions from those presupposed in much Global North innovation literature. Third, polycentric global governance refers to governance in which multiple centers of authority interact without a single hierarchical controller; within such systems, non-state actors matter when they can produce credible knowledge, mobilize implementation capacity, and broker cooperation across institutional boundaries (Ostrom, 2010; Gurol et al., 2026). These concepts provide the analytical basis for the GSSIH framework developed below.

The unit of analysis is the institutional capability configuration through which a large faith-based organization may connect local social innovation with transnational circulation and global governance. The analysis therefore does not treat a single NU program, leader, or organizational unit as the primary case. Instead, it examines the conceptual relationships among institutional legitimacy, organizational ecosystem, local knowledge production, transnational networks, and knowledge diplomacy, while using publicly documented NU manifestations to illustrate how those dimensions may appear in an actual organization.

The study employs a conceptual theory-building design because its principal objective is to construct and specify a new analytical framework

rather than test a causal hypothesis with primary field data. Conceptual research is rigorous when the author makes explicit how existing concepts are selected, recombined, and transformed into a more coherent explanatory model (Whetten, 1989; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Jaakkola, 2020). This design is appropriate here because the relevant literatures have developed in parallel, while the phenomenon to be explained - a Global South FBO functioning as a scale-bridging innovation infrastructure - is not adequately captured by any single established framework.

The information base consists of two types of secondary material. The first is international scholarly literature on social innovation, Global South innovation and epistemic asymmetry, faith-based organizations, polycentric global governance, network governance, organizational legitimacy, and knowledge diplomacy. The second is peer-reviewed and publicly documented material on NU's institutional development, transnational networks, and international partnerships (Bush, 2009; Afkar & Sundrijo, 2023; Ali, 2026; Loo & Suryana, 2024; Ridwan et al., 2025). These materials are used as conceptual and illustrative evidence; they are not treated as a substitute for interviews, ethnography, or program-impact data.

Sources were assembled through a purposive integrative-review strategy. Integrative review is appropriate when the purpose is to connect mature but separately developed scholarly traditions and generate a new conceptualization rather than estimate an aggregate empirical effect (Torraco, 2016; Snyder, 2019). The review prioritized works that were foundational to a construct, introduced a major conceptual development, or supplied recent evidence directly relevant to the intersection of religion, innovation, and governance. Citation chaining was used to connect foundational and more recent contributions. Because the procedure is concept-driven rather than exhaustive, this study does not claim the completeness associated with a systematic review; that limitation is made explicit so that the evidentiary basis of the framework is not overstated.

Analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the review identified the principal mechanism emphasized in each literature. Second, overlapping mechanisms were grouped into higher-order institutional dimensions. Third, the dimensions were ordered into a process model describing how innovation is embedded locally, generated organizationally, circulated through networks, and translated into wider legitimacy and governance influence. Fourth, the model was stress-tested against countervailing evidence, including coordination problems, uneven grassroots buy-in, internal contestation, and the risk that international visibility becomes detached from local learning (Loo & Suryana, 2024). Conceptual validity is assessed through coherence, parsimony, explanatory usefulness, testability, and transferability, with

observable indicators and propositions specified so that later empirical work can challenge rather than merely illustrate the model (Whetten, 1989; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Hernández-Ascanio et al., 2026).

Results and Discussion

The conceptual synthesis produces three interrelated findings corresponding to the study objectives. The first concerns the institutional foundations that make experimentation socially and organizationally possible. The second concerns the production and cross-border circulation of knowledge. The third concerns the conversion of circulated knowledge into broader normative influence. Each finding is presented through synthesized evidence, a visual summary, a restatement of the evidence, recurring patterns, and an interpretation of its implications for the GSSIH framework.

Institutional Foundations of Faith-Based Social Innovation

The first finding is that faith-based social innovation requires both socially recognized legitimacy and a differentiated institutional ecosystem. Legitimacy lowers the cost of convening communities and introducing new practices because the organization is already embedded in relationships of trust and normative recognition (Suchman, 1995). An institutional ecosystem, by contrast, provides multiple sites in which needs can be detected, resources mobilized, ideas tested, and practices replicated. NU offers plausible manifestations of both dimensions through its long historical embeddedness, pesantren-linked authority, educational and philanthropic structures, and differentiated women, youth, and community-development bodies (Bush, 2009; Ali, 2026). The evidence does not establish innovation performance by itself; it establishes the organizational conditions from which innovation may become possible.

