

## Examining Social Capital among Poor Households: Community Ties versus Leadership Relations

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### Abstract

This paper explores the social capital of individuals living in poverty, specifically examining their relationships within the family, community and with community leaders. We use a descriptive statistical method to explore the distribution of social capital and its association with income. Data collected from interviews with 1080 heads of poor households show that social relations within the family are generally strong. However, these relationships tend to weaken when it comes to interactions with community leaders, particularly as their hierarchical position increases. Our research findings indicate that, in some instances, there is a significant association between income and social relations within the community. This suggests that variations in income levels may influence the quality and extent of social interactions and relationships among community members, and *vice versa*. By understanding the dynamics of social capital among those living in poverty, it becomes possible to design more effective community development programs and interventions. Addressing the disparity in social relations between community members and leaders could enhance social cohesion and support poverty alleviation efforts, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and supportive community environment.

**Keywords:** Community development; Poor households; Social capital

### 1.0 Introduction

Social capital refers to the networks of relationships, trust, and cooperation within a community or society that enable its members to achieve common goals. It encompasses the social norms, values, and social connections that facilitate cooperation and collaboration among individuals and groups. Social capital is important for several reasons. It promotes community well-being by fostering trust, reciprocity, and cooperation among its members. It also enhances the sense of belonging and identity within the community. Additionally, it plays a crucial role in economic development by facilitating economic transactions, information sharing, innovative development (Pylypenko et al., 2023), and entrepreneurship (Babajide et al., 2022; Sánchez-Arrieta et al., 2021). Social capital creates opportunities for economic growth and innovation, and it may foster social inclusion, thus reducing social inequalities. All these qualities promote better physical and mental health among community members. The relationships between community members and leaders are vital for the functioning democratic governance as it increases participation or engagement in decision making by selecting a suitable representative.

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Why is social capital important, especially for vulnerable groups such as poor households? The main reason is community development. Understanding the level of social capital among the poor helps identify the strengths and weaknesses of community networks. Building on this understanding, the aim of this paper is to explore the level of social capital among poor households in the state of Kedah. Based on the Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIES) in 2022 (DOSM 2023), Kedah ranked 4th for the highest poverty rates out of 13 states and three federal territories in Malaysia. This study is based on data gathered for a poverty eradication program known as Basmi Miskin Tegar (BMT). This knowledge is crucial for developing effective community development programs and interventions. Thus, the objective of this paper is to explore the social capital of individuals living in poverty, focusing on their community relationships within the family, community, and community leaders. The following sections review past studies, followed by the methodology employed, presentation of the findings, and discussion. The final section concludes the paper.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

In developing countries like Malaysia, social capital plays a crucial role in shaping economic outcomes, access to services, and overall well-being, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Social capital, as conceptualized by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2000), involves the resources embedded in social relationships and networks that individuals and communities can leverage for various benefits. The unique socio-cultural and economic context of Malaysia, characterized by ethnic diversity, migration patterns, and urban-rural divides, significantly influences the operation and impact of social capital. This literature review aims to explore these theoretical perspectives and empirical studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of social capital within this context.

### **2.1 Social Capital and Social Networks**

Social capital refers to the resources and benefits that individuals and communities derive from social networks. Bourdieu (1986) describes it as resources linked to institutionalized relationships, while Coleman (1988) emphasizes its role in facilitating coordinated actions and creating human capital. Putnam (2000) highlights social capital as connections among individuals and the norms of reciprocity and trust that arise from these connections. Durlauf and Fafchamps (2008) argue for understanding social capital through the lens of social network structures, which impact individual outcomes. Fukuyama (1999) defines social capital as informal norms promoting cooperation, ranging from simple reciprocity to complex cultural doctrines. The World Bank (Grootaert and Bartelaer, 2001) sees social capital as the institutions, relationships, and norms shaping social interactions and contributing to economic and social development. Social capital is the "glue" that holds societies together, facilitating coordination and cooperation.

