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EVALUATING AND ENHANCING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS AMONG URBAN POOR COMMUNITIES IN KUALA LUMPUR

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Abstract

The sustainable livelihoods of urban poor groups in Kuala Lumpur have emerged as a critical emphasis due to the ongoing challenge of urban poverty faced by cities worldwide. Accelerated urbanization has exacerbated the socioeconomic divide, resulting in numerous urban poor individuals grappling with challenges related to housing, work, and access to essential services. To tackle these difficulties, sustainable strategies, such as community-driven initiatives and partnerships with local authorities, are essential for empowering citizens and equipping them to endure economic disruptions. This study assesses and improves the sustainable livelihoods of poor urban neighbourhoods in Kuala Lumpur. The study, grounded in the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF), involved a survey of 394 participants, with data gathered via questionnaires and analysed using SPSS version 25 and Microsoft Excel. The results demonstrate that governmental actions substantially contribute to improving the sustainable livelihoods of urban residents in Kuala Lumpur. Mean analysis indicates that poor areas in Kuala Lumpur exhibit high well-being solely in the environmental factor.

Keywords: Sustainable livelihoods; urban; poor; communities; Kuala Lumpur

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INTRODUCTION

Urban poverty remains a significant challenge for cities worldwide, including Kuala Lumpur. Recent urbanization has widened the socioeconomic divide, with many urban poor facing difficulties in housing, employment, and access to essential services (Kamal et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2021). Achieving sustainable and resilient living for these communities requires addressing immediate needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare while also establishing pathways for long-term stability and self-sufficiency through inclusive policies and community-based initiatives (Shah et al., 2023; United Nations, 2019). Community-driven initiatives and collaborations with local authorities are essential for empowering communities and enhancing their ability to adapt to economic shocks and disruptions, which have become increasingly common due to global crises and climate change (World Bank, 2020). Resilience is crucial, as it enables communities to recover and thrive despite challenges. Research indicates that urban poor populations with access to education, skill development, and support networks are better equipped to overcome economic hardships and improve their quality of life over time (Mokhtar & Rahman, 2022). Efforts to promote sustainable and resilient living for Kuala Lumpur's urban poor must adopt a comprehensive strategy encompassing financial aid, skill development, healthcare, and housing assistance to achieve lasting transformation and improved welfare (UN-Habitat, 2020). This introduction establishes the framework for examining effective methods and policies aimed at fostering sustainable and resilient urban living for low-income residents of Kuala Lumpur.

Furthermore, current research highlights a lack of empirical studies on the sustainable and resilient living conditions of urban poor communities in Kuala Lumpur. While extensive studies have examined global urban poverty and resilience, research specifically addressing sustainable and resilient living among Kuala Lumpur's urban poor remains limited. Existing studies often focus on broader issues such as urban poverty, housing affordability, and access to basic needs but lack empirical investigations into holistic frameworks tailored to Kuala Lumpur's unique socio-economic context (Zainal et al., 2019; Ariffin & Yusof, 2021). This gap limits our understanding of how these communities navigate economic and environmental challenges and the potential impact of government interventions in strengthening their resilience. This study aims to assess and enhance the sustainable livelihoods of poor urban neighbourhoods in Kuala Lumpur.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF)

The notion of Sustainable Livelihood is an effort to extend beyond the conventional view and strategies for poverty elimination. From this perspective, emphasize given to several areas of human well-being that could hamper their life progress in a sustainable manner. Historically, the concept of sustainable livelihood was established by the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development as a medium to form an interconnection between socioeconomic and ecological aspect of human well-being. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) has broaden the idea, primarily in the context of Agenda 21 and uphold the achievement of sustainable livelihood as an ultimate means of poverty eradication.

