

## REALITIES OF ECONOMIC LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES OF URBAN POOR MALAY FAMILIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Nor Hafizah Mohamed Harith<sup>1\*</sup> & Nur Fatima Aisya Jamil<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

\*E-mail: [norha561@uitm.edu.my](mailto:norha561@uitm.edu.my)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Rakodi and Llyod-Jones (2002) explain that vulnerability is a threat to the urban poor. It includes the ability of the poor to recover or be resilient to overcome shocks, stresses, and long-term socio-economic life difficulties. However, Moser (1996) argues that the ability to avoid or reduce vulnerability depends on the capacity of the poor to manage and transform these assets into income, food, or other necessities to sustain their livelihood. Nevertheless, the outbreak of COVID-19 poses a significant threat and economic vulnerability for the urban poor in sustaining their livelihood. The first case of COVID-19 was brought into Malaysia by Chinese nationals in February 2020. As of 24 September 2021, Malaysia reported more than 2 million COVID-19 cases (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2021). The economic catastrophe of the COVID-19 is tremendous. The latest Gini Coefficient score released by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia (2020) measures income and wealth inequality within a country, increased by 0.008 index points from 0.399 in 2016 to 0.407 in 2019, indicating the income gap between households is widening. As of today, the COVID-19 and movement restriction had adversely affected the poor urban. The socio-economic factors of approximately half of the low-income households living in the capital city's public flats worsened further in the fourth quarter of 2020 (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2020).

Globally, a few recent studies have investigated the socio-economic impacts of C-19 on the urban poor mainly in Global South countries (Recio, Lata, & Chatterjee, 2021; Munjor, 2020; Mohamed Buheji et al., 2020). In Malaysia, minimal literature works were carried out on the economic impacts of COVID-19 on lower-income families during the pandemic. Puteri Marjan and Theebalakshmi (2020) argued that money, food, and living conditions are the main impacts of COVID-19 facing the urban poor. Whilst a survey on lower-income families was carried out by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in partnership with Malaysia-based public policy research outfit, DM Analytics in September 2020 have shown the urban poor who live in absolute poverty in the community remains high, with 50% households and 52% children living below the absolute poverty line, up from 44% and 45% in 2019. These findings have pointed to a "partial, uneven, and uncertain" recovery for low-income urban families from the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, it was found that more families living in Kuala Lumpur City Hall PPR low-cost flats in September 2020 have sunk further into poverty. Hence, the research aims to explore the economic impacts of COVID-19 on urban poor Malay families' livelihood through a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insights on how the COVID-19 has impacted the urban poor families. In particular, the research focuses on how the urban poor in Klang Valley Malaysia copes with economic hardship during the pandemic.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This research is mainly grounded within a social constructionist philosophical position or interpretivism. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the Interpretive Epistemological perspective assumes that reality is socially constructed. Thus, the study highlights the economic reality of the urban poor Malays in sustaining their livelihoods during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was carried in January-February 2021 and employed a qualitative case study design. It provides an in-depth description for exploring the individual's poor household to share their stories, hears their voices, and minimize the researcher's control over the data (Creswell, 2007). Data were collected through an in-depth interview. Eight participants of the study were selected based on several main criteria; e-Kasih recipients; family households who live in major cities in the Klang Valley (see Table 1). The purposeful technique was chosen and the total sample size was determined based on data saturation. The small samples of people within the limits of time and means connect directly to the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The study locations were in Projek Perumahan Rakyat (PPR), housing populated areas in the Klang Valley. A total of eight numbers of PPR housing located in Kuala Lumpur Parliament constituents and Selangor Districts were chosen; namely PPR Batu Muda, PPR Beringin, PPR Desa Rejang, PPR Kg Baru Air Panas dan PPR Seri Semarak were selected in Kuala Lumpur Parliament and PPR Lembah Subang and PPR HICOM were selected in Selangor District. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and later were analysed through thematic analysis with the assistance of NVivo software.

