

Original Article

Success Stories of ALS Graduates in Building Sustainable Livelihoods: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Alternative Learning System (ALS) programs offer flexible education for individuals who missed basic schooling, yet evidence linking completion to stable livelihoods remains limited. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the success stories of ten ALS graduates who achieved sustained employment or income-generating activities. Findings reveal that graduates build successful livelihoods by cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset, applying transferable skills, and deliberately managing resources. This process is deeply rooted in educational empowerment and strengthened resilience, which are further sustained through community collaboration, financial discipline, and continuous learning. Ultimately, successful livelihood outcomes depend on combining these personal capabilities with social and structural supports that enhance access to opportunities. To ensure ALS completion translates into durable livelihoods, programs should be refined to actively strengthen financial capabilities, practical enterprise skills, and linkages to local networks.

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1. Introduction

Education interruptions remain common among youth and adults who face poverty, early work, caregiving duties, mobility, or local disruptions. In the Philippines, the Department of Education addresses this through the Alternative

Learning System, a parallel pathway that offers flexible basic education through community learning centers and partner providers (Department of Education, 2026). The enhanced ALS policy clarifies program scope, delivery arrangements, and standards for implementation, with the intent to widen access and support completion for out of school youth and adults (Department of Education, 2026).

Completion alone, however, does not guarantee improved life chances. In many communities, the value of second chance education is judged by whether learners translate new skills into stable income, better work conditions, or improved household security. Contemporary livelihoods scholarship frames sustainability as capability based and context dependent, shaped by assets, institutions, and the opportunity environment that affects how people choose strategies over time (Natarajan et al., 2022). This view aligns with how many adult learners describe progress: small but cumulative changes in decisions, routines, networks, and resource use that reduce vulnerability and increase control over livelihood outcomes.

Recent evidence on ALS points to implementation and support conditions that may influence such outcomes. A process evaluation of the Philippine ALS reported constraints that can affect delivery quality, including resource and coordination issues at the local level, with implications for sustained program effects beyond completion (Albert et al., 2024). Policy improvements aim to address these issues, but program refinement benefits from qualitative evidence that describes how graduates use what they learn after completion in real work and family contexts.

Adult learning theory offers a lens for interpreting the transition from learning to livelihood. Transformative learning theory proposes that adults revise frames of reference through reflection and dialogue, which can strengthen agency and support more deliberate life choices (Mezirow, 1997). Human capital theory also links education and training to productivity and earnings through acquired knowledge and skills (Becker, 1993). Yet capability gains often operate through relationships and networks. Social capital theory highlights how trust, norms, and social ties provide access to resources and opportunities that an individual may not secure alone (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). In livelihood contexts, social ties can support job leads, customer access, informal finance, skills exchange, and collective problem solving.

This study examined the success stories of ALS graduates who built sustainable livelihoods after completing the program. It addressed three aims: to identify the key skills and strategies graduates used, to describe how they made sense of their experiences while building livelihoods, and to capture insights they shared about sustaining livelihoods in their communities. Such evidence can inform ALS program decisions that strengthen post completion pathways and align learning with inclusive development goals.

2. Methodology

The study used a qualitative phenomenological design to describe the meaning of livelihood building as experienced by ALS graduates who achieved sustained income generating activities or stable employment after program completion. Phenomenology supports inquiries that seek detailed descriptions of lived experience and the essence of a shared phenomenon across participants. The design emphasized depth of narrative, attention to context, and careful interpretation of how participants described change in skills, decisions, and livelihood outcomes.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure information rich cases. The study included ten ALS graduates who completed ALS within the past ten years and who engaged in livelihood activities that provided ongoing support for personal and family needs. Recruitment sought variation in livelihood form, such as small business, farming, and employment, to capture a range of livelihood pathways. Participant identities were protected through codes (P1 to P10), and the study observed confidentiality procedures during recruitment, data collection, and reporting.

Data collection relied on in depth, semi structured interviews to elicit detailed narratives about skills, strategies, and meanings linked to livelihood work. The interview protocol aligned with the three study aims and followed qualitative interview guidance that emphasizes open questions, careful probing, and participant led detail to produce rich accounts. The protocol drew from established interview methods that treat interviews as purposeful research conversations, with questions that move from experience description to reflection on meaning (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The instrument included prompts on livelihood history, skills gained from ALS, decision processes in work or enterprise, sources of support, barriers encountered, and advice for sustaining livelihoods. The guide underwent face validation by experienced educators and a pilot interview to refine wording and sequence for clarity and cultural fit.

Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Where participants used local language, transcripts preserved original phrasing and the analysis team produced direct English translations for reporting. Field notes captured contextual observations and immediate analytic reflections after each interview. These materials supported transparency and helped link interpretations to the setting and interaction context.