Karki (2021) highlighted that the term livelihood refers to activities, resources and entitlements a person acquires to make a living. The ability to earn a livelihood is a critical factor of a person's role and existence within society, as it encompasses the means through which people fulfil their basic needs and achieve economic security. Individuals earn their livelihoods from a mix of both movable and immovable resources, drawing on a wide range of assets and activities that help them sustain their daily lives and meet their needs. Chambers and Conway (1992) define livelihood as the combination of people's capabilities, resources, and the activities they engage in to secure their means of living and pursue their goals and aspirations. These resources include a broad spectrum of assets, including social, human, natural, and financial capital, all of which play a critical role in shaping individuals' ability to achieve sustainable well-being.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) has emerged as a vital framework within contemporary development policy aimed at mitigating poverty and reducing vulnerability among rural households (Stirrat, 2004). By analysing the interplay between livelihood strategies and livelihood capitals, the SLA applies the capital and capabilities framework (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Bebbington, 1999) to identify strategies to alleviate poverty and enhancing sustainable livelihoods. The evolution of sustainable livelihoods from SLA approach to an established framework, Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) was evidenced by the publication of a seminal IDS working paper authored by Ian Scoones in 1998. Later, the Department for International Development (DFID) advanced this progression by simplifying some of the complexities of Scoones' original diagram, transforming his framework into a more practical methodology (Carney, 1999). The SLF integrate five aspects that influence people's livelihoods including livelihood assets, vulnerability context, transforming structures and processes, livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes. The central feature of DFID framework emphasizes the concept of capital assets and examine how these are affected by any vulnerable events. At

the core of the framework is the assets that households use to sustain their livelihoods. These assets are formed by the vulnerability context, which include the various sources of insecurity that could affect both individuals and their resources. The access to and effective utilization of these assets are further conditioned by the role of government policies, institutional structures, and the dynamics of relationships between individuals, organizations, and governing authorities.

While the SLF was initially developed to understand rural poverty, it has increasingly been applied in urban poverty contexts, particularly in rapidly urbanising developing economies. Urban poverty is characterised by distinct vulnerabilities such as unstable employment, high living costs, overcrowded housing, and environmental risks associated with urban infrastructure (Rakodi, 2002). As a result, implementing the SLF in urban environments need modification to address urban-specific difficulties and institutional dynamics.

In the Malaysian context, several studies have utilised the SLF to examine livelihood conditions among vulnerable communities. For instance, Ibrahim et al (2018) confirm that physical asset, natural asset and social asset are significantly related to the achievement of sustainable livelihoods in Kedah and Kelantan. Meanwhile, Kunjuraman (2022) also applied the SLF framework to analyse livelihood impacts of community-based ecotourism in Sabah. Given the complexity of urban poverty in Kuala Lumpur, the SLF provides a comprehensive framework to capture the interaction between vulnerability factors, livelihood assets, institutional structures, and livelihood outcomes among urban poor households.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 depicts the modified conceptual framework of the study, based on the Department for International Development (DFID) (1999). The conceptual framework comprises five primary components: vulnerability setting, assets, structures and processes, tactics, and livelihood outcomes. Vulnerability has three dimensions: economic, social, and physical, as well as environmental. Economic hazards encompass the loss of money sources or work opportunities. Social and physical risks pertain to the physical state of the residence, including insufficient furnishings and inadequate basic amenities. Environmental concerns encompass water contamination, industrial emissions, and flooding. Institutional aspects denote entities that guarantee the execution of legislation and policies, deliver services, facilitate exchanges, and perform specific duties that impact individuals or families. These institutions dictate and shape the interactions of individuals or households. The institutional setting influences the vulnerability experienced by individuals and their access to life assets. This study has discovered multiple organizations directly associated with the respondents, indicating that agencies

tied to rural communities are either engaged in assisting or providing services to urban communities and the poor.