Table 1. Institutional foundations of faith-based social innovation

Dimension	Synthesized evidence	Mechanism	Observable indicators
Institutional legitimacy	Long historical presence, pesantren-based authority, and broad community recognition in NU scholarship	Converts trust and normative authority into participation and willingness to adopt or test new practices.	Perceived trust; participation; community feedback; legitimacy across constituencies;

	(Bush, 2009; Ali, 2026).		accountability channels.
Institutional ecosystem	Education, pesantren, philanthropy, women and youth organizations, and community-development units create organizational diversity.	Creates multiple sites for problem sensing, experimentation, resource mobilization, and replication.	Cross-unit projects; learning routines; coordination mechanisms; resource sharing; evidence of replication across units.

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis from the literature cited in the table.

Table 1 shows that legitimacy and organizational diversity should be read as enabling conditions rather than as outcomes. In simpler terms, a large and trusted organization may have greater access to communities and more places in which to experiment, but scale and trust do not guarantee learning. The critical question is whether authority is open to feedback and whether differentiated units are connected through routines that allow ideas, evidence, and resources to move across the organization.

Four patterns emerge from the synthesized evidence. First, historical embeddedness can reduce the transaction costs of mobilization because communities already recognize the organization and its moral vocabulary. Second, organizational diversity increases the number of settings in which different problems can be addressed. Third, the same legitimacy that accelerates uptake can also suppress criticism when deference to authority is stronger than accountability. Fourth, the same organizational diversity that enables experimentation can produce siloing, duplication, and uneven capacity when cross-unit coordination is weak (Jones et al., 1997; Powell et al., 2005; Provan & Kenis, 2008).

The interpretation is therefore conditional: the institutional foundation of a social innovation hub is not size, visibility, or religious authority as such, but the conversion of those assets into participatory experimentation and cumulative learning. This leads to two propositions. Proposition 1 (legitimacy conversion): institutional legitimacy increases the uptake of social innovation when trust is coupled with participatory problem definition, accountability, and mechanisms for internal criticism. Proposition 2 (ecosystem

coordination): organizational diversity increases innovation capacity when specialized units are linked by governance arrangements that support experimentation, cross-unit learning, and resource sharing; without such arrangements, diversity is more likely to generate fragmentation than cumulative innovation.

Knowledge Production and Transnational Circulation

The second finding is that local innovation becomes scale-bridging only when experiential and normative knowledge is made sufficiently explicit to be compared, evaluated, adapted, and circulated. Global South innovation scholarship emphasizes that valuable problem solving frequently emerges outside formal research-and-development infrastructures and is embedded in local social relations (Srinivas & Sutz, 2008; Cozzens & Sutz, 2014). In NU, pesantren scholarship and deliberative practices such as bahtsul masail provide an institutional basis for contextual knowledge production, while contemporary NU-linked scholarship demonstrates normative engagement with social and environmental issues (Yakub et al., 2023). Yet local knowledge becomes a social innovation capability only when practice is documented, outcomes are examined, and tacit learning is translated into forms that can travel without being detached from the conditions that make it work.

Transnational networks provide the second half of this mechanism. NU's overseas special branches and diaspora networks create potential brokerage nodes linking Indonesian religious and organizational experience with academic, civic, and policy contexts abroad (Afkar & Sundrijo, 2023). Research on Fatayat NU in South Korea is particularly instructive because it shows adaptation to migration and minority contexts rather than simple institutional replication (Mulyani et al., 2026). This indicates that the relevant network function is not ceremonial presence but bidirectional translation: practices are adjusted to new environments, and lessons from those environments can return to the originating organization.

Table 2. Knowledge production and transnational circulation

Dimension	Synthesized evidence	Mechanism	Observable indicators
Local knowledge production	Pesantren reasoning, bahtsul masail,	Transforms lived experience and normative	Documentation quality; evaluation

	community problem solving, and issue-based scholarship provide contextual knowledge resources (Yakub et al., 2023).	reasoning into explicit, evaluable, and adaptable knowledge.	routines; codified models; research partnerships; evidence of adaptation.
Transnational networks	PCI NU and diaspora networks connect NU-linked actors with multiple national, academic, civic, and migration contexts (Afkar & Sundrijo, 2023; Mulyani et al., 2026).	Enables brokerage, translation, comparison, and two-way circulation across institutional environments.	Cross-border collaborations; returned learning; local adaptation; brokerage roles; continuity beyond ceremonial events.

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis from the literature cited in the table.

