RESEARCH REPORT

Multidimensional Poverty Index & Qualitative Study Among Urban Poor : **Case Study Kuching**

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sarawak's state administration has expressed concerns over the accuracy and relevance of national poverty statistics particularly eKasih data and income-based metrics like the Poverty Line Income (PLI) in capturing Sarawak's lived realities. Sarawak has the highest urban PLI in Malaysia, underscoring both high living costs and how easily urban Sarawakians fall below the poverty threshold. Yet, paradoxically, the World Bank recently declared Sarawak a high-income state, highlighting inconsistencies in existing poverty assessments. In response, there were calls for Sarawak-led studies using state-specific indicators, while the Ministry of Women, Childhood, and Community Wellbeing Development (KPWK) has explored tailored social aid initiatives such as cash plus programme that seeks to provide beyond financial assistance. Recognizing that national-level surveys often overlook Sarawak's smaller population and its urban-rural nuances such as rural wealth indicators (e.g., land, vehicle ownership) and urban living cost burdens the Sarawak Development Institute (SDI) has long advocated for a Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) approach, incorporating not just income but also education, health, and living standards.

As part of efforts to localize poverty assessment and improve policy targeting, SDI partnered with the Society for the Kuching Urban Poor (SKUP) to conduct a pilot MPI study in Kuching. The study surveyed 137 SKUP food aid recipients across five areas, grouped into City Centre, Kuching East, and Greater Satok. Using a mixed-methods approach, it adapted the national MPI framework to better reflect Sarawak's urban context. The findings offer granular, ground-up insights into urban deprivation, highlight limitations of applying uniform national thresholds to diverse local realities, and strengthen the case for a Sarawak-specific MPI to inform data-driven social interventions.

Key Findings

- **Demographic Profile:** Respondents are predominantly elderly (61% aged 60+), female (56.9%), and low-educated (62% with primary or no formal education), with over half in single- or two-persons households.
- **Income Deprivation:** 100% below Sarawak's urban PLI (RM2,860) with 88.3% destitute (miskin tegar) and the remaining poor (miskin); inclusion of income as MPI domain (following 11th Malaysian Plan) spiked poverty incidence from 8% to 45.3%.
- **Education:** Households surveyed have near-universal school attendance (2.9% deprivation), but 37.2% of adults have less than 11 years of schooling, limiting economic mobility.
- **Health:** Subsidized care reduced deprivation (8.8% access issues, 0.7% water supply), yet qualitative gaps (e.g., dialysis transport costs) persist.
- **Living Standards:** High overcrowding (33.6%) and poor housing (27.7%), especially in informal settlements, with basic sanitation access.
- **Locality Variations:** Greater Satok most deprived overall; Kuching East led in non-income poverty; City Centre had better service access but income struggles.

Emerging Trends:

Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs): Elderly increasingly live alone or in small households, relying on neighbors for support.

Community-Led Redistribution: Informal networks in areas like Sungai Apong manage aid, filling formal system gaps.

High Cost of Urban Poverty: Expensive private transport and informal utilities burden low-income households.

Intergenerational Strain: Elderly face mistreatment or isolation from family, reflecting economic, emotional and social pressures.

Patchwork Support Systems: Reliance on multiple, uncoordinated aid sources (government, NGOs, religious groups) highlights systemic fragmentation.

Policy Recommendations

Sarawak-Specific MPI:

- Separate MPI frameworks should be developed for urban and rural Sarawak to address their unique poverty challenges and needs. Requires further studies beyond urban and food aid recipients respondents.
- Indicator thresholds should be raised, such as targeting secondary education and health affordability, to better reflect relative poverty and development goals.
- Assets like land ownership and qualitative factors such as mental health should be included to capture Sarawak-specific dimensions of well-being and deprivation.

Welfare Design

- Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) should be supported with caregiving services and mobility aids to reduce elderly isolation and dependency.
- Urban poverty costs should be reduced by improving public transportation and regulating informal utility expenses for low-income households.
- Community-led networks should be formalized to enhance the efficiency and coordination of aid delivery across Kuching's poor communities.
- Intergenerational strain should be addressed through mediation services and housing support to improve family dynamics and elderly care.
- Aid systems should be streamlined to improve access and raise awareness, ensuring all eligible individuals can benefit from available support.

Conclusion

This study validates the MPI's ability to uncover poverty's complexity in Kuching, advocating for localized interventions over uniform policies. It lays the foundation for a tailored Sarawak MPI to drive inclusive poverty alleviation under PCDS 2030, with further research needed for rural and longitudinal insights.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

BKK	Bantuan Kanak-Kanak
BKSS	Bantuan Khas Sarawakku Sayang
BR1M	Bantuan Rakyat 1 Malaysia
BTB	Bantuan OKU Tidak Berupaya Bekerja
BWE	Bantuan Warga Emas
CPI	Consumer Price Index
DOSM	Department of Statistics Malaysia
EPOKU	Elaun Pekerja Orang Kurang Upaya
ICU-JPM	Implementation Coordination Unit, Prime Minister's Department
JKM	Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat
KMC	Kuching Municipal Council
KPWK	Ministry of Women, Early Childhood and Community Wellbeing Development
KIR	Ketua Isi Rumah (Head of Households)
MBKS	South Kuching City Council
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NORC	Naturally Occuring Retirement Communities
OKU	Orang Kurang Upaya - Persons With Disabilities (PWD)
OPHI	Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative
PCDS	Post COVID-19 Development Strategy
PLI	Poverty Line Income
RMK	Rancangan Malaysia Kembara
RMT	Rancangan Makanan Tambahan
RTI	Rent To Income Ratio

SDI	Sarawak Development Institute
SGH	Sarawak General Hospital
SKUP	Society for Kuching Urban Poor
SRAS	Sarawak Rental Assistance Scheme
STR	Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah
UKAS	Unit Kerjasama Awam Swasta
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UTC	Urban Transformation Centre

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction & General Overview of Poverty in Sarawak and Malaysia

1.1 Need for Alternative Measurement

Sarawak's representation in national statistics has been under scrutiny, with the state administration expressing doubts about the accuracy of data presented by federal agencies. eKasih data produced by the Implementation Coordination Unit under the federal government's Prime Minister Department (ICU-JPM), was identified as one of the primary statistics with questionable accuracy. The state disputed the number of poor and hardcore poor households which placed Sarawak as a state with highest incident of poverty after Sabah and Kelantan. As of July 2025, statistics showed 41,395 poor households in Sarawak, of which 97 households from the figure categorized as hardcore poor. This represented 13.7 percent of the national total, equivalent to about one in seven incidences nationwide.

State	Urban	Rural	Overall
Malaysia	2,660	2,342	2,589
Sarawak	2,860	2,263	2,618
Johor	2,665	2,481	2,627
Kedah	2,303	2,206	2,271
Kelantan	2,415	2,199	2,297
Melaka	2,721	2,122	2,670
Negeri Sembilan	2,617	1,876	2,402
Pahang	2,675	2,235	2,480
Pulau Pinang	2,258	2,136	2,250
Perak	2,332	2,199	2,297
Perlis	2,199	2,069	2,140
Selangor	2,848	2,421	2,830
Terengganu	2,799	2,662	2,751
Sabah	2,706	2,795	2,742
W.P. Kuala Lumpur	2,816	n.a	2,816
W.P. Labuan	2,606	2,196	2,576
W.P. Putrajaya	2,450	n.a	2,450

Table 1a Poverty Line Income for Malaysia and its States (DOSM, 2022)

Sarawak has the highest urban Poverty Line Income (PLI) among all Malaysian states, reflecting a higher cost of living in its urban areas compared to neighboring states. Urban households, particularly in cities like Kuching, require more income to avoid falling into poverty. The state's overall PLI stands at RM2,618; slightly above the national average of RM2,589, indicating the state's high cost of living. In contrast, Sarawak's rural PLI is RM2,263, which is below the national rural average of RM2,342. These figures suggest the wide disparity of living expenses between urban and rural Sarawak.

The Premier of Sarawak, The Right Honourable Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr) Abang Haji Abdul Rahman Zohari bin Tun Datuk Abang Haji Openg mooted the need to conduct a state-led study to reassess the local poverty incidences. The Premier highlighted the limitations of existing surveys in capturing Sarawak-specific indicators of wealth, such as land and automobile ownership. He also emphasized the state's efforts to eradicate poverty through education and hinted at adopting measurements that can capture people's capacity to escape the cycle of poverty. Additionally, the Ministry of Women, Early Childhood and Community Wellbeing Development (KPWK) engaged with UNICEF to explore cash-plus programmes that require identification of diverse deprivations, such as child poverty, beyond income indicators.

Given the complexity of poverty and the expressed need for a more holistic measurement, the Sarawak Development Institute (SDI) advocated to adopt the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), a measure that is growing in popularity to provide a comprehensive assessment. The measure which was first proposed by Alkire et al. (2014) shifts away from income-centred indicators towards deprivations in domains such as education, health and living conditions. The wide coverage of multiple dimensions in the MPI allows it to better capture the contextual realities of poverty incidences across Sarawak.

To this end, SDI piloted the first study in the state capital, Kuching. This report details the outcomes of the study conducted to highlight the advantages of using the MPI over traditional measures in understanding Sarawakian poverty and addressing concerns of misrepresentation.

[1] https://www.theborneopost.com/2023/04/29/abg-jo-state-to-conduct-study-to-determine-poverty-level-of-sarawakians/
[2] https://www.theborneopost.com/2023/02/25/abang-jo-better-to-teach-them-how-to-fish-than-to-give-them-fish/
[3] https://dayakdaily.com/swak-ministry-unicef-msia-to-study-child-poverty-strengthen-indigenous-pre-school-learning/

1.2 Multidimensional Poverty Index

Poverty is not only the status of being poor, it is about the deprivations to life. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) emerged from a conviction towards the complexity of poverty and the inadequacy to understand it merely through income. MPI was developed following Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, which focuses on the availability of resources to improve lives, i.e., helping people to get out of poverty. The complexity of poverty is addressed by the open-endedness of the MPI approach. Each country is expected to design its own MPI by including dimensions and indicators pertinent to its local poverty incidences.

In Malaysia, the MPI has often been overshadowed by simpler measures such as the PLI, which is based solely on income thresholds. However, the PLI fails to capture the full range of deprivations experienced by individuals and communities, overlooking essential aspects of well-being such as education, healthcare, clean water, and adequate housing. This narrow focus limits the development of effective poverty reduction strategies.

Despite debuting in Malaysia in 2015 under the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, RMK-11 (2016-2020), MPI has not been featured prominently in policy formulation or public discourse as it was overshadowed by other measures such as the B40 categorization (World Bank 2021). The introduction of MPI was intended to complement PLI which was used since the 1970s. The Malaysian MPI incorporates an Income dimension in addition to the three domains of Health, Education and Living Standards. Notably, the following 12th Malaysia Plan (RMK-12) did not continue utilising MPI's framework as started in RMK-11.

There are avenues for improvement for Sarawak to explore. Malaysia's MPI includes income as one of its dimensions, a choice not widely practiced by other nations. The arbitrary averaged weightages used by the MPI, set by a simplistic division of 25 percent for each of the domains, followed by averaged division of the quantity of domain indicators, were found problematic (Deyshappriya & Feeny, 2021)

Fortunately, the flexibility of MPI allows for contextual adjustments to capture the nuances of local poverty. As an instrument that seeks to be inclusive in measuring the different domains of social deprivations, MPI holds the possibility as an useful tool for Sarawak in its bid for social inclusivity.

"Poverty is not just a lack of money; it is not having the capability to realize one's full potential as a human being."

Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom (1999)

1.3 Sarawakian Case Studies using MPI

Depth, not breadth - Sarawak is often statistically marginalised. The low Sarawakian population compared to other states often caused the state to be glossed over in national statistics due to its low statistical representation. Poverty surveys are often performed with an ambitious goal to cover territory-wide (nation, region, state) incidences, with internal tendencies for breadth to cover the widest area possible. As numerical representation goes, Sarawakian districts with lower populations are often under-represented as they are often eclipsed by populous Malaysian peninsula districts, often missing groups that needed their issues to be highlighted.

Similarly, issues in districts with low populations within Sarawak are also often overlooked in state-wide statistics. The state government's pledge towards inclusivity in PCDS 2030 calls for the less common practice of prioritising granular data. This research proposes poverty data collection on targeted groups, not to gather incidences of poverty, but rather what poor people are deprived of. This is particularly important as Sarawakian districts, such as Pakan and Pusa were often named as having the highest poverty incidences in the country. Targeted policy intervention requires data expounding on the context on the ground.

On the state level, while incomes are rising in most districts, so does inequality in cities such as Kuching, Miri and Bintulu (with Kuching recording the biggest income gap at RM1,620). In general, data showed positively skewed distribution (higher mean income than median income) for every district, suggesting that most people earn less, while a small minority earn significantly more.

Deeper dive into the 2019 and 2022 poverty figure for Sarawakian districts revealed interesting observations. Relative poverty increase in many districts suggests the rise of income inequality despite reductions in poverty. Some districts such as Daro (32.5 percent) and Julau (31.2 percent) showed signs of extreme poverty with nearly 1 in 3 households classified as poor. Julau's 46.8 percent of relative poverty meant that half of the district's household earn less than the local median income This inequality is also experienced by Tebedu (44.1%) and Song (41.2%), indicating wealth is oncentrated among a small group of higher-income earners. For other districts like Bukit Mabong, here is observable improvement in absolute poverty (28.7% → 8.2%) but saw a major increase in relative poverty (21.6% → 39.2%), meaning poverty decreased overall but income inequality widened. While the states PLI showed us the high PLI threshold level for urban Sarawak, this table showed the vulnerability of predominantly rural districts in incurring poverty incidences. These can be observed from the increase of poverty in Tanjung Manis (+17.3%) and Kapit (+16.8%). Noticeably, urban areas like Kuching, Miri, and Sibu have much lower poverty rates than rural districts.

[4] https://codeblue.galencentre.org/2025/02/sarawak-ngos-call-for-disaggregated-health-data-on-remote-communities/
[5] https://www.theborneopost.com/2019/01/29/pakan-poorest-district-in-malaysia-report/
[6] https://rmke12.ekonomi.gov.my/en/documents/twelfth-plan
[7] https://open.dosm.gov.my/data-catalogue/hh_income_distric

DISTRICT	2019		2022	
	Absolute Poverty	Relative Poverty	Absolute Poverty	Relative Poverty
Asajaya	20	28.4	17.9	19.9
Bau	9.6	13	8.3	18.7
Belaga	6.9	21.4	19.5	28.1
Beluru	12	22.2	13.7	18.9
Betong	22.4	31.3	9.8	21.3
Bintulu	2.1	2.6	3.5	1.9
Bukit Mabong	28.7	21.6	8.2	39.2
Bintulu	11.9	20.5	11.1	19
Daro	18.5	25.8	32.5	34.5
Julau	13	43.2	31.2	46.8
Kabong	16.1	32.7	8.6	26.9
Kanowit	21.9	41.8	24.9	45.7
Kapit	3.8	18.2	20.6	37.9
Kuching	**5.6**	**7.4**	**9.1**	**10.1**
Lawas	14.4	16.1	18.1	33.7
Limbang	11	16.2	14.6	20.5
Lubok Antu	7.9	32.1	14.8	32.7
Lundu	10.2	25	13.1	23.2
Maradong	12.7	32.4	19.5	36.4
Marudi	16.9	26.1	12.9	20.6
Matu	24.1	35.3	20.8	30.8
Miri	4.7	6	6.3	6
Mukah	10.4	16.8	14	21.4
Pakan	21.7	38.1	17.6	29.4
Pusa	23	44	17.2	28
Samarahan	4.7	6.5	7.9	6.7
Saratok	13.8	28.6	7.4	12.6
Sarikei	9.1	25.4	20.9	30
Sebauh	7.4	14.5	4.8	16.9
Selangau	14.3	38.2	19.6	38
Serian	16.8	20	14.6	22.7
Sibu	7.3	11	10.2	14.8
Simunjan	21.1	35.6	17.9	33.8
Song	6	40	15.8	41.2
Sri Aman	7.4	20.7	8.9	28.4
Subis	7.5	10	4.7	14
Tanjung Manis	3.4	25	20.7	33.7
Tatau	5	8.7	5.9	14.1
Tebedu	38.6	40.3	26.9	44.1
Telang Usan	13.6	23.7	6	20.5

Table 1b Poverty incidence in Sarawak districts (source: DOSM)

[8] https://open.dosm.gov.my/ms-MY/data-catalogue/hh_poverty_district?date=2019-01-01&visual=table

The income gaps and poverty incidences are shaped by Sarawakians' on the ground social realities. There is a need to sensitise research observations to better capture Sarawak's distinctive social and economic realities compared to Peninsular Malaysia. While this study did not intend to redesign the Malaysian national MPI instrument, the contextual differences were observed and recorded through qualitative observation to supplement the quantitative data gathered. Emerging themes from these observations informed the eventual redesign of an MPI to cater to Sarawak. Relevant themes included

Cultural and Ethnic Diversity: Sarawak's population is ethnically and culturally diverse, with its variety of indigenous societies. Poverty indicators considered the specific needs and vulnerabilities of these groups, as cultural factors, language barriers, and traditional livelihoods influenced poverty. On the extreme end, some scholars argued the existence of a culture of poverty (Lewis, 1963) to explain norms, values, and beliefs within a particular population that perpetuate poverty.

Geographic Isolation: Many communities in Sarawak are located in remote and isolated areas due to its large landmass and sparse population, affecting their access to basic services like healthcare, education, and clean water. The MPI included indicators related to geographic accessibility and infrastructure development. Coverage of water supply, especially in isolated rural areas, remained a crucial factor in Sarawak's poverty; while the water supply coverage throughout Sarawak is 85.4 percent, coverage in rural areas is still at 70.5 percent (UKAS 2024).