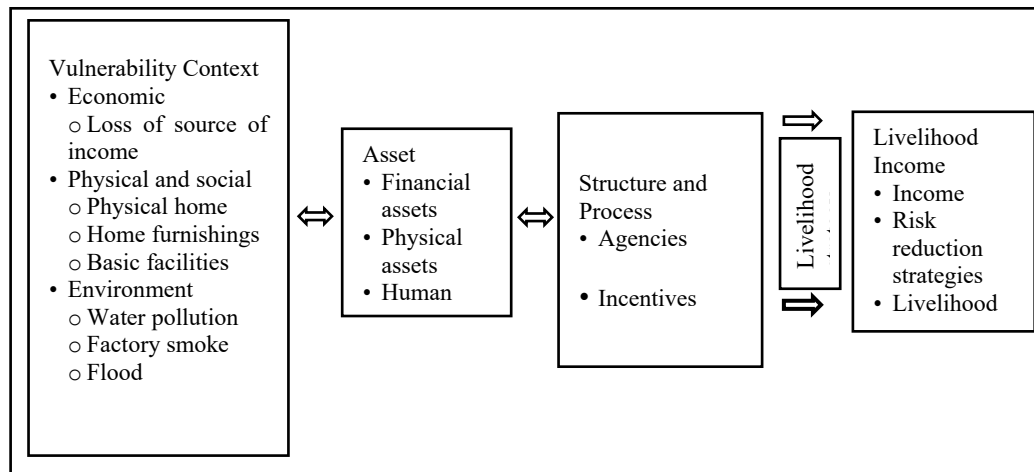


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study: Sustainable Livelihood Framework of the urban poor communities in Kuala Lumpur

In this study, livelihood strategy denotes the economic activities undertaken by individuals, encompassing both primary and secondary employment. Livelihood income influences household welfare and long-term growth potential. This study identifies three criteria as components of livelihood outcomes: income, well-being, and the mitigation of vulnerability experienced by individuals, pertaining to the method of vulnerability reduction.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine sustainable livelihood conditions among urban poor communities in Kuala Lumpur. The study focuses on households living in identified low-income neighbourhoods within Kuala Lumpur, which represent areas with a higher concentration of urban poverty. To identify suitable respondents, the study employs a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling enables the deliberate selection of participants who possess relevant characteristics and experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation, particularly individuals residing in urban poor communities (Patton, 2015). This approach is appropriate for studies that aim to obtain insights from specific populations that are directly affected by the research issue, in this case households experiencing socioeconomic vulnerability in urban settings.

Respondents were selected from urban poor neighbourhoods identified through secondary information from relevant government agencies and

community records. The sampling focused on households classified as low-income or vulnerable according to local socioeconomic indicators. To reduce potential selection bias, respondents were approached across multiple neighbourhood locations and demographic groups within the targeted communities. Although purposive sampling was used to identify eligible respondents, the sample size was determined based on population size to ensure sufficient statistical power. According to data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), approximately 18,445 households in Kuala Lumpur are classified as experiencing deep poverty. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a minimum sample of 377 respondents is required for populations exceeding 15,000. To enhance reliability and reduce sampling error, this study collected data from 394 respondents, exceeding the minimum required sample size.

Data for this study were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure respondents' perceptions regarding livelihood conditions, vulnerability factors, and asset ownership. For data analysis, this study utilised several statistical tools. Descriptive and statistical analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25. In addition, two indices were constructed to assess livelihood conditions: the Vulnerability Index and the Asset Ownership Index. These indices were used to evaluate the level of vulnerability and access to livelihood assets among urban poor households in Kuala Lumpur, thereby revealing more about their sustainable and resilient living conditions.

Vulnerability Index

This study's Vulnerability Index is a composite index methodology introduced by Hahn (2009). The Vulnerability Index for the study encompasses three categories of vulnerability: economic, social, and physical, as well as environmental. The inquiries for each indicator are structured as a dichotomy, represented by 1 (facing/ever facing) and 0 (not facing). This indicator for vulnerability categories is selected based on the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) by DFID (1999), tailored to the context of this study. All vulnerability indicators are standardized (composite) for the creation of this index. The construction of the Vulnerability Index employs a uniform weighting value for each category of vulnerability and its corresponding indication. This weighting factor is derived from Sullivan et al. (2002), wherein each indication contributes equally to each category of vulnerability. According to Hahn (2009), index calculation should employ a comprehensible procedure, with the application of uniform weights being one of the suggested approaches. Nonetheless, it may be modified by the researcher to align with the study's

requirements. This study used nominal data represented as 1 (facing/ever facing) and 0 (not facing). The nominal data for each indicator will be computed as a % and transformed into an index value utilizing the 92-conversion process employed in the Human Development Index, which takes into account three principal values: the actual data value, the minimum value, and the maximum value.