The table can be restated as a sequence: local experience first has to become visible as knowledge, and only then can a network do more than move people or organizational symbols. A transnational branch that does not capture and translate learning adds geographic reach but not necessarily innovation capacity. Conversely, well-documented local innovation that lacks brokerage channels may remain contextually valuable but difficult to scale or compare.

Four tendencies are visible. First, context is not noise to be removed from innovation; it is part of the mechanism that explains why a practice works. Second, codification is necessary for learning across sites, but over-standardization can decontextualize practices and weaken their relevance. Third, diaspora nodes can function as translators because they are simultaneously connected to the originating institution and to host-country environments. Fourth, genuine circulation is reciprocal: knowledge moves outward and returns in modified form, rather than being exported in a one-way manner. These patterns are consistent with decolonial arguments that Southern knowledge becomes globally consequential when it is translated

without being epistemically subordinated (de Sousa Santos, 2016; de Sousa Santos & Meneses, 2019).

The interpretation is that scale-bridging capacity depends on a coupling between codification and brokerage. Proposition 3 (codification without decontextualization): locally embedded practices become scalable social innovations when experiential and normative knowledge is systematically documented, evaluated, and translated into adaptable models without stripping away the contextual conditions that make them effective. Proposition 4 (reciprocal circulation): transnational networks increase diffusion and adaptation when overseas nodes possess brokerage capacity and facilitate bidirectional knowledge translation; networks focused mainly on ceremonial representation are unlikely to generate sustained organizational learning.

From Knowledge Circulation to Global Influence

The third finding concerns the conversion of circulated knowledge into broader governance influence. Knowledge diplomacy provides the central mechanism because it emphasizes reciprocal relationship-building through knowledge, research, education, and innovation rather than one-directional image projection (Knight, 2015, 2022). NU's international engagement provides partial illustrations. Studies of Humanitarian Islam, religious diplomacy, and second-track diplomacy document attempts to translate religious concepts and organizational experience into cross-border partnerships and policy-oriented dialogue (Nubowo, 2023; Basid et al., 2024; Loo & Suryana, 2024; Ridwan et al., 2025). These initiatives demonstrate international reach, but the evidence also cautions against treating visibility as equivalent to institutionalized influence: Loo and Suryana (2024), for example, identify challenges of communication, conceptual clarity, and grassroots buy-in.

Table 3. Conversion from transnational circulation to governance influence

Capability	Positive conversion	Failure mode	Empirical signs
Knowledge diplomacy	Circulated knowledge becomes credible policy vocabulary, reciprocal partnerships, or	Symbolic projection or branding detached from evidence and	Co-produced outputs; reciprocal partnerships; policy uptake; evidence of

	recognized normative contribution.	organizational feedback.	learning returning to the organization.
Configurational coupling	The five dimensions reinforce one another in a recurrent cycle.	Strong legitimacy or diplomatic visibility coexists with weak codification, coordination, or grassroots learning.	Repeated innovation cycles; cross- unit learning; adaptation across sites; durable external recognition linked to internal practice.

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis from the literature cited in the table.

Table 3 clarifies that global influence is a conversion outcome, not a direct consequence of organizational reputation. The same international platform can function either as knowledge diplomacy or as symbolic projection depending on whether claims are supported by evidence, reciprocal partnerships, and internal learning. Similarly, an organization may possess several GSSIH dimensions without functioning as a hub if those dimensions remain disconnected.

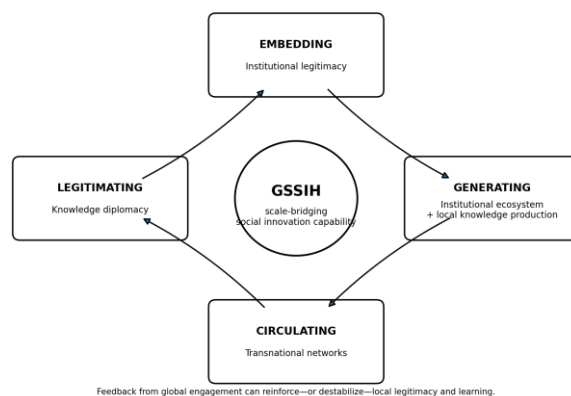


Figure 1. The four-stage Global South Social Innovation Hub cycle

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis.

Figure 1 restates the model as four linked stages. Embedding refers to the legitimacy that creates social access and trust. Generating combines the

institutional ecosystem with local knowledge production so that problems can be identified and responses tested. Circulating refers to brokerage and adaptation through transnational networks. Legitimizing refers to knowledge diplomacy through which tested ideas enter broader policy and normative arenas. The cycle is recursive: external engagement can return resources, comparison, and recognition to local institutions, but it can also weaken legitimacy when global narratives become detached from local constituencies.