Measuring social capital is challenging due to its abstract concepts like trust, community, and networks. However, studies have identified useful proxies, such as trust, civic engagement, and community involvement (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). The multidimensional definitions of social capital incorporate different levels of analysis, and its measurement depends on the context and purpose of the study. For instance, Narayan and Cassidy (2001) suggest using membership in local associations, indicators of trust and norms adherence, and collective action as proxies. Lin (2001) defines social capital as resources contained within social networks, emphasizing access and use of these resources. Knack (2002) views social capital as a value or network membership impacting individual capacity to achieve goals. Sobel (2002) interprets

social capital as the ability to benefit from association memberships within networks. Krishna (2002) stresses the importance of context in measuring social capital, arguing against standardized instruments that may not be suitable for all study settings.

Social networks, the web of relationships formed through interactions, are crucial for understanding how social capital is built, maintained, and leveraged. The structure (size, density, composition) and function (support and resources provided) of these networks significantly influence individual opportunities and life prospects (Putnam, 2001; Forrest and Kearns, 2001). When individuals or groups are excluded from important resources and information, the likelihood of enduring poverty increases (Guiaux et al., 2011; Reimer, 2004; Meij et al., 2020).

## **2.2 Social Capital and Social Networks among the Poor**

In poor communities, bonding social capital—strong, close-knit networks—is often prevalent. Stack (1974) and Small (2009) demonstrate how such networks provide crucial support systems, from childcare to financial aid. However, reliance on bonding social capital can limit exposure to new opportunities and resources outside these tight-knit groups. Social capital serves as a vital resource for coping with poverty's challenges, providing access to informal lending systems and job referrals, as highlighted by Granovetter (1973). These networks also play a crucial role in mobilizing collective action for community improvement and social change.

The structure of social networks in poor communities varies. Dense networks offer strong support but may perpetuate insularity, while sparse networks provide less immediate support but broader horizons (Moore, 1990; Berkman et al., 2000). Factors such as geographic mobility, cultural practices, and socioeconomic status shape these networks. Migration patterns, for instance, can disrupt traditional networks but also create translocal networks that span regions and countries, offering diverse resources and opportunities.

Strong social networks enhance social capital by facilitating information, resource, and support flow. These networks create a sense of community and belonging, strengthening social trust and cooperation (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). The organization of social networks influences how resources and support are distributed. Well-connected networks offer substantial benefits, including access to information, emotional support, and practical assistance. Research has focused on two main aspects of social networks: size and tie strength. A larger network expands an individual's access to opportunities, while network diversity enhances the ability to mobilize high-quality resources (Batjargal, 2003; Bian & Li, 2001). Strong ties, often with family and close friends, provide immediate support but may limit opportunities by concentrating resources within a narrow social circle (Falco & Bulte, 2011). Conversely, bridging capital, characterized by weaker but more diverse connections, is essential for accessing broader information and opportunities crucial for escaping poverty (Beall, 2001).

## **2.3 The Role of Social Capital and Social Networks in Economic and Social Well-Being**

The embeddedness perspective in development studies explores the relationship between social capital and economic development, focusing on how social and economic interactions are embedded within social networks. Social capital, both at individual and community levels, significantly influences development outcomes, including poverty reduction (Bebbington,

1999; Grootaert & Van Bastelaer, 2002). Social capital facilitates access to resources, information, and support, crucial for economic and social development (Narayan, 2002; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Social capital impacts actors' economic status by influencing the information available to them, facilitating access to resources, and reducing costs and risks associated with economic activities (Batjargal & Liu, 2004; Bian, 1997; Kwon, Heflin, & Ruef, 2013; Li & Sicular, 2014). Individuals' rich in social capital are less likely to experience poverty (Cleaver, 2005; Glauben, Herzfeld, Rozelle, & Wang, 2012).