Indigenous Land Rights: Land rights are a crucial issue in Sarawak, and many indigenous communities face challenges related to land dispossession (Dimbab, 2005). Land ownership and water access were pertinent factors in Sarawak poverty (Idris et al., 2013; Tedong et al., 2022). The MPI incorporated indicators related to land ownership and access, as these were often linked to poverty and well-being.

Environmental Factors: Given Sarawak's rich biodiversity and dependence on natural resources, environmental factors played a significant role in the well-being of its population. Changes in land use patterns from development and logging were shown to affect the livelihood of Sarawakians (Wong & Ling, 2013). The MPI considered indicators related to environmental sustainability and resilience, as environmental degradation exacerbated poverty.

This research provides a snapshot focusing on a small beneficiary community receiving an NGO's food aid. The intention of the research is to contribute towards the formulation of Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) that are sensitized to the conditions of Sarawak. The combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods in the research provides a holistic understanding of the poverty incidences in Sarawak. As observed from the tables presenting district-level poverty figures, different areas face different challenges and thus, economic policy should be similarly tailored on district level. This can be done only with granular data on the ground to reflect each area's unique situation.

1.4 Society for Kuching Poor (SKUP) & Poverty in Kuching

Founded in 2010, the Society of Kuching Urban Poor (SKUP) has served Kuching's underprivileged residents for over a decade, building trust and rapport among communities in Kuching that distinguishes it from government interactions. The organization provides daily meals to 300 individuals across four locations, operating six days a week funded by public donations with minimal government assistance.

While food aid remains as its core service, SKUP expanded in 2023 by establishing a soup kitchen in Kuching city centre, offering both breakfast and lunch. The kitchen which is located at Community Social Support Centre (CSSC) has seen an increase in the number of patrons due to its apparent strategic location. The organization also partners with the Ministry of Women, Early Childhood and Community Wellbeing Development to conduct sewing and baking classes at the 1AZAM Skill Training Centre, helping families develop income-generating skills to break the poverty cycle.

SKUP's extensive experience has yielded deep insights into urban poverty challenges, documented through their comprehensive beneficiary database. The NGO is SDI's primary option as collaborator to explore the prevalence of urban poverty in Kuching.

1.5 Exploratory Research for MPI Formulation and Understanding Poverty in Urban Kuching

SDI embarked on this research in collaboration with SKUP to explore further formulation of MPI for Sarawak while gaining a snapshot of the poverty situation in capital city Kuching. While this study adopts the Malaysian MPI, it includes supplementary survey items and qualitative observations. This cross-sectional study is not intended as a stand-alone, as it serves as a catalyst for the development of a Sarawakian MPI. Thus, the objectives of this research are;

1) To catalyse the development of MPI for Sarawak
2) To provide area-focused granular data on poverty
3) To identify indicators with the highest incidences for localities within the city
4) To provide recommendations to assist the design of deprivation-and site-specific poverty alleviation policies

To answer the objectives, the team formulated a questionnaire beginning with the indicators in the Malaysian MPI with additional relevant information. The instrument is characterised by four distinctive sections:

Section A: Demographic Information of the Head of Household
Section B: Education and Income of the Household
Section C: Health of the Household
Section D: Living Conditions of the Household

Aside from the questionnaire, enumerators also gathered data through observations and informal interviews. These qualitative methods supplemented the questionnaire, capturing information that is not easily quantifiable. Beyond the structured questions, enumerators explored participants' hopes for assistance and individual grievances, allowing for a richer understanding. This open-ended approach encouraged spontaneous and nuanced responses, moving beyond the limitations of pre-defined questionnaire options.

SDI accompanied SKUP's staff during their food distribution deliveries to various locations to establish rapport and subsequently to enumerate the survey questionnaire. The participation of the respondents were voluntary, as the research team interviewed the food aid recipients who were willing to be interviewed. Thus, this research uses convenient sampling which is possible with a small target population.

Respondents were interviewed on-site where they received their food distribution, namely Kampung Kudei, Sungai Apong Market, Poh Kwong Park, Song Kheng Hai Foodcourt as well as SKUP's Soup Kitchen at CSSC Abell Road. A total of 137 responses were obtained after various visits ensuring of the willing recipients were interviewed to obtain the largest sample possible. While initially a larger number of respondents were expected, the actual number of food aid beneficiaries diminished for many sites across the board. Our initial plan to compare among the distribution points locality had to be modified to compare groups that are more similar in sizes (see infographic A on the next page).

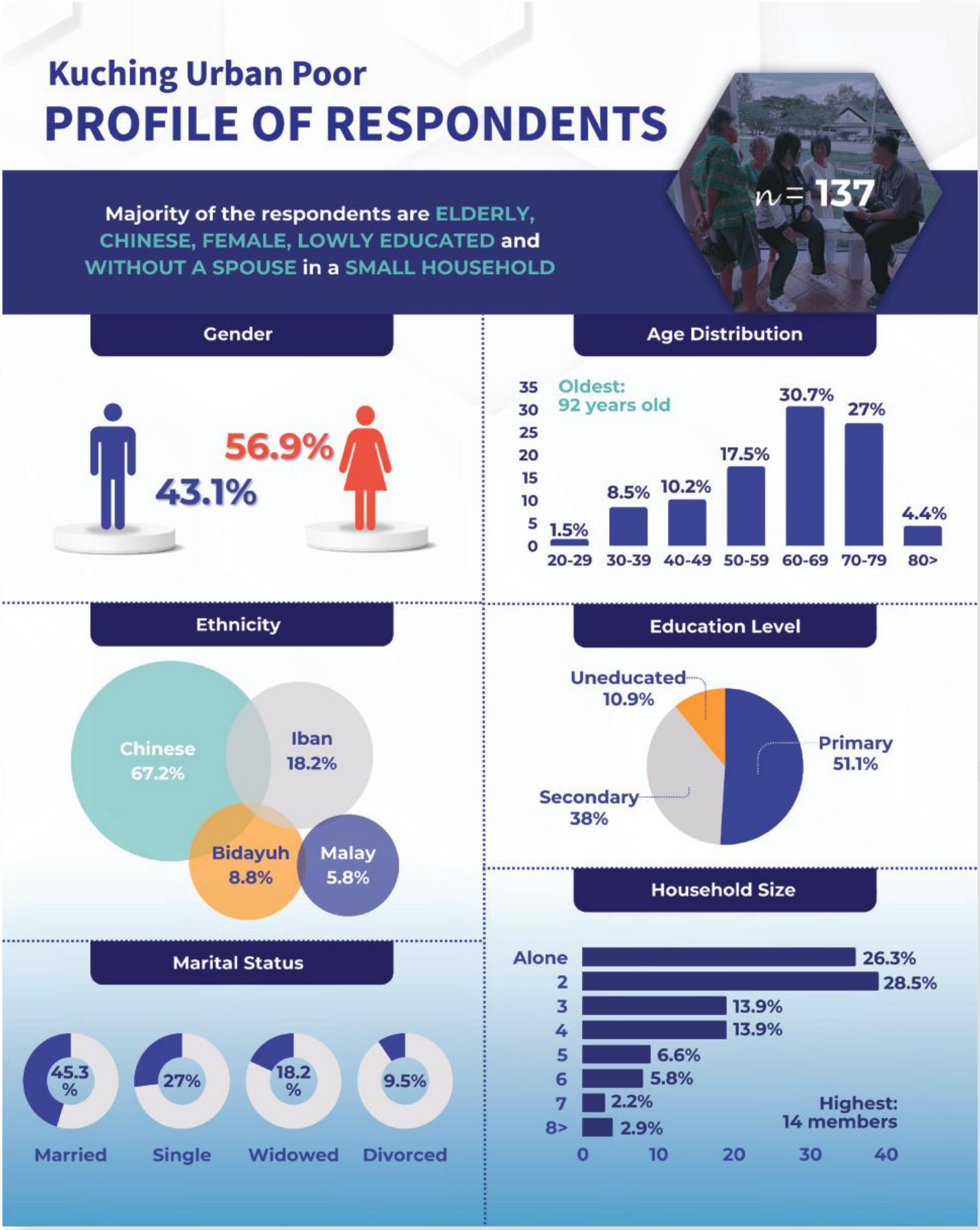
Infographic A: Distribution of respondents according to survey sites

Data obtained from filling out the survey and interviews are compiled both for quantitative and qualitative analysis. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation analysis were produced from quantitative data analysis while some of the qualitative data were either recorded to quantitative data (to look for emerging themes) or recorded as narratives expounded in the “Boxes” in the following chapters.

There are some foreseeable limitations of the generalizability of the data as the research population is a niche population of NGO clients. As it is our intention to seek for granular data against the harm of aggregated data often affecting Sarawak, generalizability of the data is not a concern for a small study like this, unlike a large scale census implemented by agencies with more resources. This inquiry is a small pilot research to test the robustness of our MPI instrument’s in capturing poverty cases in Sarawak.

CHAPTER 2

Profile of Respondents



Infographic B: Profile of respondents

This chapter provides an overview of the respondents' demographic characteristics, offering insight into the composition of the surveyed urban poor community in Kuching. Given that the study was conducted in collaboration with an NGO that serves low-income individuals, the sample skews toward older and more economically disadvantaged groups compared to the broader state population.

2.1 Age and Gender Distribution

The majority of SKUP beneficiaries surveyed are elderly, with 61 percent aged 60 and above, and the oldest respondent being 92 years old. The sample is largely composed of older individuals: 17.5 percent in their 50s, 10.2 percent in their 40s, and 8.5 percent in their 30s. The youngest respondent, a 24-year-old housewife, highlights the presence of some younger individuals who, despite being of working age, rely on food aid due to specific circumstances.

Gender-wise, the sample is female-dominated (56.9 percent), which aligns with broader patterns in poverty studies where women, particularly widows and single mothers, are more likely to rely on social assistance.

Gender and Poverty in Sarawak: A Women -Centred Perspective

by Sarawak Women for Women Society (SWWS)

In Sarawak, the intersection of gender and poverty has deep consequences for women's safety, wellbeing and autonomy. From our work with survivors of domestic violence for the past 40 years, SWWS has seen how economic hardship is not only a background factor but also a key mechanism that traps women in abusive relationships and shapes the way they manage households under difficult conditions.

Poverty amplifies women's vulnerability to abuse. Women who are financially dependent on their husbands often feel they have no choice but to remain in unsafe environments. The financial responsibilities of raising children are considerable - diapers, milk, school uniforms, medical care, and school fees all add up. Securing housing requires advance deposits and monthly rent, while transport to work or school involves costs that many women cannot shoulder alone. Without savings, access to vehicles or control over household income, leaving abusive households becomes nearly impossible. Even among women who are employed, financial control can remain out of reach. In several cases SWWS has encountered, husbands or partners keep tight control over salaries, bank accounts or household expenditure. This form of economic violence denies women agency and keeps them dependent, despite their contributions to the household. Studies have shown that having independent income can reduce the severity of abuse, yet income alone is not enough if women are excluded from decision-making or have no safe mechanisms to protect their earnings.

Research also highlights how domestic violence in Sarawak is rising: reported cases increased from 465 in 2023 to 552 in 2024, with women forming the majority of victims. Police reports show a significant increase in domestic violence reports with 552 lodged in 2024 compared to 465 in 2023, with women forming the majority. This data reflects only the surface of the issue, as many women do not report abuse due to stigma, distance from services or fear of losing the limited economic support they rely on. For women in rural and indigenous communities, geographic remoteness further increases costs and limits access to shelters, legal aid and One Stop Crisis Centres.

Despite these constraints, women demonstrate resilience in managing scarce household resources. Many prioritise their children's needs, sacrificing their own wellbeing to ensure basic survival. Some take up informal work or small-scale trading to bring in additional income, though these efforts are often precarious and poorly remunerated. These strategies highlight both women's agency and the structural barriers that prevent them from moving beyond survival.

At SWWS, we see the urgent need to break this cycle. Interventions must address both poverty and gender inequality. Economic empowerment programmes such as skills training, microfinance and financial literacy workshops can provide women with the tools to build independence. At the same time, safety nets like emergency funds, affordable childcare and accessible transport support are essential to help women make the first step out of abusive environments. Legal and policy reforms that recognise economic control as a form of abuse are also critical to protect women's rights.

Gender and poverty are deeply intertwined in Sarawak. Tackling one without the other risks leaving women behind. By centering women's lived experiences, particularly those who manage households under economic strain and abuse, we can push for solutions that create safety, dignity and true independence. Measuring poverty needs to be multi-dimensional to capture the reality of gender inequality and accessibility to essential services especially health for all and education for children. More insightful measurement is needed to promote more effective means to tackle poverty.

Sarawak Women for Women Society (SWWS) remains committed to advocating for systemic change while supporting women on the ground. Poverty should never be a barrier to safety.

Email: info@sarswws.org

2.2 Marital Status and Household Structure

A significant proportion of respondents are unmarried or living without a spouse, with only 45.3 percent currently married. Meanwhile, 27 percent are single, 18.2 percent are widowed, and 9.5 percent are divorced. This aligns with national trends indicating a rising number of single-person households, particularly among the urban poor, where the absence of a support system exacerbates financial and caregiving challenges.

In terms of household size, a notable 26.3 percent live alone, while 28.5 percent reside with just one other person, typically a family member. In total, more than half (53.9 percent) of respondents either live alone or with only one other person, raising concerns about elderly care and social isolation. The largest household size recorded was 14 people, suggesting a stark contrast in living arrangements within the community.

Given that 62 percent of respondents are senior citizens, the data suggests that a large proportion of elderly individuals are either living alone or have only one family member providing support. This highlights a concerning lack of intergenerational cohabitation, which traditionally serves as an informal safety net in many Asian societies. A Pearson correlation test was conducted to examine the relationship between respondents' age and the number of household members, yielding a correlation coefficient of -0.423. This indicates a moderate negative correlation, suggesting that as respondents' age increases, the number of household members tends to decrease.

2.3 Education Level and Economic Implications

Most respondents have low educational attainment, which may contribute to their economic vulnerability. 10.9 percent never attended school, while 51.1 percent only completed primary education. Meanwhile, 38 percent reached secondary school but did not pursue higher education.

2.4 Ethnic Composition

The majority of respondents (67.2 percent) are ethnic Chinese, largely due to the proximity of SKUP’s soup kitchen to council flats predominantly occupied by Chinese residents. The second-largest ethnic group is Iban (18.2 percent), followed by Bidayuh (8.8 percent) and Malay (5.8 percent).

2.5 Conclusion

The data paints a demographically skewed picture of urban poverty in Kuching, where the majority of beneficiaries are elderly, female, low-income, and educationally disadvantaged. However, as this study is done among the beneficiary of an NGO’s food aid initiatives, it offers a glimpse into what could be a city-wide, if not state-wide, phenomenon of poverty. The prevalence of single-person and two-person households among the elderly raises critical concerns about aging and care provision. These findings hinted at the possible need to develop inclusive social policies that address elderly care, economic empowerment, and housing support to mitigate urban poverty challenges.

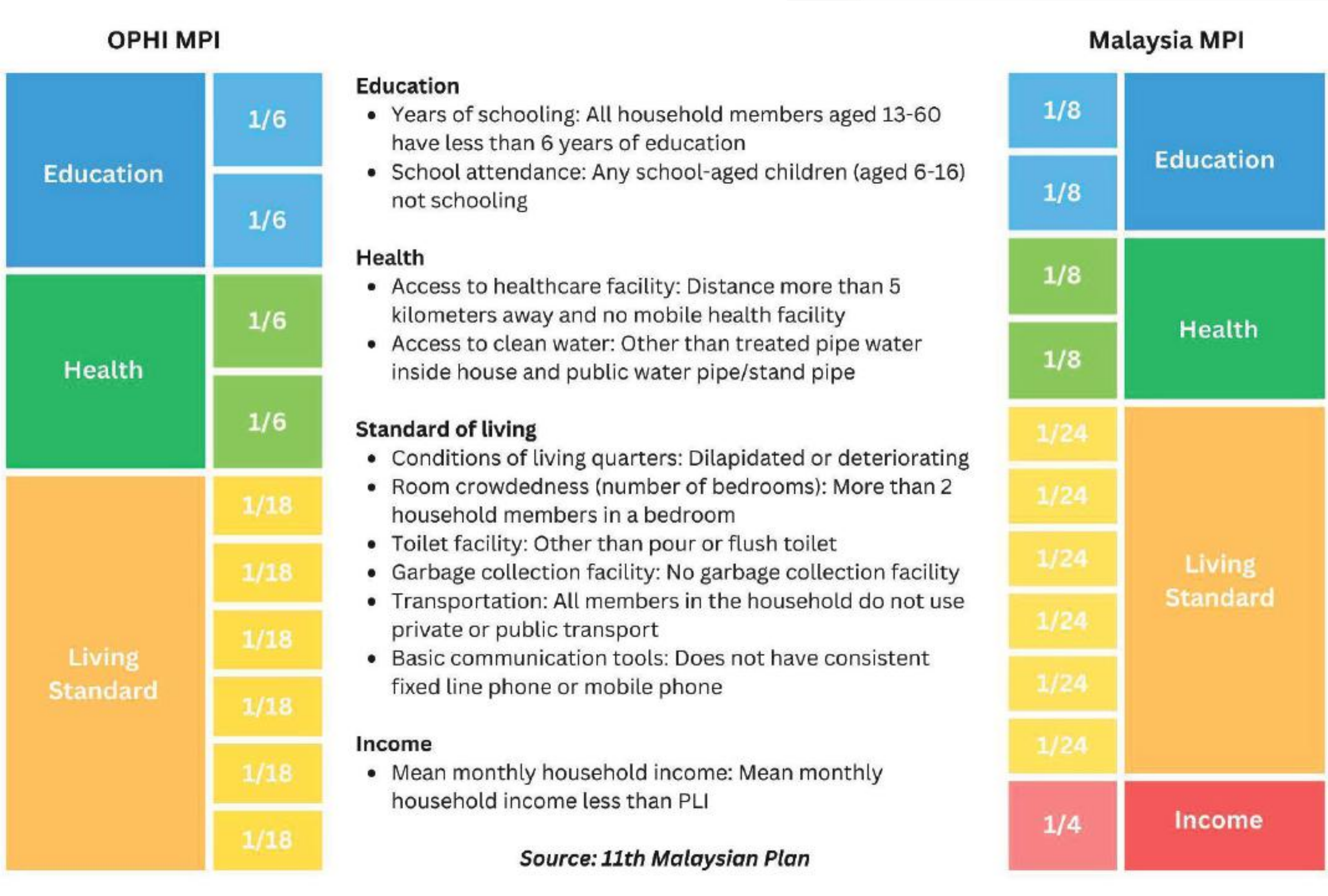
CHAPTER 3

Multidimensional Poverty in Kuching

3.1 Measuring Multidimensional Poverty

Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is an instrument that seek to understand poverty beyond monetary means by including other domains that promotes well-being. This study assigns MPI as a concept rather than a standardised measuring tool, as in practice countries everywhere adopts it to measure beyond monetary indices by customising the indicators that each country opined best reflect the deprivations of its people.