**Table 1: Profile of the Key Informants**

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Working Status	Household Structure	Number of Household Members
P1	Male	33	Married	Working	Male-centered family	6
P2	Female	51	Married	Working	Female-centered family	4
P3	Female	49	Widowed	Working	Female-centered family	6
P4	Female	66	Widowed	Not working	Female-centered family	2
P5	Male	53	Married	Working	Male-centered family	6
P6	Female	37	Married	Not working	Male-centered family	4
P7	Female	66	Divorced	Working	Female-centered family	1
P8	Male	72	Married	Working	Male-centered family	2

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most of the key informants felt the impacts of COVID-19 on their livelihoods and they felt that they have sunk further into poverty. They felt the pinch of livelihood and admitted that life was very hard during the pandemic. The findings revealed five main themes that described the economic livelihood of the urban poor Malay namely, 1) thriftiness, 2) indebtedness, 3) cook own food, 4) loss of income, 5) saving depleted and 6) dependent on government cash assistance. The summary of the main themes is shown in Figure 1.

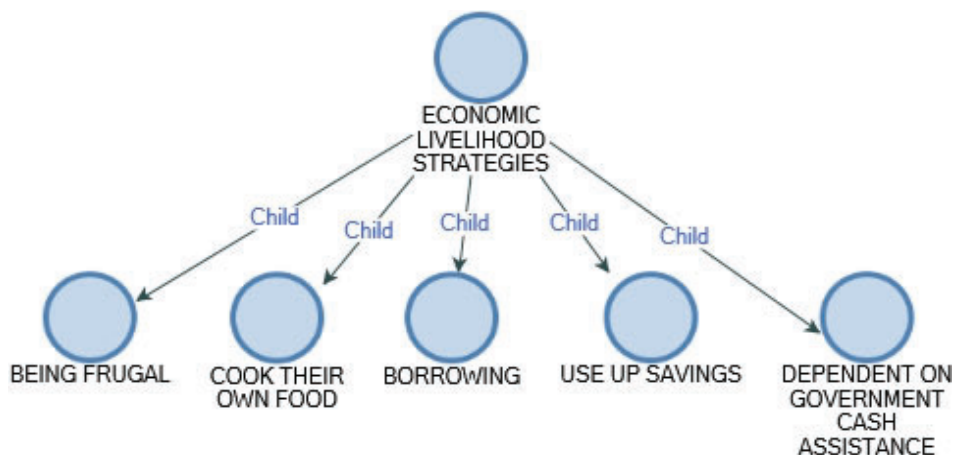


Figure 1: Main themes of Findings

All the informants felt that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted them severely. Participant 1, an elderly shared her stories of how she resorted to saving to survive the crisis; "...if we follow our heart, yes, it is not enough, no matter how much we have, it is not enough. But we must be frugal. We must be smart to divide the money for its purpose. If we do not need it, we do not have to buy it" (P1, Female, 66 years old). Almost all participants complained that the pandemic had caused a rise in costs of livings. Most of them have complained the prices of food have gone up.

One participant said, "Haa, this has increased. When comes to groceries, all have increased" (P4, Female, 66 years old). Another participant added, "Beyond the income, sometimes it is not enough. (Pause two seconds) It is normal, nowadays goods are expensive (child crying), buy, at present things are expensive, from the main food, all the other goods (child screaming), need to be frugal, eat whatever (child screaming), if there is, then there is." (P5, Male, 53 years old). "Living in the city, yes really, there is not enough" (P5, Male, 53 years old). Amidst the pandemic, most of the informants had to resort to many ways to ensure their financial survival. A participant said she had resorted to cooking their food, "... in this house alone, promise my children after the meal, mother I want *roti canai*, I make, mother I want water, ok let's go, mother, I want a cake, ok on, mother I want bread, done, so all these things need creativity, survival mood, like that" (P5, Male, 53 years old). Borrowing money from relatives, friends, and neighbours is another financial coping strategy for the urban poor. A few of the key informants said that "Yes, there is, not much, only 20 ringgits, not really, ... once in a while, if the need is great, then I borrow" (P1, Female, 66 years old). Most tragic, due to losing income through small business, another participant, a father of 4 children shared his stories, "Ok. A happy moment, before this. Before Covid was not around. So, at least I have extra income, Like that. One night 30 ringgits. Sometimes in one week three times, four times in the night market, like that" (P2, Male, 33 years old).