Four patterns define this final finding. First, influence is strongest when international claims are traceable to practices and evidence rather than organizational identity alone. Second, reciprocity is a boundary condition: external engagement that produces no learning return is closer to soft-power projection than knowledge diplomacy. Third, the five dimensions are configurational, meaning that weakness in codification or coordination can interrupt the cycle even when legitimacy and international visibility are strong. Fourth, feedback can be positive or destabilizing; global recognition may reinforce local confidence, but elite-centered internationalization may generate internal distance and contestation. This is consistent with polycentric-governance research, which treats multiple centers of authority as potentially productive but also vulnerable to fragmentation and coordination failures (Kim, 2020; Gurol et al., 2026).

The interpretation is that a GSSIH is best understood as a recurrent learning configuration rather than a status. Proposition 5 (diplomatic conversion): knowledge diplomacy generates durable governance influence when external claims are supported by credible evidence, reciprocal partnerships, and practices that retain internal legitimacy. Proposition 6 (configurational capability): an FBO functions as a Global South Social Innovation Hub only when the five dimensions are coupled into a recurrent learning cycle; strong performance in one or two dimensions is insufficient when ecosystem coordination, knowledge codification, reciprocal circulation, or accountability remains weak.

Discussion: Repositioning Nahdlatul Ulama in Polycentric Global Governance

The results show that the proposed GSSIH framework is not a typology of organizational assets but a theory of conversion among assets. Institutional

legitimacy and organizational diversity create the conditions for experimentation; local knowledge production converts situated experience into learnable knowledge; transnational networks move and adapt that knowledge across contexts; and knowledge diplomacy converts credible, circulated knowledge into broader relationships and normative influence. The decisive issue is therefore coupling. An organization may be large, legitimate, transnational, and publicly visible without functioning as a social innovation hub if those features do not form a recurrent learning system.

This explains why the framework places mechanisms rather than organizational scale at its center. Legitimacy matters because it reduces the social cost of participation and makes new practices culturally intelligible, but legitimacy also creates the possibility of deference and institutional closure. Ecosystem diversity matters because it creates multiple experimentation sites, but diversity without coordination produces fragmentation. Codification matters because learning must become visible to travel, yet codification that removes context can destroy the very conditions that make an innovation effective. Networks matter because they enable comparison and brokerage, but geographic reach without reciprocal learning remains representational rather than innovative. Knowledge diplomacy matters because it can convert organizational learning into governance influence, but only when external engagement is evidentially and institutionally connected to internal practice.

Compared with mainstream social innovation scholarship, the framework confirms the importance of relational and institutional change while extending the range of actors through which such change can be produced. Mulgan (2006, 2012), Phills et al. (2008), Murray et al. (2010), and Westley and Antadze (2010) establish the importance of social value, scaling, and systemic change; Cajaiba-Santana (2014), van Wijk et al. (2019), and Pel et al. (2020) move the field toward institutional and multi-level explanations. The present study adds a religiously embedded pathway in which trust, moral authority, vernacular knowledge, and mass organizational infrastructure become possible components of innovation capacity. This does not reject established theory; it specifies a configuration that is more visible in Global South institutional environments than in the venture-capital, foundation, or innovation-lab settings that have shaped much canonical discussion.

Compared with FBO scholarship, the contribution is also more specific than the claim that religious organizations do more than deliver services.

Berger (2003), Clarke (2006), and Haynes (2007) already demonstrate that faith shapes organizational identity, legitimacy, motivation, and community relations. Mandaville (2023), Nubowo (2023), and Ridwan et al. (2025) show that religious actors also participate in transnational diplomacy and political engagement. The GSSIH framework asks a different question: are service delivery, moral authority, diplomacy, and transnational networks connected to an institutional learning system? A humanitarian program or an interfaith forum contributes to hub capability only when experience is captured, evaluated, translated, and fed into subsequent practice. The unit of evaluation therefore shifts from visible activity to cumulative learning.

The results also refine polycentric global-governance theory. Polycentricity identifies the coexistence of multiple centers of authority, but it does not guarantee that every center is equally consequential. The GSSIH framework specifies a pathway through which a non-state religious organization can become epistemically and institutionally relevant: it must generate credible knowledge, demonstrate implementation capacity, broker across contexts, and maintain trusted relationships. This interpretation is consistent with Ostrom's (2010) emphasis on experimentation and mutual adjustment, with Keohane and Victor's (2011) analysis of regime complexity, and with Kim's (2020) distinction between polycentricity and mere fragmentation. It also supports newer arguments that Global South actors can be co-creators rather than peripheral participants in emerging governance arrangements (Gurol et al., 2026).