MPI made its debut in Malaysia through the 11th Malaysian Plan (2016-2020). MPI includes income as a domain, together with three typical domains of Education, Health and Living Standards. Aside from income which stands alone as the sole indicator of the domain, other domains have a variety of indicators, each with their cutoff points. Thus, the items in MPI are binarily expressed either when deprivation occur (1) or absent (0), rather than in any form of scale. Each indicator has their respective weightage. The more a person reported form of deprivation experienced, the higher the total deprivation of the person- hypothetically, a person with 0 percent experienced no deprivation in any of the dimensions while a person with 100 experienced deprivation in all of the dimensions and indicators.



Infographic C: OPHI and Malaysian MPI

As an instrument, MPI aims to illuminate various forms of deprivations that a country considers important to determine whether a person is poor or not. Malaysia decided total deprivation above 33.3%, following OPHI (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative)'s cutting point, as indicating a multidimensionally poor household.

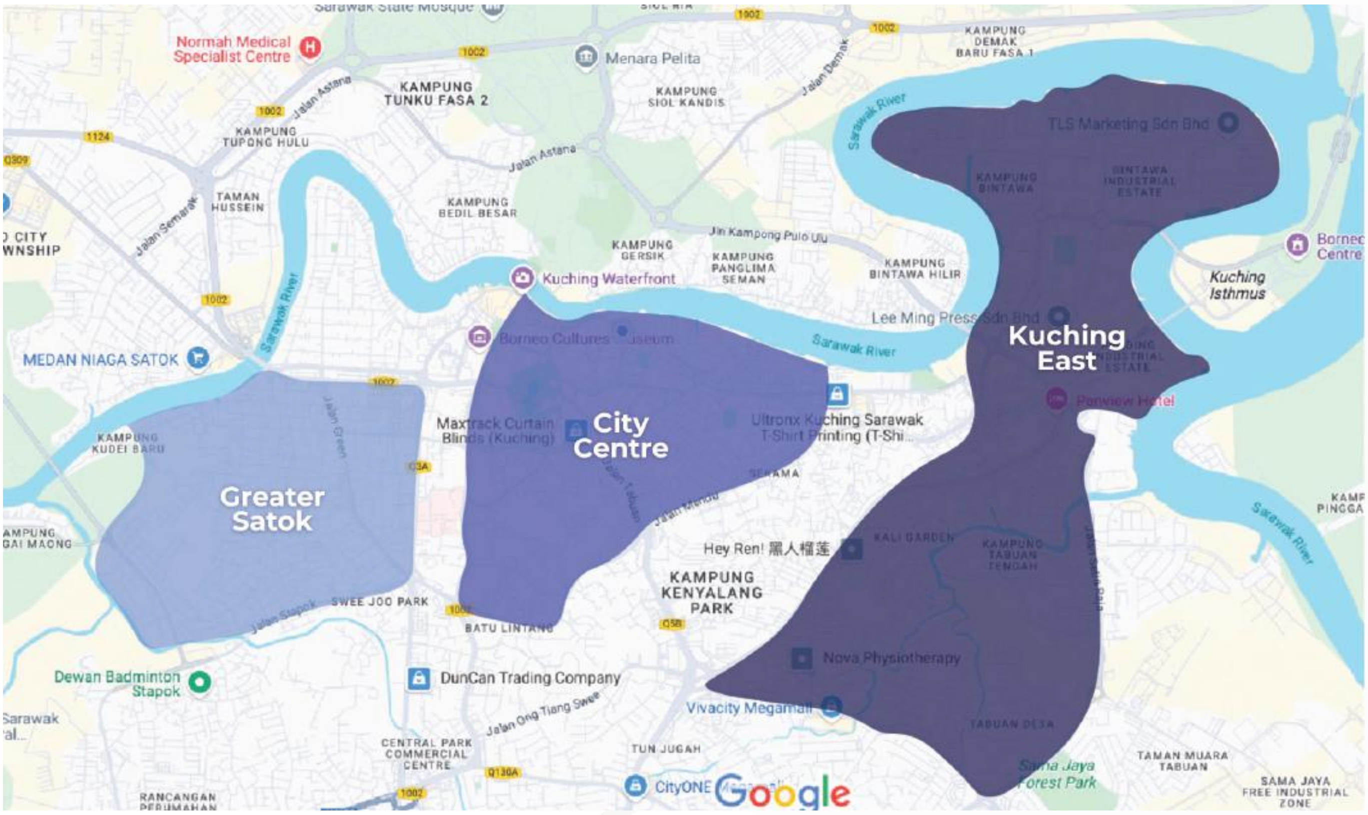
The focus on variety segments enable social planners and policymakers to accurately identify the forms of deprivations suffered by a community in a particular locality. MPI sensitises a research towards the bare necessities for a person to have a decent life as it also intends to proximate towards the context to deprivations faced by the people it surveys. A person with a decent income could become poor by having particular diseases that incur high medical costs. Alternatively, a person who lives in a squatter home does not have to pay for their housing, but they might face issues pertaining to access to clean water and electricity. The format of MPI allows for these dimensions to be asked, with the goal to understand the plurality of deprivations from different contexts.

3.2 Multidimensional Poverty in Kuching Localities

While we followed SKUP's distribution points for data collection as discussed in Chapter 1, three groupings of residential areas within the city emerged to allow for a locality comparison. We categorized these areas as City Centre, Kuching East, and Greater Satok (see Infographic D in the next page). Since the areas were not pre-stratified in our research design, the number of households surveyed in each area varied; 54 in City Centre, 38 in Kuching East, and 25 in Greater Satok. Although this uneven distribution limits direct comparisons, it nonetheless provides valuable insights into the overall situation on the ground.

Kuching City Centre is located at the central business district of Kuching and it's vicinity, which includes the location of SKUP's Soup Kitchen. One of the largest council residential areas here is the Kuching Municipal Council (KMC) flats. Constructed in 1957 the 22 blocks with a total of 531 units of the KMC flats were constructed to provide housing for the poor in the city. Most of the residents of these residences are those of Chinese descent.

[9]https://www.theborneopost.com/2013/01/30/kmc-flats-meant-for-urban-poor/

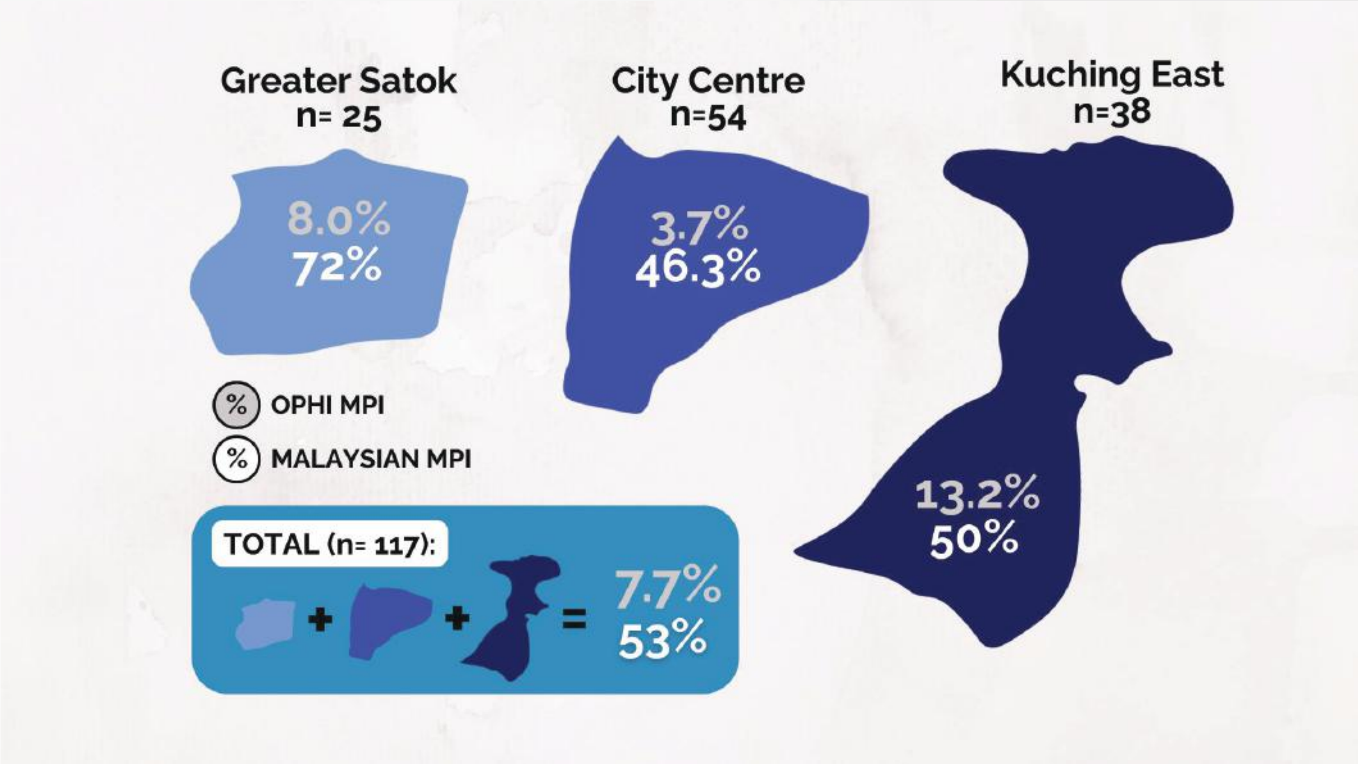


Infographic D: Localities in Kuching: Greater Satok, City Centre and Kuching East

As its name suggests, Kuching East is located at the east of the city, which includes a mixture of formal and informal villages and residential neighbourhood located among industrial areas (Bintawa and Tabuan). The Sungai Apong Market, where SKUP delivers the largest number of food packs to, is located within this area. Many of the residents in this area is a mixture of ethnicity, both natives and Chinese.

Greater Satok refers to areas surrounding Satok, which used to be the location of a popular weekend market before it was relocated. Two of the SKUP's food delivery areas, Kampung Kudei and Poh Kwong park are located within this area. While the former are predominantly native Dayaks and Malay, the latter is mostly populated by Chinese.

The inclusion of the income domain produces stark differences in multidimensional poverty incidence. For the sake of comparison, Kuching's multidimensional poverty was assessed using both the OPHI and Malaysian MPI frameworks (see Infographic E), revealing notable differences with the inclusion of income as domain. Under OPHI's measure, which excludes income, Kuching East recorded the highest poverty rate at 13.2%, followed by Greater Satok (8%) and City Centre (3.7%). However, when using Malaysia's MPI, which incorporates income deprivation, Greater Satok had the highest incidence at 72%, followed by Kuching East (50%) and City Centre (46.3%). While City Centre consistently had the lowest poverty rates, Kuching East and Greater Satok switched rankings depending on whether income was considered. This, together with the apparent increase of 45.3% of multidimensional poverty incidences (from OPHI to Malaysian MPI) highlighted the role of financial hardship in determining multidimensional poverty levels.



Infographic E: Incidence of Multidimensional Poverty in Kuching localities

The significantly higher poverty rates under the Malaysian MPI suggest that income deprivation is a major factor affecting households in Kuching. Many households that do not appear multidimensionally poor under OPHI's framework fall into poverty when income is factored in. City Centre, despite having the lowest poverty rates in both indices, still exhibits a substantial proportion of income-poor households, indicating financial struggles despite better access to services.

Greater Satok stands out as the most vulnerable area overall, exhibiting high levels of both income and non-income deprivations. In contrast, Kuching East shows the highest rate of non-income poverty but comparatively lower income deprivation than Greater Satok. This suggests that while many in Kuching East experience hardships related to education, health, or living conditions, a greater proportion still earn enough to avoid falling into income-based poverty.

3.3 Incidences of Domain Deprivations in Kuching Localities

While the findings in the previous section showed the overall multidimensional poverty incidences according to both the OPHI and Malaysian domain and its respective weightages, this section provides an investigation of deprivation incidences in specific indicators across the localities. The findings are summarised in Table 3a below.

Indicators	City Centre (%)	Kuching East (%)	Greater Satok (%)	Other Areas (%)	Total
Education					
a) Years of schooling	39.6	50	64	0	37.2
b) School attendance	1.9	3.6	8	0	2.9
Health					
a) Acces to healthcare	5.7	10.7	0	28.6	8.8
b) Treated water supply	0	3.6	0	0	0.7
Living Standard					
a) Living quarters	1.9	57.1	84	0	27.7
b) No. of bedroom	20.8	71.4	60	0	33.6
c) Toilet facility	0	0	0	0	0
d) Garbage collextion	0	15.8	36	0	10.9
e) Transportation	17	7.1	8	19	12.4
f) Basic Communication	26.4	42.9	4	9.5	21.2

Table 3a Indicator Deprivations Across Kuching Localities by Percentage

Under the Education domain, “Years of schooling” indicator (i.e. household members aged 13-60 having less than 6 years of education), Greater Satok has the highest deprivation (64%), followed by Kuching East (50%) and City Centre (39.6%). For “School attendance” indicator [i.e. Any school-aged children (aged 6-16) not schooling], deprivation is low across all areas with Greater Satok (8%), followed by Kuching East (3.6%) and City Centre (1.9%). Greater Satok leads as the area with the most deprivation in the education domain.

Kuching East leads in the health domain’s deprivation. The area has the highest deprivation in Access to Health (10.7%) among the three focal areas, followed by City Centre (5.7 percent). Greater Satok has no reported deprivation in this indicator. Kuching East is also the only area that reported ‘Treated water supply’ access deprivation (3.6%).

Living Conditions deprivation varies with six of its indicators. Greater Satok reported the highest incidence of deteriorated or dilapidated housing (84%), followed by Kuching East (57.1%). City Centre only recorded minimal incidence (1.9%). Aside from financial constraints, poor housing conditions at the first two areas might be due to the majority of respondents there residing in informal settlements which are characterised by uncertain land occupation tenures which in turn, affect the decision of further investment on their respective dwellings.

Kuching East respondents mostly stayed in crowded conditions, with 71.4 percent belonging to households with two or more of its members sharing bedrooms. Greater Satok followed a close second at 60% while City Centre reported notable 20.8% of the deprivation. However, there is no reported toilet facility deprivation with households either having flush or pour toilets at their homes.

Garbage collection facilities also varies in the city, albeit in lower percentage of deprivations compared to other indicators. Greater Satok reports the highest deprivation (36%) followed by Kuching East (15.8%). City Centre reported no deprivation.

City Centre once again reporting the highest deprivation in Transportation (i.e. All members in the household do not use private or public transport) at 17% followed by Greater Satok (8%) and Kuching East (7.1%). The higher percentage in City Centre might mean that residents do not have to rely on any motorised transportation as their residences are located conveniently within walking distance.

Finally, Kuching East reported high deprivation in Basic Communication Tools (i.e. Does not have consistent fixed line phone or mobile phone) with 42.9% followed by City Centre (26.4%) and Greater Satok (4%).

3.4 Discussion & Conclusion

The general analysis of the different domains of the MPI reveals some of the MPI measurements used by the government, including recommendations made by the World Bank.

The results on specific indicator deprivations provide valuable insights into how poverty is highly localized. Greater Satok stands out with the worst deprivation in housing conditions, including living quarters (84%) and bedroom availability (60%), and a notable 36% lack of garbage collection. However, it shows zero deprivation in health access and water supply.

Kuching East shows consistently high deprivations across multiple indicators, particularly in bedroom overcrowding (71.4%), basic communication (42.9%), and living quarters (57.1%), and also struggles in education and health. However, it has some access to treated water, though limited. This area comprises a mix of formal and informal settlements, with respondents from various ethnic backgrounds.

City Centre shows relatively better outcomes in housing and education, but has transportation (17%) and communication (26.4%) challenges which is possibly related to inner-city inequality or specific under-served pockets.

While the percentages indicate the severity of certain poverty-related deprivations, these figures must be interpreted with caution due to differences in sample sizes across areas. The higher deprivation rates in Greater Satok, for example, may reflect its small sample base rather than a true proportionate incidence of poverty. However, the findings suggest that poverty in Kuching is highly localized and varies by area: some localities struggle more with housing conditions, while others face infrastructure or educational challenges. Furthermore, zero values in some domains should be understood as sample size limitations rather than a complete absence of deprivation.

These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of poverty in Kuching, where different localities face distinct challenges. Future policy interventions should target specific needs by locality rather than applying a one-size-fits-all solution. The complexity of these poverty incidences is further compounded by individual household contexts. Our findings call for area-specific poverty interventions, in particular;

- **Greater Satok: Improve housing and municipal services.**
- **Kuching East: Address multiple living standard deprivations; education, housing, and communication.**
- **City Centre: Tackle hidden urban poverty among the elderly particularly in communications and its possible connection with low education**

The residences of research participants vary between squatter areas, inherited old houses, and council rental flats, each facing unique deprivation contexts (see the following chapter for detailed comparison of these areas). For example, even among homeowners, different challenges impact their MPI scores. Residents in squatter areas struggle to access electricity and treated water due to their housing status. Those living in inherited homes often contend with deteriorating housing conditions, as their homes age alongside them. Meanwhile, council flat tenants benefit from reliable utilities and relatively problem-free housing but must manage monthly rental payments which though affordable, these still add to their financial burdens.