Empirical studies provide valuable insights into social capital's role in influencing access to resources and benefits. For instance, Narayan and Pritchett's (1999) study in Tanzania demonstrates how community groups and associations impact household welfare. Krishna's (2002) research in India shows that communities with higher social capital levels were more successful in leveraging external resources for development projects. Social capital and networks vary across contexts. Studies in urban slums in Brazil (Perlman, 2010) and rural villages in Kenya (Molyneux, 2002) reveal how local conditions shape social capital's forms and functions. In Malaysia, studies highlight the importance of family and ethnic networks in providing support and navigating socio-economic challenges (Fong and Shaffer, 2019). Community-based organizations in urban poor communities and traditional networks in rural villages contribute to collective action, resource-sharing, and community resilience (Embong, 2015).

In conclusion, social capital is a multifaceted concept that significantly impacts economic and social well-being, particularly in developing countries like Malaysia. The structure and function of social networks, influenced by socio-cultural and economic factors, play a crucial role in determining the extent and effectiveness of social capital. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing policies and interventions that leverage social capital for poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

### **3.0 Research Methods**

#### **3.1 Study Context**

This analysis is a part of a larger project under the *Program Pembasmian Kemiskinan Tegar* (BMT), a program to eradicate hardcore poverty in Malaysia. This program, coordinated by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and the Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU) of the Prime Minister's Department, was initiated following the decision made during the 12th Malaysia Plan (RMKe-12). The main goal of BMT program is to eradicate hardcore poverty among households nationwide by the end of 2025.

#### **3.2 Study Area, Population and Data Source**

This study specifically focuses on the state of Kedah as the case study within this broader context. Kedah is one of the less economically developed states in Malaysia, with a relatively high incidence of poverty, especially in rural areas. Kedah is a state located in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia, covering an area of 9,424 square kilometres. It is administratively divided into 12 districts and 132 sub-districts (mukim). As of 2021, Kedah had a population of approximately 2.2 million people in 2024 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia (DOSM), 2024), resulting in a population density of about 231 people per square kilometer. This moderate population density reflects a balance between urban and rural areas, with the state being known for its agricultural landscapes, particularly paddy fields.

The state has a significant number of households registered in the eKasih database, which identifies them as poor or hardcore poor. Kedah was selected as the case study for in-depth analysis due to its significant representation in the national hardcore poor population. The state provides a relevant context for understanding the dynamics of poverty and the association of social capital on poverty indicators, for example, income. The population for this study comprises households listed in the eKasih database, specifically focusing on both poor and hardcore poor categories. The absolute poor are individuals whose household monthly income falls below the Poverty Line Income (PLI). In Kedah, the PLI in 2022 was RM2,271 (with RM1,156 for the hardcore poor), compared to the national average of RM2,589 and RM1,198 for the hardcore category (DOSM,2024).

The eKasih database is a comprehensive national poverty data bank that includes detailed information on individual profiles, assistance programs received by the head of households (HHs) and their family members (HMs), as well as data on the effectiveness of these programs. Table 1 shows the distribution of the population in each district in 2023 (DOSM, 2024) and associated hardcore poor households surveyed for the BMT program. Figure 1 shows the study area and number of households surveyed for BMT-Kedah.

Table 1: Distribution of Population by District in Kedah, 2023

District	Population* (‘000)	Hardcore households under study	Urbanisation status Urban (U)/Rural (R) <sup>1</sup>
Baling	146.6	189	R
Bandar Baharu	45	NA <sup>2</sup>	R
Kota Setar	379.2	62	U
Kuala Muda	559.5	60	U
Kubang Pasu	251.4	66	U
Kulim	346.2	58	U
Langkawi	98.1	52	U
Padang Terap	67	84	R
Pendang	100.6	116	R
Pokok Sena	50.4	97	R
Sik	69.2	190	R
Yan	74.2	106	R
<b>Total</b>	<b>2187.4</b>	<b>1080</b>	

Source: \*Department of Statistics, Malaysia (DOSM) (2024)

Note : <sup>1</sup>Status is based on the status of the Local Authority of each district: Municipal Council (Urban) and District Council (Rural).

<sup>2</sup>Refined data are not available at the time of analysis.