Data analysis used reflexive thematic analysis procedures. The researcher read transcripts repeatedly for familiarization, generated initial codes, clustered codes into candidate themes, reviewed themes against the dataset, refined theme boundaries, and produced a coherent narrative that linked claims to evidence. This workflow aligns with guidance on good practice in thematic analysis that emphasizes analytic transparency and careful theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Byrne, 2022). Trustworthiness was supported through member checking of summary interpretations, peer debriefing with a qualitative research mentor, and an audit trail that documented coding decisions and theme refinement.

3. Results

3.1 Key Skills and Strategies to Build Sustainable Livelihoods

Theme 1: Entrepreneurial Mindset

Participants described opportunity seeking and practical enterprise planning that supported livelihood start up and continuity. They linked this mindset to budgeting, saving, and reinvestment decisions that reduced instability during difficult periods. They mentioned:

"The ALS program helped me develop the skills to start my own small business and manage it effectively." (P1)

"It taught me how to budget and save money to ensure the business stays afloat during tough times." (P3)

"We were taught how to plan a business and manage our earnings." (P5)

Theme 2: Resource Management

Participants reported deliberate use of local assets, including natural resources and small innovations that improved production or sales. They also described careful allocation of inputs and experimentation with techniques that helped maintain operations. They stated:

"I've learned how to use the resources in our community wisely, like growing vegetables and fruits for both consumption and profit." (P2)

"Innovation is key adapting new techniques for farming or handicrafts has helped me reach more customers and stay competitive." (P4)

"I use the natural resources available in our place so the business can continue." (P6)

Theme 3: Lifelong Skills

Participants emphasized transferable skills such as time management, problem solving, and decision confidence. They described use of these skills in daily work behavior and in responses to new demands in business and employment. They verbalized:

"The skills I learned in ALS, like time management and problem-solving, continue to help me every day. I feel more confident in making decisions, whether in business or personal life." (P5)

"The critical thinking skills from ALS really helped me adapt when I started my job. I can approach problems from different angles and find solutions quickly." (P8)

"I learned a lot in ALS, such as managing time and planning. I still use these skills in all my decisions up to now." (P10)

3.2 Meaning-Making of Experiences while Building Sustainable Livelihoods

Theme 1: Empowerment through Education

Participants described ALS completion as a turning point that strengthened confidence and widened perceived options. They described education as a practical tool that supported pursuit of better work, further study, or improved family outcomes. They mentioned:

"Completing ALS made me realize that education is really powerful. I now believe that I can improve my life, not just for myself but for my family too." (P7)

"Before ALS, I didn't believe I could go to college or get a formal job. But after graduating, I felt empowered to pursue my dreams." (P1)

"ALS taught me that education can be used to improve life. I was able to do things I did not expect." (P5)

Theme 2: Practical Application of Skills

Participants reported direct use of ALS lessons in business operations and household management, with emphasis on budgeting, planning, and routine organization. They described visible changes in daily practices that improved stability in income and family support. They verbalized:

"What I learned in ALS helped me run my small business. The lessons on budgeting and planning have made a huge difference in my day-to-day operations." (P3)

"The skills I gained were not just for earning money they also helped me take care of my family and manage our day-to-day needs better." (P2)

"I used what I learned in ALS in my business and for my family. I kept going with our plans because of the practical lessons." (P6)

Theme 3: Personal Resilience and Growth

Participants described growth in resilience and persistence when facing setbacks in work and life. They reported that ALS supported a mindset that treated obstacles as manageable and encouraged sustained effort during hardship. They stated:

"The lessons in ALS taught me to be strong and face challenges head-on. I've learned that setbacks are just part of the journey, and I can always recover." (P4)

"ALS gave me the mindset to never give up, even when times are tough. I now approach every challenge with patience and courage." (P8)

"ALS taught me how to face hardship and trials. I learned to continue even when problems arise." (P9)

3.3 Insights to Sustain Livelihoods in Communities

Theme 1: Community Collaboration

Participants emphasized mutual assistance, exchange of tools and ideas, and shared work as practical supports that reduced individual burden. They described collaboration as a pathway to stability because it expanded access to resources and informal support. They mentioned:

"In our community, we always help each other. Whether it's sharing tools for farming or exchanging business ideas, working together makes it easier for everyone." (P6)

"Sustainability comes when we all do our part. If everyone in the community contributes, even in small ways, it adds up to something bigger." (P2)

"Cooperation and helping each other in the community greatly supports everyone's livelihood. If we help one another, we can prosper." (P5)

Theme 2: Financial Discipline and Savings

Participants stressed budgeting, saving, and basic investment as essential for resilience and business continuity. They described financial discipline as protection during emergencies and as a mechanism that enabled gradual growth. They verbalized:

"Learning how to budget and save money was one of the most important lessons I took from ALS. Now, I make sure to set aside some of my income every month." (P3)