Finally, one of the significant observations from the findings above is the inclusion of income as a domain/indicator. Income indicators have traditionally been used to measure poverty, but their inclusion within the MPI framework has significant implications for the results obtained. In the case of Kuching, our research revealed stark differences in the incidence of multidimensional poverty when comparing the Malaysian MPI, which includes income as a weighted domain (1/4 weightage, single indicator), with the OPHI MPI, which excludes income.

While the importance of income in assessing poverty cannot be denied, integrating it directly into the MPI structure alters the composition of multidimensional poverty and influences the overall measurement outcomes. Income-based measures tend to be volatile, affected by short-term fluctuations, seasonal employment, and reporting inconsistencies. In contrast, MPI aims to capture long-term deprivations in essential aspects of well-being, such as education, health, and living conditions.

A more balanced approach could involve using income as supplementary data alongside MPI rather than embedding it as a domain. This would allow policymakers to analyze poverty holistically, considering both structural deprivations and economic constraints without distorting the multidimensional nature of poverty assessment.

CHAPTER 4

Income & Expenditure

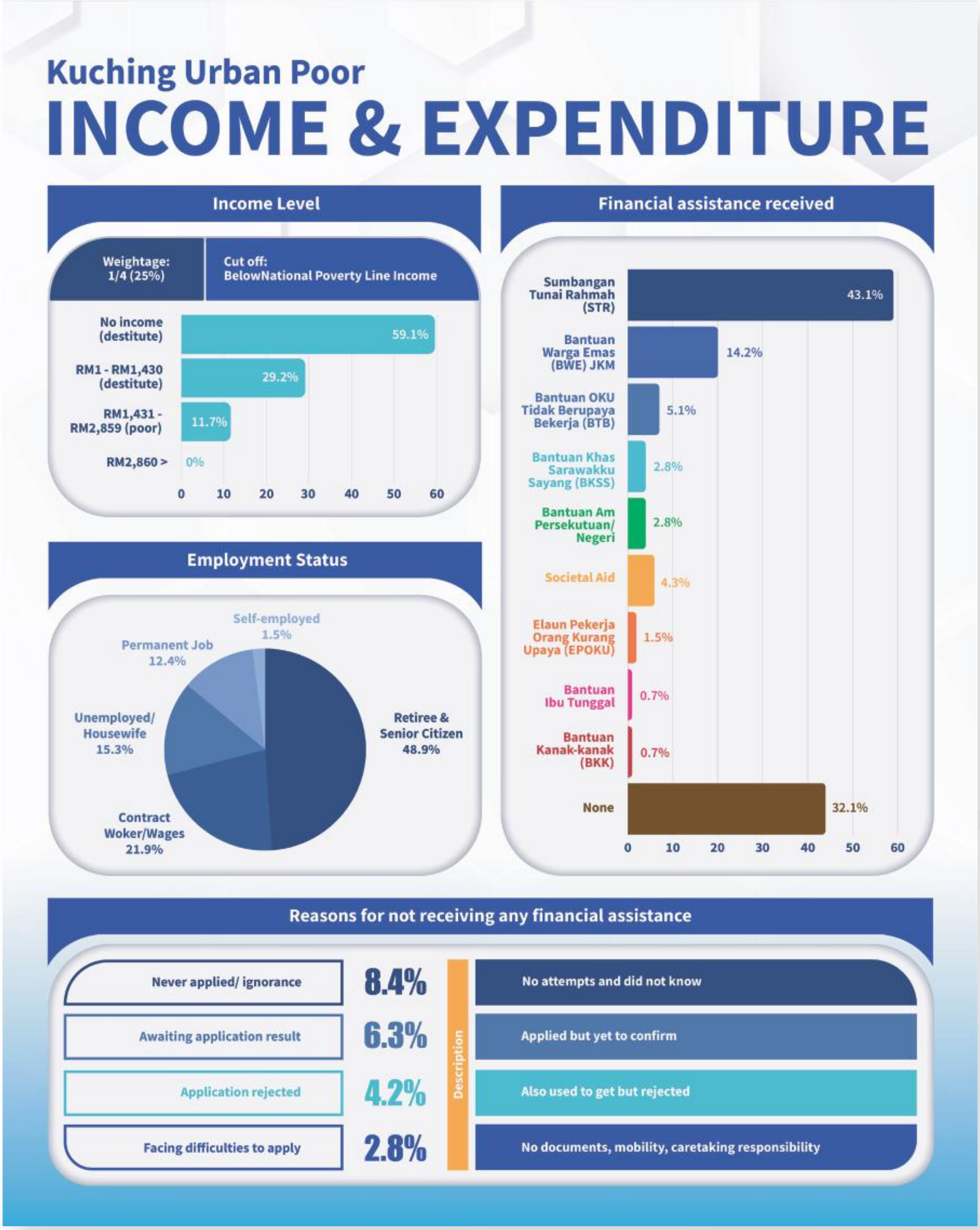
4.1 Income Domain of the MPI

Income is the only dimension within the Malaysian MPI with a single indicator- the cutoff point for MPI's income is the national poverty line income. Most of the SKUP surveyed beneficiaries do not enjoy a high level of income (See Table 4a below), if any, which qualify them to receive food aid from the soup kitchen. The majority of them do not have any regular means of income or a permanent job, leading to their precarious economic condition. The income level of the respondents are divided using 2022 urban Sarawak RM2,860 PLI as reference for this case study at capital city of Kuching. Those who reported income below the figure are considered as poor, while those who are below half of the PLI are considered as destitute. All of the respondents (100 percent) have income lower than the PLI with 59.1 percent without any income, 29.2 percent earning income below RM1,430 and 11.7 percent earning in between RM1,431 and RM2,859. In other words, 88.3 percent of the sample are destitute with the remaining 11.7 percent are poor.

Income Domain	Income Level	Percentage
Weightage: 1/4 (25 %) **Cut off:** Below National Poverty Line Income	No income (destitute)	59.1
	RM 1 - RM 1,430 (destitute)	29.2
	RM1,431 - RM 2,859 (poor)	11.7
	RM2,860 and above	0

Table 4a Incidences of income deprivation

The figure presented is not a surprise when considering the low level of labour participation. Retirees make up the majority of the sample with 48.9 percent (see Infographic F next page). Together with 15.3 percent of housewives and the unemployed, the two groups make up 64.2 percent of respondents not currently participating in the labour market. For those who are, 21.9 percent earn irregularly from wages or contract work, 12.4 percent with permanent job while 1.5 percent from self-employment.



Infographic F: Income and Expenditure

For those who work, they reported a variety of occupations, predominantly low waged jobs as construction worker (10.9 percent), cleaner (5.1 percent), general worker (5.1 percent), vendors, security guards, driver and so on. Most of these jobs are piecemeal and inconsistent - for example those who "kerja kontrak" doing cement work cannot work on rainy days, where they are then deprived of the RM50-80 for a day's work. One respondent survived by collecting cardboards to sell to the recycling center.

Box 1

From Livelihood to Loss: How the Pandemic Displaced a Former Business Owner

Among the various pathways into poverty identified in this study, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as particularly disruptive. One elderly respondent, previously involved in a small hospitality venture in the city, shared how the pandemic upended his livelihood. His modest business, which had sustained him for years, was forced to shut down during the prolonged lockdowns. Over time, the unused premises deteriorated; furnishings became unsalvageable, and essential equipment like air conditioning units were damaged beyond repair. Reviving the space was estimated to cost around RM200,000, an amount well beyond his means.

Compounding the issue was the withdrawal of financial support from his former business partner, a close family member. With no income and limited assistance, he gradually depleted his savings to cover basic living expenses. Eventually, he found himself without a permanent home, often sleeping in public areas around the Kuching waterfront. While he occasionally seeks refuge at a friend's place to rest, cook, or wash up, he refrains from staying long-term due to the unsuitable housing conditions

4.2 Financial and Income Generation Assistance

Respondents were able to secure monetary aid from a variety of government cash transfers. Most receive the federal government's Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah (STR), which is a continuation of previous cash aid started by Bantuan Rakyat 1Malaysia (BR1M), which benefits 43.1% of the sample. 14.2% receives elderly assistance Bantuan Warga Emas (BWE) by Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM) while 5.1% receives Bantuan OKU Tidak Berupaya Bekerja (BTB), the unemployment assistance for persons with disability. The respondents also receives other funds from both federal and state government such as Bantuan Am and Bantuan Khas Sarawakku Sayang (BKSS), aside from those targeting groups with special needs such as Elaun Pekerja Orang Kurang Upaya (EPOKU) for working persons with disabilities, Bantuan Ibu Tunggal for single mothers and Bantuan Kanak-Kanak (BKK) for children. There is also a small percentage that receives assistance from societies, churches and individuals.

There are a handful of respondents who receive more than one assistance; four households receive both BWE and STR, four receive both BKSS and STR, one receives both BTB and STR, one receives both STR and societal aid. There are also some who reported receiving Rancangan Makanan Tambahan (RMT) food assistance for their school-attending children. While the majority receive some form of financial assistance, 32.1% do not receive any and were asked for the reason for their deprivation.

There were a variety of reasons given. 8.4 percent of them never attempted or said they did not know how, 6.3 percent stated that they are awaiting approval to their submissions, 4.2 percent stated that their applications were rejected, while four (2.8 percent) said that they faced difficulty to apply.

Other than financial assistance, some of the respondents had undergone skills training for them to be able to generate income. Majority of the 9.5% that had undergone training are from the same area, where they were provided with sewing and bakery training and equipment by SKUP and 1AZAM. One respondent whom undergone the baking training shared that she did not use the skill she learnt to generate income as she did not have the starting capital, electricity supply (for the oven) and was occupied with her role as a housewife.

4.3 Categories of Household Expenditure

Aside from income sources and financial aid, we asked for estimates of expenditure across typical categories of household spending. Expenditure can reveal the amount of discretionary spending to be examined against aggregated reported income. The listed expenditures are grouped into essential and non-essential categories to provide another layer of analysis. Essential expenditures refer to fundamental necessities required for basic survival and well-being, such as food, housing, utilities, and transportation. Non-essential expenditures, while still important in daily life, are classified as discretionary because they are more flexible and can be adjusted based on income levels and priorities.

However, it is acknowledged that some expenditures, such as education, communication, and clothing, are increasingly considered necessary for social and economic participation in modern society. In certain contexts, these may be regarded as quasi-essential rather than purely discretionary. While Malaysian national statistics such as Consumer Price Index (CPI) do not differentiate between necessities and discretionary spending, this study follows the general economic principles (Engel's Law) which distinguish between necessity and discretionary spending.

Expenditure Categories	Mean (RM)	Median (RM)	Max (RM)	Budget Percentage
ESSENTIALS				
Food	304.66	280	2,000	45.6
Transportation	91.26	40	1,000	13.6
Housing (rental)	86.37	0	600	12.9
Utilities	55	40	340	8.2
Cooking Fuel	25.99	30	90	3.9
Health	9.35	0	350	1.4
NON ESSENTIALS				
Communications	33.46	30	200	5.0
Education	31.73	0	440	4.7
Home Maintenance	19.34	0	1000	2.9
Clothes	11.6	0	300	1.7

Table 4b Expenditure categories and its percentage

What do the poor spend on? The findings from our study revealed that most households spent the most on Food, Transportation and Housing, the three essential household expenditures. The least was spent on clothes and health. Food dominates with 45.6 % of the monthly budget spent on the category, despite our survey which was done among food aid beneficiaries. This clearly indicates food being the most essential spending among those surveyed. Transportation is only a distant second at 13.6% followed by housing at 12.9%. While on average housing do not seem to account for much of their monthly budget, further analysis among those who rent their dwelling revealed that only 71.1% can afford their rent. This meant that housing rental exceeds 25% of monthly expenditure for 28.3% of those who rent.

The rest of the categories spread out the monthly budget each with less than 10% respectively. Overall, 85.6% of total household spending is allocated to essentials while 14.4% is spent on discretionary items like communication, education, and clothing.

When asked whether their monthly ***expenditure exceeds their income, 55.5%*** *answered YES. A minority* ***10.2%*** *have* ***taken some form of loans.***

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A deeper analysis of the data further reveals a few insights. While overall data showed that most were spent on food, the category also show a large spending range between those who spend nothing on the category versus those who spend RM2,000 to feed themselves. Aside from food, there's a noticeable high variation in essential (Housing, Transportation and Health) and some non-essential (Education and Home Maintenance) categories as well. Most households reported no spending on Education, Clothing, and Home Maintenance. Expenditure on non-essential is avoided by some by receiving donations of clothing from friends and families.

[10]Calculation done using Rent-to-Income (RTI) ratio (Suraya et al., 2019), which considers dwelling affordable if the rent payable is up to 25% of the renter's gross income.

There are a few reasons that we inferred from our qualitative observation for these variations in expenditure:

1) Composition of households

The difference in households sizes and generational composition determine different budget emphasis. Households with school-going children will incur spending for education, while households without children will spend none, producing stark variations. Similarly, those with big households spend much more on food compared to those who stay in a smaller household and solely rely on food aid from SKUP.

2) Housing type

There is variation incurring from housing from those who stay in squatter areas compared to those who rent the dwelling. Some of the former 'own' their dwelling (albeit illegally squatting) and thus do not need to pay any monthly rental. The latter needs to pay rental, some as high as RM600 per month.

3) Health conditions

While most of the respondents benefitted from the heavily subsidised healthcare in Malaysia, leading to its apparent low percentage in monthly expenditure, there are others who also incur other health-related expenses such as transportation costs to access healthcare, medical supplies and payment for health procedures not subsidised by the government (see Box 3 in the next chapter). Health is a significant threat to the economic well-being of the family, particularly those that alter the household breadwinner's capability to participate fully in the labour force while having to bear the costs of additional medical expenses.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter highlights the severe income deprivation among SKUP beneficiaries, with 100 percent living below the poverty line and nearly 90 percent classified as destitute. Most respondents are elderly, retired, or engaged in low-paying, irregular work, contributing to their fragile economic standing. While many receive government cash assistance, nearly a third do not benefit from any aid, often due to lack of awareness or difficulties in the application process. Expenditure patterns reveal that essentials such as food, transportation, and housing dominate household budgets, with minimal spending on health, education, or clothing. However, there is considerable variation depending on household composition, housing type, and health conditions; factors that not only shape daily expenditure but also signal deeper vulnerabilities. These financial strains are especially acute when compounded by poor health, which emerges as both a consequence and a driver of poverty: an issue explored in greater depth in the next chapter.

Box 2

Patchwork Livelihoods: Stories of Urban Hardships

Beneath the glitz of urban development, many underprivileged individuals navigate daily survival through informal, low-income activities. Their resilience is evident, yet their struggles highlight the precariousness of life without stable financial security.

Take the case of a disabled elderly man who spends his days collecting recyclable waste: cardboard, cans, plastic, and scrap metal, to sell at a recycling center. On a good month, he earns about RM200, barely enough to cover food and transportation. His work is physically demanding, yet he has little choice, as his age and health issues limit his employment options.

For others, selling homemade food is a means to sustain themselves. A widow in Sungai Apong makes banana fritters, earning between RM10 and RM20 a day, just enough for her daily meals. Another elderly woman in Poh Khong Park prepares kuih angku for local restaurants, but when illness strikes, she loses her income entirely. These women, despite their age, persist in their trade, unwilling to burden their children, yet constantly at risk of financial insecurity. In recounting their lives, the emotional toll was palpable; one woman, in the midst of sharing her story, broke down in tears, revealing just how deeply the struggle weighs on her.

Then there are those who rely on temporary, labor-intensive jobs. A man offers grass-cutting services for RM20 per job, knowing that if he finds no work that day, he earns nothing. Others take on delivery and loading tasks for small shops in town, yet chronic health issues prevent them from securing full-time employment. Without a steady income, their lives remain uncertain, dictated by the availability of daily-wage work.

These stories reflect a broader reality: for many, old age, health conditions, and lack of formal employment opportunities force them into informal, unstable work. While their perseverance is commendable, their vulnerability to financial shocks underscores the need for better social safety nets, targeted welfare programs, and inclusive economic opportunities. Sustainable interventions such as livelihood assistance, skills training, and expanded elderly support schemes could provide pathways to dignity and stability for those struggling on the margins of society.

CHAPTER 5

Health

5.1 Health Domain of the MPI

MPI's health domain consists of two indicators: access to health facilities and access to clean drinking water supply. As presented in Subsection 3.3 above, the percentage of deprivation incidence is 8.8 and 0.7 respectively. The low incidence is not surprising for urban community with the proximity of health facilities and water supply connectivity. However, the indicators used in MPI do not fully capture the deprivation realities of the domains holistically.