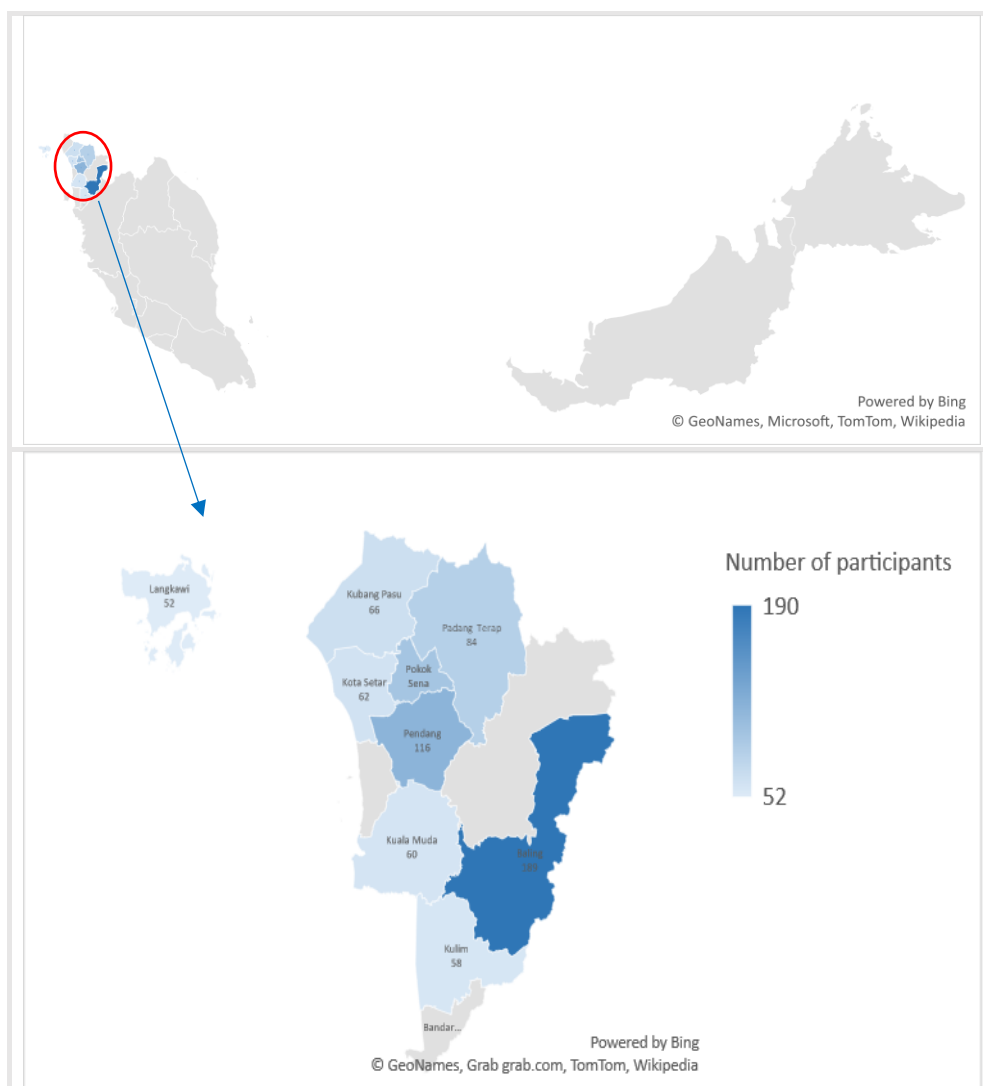


Figure 1: Study area and the number of participants in the survey for BMT-Kedah

### 3.3 Sample and Data Collection

The study utilises data from 1080 hardcore poor households in Kedah, as identified in the eKasih database. Data collection was conducted through face-to-face interviews with the heads of households. The interviews were carried out from November 2022 to May 2024. At the time of analysis, data collection from the Padang Terap District was still ongoing. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire designed to capture information across various domains relevant to the study's objectives. The questionnaire included, among others, sections on demographics, economic activities, education, health, property ownership, and most importantly, the social capital which is the primary focus of this paper. Although the questionnaire does not explicitly inquire into multiple social capital domains like group networks or generalized trust, it implicitly covers these areas by focusing on closeness and access to key community members. These relationships can be proxies for trust and network strength, as they reflect the social ties and the degree of mutual reliance within the community. Furthermore, given that the target population may have low educational levels, it is essential to design a questionnaire that is easy to understand and respond to. Using straightforward questions about the level of closeness and access to various members of society ensures that respondents can accurately convey their experiences without misunderstanding complex concepts.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using a descriptive statistic. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the level of social capital and explore its relationship with one poverty indicator, which is household income. The analysis aims to identify the role of social capital in income levels within poor households in Kedah. In this study we use two indicators for social capital:

1. **Closeness level** within the family (spouse) and the community (people in the neighbourhood, religious community, and community leaders).
2. **Access level** to the family (spouse) and the community (people in the neighbourhood, religious community, and community leaders).

Access level to a community reflects the frequency of participation, involvement, or privileges an individual or group has within that community, whether it is physical, social, or online. This access level determines the activities, resources, or information a person can engage with or contribute to. During the interview, heads of households rated their level of closeness with family members, the community, and community leaders on a five-point scale: 0 (Not related), 1 (Very bad), 2 (Not good), 3 (Good), and 4 (Very good). Additionally, a six-point scale was used to measure the frequency of access: 0 (Not related), 1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), and 5 (Very often). Scores of 0 (Not related) for some variables were excluded from further analysis for accuracy of interpretation.

### 4.0 Results

From the data, we found that the incidence of poverty from the eKasih register was associated with the urbanisation status of the district. The incidence of poverty was higher in districts under the 'Rural' category, such as Baling, Pendang, Sik, and Yan. The average household's poverty incidence is significantly different at 1 percent depending on the urbanisation status. In this section, we present an overview of social capital, measured by social relation levels as reported by the heads of households.

#### 4.1 Overview of social relations within family, community members and leaders

Table 2 presents the summary statistics of reported level of closeness and access between the head of household and their spouse, community members, and leaders.

Table 2: Closeness and Access Levels of Heads of Households to Various Community Entities

Variable	Observation	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>Social Entity</i>					
<i>Closeness</i>					
Parents*	843	3.654	0.557	1	5
Spouse*	928	3.671	0.571	1	5
Neighbour*	1073	3.471	0.559	1	5
Co-workers*	938	3.173	0.450	1	5
Mosque committee member*	1013	3.133	0.409	1	4
Fellow villagers	1080	3.434	0.640	0	5

<i>Penghulu</i> (Village head)	1080	2.908	0.876	0	4
State Assemblyman/woman	1080	2.545	1.184	0	5
Member of Parliament	1080	2.498	1.212	0	4
<i>Access</i>					
Parents*	830	4.373	0.797	1	5
Spouse*	932	4.561	0.734	1	5
Neighbour*	1068	4.123	0.753	2	5
Co-workers*	927	3.335	1.053	1	5
Mosque committee member*	1007	3.199	0.983	1	5
Fellow villagers	1080	3.992	0.929	0	5
<i>Penghulu</i> (Village head)	1080	2.673	1.153	0	5
State Assemblyman/woman	1080	2.076	1.234	0	5
Member of Parliament	1080	1.991	1.244	0	5

Note: \*Scores of 0 (Not applicable) are excluded to ensure the accuracy of the statistics. For the remaining variables, a score of 0 is included, as it indicates a lack of relation to the entity, reflecting very low closeness and access.

The analysis closeness and access levels across various community entities reveals important insights into the relationships and engagement of heads of households. The closeness level with parents and spouse exhibits the highest mean scores, with scores of 3.654 and 3.671, respectively, indicating strong familial bonds and a high level of personal connection. The level for neighbours and fellow villagers also demonstrates relatively high mean scores of 3.471 and 3.434, respectively. Although these relationships are somewhat less intimate than those with parents and spouses, they still hold significant value. In contrast, co-workers and mosque committee members show lower mean scores of 3.173 and 3.133, reflecting a more formal or professional relationship. The closeness scores for the *penghulu* and state assemblyman/woman are even lower, at 2.908 and 2.545, respectively, highlighting a more distant connection likely due to the hierarchical nature of these roles. Members of Parliament have the lowest mean closeness score at 2.498, suggesting the least personal connection among the entities considered.