The broader interpretation concerns epistemic asymmetry. Global South innovations are often rendered invisible when they remain tacit, locally documented, or categorized as implementation rather than knowledge production. The framework therefore treats codification and translation as political as well as organizational processes. This insight aligns with Epistemologies-of-the-South and decolonial scholarship, which challenge the unequal distribution of epistemic authority (Mignolo & Escobar, 2010; de Sousa Santos, 2016). Repositioning FBOs as potential knowledge infrastructures does not mean romanticizing religious tradition; it means asking whether contextually grounded practices can be evaluated and translated without being subordinated to external categories of what counts as innovation.

A critical reflection is necessary because each GSSIH dimension also carries a dysfunction. Legitimacy can become hierarchy; organizational scale

can become bureaucracy; local knowledge can become insulated from external scrutiny; transnational networks can become fragmented or elite dominated; and knowledge diplomacy can become branding. NU illustrates these tensions particularly clearly. Its scale and institutional diversity make it a plausible site of experimentation, while studies of its international partnerships also show that global visions can face uneven communication and grassroots buy-in (Loo & Suryana, 2024). The framework therefore rejects celebratory inference: not every NU program is a social innovation, not every international initiative constitutes knowledge diplomacy, and not every networked activity produces learning. Accountability, evidence, reciprocity, and internal translation are boundary conditions of the model.

The practical implication is that strengthening GSSIH capacity requires knowledge infrastructure rather than program expansion alone. For NU, this would include systematic documentation and evaluation of pesantren- and community-based innovations; cross-unit learning mechanisms linking philanthropic, educational, women's, youth, and research bodies; clearer brokerage functions for PCI NU branches; partnerships with universities and policy institutions for evidence generation; and safeguards that protect internal criticism and community feedback. Recent work on social innovation capability reinforces the importance of participatory governance and adaptability as organizational properties that can be assessed rather than merely asserted (Hernández-Ascanio et al., 2026). For development partners, the implication is to engage Global South FBOs as potential co-producers of knowledge and policy rather than only as channels of implementation.

The study's novelty therefore lies in three moves. It expands the actor category of social innovation by theorizing mass-based Global South FBOs as potential innovation infrastructures; it specifies a five-dimension, four-stage mechanism connecting local embeddedness to transnational influence; and it introduces failure modes and observable indicators that make the framework empirically challengeable. The framework predicts that organizations with strong service networks but weak codification will remain distributed providers rather than hubs; organizations with strong diplomacy but weak grassroots legitimacy will struggle to sustain influence; and organizations with strong local innovation but weak brokerage will face scaling constraints. These predictions create a comparative research agenda rather than a normative endorsement of any single organization.

Conclusion

This article finds that a faith-based organization can be conceptualized as a Global South Social Innovation Hub only when five institutional dimensions are coupled into a recurrent learning cycle. Institutional legitimacy and ecosystem capacity provide the foundation for experimentation; local knowledge production and transnational networks enable contextual learning to be codified, adapted, and circulated; and knowledge diplomacy can convert that circulated knowledge into broader normative influence. The four-stage process of embedding, generating, circulating, and legitimating captures how these dimensions interact and why organizational size or international visibility alone is insufficient.

The principal scientific contribution is the GSSIH framework itself. It brings social innovation, FBO studies, Global South epistemic debates, network governance, and polycentric global governance into one analytical model and generates six propositions with observable indicators. NU is not presented as a fully validated global innovation hub but as an illustrative case showing why large faith-based organizations deserve to be studied as potential knowledge and innovation infrastructures. The framework therefore distinguishes institutional potential from demonstrated capability and provides a basis for comparative empirical research.

The study is limited by its conceptual and secondary-data design. The review is integrative and purposive rather than systematic, the NU analysis relies on publicly documented evidence rather than interviews or program-level impact evaluation, and the causal relationships among the five dimensions remain propositions. Future research should test the model through comparative case studies, organizational-network analysis, surveys of innovation capacity, process tracing of specific innovations, and research on how knowledge moves between local institutions and transnational forums. Comparative work across Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and indigenous faith-based organizations would be especially valuable for identifying the framework's boundary conditions and refining its explanatory reach.

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