Indicators	Cut Off	Weightage	Incidence (% Overall)
Access to Health Facilities	Distance to health facility is more than three kilometres away and no mobile health facility is provided	1/8 (12.5%)	8.8
Access to Clean Drinking Water Supply	Other than treated pipe water inside house and public water pipe/stand pipe	1/8 (12.5%)	0.7

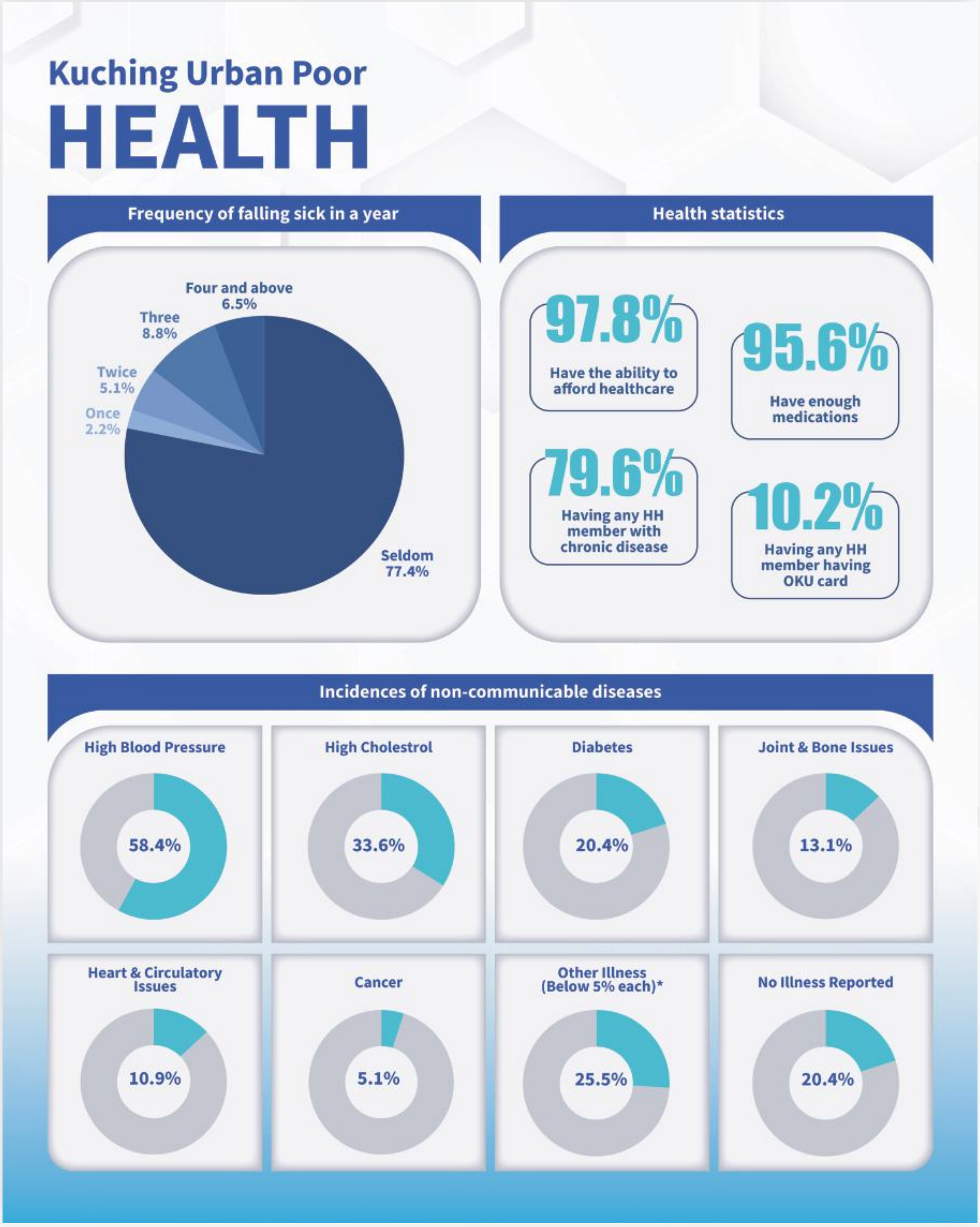
Table 5a MPI health domain and its indicators

5.2 Health Conditions and Service Affordability

To better understand the health situation among the poor, we asked respondents additional health-related questions. The majority (77.4%) reported that they seldom fall sick, while others experienced illness once (2.2%), twice (5.1%), or three times (8.8%) a year (see Infographic G next page). Meanwhile, 5.8% stated they fall sick more than four times annually.

In terms of healthcare affordability, 97.8% of respondents reported that they were able to afford medical care. This high percentage is largely due to Malaysia's heavily subsidized healthcare system, which remains accessible despite rising medical costs. However, even with affordable consultations, patients still face out-of-pocket expenses. For example, some respondents rely on e-hailing services for hospital visits, which can be a significant financial burden, especially for those undergoing frequent treatments like dialysis (see Box 3 below).

Additionally, 95.6% stated they receive sufficient medication for their health conditions. When asked about chronic illnesses within their households, 79.6% responded affirmatively, and 10.2% reported having a household member with an OKU (Persons with Disabilities) card. The types of chronic illnesses affecting households were also recorded, summarised in the infographic on the next page.



Infographic G: Health 1

The top three reported health conditions among respondents were high blood pressure (58.4%), high cholesterol (33.6%), and diabetes (20.4%). These conditions are not only highly prevalent individually but are also commonly interlinked, suggesting a strong likelihood of comorbidity, where individuals suffer from more than one of these chronic illnesses simultaneously. This pattern is consistent with known risk clusters associated with lifestyle and age-related non-communicable diseases. Other reported conditions such as joint and bone issues (13.1%), heart and circulatory problems (10.9%), and cancer (5.1%) were less prevalent but still significant. Meanwhile, health issues like respiratory conditions, digestive problems, neurological concerns, and others were mentioned in much smaller numbers (affecting 25.5% of the respondents collectively), indicating lower overall occurrence within the community surveyed.

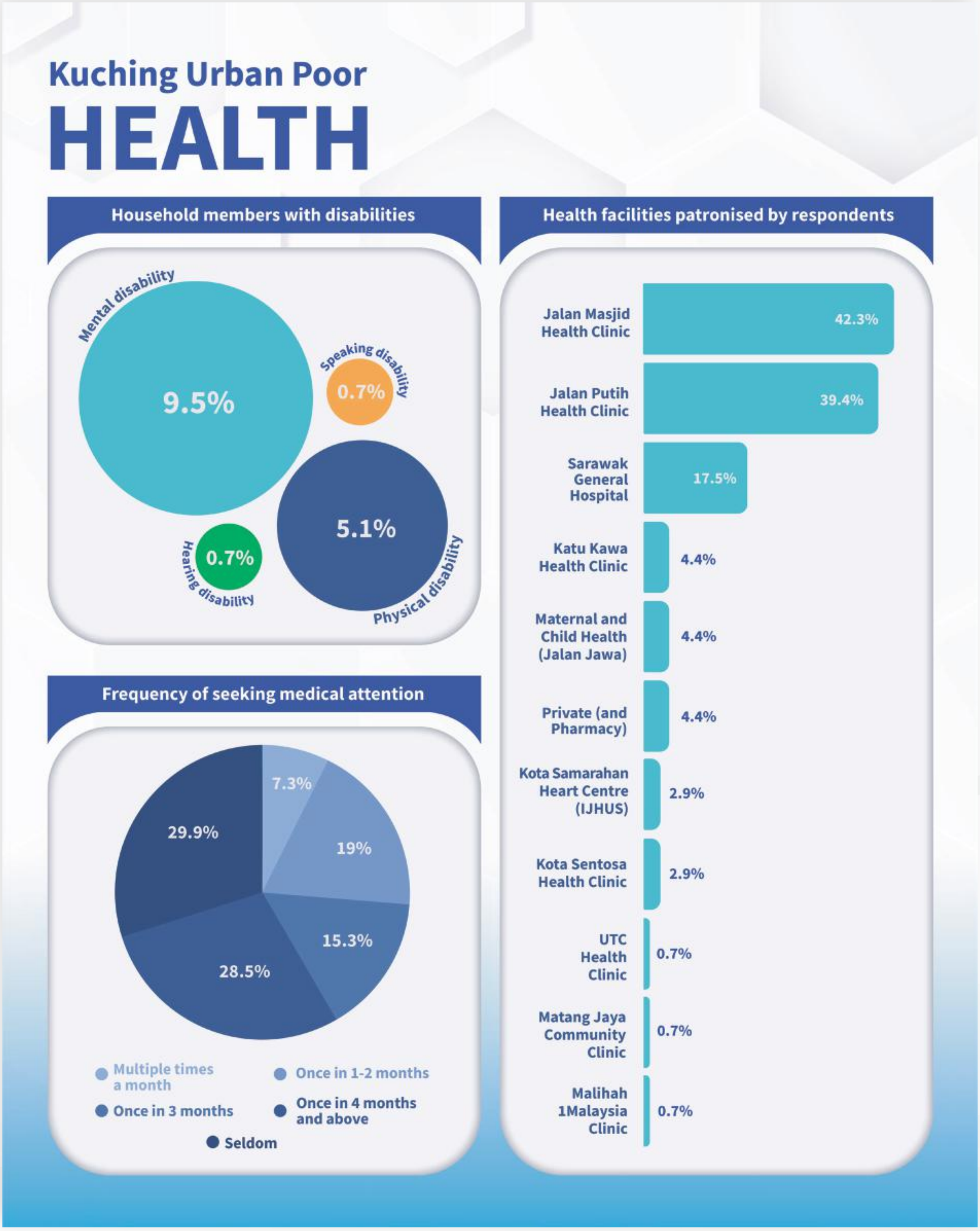
Most of those who require medicine for non-communicable diseases such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol have access to medicine which obliged them for regular checkups. Almost 100 percent of those diagnosed have been receiving medicine supply- either quarterly or half-yearly The Malaysian government policy to provide free medicine has liberated the cost of medical services from many of those who lived with poverty.

A number of households surveyed have persons with disabilities (OKU). Almost one-tenth (9.5%) of households houses one person with mental disabilities, followed by 5.1% with physical disabilities and one household with speaking and hearing disability respectively. Only about two-third of the families (63.6 percent) possessed OKU card to authenticate and enjoy the facilities designated for disabled persons.

While this study is only drawn from a small sample, the high percentage of households with mental health disability reveals the need to draw attention to it amongst other underprivileged groups. Throughout data collection, we have observed and listened to respondents that may suffer from underlying mental health challenges that have not yet been formally identified, particularly amongst elderly staying alone or suffering from the loss of loved ones.

There were observations made during data collection that some of the respondents might suffer from undiagnosed mental health issues. Some elderly, particularly those who were left to fend for themselves expressed that they are just 'living day to day' while 'awaiting for their death' and not having anything to look forward to in life. These sharings were usually accompanied by teary eyes. Due to the invisibility of mental illness and possible stigma related to mental illness, there is a possibility that most people from poorer backgrounds who are affected suffer in silence without appropriate treatment. While the government has made some progress on elderly physical health, there is still a lack of attention to their mental health.

[11]includes asthma, kidney disease, eye problems, stroke, gastric, anemia, thyroid, low glucose, urology issues, insomnia, schizophrenia, and others individually reported at frequencies below [5]%.



Infographic H: Health 2

One respondent suffers from depression since her son's passing and has been getting medications from SGH for her mental health. She also has insomnia and is taking medication prescribed by a doctor to her. There seems to be a realisation on the importance of mental health that is affecting her, as when asked what further government assistance that she wished for, she answered that she just wants to be happy.

5.3 Healthcare Facilities and Frequency of Access

The data shows that government health services are the most commonly used by respondents. The top three facilities cited were Jalan Masjid Health Clinic (42.3%), Tanah Putih Health Clinic (39.4%), and Sarawak General Hospital (17.5%). Other facilities had significantly lower usage, likely due to their location outside Kuching city centre or their specialised services. These include Batu Kawa Health Clinic and the Maternal and Child Health Clinic (Jalan Jawa) at 4.4% each, Kota Samarahan Heart Centre (2.9%), and Kota Sentosa Health Clinic (2.9%). A smaller percentage of respondents visited private clinics, pharmacies, or community clinics such as UTC, Matang Jaya, and Malihah.

Although most facilities were located relatively close to where respondents lived, some still faced transportation challenges. A number of those interviewed relied on Sarawak's subsidised public buses, which conveniently pass by both their homes and the clinics. However, not everyone was as fortunate. One respondent from Sungai Apong shared that she had to walk nearly an hour to reach Tanah Putih Clinic for her appointments. Others depended on friends or neighbours for transportation.

While Malaysia's low-cost public healthcare services make treatment financially accessible, the question arises: **how frequently do community members seek care when cost is no longer a major barrier?**

Most respondents reported that they **seldom** visited health facilities (29.9%). This was followed closely by those who sought care **once every four months or longer** (28.5%). About **19% visited once every one to two months**, while **15.3% reported quarterly visits**. Only a small proportion, **7.3%** visited health facilities **multiple times per month**.

The distribution suggests that the **majority of respondents seek healthcare only occasionally**, with responses skewed toward infrequent use. This may imply that many in the community only seek medical attention when symptoms are severe or when required for specific follow-up appointments, rather than for regular health monitoring. Those who visited medical facilities more frequently were typically individuals with chronic conditions that required regular check-ups as a prerequisite for continued access to their prescribed medications.

HIV/AIDS and Poverty: Insights from Sarawak

by Dr Yuwana Podin

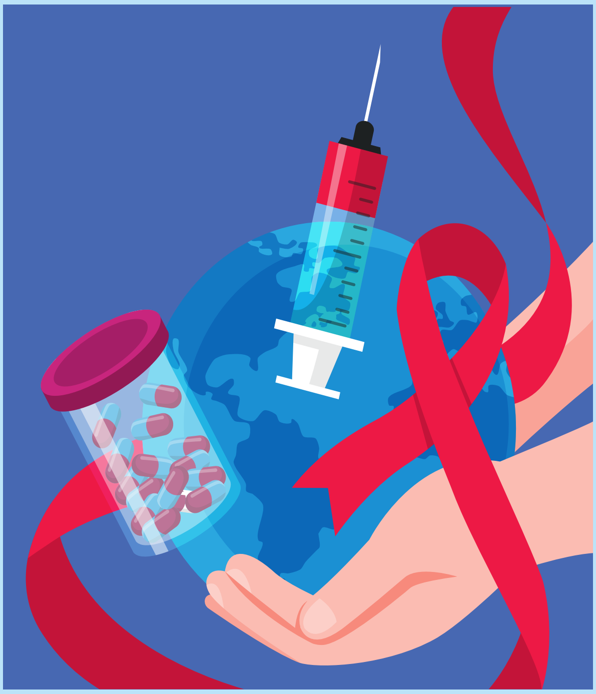
Malaysia's first HIV case was reported in 1986, and Sarawak's in 1989. To achieve the global target of ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030, UNAIDS set the 95-95-95 goals[1]. By 2023, Malaysia had reached 84-68-89, showing encouraging progress but with clear gaps in testing and treatment coverage.

In 2024, the National AIDS Registry recorded 71,927 PLHIV nationwide with 90% male and 10% female with alarmingly over 70% new infections below 40 years. While 84% of PLHIVs were aware of their status in 2023, 68% were late diagnoses, highlighting the urgent need for earlier detection. Sexual transmission remains the dominant route at 95%[2].

In Sarawak, there are around 3,000 HIV cumulative cases in Sarawak, with over 200 new detections annually where the state ranks fourth nationwide in 2023[3]. The Sarawak AIDS Concern Society (SACS), established in 1998, is a non-profit organization that provides advocacy, prevention, and support services. Its flagship programme, the Differentiated HIV Services for Key Populations (DHSKP), is implemented in collaboration with MOH and the Malaysian AIDS Council/Foundation. Through this programme, trained community health workers (CHWs) deliver prevention kits, voluntary free HIV screening, referrals for confirmatory testing and treatment, access to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), and psychosocial support. These services cover individuals from urban/semi-urban Kuching, Samarahan, and surrounding districts including Simunjan, Siburan, Serian, Bau, and Lundu.

Each year, SACS serves over 1,200 individuals aged 18–57 years, of whom 70% are male and 30% female. Consistent with national patterns, 90% of new HIV infections are male, and more than 70% are under 40 years. Socioeconomic hardship is widespread where 80% are unemployed or earn below minimum wage, with many needing transport assistance to access healthcare4. In addition, older clients face additional noncommunicable health burdens. Recognizing food insecurity amongst clients who are economically unstable, SACS provides food baskets for clients albeit not regularly due to funding limitations

First-line antiretroviral therapy (ART) is fully subsidized at government facilities, but resistance may develop from noncompliance, requiring second-line ART costing RM500 - RM2,000 monthly5. In addition, the uptake of ART among PLHIV in Sarawak is around 50%, way below the 95% national target6. Barriers include financial hardship, especially transport costs for rural patients, and loss of daily wages from attending medical appointments. Side effects from ART can also jeopardize job security when patients are unable to work.



The clients' challenges are compounded by stigma and discrimination which is corroborated by a 2023 nationwide survey whereby 79% of respondents aged 15–49 held stigmatizing views toward PLHIVs8. Such stigma not only marginalizes individuals but also undermines treatment adherence and restricts employment opportunities. Limited education further confines many clients to unstable jobs in the service and gig economy, reinforcing cycles of poverty.

Despite these challenges, several support initiatives were designed for PLHIVs. The Malaysian AIDS Foundation's Positive Audacious Living (PAL) scheme subsidizes second-line ART for underprivileged patients, while the Sarawak Islamic Council provides financial aid for Muslims. To address employability, SACS collaborates with PERKESO on "Projek Bangkit," which offers skills training and job-matching. Other agencies and NGOs also contribute assistance on an ad-hoc basis.

Moving forward, a multidimensional understanding and addressing of poverty is essential in ensuring no one is left behind while achieving the goals in ending AIDS[1].

Yuwana Podin (Ph.D.) is trained in molecular microbiology, and she has been volunteering in HIV/AIDS advocacy work at state and national levels since 2000.

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Box 3

Out-of-pocket costs and limited coverage for medical treatment

Many of the individuals and families who participated in this study are living with chronic health conditions. Fortunately, for most of them, proximity to public clinics and affordable treatment options have provided some level of healthcare security. Government facilities like the clinics in Jalan Masjid and Tanah Putih are well-utilised by respondents, offering consultations, follow-ups, and medication at highly subsidised rates, often just RM1 per visit. These subsidies are a lifeline, especially for those managing long-term illnesses.