Asset Ownership Index

The Asset Ownership Index utilized in this study is a composite index methodology introduced by Han (2009). This study's Asset Ownership Index comprises five categories of assets: financial, physical, human, social, and natural assets. Twenty indicators represent these five assets. The selection of indicators for these assets is grounded in the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) by DFID (1999), tailored to the context of this study. Only standardized asset indicators are utilized in the computation of the asset ownership index. Asset indicators that cannot be standardized for calculation will be addressed descriptively only. The computation of the Asset Ownership Index employs an identical weighting value for each asset and its corresponding indication. This weighting factor is derived from Sullivan et al. (2002), wherein each indication contributes equally to each asset category. According to Hahn (2009), constructing the Asset Ownership Index should employ a comprehensible procedure, with the application of uniform weights being one of the recommended approaches. Nonetheless, it may be modified by the researcher to align with the study's requirements.

Due to the varying measurement scales of each asset indicator, researchers may opt to utilize the original scale or select items with a consistent measurement. This study exclusively considers uniform asset indicators in the construction of the asset ownership index. This study used nominal data represented as 1 (presence) and 0 (absence). The nominal data for each indicator will be computed as a percentage and transformed into an index value utilizing the conversion method employed in the Human Development Index, which takes into account three primary values: the actual data value, the minimum value, and the maximum value (UNDP 2007; Hahn 2009).

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS OF URBAN POOR COMMUNITIES IN KUALA LUMPUR

Table 1 presents the vulnerability index across three dimensions, namely economic, social, physical and environmental, for urban poor communities in Kuala Lumpur between 2018 and 2022. The results reveal notable changes in the magnitude and nature of vulnerabilities experienced by households during this

period. Economic vulnerability represents the predominant factor influencing households. The index value for economic vulnerability declined from 0.852 in 2018 to 0.600 in 2022, signifying an improvement in household economic stability. The indicator for loss of primary income source or employment demonstrates a significant rise in vulnerability, escalating from 0.07 in 2018 to 0.600 in 2022. The pronounced increase indicates that urban poor households had considerable employment volatility during this timeframe, probably mirroring extensive economic disturbances, including labour market shocks and the economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social and physical vulnerabilities show a noticeable decline over time. The overall index value for this dimension decreased from 0.320 in 2018 to 0.187 in 2022, suggesting improvements in housing conditions and basic household facilities. Specifically, the vulnerability associated with the physical condition of housing (cramped or poor housing conditions) declined from 0.42 to 0.200, while lack of home furnishings decreased from 0.322 to 0.133. Similarly, the vulnerability related to lack of basic facilities such as prayer spaces, kindergartens, or local shops fell from 0.063 to 0.044. These improvements may reflect ongoing urban development initiatives, housing assistance programmes, and infrastructure upgrades implemented by local authorities and social support agencies in Kuala Lumpur.

Nonetheless, environmental vulnerability appears to have intensified. In particular, the environmental vulnerability index increased from 0.250 in 2018 to 0.352 in 2022, indicating growing environmental risks faced by urban poor communities. For example, the indicator for polluted rivers or contaminated water sources went up from 0.038 to 0.089, and the number of floods that damaged crops and property went up from 0.012 to 0.044. In addition, exposure to factory smoke remains consistently high, increasing slightly from 0.893 to 0.933, suggesting persistent environmental pollution in areas where vulnerable communities reside. These findings indicate that despite improvements in social and housing conditions, environmental hazards continue to cause serious harm to the well-being of urban poor households.