Among the various entities, spouses exhibit the highest level of access for heads of households, with a mean score of 4.561, reflecting exceptional interaction and accessibility between them. Parents follow closely with a mean score of 4.373, reflecting strong access levels. Neighbours and fellow villagers also show strong access levels for heads of households, with mean scores of 4.123 and 3.992, respectively, indicating effective community interaction. In contrast, co-workers and mosque committee members have more moderate access, with mean scores of 3.335 and 3.199, reflecting reasonable but less frequent engagement. The *penghulu* and state assemblyman/woman exhibit lower access levels, with means of 2.673 and 2.076, respectively, signifying less frequent interaction. Members of parliament have the lowest mean access score at 1.991, indicating the least level of accessibility among the entities.

Overall, the data shows that personal and familial relationships, such as those with parents and spouses, tend to have higher levels of both closeness and access. In contrast, formal and hierarchical relationships, such as those with government officials and community leaders, generally exhibit lower levels of both dimensions. This highlights the importance of personal connections in achieving both closeness and access within the community.

Next, we aim to establish the association between social capital and income level of the households. For this purpose, we calculate pairwise correlation coefficients between variables. The pairwise correlation handles missing data by computing correlations for each pair of variables using all available observations for that pair. Table 3 shows the result of the analysis.

Table 3: Pairwise correlation between social capital and income

<i>Social Entity</i>	Income
	Correlation coefficient, p-value
Parents	0.0671, 0.054*
Spouse	0.0818, 0.0129**
Neighbour	0.0699, 0.0228**
Co-workers	0.1325, 0.0001***
Mosque committee member	0.0803, 0.0110**
Fellow villagers	0.0794, 0.0093***
Penghulu (Village head)	-0.0043, 0.8875
State Assemblyman/woman	-0.0499, 0.1022
Member of Parliament	-0.0388, 0.2046

The analysis reveals that income shows a statistically significant positive correlation with access to spouses, neighbours, mosque committee members, and fellow villagers, with the most substantial association seen with co-workers. The correlation with co-workers is moderate and highly significant. In contrast, interactions with the *penghulu*, state assembly members, and members of parliament show no significant relationship with income, with negative or near-zero correlations and high p-values indicating a lack of substantial association. The study by Abdul-Hakim, Abdul-Razak & Ismail (2010) within Malaysian context also confirm that social capital is a significant factor in explaining the likelihood of rural households experiencing poverty while a study in Bangladesh also suggests that a reduced level of social network is associated with a higher likelihood of the household being in poverty (Islam, & Alam, 2018).

## 5.0 Conclusion

In this study we found additional evidence that poor households rely more on their immediate social network for emotional, social, and possibly financial support, rather than community leaders. Based on the results, it appears that low-income households, social capital within their immediate community and close social circles is notably more significant compared to relationships with higher hierarchical entities. This might be due to less frequent or less personal engagement with these higher-level figures, which contrasts with the more direct and frequent interactions they have with their immediate community, resulting less impactful impact on economic development of the society. The significant positive correlations with spouses, neighbours, co-workers, mosque committee members, and fellow villagers suggest

that these relationships are crucial sources of support and interaction for those with lower income. As suggested by previous studies, while strong ties, often with family and close friends offer immediate support, they may restrict opportunities by keeping resources concentrated within a limited social circle, thus broader limit opportunities for economic developments (Beall, 2001, Falco & Bulte, 2011).

Future research should include an in-depth investigation of how social capital varies across different socioeconomic profiles within low-income households. This would enable the design of more targeted and effective programs that address the specific needs and dynamics of these groups. Additionally, initiatives aimed at enhancing social capital, particularly by fostering broader and more diverse connections within and beyond immediate social circles, could be essential in expanding opportunities for economic development and improving the overall well-being of the poor.

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### **Ethical Considerations**

All data collection procedures adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the respondents. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews, and their participation was voluntary.

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