Yet, even when medical services are relatively accessible and affordable, health conditions can still be a source of financial strain, particularly when the treatment required falls outside the scope of basic subsidies. One family we spoke to is navigating this exact challenge. The father, who is the main provider for the household, requires dialysis three times a week. Unfortunately, the facility that he is assigned to receive this treatment is located in another district, about 16 kilometres from their home. After each session, he is physically unfit to ride his motorcycle, making it necessary to depend on e-hailing rides that cost RM30 one-way.

On top of that, although they applied for subsidised dialysis support in the past, the application was unsuccessful. As a result, the family pays out-of-pocket RM39 per week for the dialysis sessions themselves. Combined with transportation, the total monthly cost of treatment exceeds RM500.

This is a significant burden for a couple raising four school-going children. The father's illness not only limits his ability to work but also demands a substantial portion of the household's income just to keep him alive. Their story illustrates how the intersection of health and poverty can create a cycle that is difficult to break, even when basic healthcare services are within reach. While the subsidised healthcare significantly increases its access, there are out-of-pocket costs that needs to be added into policy consideration.

5.4 Conclusion

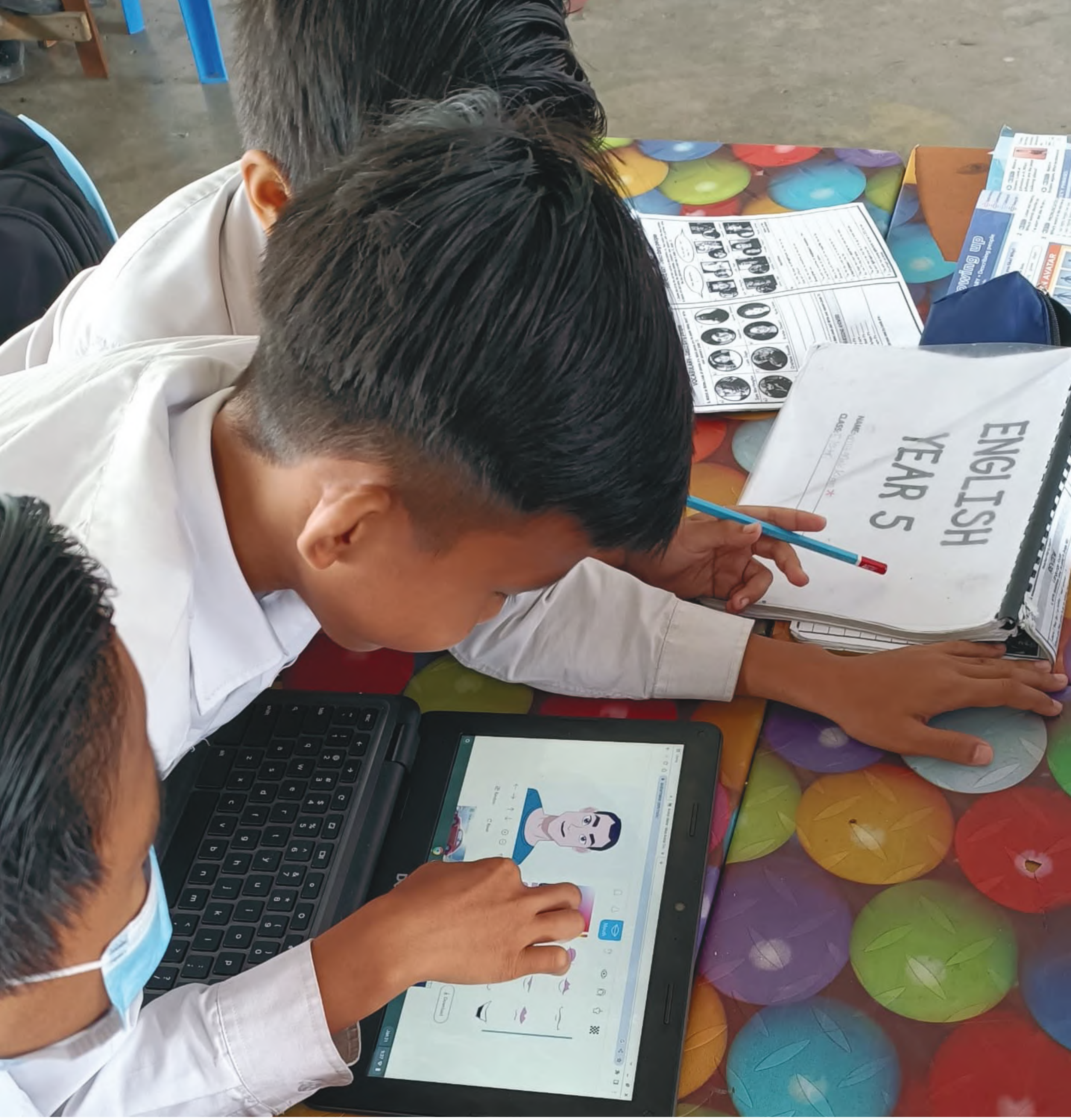
The Health domain of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is measured through two indicators: access to health facilities and access to clean drinking water, with low deprivation incidences of 8.8% and 0.7% respectively- expected outcomes for urban communities with developed infrastructure. However, these indicators alone may not fully reflect the lived realities of health deprivation, especially among low-income groups.

To provide a fuller picture, additional data was collected on health conditions, affordability of healthcare, and frequency of service use. While 97.8% of respondents reported being able to afford medical care, thanks to Malaysia's subsidised public healthcare, hidden costs such as transportation (e.g. reliance on e-hailing services for treatment like dialysis) remain a concern. Despite the affordability, about 30% seldom sought medical attention, and another 28.5% did so only once every four months or longer, suggesting that health-seeking behaviours remain largely symptom-driven or conditional on required follow-ups. Health issues among the poor are significant: 79.6% reported having a household member with chronic illness, with high blood pressure (58.4%), high cholesterol (33.6%), and diabetes (20.4%) being the most common. Co-morbidities are likely, highlighting the burden of lifestyle-related non-communicable diseases. While most patients had access to medications, regular check-ups were necessary to continue receiving them.

Mental health concerns also emerged, particularly among the elderly. Though only 9.5% reported a household member with a mental disability, field observations suggest that this figure may understate the true extent of the issue.

Cases of undiagnosed depression, grief, and psychological distress, especially among elderly individuals living alone were noted. This points to a gap in mental health support for vulnerable groups, even as physical healthcare infrastructure is accessible.

Government clinics dominated usage, with Jalan Masjid and Tanah Putih clinics being the most frequented. Still, proximity does not eliminate all barriers: some respondents struggled with transport, relying on buses, friends, or long walks. Overall, while public healthcare is financially accessible, disparities persist in utilisation, especially for those with chronic illnesses or mental health needs.



CHAPTER 6

Education

6.1 Education Domain of the MPI

Education is a fundamental driver of socioeconomic development and a key determinant of an individual's opportunities in life. In the context of multidimensional poverty measurement, education plays a crucial role in determining long-term well-being, employment prospects, and social mobility. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) evaluates education through two key indicators: Years of Schooling and School Attendance. Each carries an equal weightage of 1/8 (12.5%), reflecting the significance of educational attainment in assessing poverty levels.

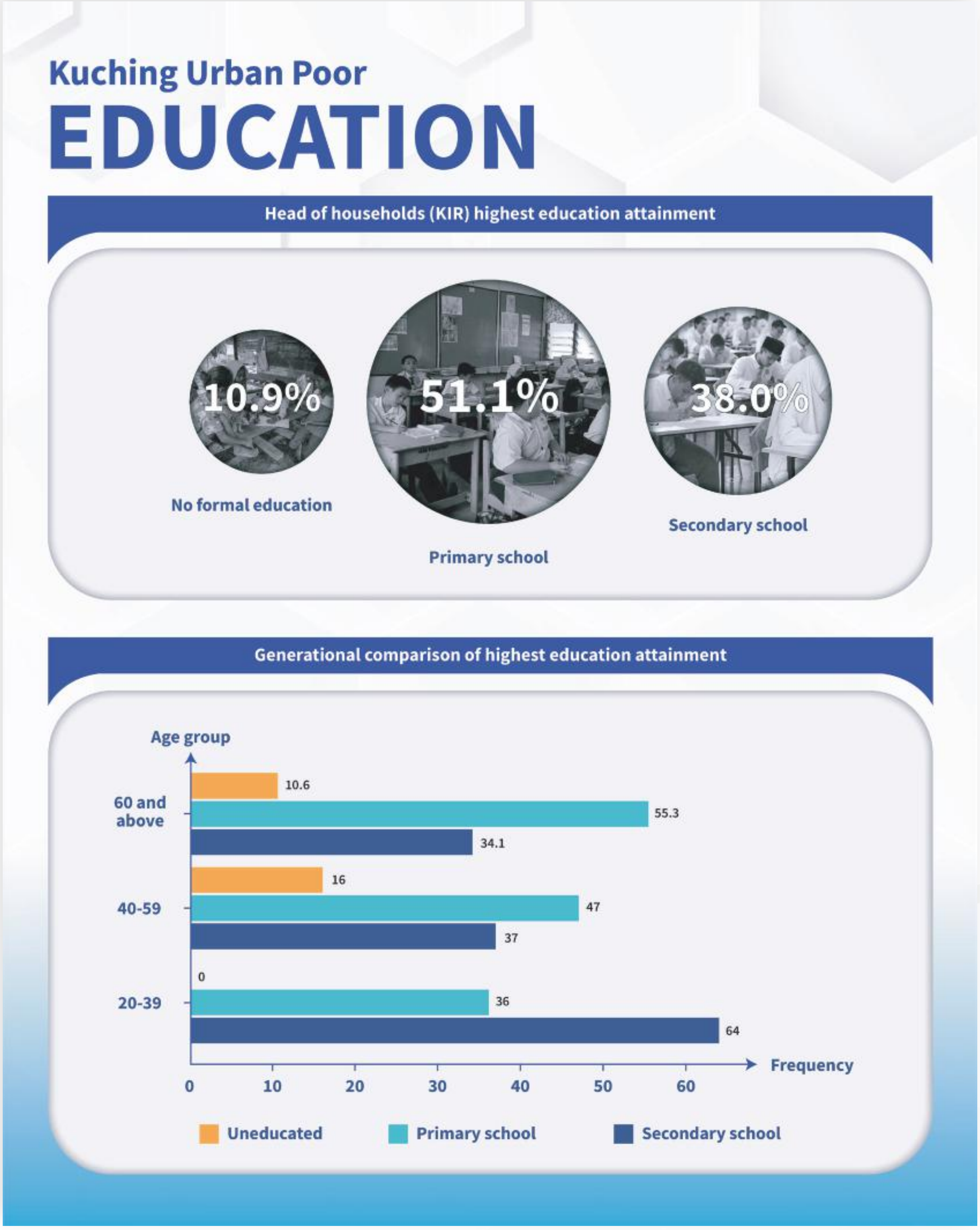
Indicators	Cut Off	Weightage	Incidence (% Overall)
Years of Schooling	All household members aged 17-60 have less than eleven years of education	1/8 (12.5%)	37.2
School Attendance	Any school children aged 6-16 not schooling	1/8 (12.5%)	2.9

Table 6a MPI education domain and its indicators

The Years of Schooling indicator shows a relatively high incidence rate of 37.2%, meaning that over one-third of households surveyed have members aged 17–60 who have not completed 11 years of formal education. In contrast, the School Attendance indicator is significantly lower at 2.9%, suggesting that almost all children aged 6–16 are enrolled in school.

This trend indicates a shift towards higher school participation rates among the younger generation, reflecting the success of policies and initiatives aimed at increasing access to primary and secondary education. However, the persistence of low educational attainment among adults suggests that earlier generations may have faced barriers to schooling, which could still impact their socioeconomic prospects today.

The majority of household heads (51.1%) had only completed primary school, while 38% had reached secondary school. A smaller proportion (10.9%) had never received formal education. This suggests that educational opportunities were more limited for older generations.



Infographic I: Education

A generational analysis reveals a clear improvement in education levels over time.

- Among those aged 20–39, all respondents had received formal education, with 64% completing secondary school and 36% attending primary school.
- In contrast, the 40–59 age group had a significant portion (16%) who had never attended school, while 47% completed primary education and 37% reached secondary school.
- Among those aged 60 and above, more than half (55.3%) had only primary education, while 34.1% had secondary schooling.

This intergenerational shift highlights improved access to education over time, likely driven by government policies (such as compulsory primary education under Education Act 1996 [effective January 2003] and incentives such as Rancangan Makanan Tambahan - see Box 4 below), infrastructure development, and greater societal emphasis on schooling. However, the relatively low secondary school attainment among older generations may limit their access to stable, higher-income employment, contributing to economic disparities. The recent passage of the Education (Amendment) Bill 2025, which mandates compulsory secondary education, could enhance educational attainment if accompanied by incentives for low-income families. Without such government support, compulsory schooling for older teenagers may place additional burdens on underprivileged households.

The findings indicate a positive trend in education among younger generations, with school attendance nearly universal and secondary school attainment increasing. However, historical disparities persist, particularly among older individuals, whose limited education may constrain their economic opportunities. Addressing these disparities may require targeted adult education programs, skill development initiatives, and continued investment in accessible education to break cycles of poverty and improve long-term economic outcomes.

Box 4

Food Aid for Primary School Children: Support or Dependency?

The Rancangan Makanan Tambahan (RMT) programme, which provides daily meals to primary school students, plays a critical role in supporting low-income families. For many, it represents more than just a school-based nutrition initiative; it helps relieve the everyday financial pressures of feeding a household.

One parent interviewed shared their deep reliance on this form of assistance. Living in a six-person household with a monthly income of RM1,700, they face difficult choices when managing daily expenses. The cost of car loan repayments, food, and the general rise in living expenses leave little room for flexibility. In such situations, the RMT meals served at school help to bridge a vital gap.

Separately, another family highlighted how the absence of RMT in secondary schools makes it costly to continue schooling. They reported needing to allocate approximately RM5 per child per day for canteen food, a burden that becomes substantial over time. This comment reflects how food aid has become a crucial component of daily household planning, and how its sudden absence can lead to perceptions of increased hardship, even when the overall structure of schooling remains unchanged.

From field observations, there were also signs of long-term reliance forming around such assistance. While food aid undeniably eases immediate hardship, there is an emerging risk that its consistent availability may unintentionally foster expectations of continuous support. This raises important questions about how best to balance short-term relief with strategies that build resilience and promote self-sufficiency over time.

6.2 Conclusion

The education domain within the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) reveals a mixed picture of progress and persistent gaps. On one hand, the near-universal school attendance among children reflects the success of education policies and programmes aimed at expanding access, especially in the last two decades. Younger generations are clearly benefiting from these efforts, as seen in the upward trend in secondary school attainment.

However, the legacy of limited access to education continues to affect older cohorts. The high incidence of households with adults lacking 11 years of schooling (37.2%) underscores how past structural barriers still shape present-day vulnerabilities. This gap in educational attainment contributes to reduced employment opportunities and lower earning potential, perpetuating cycles of poverty for some families.

Overall, while the trajectory is positive, particularly among school-age children, addressing educational deprivation among adults remains critical. Targeted lifelong learning initiatives and continued support for equitable, quality education can help close this generational gap and reinforce education's role as a pathway out of poverty.

Poverty's Impact on Students' Learning in Sarawak

by Serena Clare Christopher

As a teacher with over ten years of experience teaching in Sarawak's schools, I have seen how poverty affects students' education beyond financial constraints. The Sarawak Development Institute's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) study, released in April 2025, reveals that many adults in poor households have limited formal education, perpetuating challenges for their children. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this disparity, as the shift to online learning in 2020-2021 disadvantaged students from low-income families. The Malaysia Learning Poverty Brief (April 2024) confirms this crisis, noting that 42% of Malaysian children at late primary age lack reading proficiency, 8% higher than the East Asia and 9% above upper middle-income (UMC) countries, with a gender gap showing 50% of boys versus 34% of girls affected.

Wealthier students adapted to online classes with devices and reliable internet, while poorer students struggled. As I navigate the challenges of teaching online, I observed families prioritizing survival such as food and shelter over education tools. The MPI report echoes this, citing job losses and financial stress that hindered access to devices or data plans. In cramped homes lacking study spaces, students missed classes and lagged behind, with younger children often sidelined as older siblings used shared devices.

Beyond device shortages, parents' inability to support learning at home persists beyond pandemics. During the crisis, unprepared caregivers took on teaching roles, adding stress due to their own limited education, as noted in the MPI. Outside pandemics, long hours in low-paying jobs leave them exhausted, and without literacy or numeracy skills, they struggle to assist with homework or motivate children. This contrasts with wealthier families who enhance learning through reading discussions or skill practice, fostering a cycle of lower confidence and progress among the poor.

Even more troubling was the deterioration of nutrition for many students. Many Sarawak students relied on school meals for balanced diets, but closures forced families to opt for affordable, processed foods like instant noodles or canned goods over costly fresh produce, leading to vitamin and mineral deficiencies. This caused tiredness and poor focus, evident in my fatigued students struggling with tasks. For families with infants or growing children, food aid often provides basics like rice or oil, but should include fortified foods or supplements to prevent stunting and support development.

The pandemic showed a clear issue: poverty forces families to focus on survival instead of education, which increases inequality. When schools reopened after lockdowns, many students from poor families still struggled, and the gap between them and wealthier students remains obvious today. This MPI study presented a handful of recommendations for Sarawak, which is consistent with my personal opinion. Providing devices, internet access, and better nutritional support would help a lot. Teachers also need training to identify struggling students and use tools for tailored help, including programs to build parents' skills for home learning. By addressing these core issues, we can create better opportunities for disadvantaged students as envisioned by the state's PCDS 2030 plan, using lessons from the pandemic to build a fairer future.

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CHAPTER 7

Living Standards

7.1 Living Standard Domain of the MPI

The Living Standards domain comprises six indicators designed to assess the conditions of living quarters, waste management, mobility, and communication. The prevalence of deprivation within our sample in Kuching varies across these indicators (see Table 6a below).