Table 1. Vulnerability Index of urban poor communities in Kuala Lumpur

Construct	The value of the index according to the indicator		Type of Vulnerability	The value of the index is according to the type of vulnerability	
	2018	2022		2018	2022
Loss of main source of income/job	0.07	0.600	Economic	0.852	0.600
Physical condition of the house (cramped/bad house)	0.42	0.200	Social and Physical	0.320	0.187
Lack of home furnishings	0.322	0.133			

Construct	The value of the index according to the indicator		Type of Vulnerability	The value of the index is according to the type of vulnerability	
Lack of basic facilities (prayer, kindergarten, shop lot)	0.063	0.044			
There is a polluted river/source of water	0.038	0.089	Environment	0.250	0.352
Floods that damage crops and property	0.013	0.044			
Factory smoke	0.893	0.933			

Source: Field Study (2022)

Table 2 presents the Asset Ownership Index of poor communities in Kuala Lumpur across five livelihood asset categories including human, physical, social, natural, and financial assets for the years 2018 and 2022. Overall, the aggregate asset ownership index slightly declined from 0.620 in 2018 to 0.590 in 2022, suggesting that although certain asset categories improved, the overall asset base of urban poor households did not strengthen substantially during the period.

First, human assets demonstrate a notable improvement over time. The index value increased from 0.536 in 2018 to 0.606 in 2022, reflecting an enhancement in human capital among urban poor households. In particular, the indicator for respondents' highest education level increased substantially from 0.145 to 0.334, suggesting improvements in educational attainment. Similarly, knowledge of how to obtain assistance rose from 0.213 to 0.378, indicating increased awareness of available support services and institutional mechanisms. In addition, work experience improved from 0.219 to 0.267, while health conditions increased from 0.654 to 0.778. Similarly, physical assets also recorded an improvement during the period under study. The index value increased from 0.478 in 2018 to 0.543 in 2022, indicating better access to basic infrastructure and household facilities. For instance, access to water sources improved from 0.462 to 0.532, while toilet facilities increased from 0.532 to 0.632, reflecting improved sanitation conditions. Furthermore, home conditions improved significantly from 0.169 to 0.321, suggesting improvements in housing quality among low-income households. In addition, vehicle ownership increased from 0.413 to 0.600, potentially enhancing mobility and access to employment opportunities. However, despite these improvements, home ownership declined sharply from 0.354 to 0.121, highlighting the growing challenges of housing affordability in urban areas and the increasing reliance on rented accommodation among the urban poor.

Furthermore, natural assets also declined during the study period. The index decreased from 0.547 in 2018 to 0.466 in 2022, largely due to a reduction in land ownership from 0.242 to 0.144. This trend reflects the limited access to

land resources among urban poor households, which is commonly observed in rapidly urbanising environments where land availability is scarce and property prices are rising. Meanwhile, financial assets recorded a modest improvement. The financial asset index increased from 0.389 in 2018 to 0.430 in 2022, suggesting some improvement in financial capacity among urban poor households. In particular, household income increased from 0.564 to 0.666, indicating improved income-generating capacity. Moreover, acceptance of financial aid increased slightly from 0.762 to 0.800, highlighting the continued role of government assistance programmes and social protection mechanisms in supporting vulnerable households. Access to loans increased from 0.132 to 0.144, while savings improved from 0.087 to 0.111, although the latter remains relatively low. This suggests that while households may have better access to financial support, their ability to accumulate savings and build long-term financial resilience remains limited.

Table 2. Asset Ownership Index of poor communities in Kuala Lumpur

Asset component	Index value according to indicator		Asset type	The value of the index depends on the type of asset	
	2018	2022		2018	2022
Respondent's highest education	0.145	0.334	Human assets	0.536	0.606
Current work experience	0.219	0.267			
Health	0.654	0.778			
Knowledge get help	0.213	0.378			
Water source	0.462	0.532	Physical assets	0.478	0.543
Toilet	0.532	0.632			
Home conditions	0.169	0.321			
Home ownership	0.354	0.121			
Vehicle ownership	0.413	0.600	Social assets	0.327	0.242
Association position	0.312	0.289			
Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA)	0.421	0.411			
Society	0.692	0.600			
Cooperative	0.031	0.00	Natural assets	0.547	0.466
Land ownership	0.242	0.144			
Income	0.564	0.666	Financial assets	0.389	0.430
Acceptance of financial aid	0.762	0.800			
Loan	0.132	0.144			
Savings	0.087	0.111			
Overall				0.620	0.590