"It's not just about making money it's also about managing it well. Saving and investing helped me grow my business and prepare for emergencies." (P1)

"Knowing how to save and budget money is very important. I realized that saving gives stability to my business." (P9)

Theme 3: Continuous Learning

Participants viewed learning as ongoing after ALS, with attention to new techniques and market related skills. They described workshops, training, and self-directed learning as strategies that supported adaptation and competitiveness. They stated:

"To keep my business going, I have to constantly learn new things whether it's new farming techniques or how to use technology for marketing." (P4)

"ALS taught me that learning doesn't stop after graduation. I've attended workshops and training to improve my skills and keep up with changes." (P7)

"I continue learning new skills and knowledge so I stay competitive in business and keep improving." (P10)

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that ALS related livelihood success reflects both capability gains and enabling conditions. Across themes, graduates emphasized a pattern of deliberate decision making that linked basic enterprise planning, budgeting, and saving with day to day livelihood actions. This pattern is consistent with human capital accounts that connect education to productivity through acquired skills and improved decision quality (Becker, 1993). It also aligns with evidence that human capital relates to entrepreneurial success, although effect sizes can be modest and dependent on context, measurement, and opportunity conditions (Unger et al., 2011). For ALS graduates, even modest capability gains may matter when they translate into consistent routines that stabilize cash flow and reduce exposure to shocks.

The entrepreneurial mindset theme suggests a change in perceived agency and in how participants evaluated opportunities. Transformative learning theory proposes that adult learners can revise frames of reference and develop a stronger sense of agency through reflection and dialogue (Mezirow, 1997). Participants described greater confidence and a clearer sense of direction, which fits this theoretical expectation. When confidence supports careful planning and persistence, it can improve the likelihood that a livelihood activity continues beyond initial start-up, particularly in resource constrained settings.

Resource management in the results reflects a livelihood strategy that blends local asset use with small scale innovation. The sustainable livelihoods framework highlights that strategies depend on accessible assets and the broader structures and institutions that shape livelihood options (Natarajan et al., 2022). Participants described use of natural resources, farming inputs, and local know how as assets. Such strategies may succeed when local markets, skills support, and community networks reduce barriers to entry. The findings suggest that ALS can support resource awareness and practical problem solving, but stable outcomes still require opportunity environments that allow these strategies to generate returns.

Themes on community collaboration and support point to the role of social capital in livelihood stability. Social capital theory emphasizes that social ties provide access to information, obligations, norms, and trust that facilitate coordinated action (Coleman, 1988). Portes (1998) also described social capital as resources embedded in social networks that can yield benefits for members. In this study, collaboration functioned as shared labor, exchange of tools, and mutual advice. These resources can reduce individual risk and can improve access to customers, materials, and informal assistance. For ALS delivery, this suggests that stronger links between learning centers and local livelihood ecosystems may amplify graduate outcomes.

The results also highlight financial discipline and savings as a practical mechanism for resilience. Participants treated saving as a buffer against emergencies and as a basis for gradual business growth. This theme has direct program relevance because financial capability skills can be taught and reinforced through practice. ALS policy documents recognize the need for quality implementation and relevant learning experiences (Department of Education, 2019, 2026). The present findings support an interpretation of relevance that includes money management, basic enterprise numeracy, and access to local support services that help graduates apply these skills in real contexts.

Continuous learning after completion reflects an adaptive stance toward livelihood work. This theme suggests that ALS graduates treated completion as a starting point rather than an endpoint. Such a stance fits lifelong learning priorities in adult education and can support adaptation to market shifts, technology change, and local shocks. From an implementation angle, recent evaluation work underscores that delivery conditions can influence outcomes beyond completion (Albert et al., 2024). If programs offer pathways to short courses, local training, or mentoring, graduates may sustain the habit of skill upgrading that supports long term livelihood stability.

Methodologically, organizing themes by research aim clarifies how different dimensions of livelihood building relate to each other. Thematic analysis guidance emphasizes coherent theme definitions, a clear link between interpretations and evidence, and reflexive engagement with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Byrne, 2022). The theme structure in this study provides a map that can guide monitoring of post completion outcomes, such as tracking the uptake of budgeting practices, use of local resources, participation in community networks, and engagement in continuing

skills development. Future research may test these pathways through mixed methods designs that combine qualitative explanations with quantitative outcome tracking.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that ALS graduates who sustain livelihoods draw on linked outcomes that include entrepreneurial and resource strategies, empowerment and resilience experiences, and community and learning based supports for continuity. Findings suggest that livelihood pathways strengthen when programs reinforce financial capability and practical enterprise skills while also connecting graduates to local networks that expand resource access and opportunity. Program leaders may use these insights to refine ALS delivery and strengthen post completion support that improves the durability of livelihood outcomes.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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