The most common deprivation reported is overcrowding, with 33.6% of respondents living in households where bedrooms accommodate more than two people per room. This issue highlights the strain on available living space. The second most reported issue is poor housing conditions, affecting 27.7% of respondents. This problem is especially pronounced among the elderly, many of whom continue to reside in aging homes that have deteriorated over time. In terms of access to communication tools, one in five (21.2%) of respondents reported having no access to basic devices such as mobile phones or the internet. This deprivation limits their ability to obtain important information and resources that could improve their well-being.

Indicators	Cut Off	Weightage	Incidence (% Overall)
Conditions of Living Quarters	Dilapidated or Deteriorating	1/24 (4.17%)	27.7
Number of Bedrooms	More than two members/room	1/24 (4.17%)	33.6
Toilet Facility	Other than flush and pour toilet	1/8 (12.5%)	2.9
Garbage Collection	No facility	1/24 (4.17%)	10.9
Transportation	All members of the household do not use either private or public transport to commute	1/24 (4.17%)	12.4
Access to Basic Communication Tools	Does not have radio or television, and fixed line phone or mobile phone, and PC/laptop or Internet	1/24 (4.17%)	21.2

Table 7a MPI living standards domain and its indicators

Regarding **mobility, 12.4%** of respondents reported not using either public or private transportation. This could be attributed to various factors, such as affordability, accessibility, or personal preferences, particularly in urban areas. Subsequently **10.9%** of respondents indicated that they do not have access to proper **waste collection services**. This issue is more commonly observed in informal settlements within the city, where infrastructure for essential services is often lacking. Finally, none of the respondents reported using toilet facilities other than flush or pour-flush toilets in their homes, suggesting a baseline level of sanitation and adherence to hygienic practices within the community.

7.2 Housing Conditions, Toilets and Assets

Housing conditions play a significant role in determining an individual's overall well-being. This is evident from the fact that four out of six indicators under the Living Standards domain are directly related to housing conditions. A home provides a space for rest and care for household members. While we have discussed the level of deprivation based on the indicators, we further explore additional aspects, beginning with home ownership. Our findings reveal that slightly more than half (53.3%) of respondents own their dwellings (see Table 7b). However, as this survey focuses on underprivileged groups, homeownership does not necessarily equate to adequate living conditions. A considerable portion (27.7%) of respondents reported living in deteriorated or dilapidated housing, as discussed in the previous section. Some of these dwellings are located in informal settlements, lacking access to essential utilities, waste collection services, and legal rights to occupancy.

Status	Percentage
Own house	53.3
Rental	43.1
Relative	2.2
Homeless	1.5
Total	100

Table 7b Home ownerships

While homeowners may experience deprivation in terms of housing quality, others face financial burdens due to rental costs. A significant proportion (43.1%) of renters lease their homes from the Kuching South City Council (MBKS), with rental rates varying based on unit type. Although these tenants have access to basic facilities, they must bear fixed monthly rental expenses, even in cases where they are elderly, unemployed, and without a stable income. However, some respondents have benefited from the state government's Sarawak Rental Assistance Scheme (SRAS). Notably, a considerable number of respondents, despite having children living elsewhere with their own nuclear families and even providing childcare support, are either not invited to stay with their offspring or choose not to do so. Additionally, a small minority (2.2%) reside with relatives, while 1.5% are homeless.

The survey also examined toilet types and ownership of telecommunication devices alongside other household assets. Both pump-flush and pour-flush toilets are considered to meet the basic sanitation requirements outlined in Malaysia's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) under the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (RMK11). However, subsequent reports referencing the same source have used "other than flush toilet" as a cutoff point, effectively excluding pour-flush toilets. While we do not intend to debate the differences between these toilet types, inconsistencies in the classification of deprivation criteria may impact MPI analyses. In our study, we found that 70.8% of respondents use the superior pump-flush toilets, while 29.2% rely on the inferior pour-flush toilets. If pour-flush toilets were classified as a deprivation factor under the Living Standards domain, the overall deprivation level would be significantly higher.

Status	Percentage
Pump-flush toilet	70.8
Pour-flush toilet	29.2

Table 7c Types of toilet owned

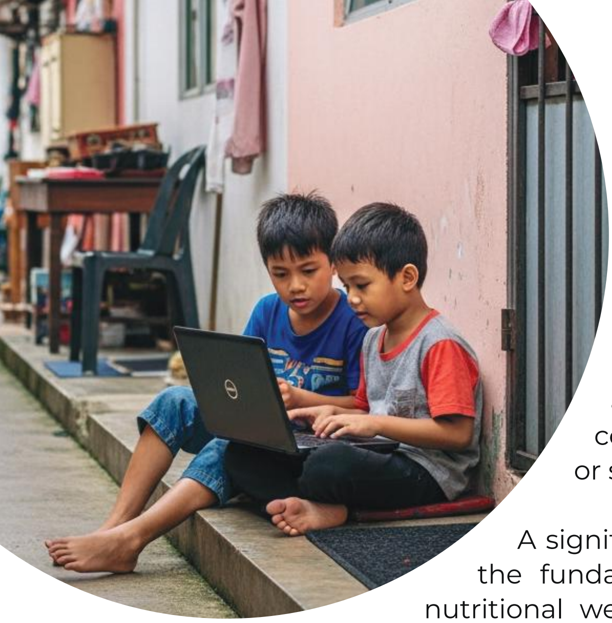
While the Malaysian MPI primarily considers communication devices such as televisions and smartphones, our survey extended beyond these to assess the ownership of other household appliances and furniture that contribute to an improved standard of living. Some of these items, such as gas stoves, are recognized in some countries' MPI frameworks as indicators of living quality.

As shown in Table 7d, a significant majority (87.9%) of respondents own a mobile phone, underscoring its role as a vital tool for communication, access to emergency services, and social connectivity. Mobile phones also serve as an essential means for financial transactions, job searching, and accessing government services, particularly for individuals in lower-income groups who may lack other digital infrastructure. However, while ownership is high, disparities in smartphone functionality and internet access may still impact digital inclusivity.

Assets	Percentage
Mobile phone	87.9
Stove	87.6
Fan	81.8
Internet Access	77.3
Refrigerator	70.1
Television	59.9
Closet	45.3
Washing Machine	39.4
Oven	4.4
Grass cutter	2.2
Sewing machine	1.5

Table 7d Types of household electrical appliances and furniture owned

[12]SRAS provides rental assistance of RM200 for up to 36 months to eligible applicants with monthly household income of less than RM4,556. As of October 2023, the scheme has benefitted a total number of 2,104 tenants of which 1,484 tenants are in Kuching.



Internet access is available to 77.3% of respondents, representing a crucial factor in bridging the digital divide. The internet plays a key role in accessing educational resources, work opportunities, and essential government services. For low-income households, reliable internet connectivity can enhance learning outcomes for children, facilitate online business opportunities, and improve overall socioeconomic mobility. However, despite this relatively high percentage, the affordability, quality, and stability of internet access remain concerns, particularly for households relying on prepaid data plans or shared connections.

A significant majority (87.6%) of respondents own a stove, highlighting the fundamental necessity of cooking facilities for food security and nutritional well-being. Similarly, 81.8% possess a fan, which is essential in providing relief from Malaysia's warm climate and improving indoor comfort. Refrigerators, owned by 70.1% of respondents, enable proper food storage, reducing food wastage and enhancing dietary quality.

Televisions, present in 59.9% of households, serve as both an information source and a means of entertainment, bridging digital access gaps. Meanwhile, only 45.3% have a closet for organized storage, reflecting possible constraints in household space and resources. Washing machines, owned by 39.4% of respondents, significantly reduce the physical burden of laundry, particularly for households with elderly members or working parents.

Lower ownership rates of appliances such as ovens (4.4%), grass cutters (2.2%), and sewing machines (1.5%) suggest limited disposable income for non-essential or income-generating equipment. The low percentage of sewing machines, for instance, may indicate missed opportunities for home-based economic activities that could enhance financial resilience.

The varying levels of ownership across these assets illustrate the disparities in household living conditions, emphasizing the importance of targeted interventions to improve the quality of life for underprivileged communities.

7.3 Transportation ownership

We have discussed in the previous section that transportation ranked second in monthly household expenditure. The capability to transport oneself from one place to the other, while not directly satiating one's bodily needs, serves as the conduit to increase one's accessibility to other needs and means to income. There are countless examples in which we observed that a person is better off simply by owning a personal vehicle - which will enable them to reach where aids are distributed or increase their capacity to collect recyclables to be sold off for money. Conversely, there are those who suffer by not owning or having access to any means of low-cost transportation - such as the need to rely on e-hailing to work or to see a doctor, which adds on to their cost of living, sometimes substantially.

Household means of transportation		Percentage (%)
Ownership of personal vehicle: **64.2%**	Car (one unit)	24.1
	Car (two units)	1.5
	Motorcycle (one unit)	45.9
	Motorcycle (two units)	1.5
	Motorcycle (three units)	0.7
	Bicycle	2.9
	Public bus	3.6

Table 7e Household means of transportation

A majority of 64.2% of the respondents own personal vehicles. The most common vehicle is a motorcycle which is owned by 45.9% of them. Almost a quarter of the sample owns a car (24.1%). A small fraction owns a bicycle (2.9%) or rely on public bus (3.5%) to go from one place to the other. There is also a small percentage that owns more than one car or motorcycle (1.5%) respectively, presumably in larger households.

Housing as a Right: Addressing Poverty Through Affordable and Accessible Homes

by Professor Dr. Abd Mutalip Bin Abdullah

Housing, understood variably by different people, fundamentally serves as a human right and essential public service, transcending its commodified view. This perspective is especially critical in Sarawak, where lack of localized research produces generalized policies ill-suited to regional needs. At the heart of urban poverty lies poor housing, which entrenches a vicious cycle: inadequate sanitation affects health, unstable dwellings disrupt education, and relentless financial pressures deepen economic woes. Without secure, safe housing, families cannot fully participate in the economy, integrate socially, or pursue personal development subsequently perpetuating intergenerational disadvantage.

Housing-related poverty takes deeply entrenched forms in Sarawak, with the shortage of affordable, suitable homes hitting low-income urban dwellers and marginalized groups hardest. This forces many into overcrowded quarters or informal settlements lacking vital infrastructure such as clean water, reliable electricity and waste management. Such environments breed health risks, insecurity, and legal challenges; without formal land titles, evictions loom, eroding physical and mental health while hindering social mobility. Thus, substandard housing not only mirrors poverty but sustains it, confining generations to economic margins and widening the urban-rural gap.

Navigating these challenges reveals both challenges and opportunities. The pivot from public rental models—like the erstwhile Kuching Municipal Council (KMC) schemes—to ownership-focused ones, such as Projek Perumahan Rakyat (RPR), has reshaped communities. Ownership promises stability, yet without rental safety nets, newcomers in bustling towns face settlement hurdles, producing overcrowding that brings health and security crises. Public rentals, by contrast, act as vital bridges, enabling job-seeking migrants to stabilize before climbing the housing ladder.It is thus deemed as important to revive them, alongside regulating the private rental market to safeguard landlords and tenants.

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Recent policies, like the Sarawak Planning Authority's (SPA) early 2025 exemption for local developers from building affordable housing, risk exacerbating inequities. It may spur prime-area developments that bring forth community and income segregation, relegating affordable units to city peripheries, intermediate towns, or rural edges which in turn, intensify the urban-rural divide and overburdening state agencies with sole provision duties. State monopolization of low-cost housing could benefit the market only if it is harnessing strategically located public lands, close to industries, factories, and offices. This would keep B40 and M40 workers economically tethered, averting productivity disruption while breaking the cycle of poverty.

The Sarawak government has initiated several programs designed to improve access to affordable housing. Efforts such as the Rumah Spektra Permata Initiative, Mutiara Mortgage and Credit Sdn Bhd Allocation, and the Housing Deposit Assistance Scheme are vital steps toward addressing the housing shortfall and aiding low-income families. These strides are vital yet insufficient against entrenched issues, demanding a holistic, sustained strategy. Sarawak's development must center housing that is affordable, rental-inclusive, strategically sited, and endowed with space, safety, and services—dismantling poverty's cycle, upholding dignity, fortifying health, and securing economic vitality for all.

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Box 5

Dark and Dry: Life in an Informal Settlement

Life in urban informal settlements presents a myriad of challenges, with one of the most pressing being the lack of access to essential utilities such as water and electricity despite their proximity to city infrastructure. For these communities living among their wealthier neighbours in the city, these daily struggles are a tangible manifestation of relative poverty.

There is a saying that it is expensive to be poor, and this rings especially true for those in informal settlements. Some residents spend up to RM300-400 per month on petrol to fuel generators that are shared between different households, bearing electricity costs that far exceed typical household utility bills. Others pay as much as RM70 for water, often relying on secondary supply from formal utility connections, making even basic necessities a costly burden. For some, the financial and logistical difficulties of obtaining electricity mean forgoing electrical appliances altogether, relying instead on candles or torchlights to navigate the darkness at night, or borrowing neighbour's electricity to charge their phones.

The backgrounds of these residents vary, yet a common thread is migration in search of opportunity. Many moved from neighboring districts such as Simunjan or Saratok to Kuching, hoping for better economic prospects or following their spouses after marriage. Others found themselves in these settlements following significant life changes, such as divorce, which forced them to downgrade to more affordable housing. Their stories reflect the precarious nature of urban poverty, where even the

7.4 Conclusion

The Living Standards domain of the MPI examines six indicators that assess household conditions related to housing, waste management, mobility, and communication. Key findings from the survey of Kuching households highlight significant deprivation in several areas:

1. **Overcrowding** affects 33.6% of households, where more than two members share a bedroom, indicating a strain on living space.
2. **Housing conditions** are poor for 27.7% of respondents, particularly among the elderly, many of whom live in deteriorating homes.
3. **Access to transportation** is limited for 12.4% of households, with no members using public or private transport, likely due to affordability or accessibility issues.
4. **Waste management** shows that 10.9% of respondents lack garbage collection services, a problem particularly noted in informal settlements.
5. **Digital access** is also a challenge, with 21.2% of households lacking essential communication tools like mobile phones, the internet, or televisions.

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Regarding **home ownership**, 53.3% of respondents own their homes, but a significant portion faces challenges with either the quality of their homes or the financial burden of renting. **Toilet facilities** meet basic sanitation requirements, with 70.8% of respondents using pump-flush toilets. Ownership of household assets varies, with high ownership of essential items like mobile phones (87.9%) and stoves (87.6%), while lower rates of ownership were noted for non-essential items such as ovens (4.4%) and sewing machines (1.5%).

In sum, the Living Standards domain findings reflect both progress and persistent inequality. Most households have achieved basic thresholds of hygiene and connectivity, but many still face overcrowding, poor housing conditions, and insufficient access to key resources that enable upward mobility. These findings underscore the need for multidimensional interventions spanning housing upgrades, asset support, waste and transport infrastructure, and digital equity initiatives to improve everyday living conditions and break cycles of urban poverty.

CHAPTER 8

Beneficiaries of SKUP & Emerging Trends

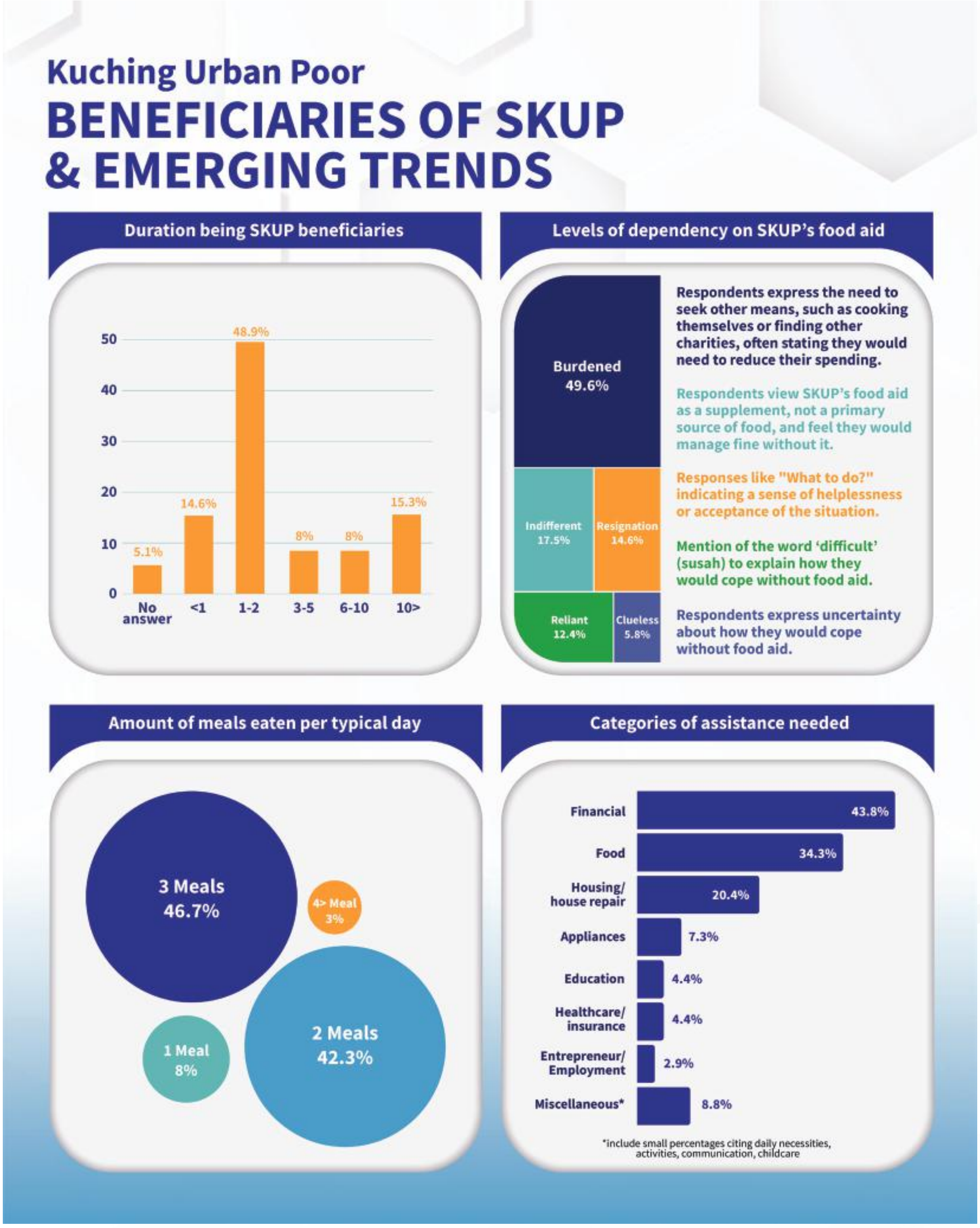
8.1 Duration of and Dependency on SKUP's Food Aid

While we have discussed all of the MPI domains, we now delve deeper into understanding the beneficiaries of SKUP, with the aim of offering a glimpse into the underprivileged community in Kuching. The beneficiaries of SKUP form a diverse group, ranging from those who have been receiving food aid for nearly a decade to the 'newly poor' who have only recently learned about the food aid, particularly through the relatively new soup kitchen in the city center. We examine the duration for which beneficiaries have been receiving aid from SKUP to provide further context.