Source: Field Study (2022)

STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS IN KUALA LUMPUR'S URBAN POOR COMMUNITIES

The findings of this study provide important implications for urban planning and poverty alleviation strategies in Kuala Lumpur. Using the SLF, the analysis reveals that while human, physical, and financial assets have shown moderate improvement, economic vulnerability remains high and both social and natural assets have declined. These patterns suggest that improving sustainable livelihoods among the urban poor requires integrated and targeted planning interventions that address multiple livelihood dimensions simultaneously. First, the results indicate a pressing need to strengthen economic resilience and employment stability among urban poor households. The vulnerability index shows a significant increase in the indicator related to the loss of the main source of income, indicating that many households remain highly exposed to economic shocks and unstable employment conditions. Addressing this issue requires coordinated policy efforts aimed at improving income-generating opportunities within low-income communities. In particular, employment and skills development programmes should be expanded through initiatives led by the Ministry of Human Resources and the Ministry of Economy, in collaboration with Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL). These agencies can facilitate vocational training programmes, job placement initiatives, and entrepreneurship support schemes targeted specifically at residents of urban poor neighbourhoods. In addition, integrating small-scale business zones and local enterprise spaces within urban development plans can enable residents to participate more actively in the local economy by providing them with accessible resources, training opportunities, and support networks that foster entrepreneurship and job creation.

Next, the findings indicate persistent challenges related to housing affordability and physical infrastructure, particularly reflected in the sharp decline in home ownership among urban poor households. This trend highlights the increasing difficulty faced by low-income households in accessing stable and affordable housing within rapidly urbanising environments. Consequently, expanding affordable housing supply should remain a key priority in urban planning policies. This can be addressed through programmes implemented by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT), the National Housing Department, and DBKL, particularly through the expansion of low-cost housing and rental housing schemes such as the People's Housing Programme (PPR). At the same time, improvements in basic urban infrastructure, including reliable access to water supply, sanitation, public transportation, and healthcare services should be prioritised. Infrastructure development efforts coordinated by DBKL, the Ministry of Transport, and the Ministry of Health can significantly enhance access to essential services and improve overall living conditions for urban poor communities.

In addition, the study also identifies a decline in social assets, particularly in terms of participation in associations, cooperatives, and community organisations. Social capital plays a crucial role in enhancing community resilience by facilitating access to informal support networks, information sharing, and collective action. Therefore, strengthening social capital should form an integral component of urban development strategies. Local authorities such as DBKL, together with community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), should promote participatory community development initiatives. These may include the establishment of neighbourhood associations, cooperative programmes, and community engagement platforms that encourage active participation of residents in local planning processes. Such initiatives can strengthen community cohesion while enabling residents to collectively address shared socioeconomic challenges. Furthermore, the study reveals increasing environmental vulnerability, particularly related to pollution exposure and flood risks. These findings suggest that environmental risk management must be more effectively integrated into urban planning policies for low-income neighbourhoods. The incorporation of green infrastructure and urban green spaces can help mitigate environmental risks while enhancing residents' physical and psychological well-being.

SUMMARY

This study enhances existing knowledge on sustainable and resilient living among urban poor populations. The results of this study demonstrate the value of adopting a multidimensional and coordinated approach to urban poverty reduction. While economic interventions are necessary to stabilise household income, improvements in housing, infrastructure, social capital, and environmental resilience are equally important for sustaining long-term livelihood security. Therefore, effective policy responses require collaboration among multiple government agencies, local authorities, and community organisations, ensuring that planning strategies are aligned with the actual needs and vulnerabilities identified in this study.

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