Another participant, a single mother said, "Mostly (child screaming), because we allocate money, we need to find a job, for everyone, children, at times we work, at times no work (Uhh one second) job also uncertain". (P3, Female, 49 years old). Indeed, most of them had used up their savings to survive this hardship. Participant 5 said, " .... up to now we have opened an account, but savings, we saved for a while, then we withdraw, that is the way" (P5, Male, 53 years old).

Finally, surviving through government assistance did help them to go through the hardship. Losing income and not being able to move around, a participant said, “I feel like last year the YB, YB Fahmi Fadzil Lembah Pantai, he donated one hundred ringgits for each family. So, I bought household things. Maybe that kind of assistance during Covid-19” (P1, Male, 33 years old).

The research points out how it is hard for the poor to adhere to the restrictive measures of social isolation or lockdown. The measures had fallen the urban poor back into poverty. The vulnerable people mainly the self-employed, people who work in informal sectors, the elderly, females, and children were badly hit by the pandemic. The extension of the movement control orders to contain the infection is expected to put further pressure on the already financially distressed urban poor, particularly those living in Projek Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) housing. The findings found similarities with a few studies (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2020; Puteri Marjan & Theebalakshmi 2020; Mohamed Buheji et al., 2020). The findings revealed the PPR survived through the trying times by 1) being frugal 2) borrowing 3) cook own food, 4) loss of income, 5) saving depleted, and 6) being dependent on government cash assistance. The poor felt the COVID-19 restricted their movement and rights to earn their livelihoods. With low-level education and highly dependent on informal sectors for livelihood, the pandemic has reduced their purchasing power. Most have lost their incomes due to movement control orders.

These protective measures might have overlooked one thing: the poor urban workers whose work either (1) requires physical presence and cannot be performed remotely, or (2) provides a much-needed income were not working means not having enough money to put food on the table (Mohamed Buheji et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in most developing countries in Asia, self-employed and daily wage earners are the worst affected population because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Due to the loss of income, they might run out of food (Mohamed Buheji et al., 2020). A similar finding is also found in the research where most of the poor were self-employed, low-income groups, or do not have savings to cope with the COVID-19 outbreak. With savings depleted amid the pandemic, more families living in low-cost (PPR) flats have sunk further into poverty. Hence, they resorted to being frugal, borrowing, cook their food, use up savings, and dependent on government cash assistance as the coping strategies to survive the pandemics.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results of the research show the urban poor Malay resorted to being frugal, borrowing, cook own food, loss of income, saving depleted, and being dependent on government cash assistance in sustaining their economic livelihood during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the low-cost PPR surveyed in the Klang Valley has sunk further into poverty. The urban poor Malay are more susceptible to the adverse economic effects of the pandemic. This visible wealth inequality is still present before the pandemic, and it is deteriorating since the crisis. This is a wake-up call for a more effective social policy framework to provide timely aid to ensure the urban poor do not slip deeper into poverty hardship. They earned the lowest paying jobs, living in high-density areas and overcrowded flats which increase the risk of infections. Social protection policy needs further improvement, and the urban poor must be helped through this hardship to sustain their financial security. Continuous financial and social security assistance is crucial to help them to sustain their livelihood. As many developing countries have quite a lot to do for the people near or below the poverty line before the COVID-19 pandemic, special guidelines for future lockdown and national emergency should be

designed to ensure it addresses the essential needs of the vulnerable poor. These are important in the policies and strategies to be developed to assist the poor to be resilient economically and be able to handle any shock and crisis in the future. Providing continuous income support through social assistance, cash transfers and other support remains critical in Malaysia's economic stimulus packages. The "Prihatin Packages" and other socio-economic welfare assistance must be sustained. Indeed, free delivery food programs and affordable food programs for the elderly, and single mothers' households with children must also be sustained. This includes also daily wage transfers or wage subsidies for those who lost their jobs. These recommendations are crucial in the development of policies and strategies so that the poor can learn to be more resilient economically in facing future economic shocks and challenges.

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