Stages of dependency	Typical responses	Percentage (%)
Reliant	Mention of the word 'difficult' (susah) to explain how they would cope without food aid.	12.4
Burdened	Respondents express the need to seek other means, such as cooking themselves or finding other charities, often stating they would need to reduce their spending.	49.6
Indifferent	Respondents view SKUP's food aid as a supplement, not a primary source of food, and feel they would manage fine without it.	17.5
Resignation	Responses like "What to do?" indicating a sense of helplessness or acceptance of the situation.	14.6
Clueless	Respondents express uncertainty about how they would cope without food aid.	5.8

Table 8 Levels of dependency on SKUP's food aid

The majority of beneficiaries (48.9%) have been receiving food aid for one to two years, while nearly 15% have been recipients for less than a year (see Infographic F in the next page). The remaining 31.3% have been receiving aid for at least three years, with the longest duration being since SKUP first started distributing food. The last figure suggests that approximately one-third of recipients have been dependent on the NGO's aid for an extended period, which may indicate a reliance on the food assistance to supplement their household's food intake. While timely aid is crucial for those experiencing hardship, prolonged assistance can foster dependency. This concern is further reflected in the responses to an open-ended question we asked: "How would recipients fare if SKUP's food aid were no longer available?" We summarize the responses into different levels of dependency:



Infographic J: SKUP Beneficiaries and Emerging Trends

Nearly half (49.6%) of respondents would feel burdened without food aid, and 12.4% said they would face difficulties. A smaller portion (17.5%) expressed indifference, seeing the aid as supplementary. Meanwhile, 14.6% resigned themselves to the idea of no aid, while 5.8% were unsure of how they would cope.

SKUP's food assistance provides beneficiaries, especially those supporting other family members, with one less worry by ensuring at least one daily meal is covered. For example, a mother with four children at Kudei mentioned how SKUP food packs completed her children's daily meal, especially two attending primary school where they also receive Rancangan Makanan Tambahan (RMT) during schooling days. The couple who solely rely on the husband's occupation as a labourer managed to outsource the task of food preparation for their children to the NGO. Aside from ascertaining their reliance on SKUP, we asked further on how many meals the respondents have in a typical day. Unsurprisingly, majority 46.7 answered three, followed by 42.3 that have two meals each day. 8 percent only have one meal per day, while there are a small percentage (3%) of those who have 4 or more meals per day. It is safe to believe that those who reported only having one meal per day relied fully on SKUP's food pack for their sustenance. It is not known whether these individuals have any meal on Sunday when SKUP do not distribute any food.

8.2 Types of Assistance Needed

In response to an open-ended question about what types of assistance they wish to receive from the government, the most cited need was **financial aid**, reported by **43.8%** of respondents. This reinforces the significance of **income and asset-related deprivations** within the MPI's standard of living domain. Cash transfers, in particular, were appreciated for their flexibility, allowing beneficiaries to address the most pressing and personal household needs.

Food assistance was the second most common request **(34.3%)**, with several respondents specifying a preference for non-perishable food items over cooked meals. This aligned with the earlier findings that showed the largest percentage of monthly budget (45.6%) goes to food spending. This suggests a desire for more autonomy and sustainability in meeting nutritional needs, and may also reflect household arrangements where food preparation is still possible, but food purchasing power is limited.

Requests for **housing support**, either new government housing or repairs to existing homes, accounted for **20.4%** of responses. This aligns with earlier findings in the report concerning the poor physical conditions observed in informal settlements. The need for secure, safe, and dignified shelter remains a key dimension of the Living Standards component of MPI.

Other less frequently mentioned assistance types include appliances (7.3%), education (4.4%), healthcare or insurance (4.4%), and employment or entrepreneurship opportunities (2.9%). Although these percentages are smaller, their relevance to MPI domains should not be understated. Education and employment directly relate to the **Education** and **Work** domains respectively, while access to healthcare reflects both **Living Standards** and potential economic vulnerability due to health shocks.

The Miscellaneous category (8.8%) revealed diverse needs such as daily necessities, communication tools, childcare, and even requests for social or community activities, highlighting how well-being extends beyond material needs to include aspects of social participation and connection.

Interestingly, a small number of respondents expressed c**ontentment with their current situation,** indicating that perceptions of poverty and sufficiency are subjective and influenced by life stage,household size, or prior expectations. This may also explain why requests related to **education, childcare, and employment** were relatively low: many of the respondents were elderly or already retired, as discussed in earlier sections.

8.3 Emerging Trends

A few notable emerging trends have been observed in poverty-stricken areas of Kuching, particularly among the elderly population, who make up the majority of SKUP's beneficiaries. One of the most significant of these is the rise of **Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs)** in residential areas such as KMC Flats and Poh Kwong Park. These NORCs form organically as elderly residents, many of whom live alone or with just one other family member, age in place. A key characteristic of these communities is the high incidence of single- or duo-member households, with the elderly often relying on their immediate neighbors for various forms of support. This arrangement is especially crucial for the very elderly, including nonagenarians, who experience limited mobility and depend heavily on the goodwill of their neighbors for daily living assistance. **The growing reliance on informal social networks** for caregiving, aid distribution, and other support services highlights the increasing role of community-based care, even in the absence of formal systems or dedicated retirement infrastructure.

Another important trend is the **rise of community-led redistribution and informal care networks**, particularly in areas with high levels of poverty. In neighborhoods like Sungai Apong, residents have formed self-organized groups to manage the redistribution of unclaimed government food aid or donations. These informal systems of mutual aid have become essential lifelines for many in the community. Local residents often take on leadership roles or act as points of contact for NGOs and government agencies, helping to manage and distribute aid to those in need. For example, one resident in Sungai Apong has become an unofficial coordinator of aid, ensuring that assistance reaches vulnerable households. In these communities, an ethic of reciprocity prevails, with neighbors helping one another by providing meals, offering transportation, and assisting those who are immobile or unwell. These community-led systems are a testament to the resilience and solidarity that emerge in times of crisis, yet they also reflect the gaps in formal support structures.

The high cost of urban poverty is another pressing issue that has emerged, often encapsulated by the recurring lament, "It's expensive to be poor." This phrase underscores the challenges faced by low-income families in Kuching, particularly in accessing essential services and maintaining a basic standard of living. One key issue is the reliance on private e-hailing transportation due to the inaccessibility or insufficiency of public transport options, which increases the financial burden on already struggling households. Additionally, informal utility connections, such as unregistered water supply connections, have been observed in these areas, signaling both desperation and a lack of access to formal, affordable services. These actions are often driven by the inaccessibility of bureaucratic processes and the inability of residents to afford standard utility fees. The precariousness of low-income life is also evident in the immediate and compounding consequences that arise when aid islost or when residents face difficulties renewing essential documents, such as their MyKad. In these situations, the inability to access or retain basic services can have severe consequences for individuals and families, exacerbating their vulnerability.

Another emerging trend is the growing **intergenerational strain within households**, particularly where elderly residents experience mistreatment by younger family members. There are indications that this strain may stem from the economic pressures faced by household members. In some cases, elderly residents choose to live in solitude rather than stay with children or family members who subject them to mistreatment, while in other cases, they feel trapped in their living arrangements with no viable alternatives. This dynamic illustrates the deep emotional and social toll that poverty can exert on families, especially in the context of intergenerational caregiving and support. The emotional and psychological strain on elderly individuals in these households is compounded by their physical vulnerability, making them even more dependent on external assistance and community networks.

Finally, many households in Kuching **rely on multiple support systems**, often receiving assistance from a patchwork of sources, including state government food baskets, welfare support from the Department of Social Welfare (JKM), and assistance from NGOs or religious institutions such as churches and temples. While this patchwork of aid helps meet the basic needs of residents, it also reveals a systemic issue: no single provider is capable of adequately addressing long-term poverty. This reliance on multiple sources of assistance highlights the shortcomings of the existing welfare system in providing a holistic, sustainable solution to poverty. The complexity of these overlapping support systems suggests the need for a more coordinated approach to aid distribution, ensuring that vulnerable populations are not left to navigate a fragmented and inconsistent network of assistance. Additionally, the multiplicity of aid sources can sometimes be counterproductive for the underprivileged, as it may be perceived as redundant or overlapping, rather than complementary. This increases the risk of beneficiaries losing the assistance they rely on, either due to confusion or mismanagement within the system.

These emerging trends highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of poverty in Kuching, where social, economic, and emotional challenges intersect, often leading to deepening inequalities and vulnerabilities among certain groups, particularly the elderly. Understanding these trends is crucial for crafting policies and interventions that can address the underlying causes of poverty and foster more resilient, supportive communities.

CHAPTER 9

Discussion and Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This research, conducted in collaboration with the Society for Kuching Urban Poor (SKUP), set out to explore the applicability of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) in capturing the nuanced realities of poverty among urban low-income communities in Kuching, Sarawak. By piloting the Malaysian MPI framework and supplementing it with qualitative observations and additional survey items, this study aimed to catalyze the development of a Sarawak-specific MPI while providing granular, locality-focused insights into urban poverty. The findings reveal a complex interplay of deprivations across education, health, living standards, and income domains, underscoring the limitations of traditional income-based measures like the Poverty Line Income (PLI) and highlighting the need for tailored, context-sensitive approaches to poverty alleviation. This chapter synthesizes the key findings, discusses their implications, acknowledges the study's limitations, and offers policy recommendations to inform future poverty measurement and intervention strategies in Sarawak.

9.2 Summarizing Discussion

The exploration of multidimensional poverty among SKUP beneficiaries in Kuching reveals that poverty is not a uniform condition but a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by diverse deprivations and contextual factors. Chapter 2's demographic profile highlighted a predominantly elderly, female, and educationally disadvantaged population, with over 61% of respondents aged 60 and above and more than half living alone or with just one other person. This demographic skew points to emerging social challenges, such as elderly isolation and limited intergenerational support, which traditional income metrics fail to capture. Chapters 3 through 7 further dissected these deprivations across MPI domains, showing significant variation by locality: Greater Satok, Kuching East, and City Centre each facing distinct challenges.

The inclusion of income as a domain in the Malaysian MPI dramatically increased poverty incidence (e.g., from 8% under OPHI's framework to 45.3% overall in Kuching under Malaysia's MPI), as detailed in Chapter 3. This underscores income's pivotal role in urban poverty, with 100% of respondents falling below Sarawak's urban PLI of RM2,860 and 88.3% classified as destitute (Chapter 4). Yet, the study also revealed that income alone does not fully reflect well-being. For instance, access to subsidized healthcare (Chapter 5) and food aid from SKUP (Chapter 8) mitigated some deprivations, allowing households to redirect scarce resources elsewhere. However, qualitative insights such as the high cost of dialysis transportation (Box 3) or reliance on informal water connections (Box 5) exposed gaps that MPI indicators like "distance to health facilities" or "treated water supply" fail to capture.

Education (Chapter 6) showed progress, with near-universal school attendance among children (2.9% deprivation), yet a lingering legacy of low attainment among adults (37.2% with less than 11 years of schooling) limits economic mobility. Living standards (Chapter 7) varied widely, with overcrowding (33.6%) and poor housing conditions (27.7%) prevalent, particularly in informal settlements, despite universal access to basic sanitation. Chapter 8 illuminated emerging trends, such as the rise of Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), community-led aid redistribution, and the high cost of urban poverty, reflecting both resilience and systemic gaps in formal support structures.

These findings affirm the MPI's value in highlighting non-income deprivations but also expose its limitations in the Sarawakian context. The Malaysian MPI's low thresholds (e.g., six years of schooling or mere proximity to health facilities) underestimate poverty's depth, while its uniform application overlooks urban-rural disparities and Sarawak's unique cultural and geographic realities (Chapter 1). The qualitative data enriched this analysis, revealing hardships like food planning (Box 4) and mental health burdens (Chapter 5) that quantitative metrics alone cannot address. Collectively, this study demonstrates that poverty in Kuching is highly localized and individualized, necessitating targeted interventions over blanket policies.

9.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations that limit its generalizability. First, the sample is restricted to SKUP beneficiaries, a niche population of 137 respondents skewed toward elderly, urban, and predominantly Chinese individuals (Chapter 2). This does not reflect Kuching's broader demographic diversity or the experiences of rural Sarawakians, who constitute 48% of the state's population. Second, the reliance on convenience sampling by interviewing only willing food aid recipients may exclude the most marginalized, such as those unaware of or unable to access SKUP's services. Third, as a cross-sectional study, it offers only a snapshot as of early 2025, missing dynamic shifts like SKUP's recent policy to limit aid to non-JKM beneficiaries. Finally, income data proved challenging to quantify accurately due to its inconsistency (e.g., irregular "pocket money" from children) and the complexity of resource-sharing within multi-unit households, potentially skewing deprivation estimates. While these limitations do not invalidate the findings, they highlight the need for broader, longitudinal research to fully represent Sarawak's poverty landscape. These limitations however, are necessary trade-offs to produce granular data beyond the typical compulsion to provide aggregated generalised data particularly in studies related to poverty.

9.4 Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to refine poverty measurement and enhance welfare policies in Sarawak:

9.4.1 On the Development of a Sarawak-Specific MPI

1. **Develop Dual Urban-Rural MPIs:** Create separate MPI frameworks for urban and rural Sarawak to reflect their distinct realities. Urban indicators should emphasize housing quality, transportation access, and digital connectivity (Chapters 7, 8), while rural ones should include land ownership (e.g., Native Customary Rights), building materials, and access to basic infrastructure, including digital connectivity (Chapter 1). The additional indicators for Sarawak can be proposed by seeking consultation with a panel of local experts.
2. **Raise Indicator Thresholds:** Adjust MPI cutoffs beyond minimal standards for e.g., target secondary education (11 years) rather than six years (Chapter 6), and assess health access by affordability and reachability (by factoring in transportation and other related costs such as purchase of medical supplies), not just distance (Chapter 5) to align with development goals and relative poverty concepts.
3. **Incorporate Qualitative Hardships:** Just like our modest attempt in this study, supplement MPI with qualitative indicators like mental health, intergenerational strain, and community resilience (Chapters 8), consulting social science experts to operationalize these (e.g., inspired by global MPIs including asset ownership).

9.4.2 On Policy Design for Welfare

1. **Support NORCs:** Institutionalize support for Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities by implementing subsidized caregiving services, provision of mobility aids, establishment of community centers, and dissemination of practical elderly care guidelines- particularly on managing mobility challenges and age-related health conditions to address social isolation and improve quality of life among the elderly (Chapter 8). Initiatives such as Geriatrik Komuniti (GeKo) pioneered by Klinik Kesihatan Kota Samarahan that provide support tailored specifically to the elderly should be expanded to critical areas with high aging populations.
2. **Address Urban Poverty Costs:** Expand public transportation and regulate informal utility costs (e.g., water, electricity) to ease financial burdens in informal settlements (Chapters 7, 8).
3. **Strengthen Community Networks:** Fund and coordinate community-led aid redistribution efforts, integrating them with formal welfare systems to enhance efficiency (Chapter 8).
4. **Mitigate Intergenerational Strain:** Offer mediation services and housing support to reduce elderly mistreatment and promote cohabitation where feasible (Chapter 8).
5. **Streamline Multiple Support Systems:** Establish a unified aid coordination framework that consolidates contributions from government agencies, NGOs, religious bodies, and private sector CSR initiatives to ensure sustained support for schemes such as food distribution (e.g., SKUP). Strengthen outreach through community leaders and local councillors to proactively identify and assist vulnerable individuals, especially those unable to register themselves at centralised aid centres like CSSCs (Chapters 4, 8).
6. **Enhance Livelihood Options:** Provide capital, equipment, and training (e.g., for baking, sewing) tailored to the elderly and disabled, building on SKUP's initiatives to foster self-reliance (Chapters 4, 8).

9.5 Conclusion

This study underscores the power of the MPI to illuminate poverty's multidimensional nature, revealing deprivations in Kuching that income-based measures obscure. From elderly isolation and housing struggles to the resilience of community networks, the findings highlight the need for localized, deprivation-specific interventions. While limited to SKUP beneficiaries, this pilot offers a foundation for a Sarawak-specific MPI that can better reflect the state's diverse urban and rural contexts. By raising indicator thresholds, integrating qualitative insights, and tailoring policies to emerging trends, Sarawak can move beyond alleviating bare minimum needs toward fostering sustainable well-being and inclusivity, aligning with its PCDS 2030 vision. Future research should expand this scope to rural areas and longitudinal trends, ensuring a comprehensive approach to eradicating poverty across the state.

Navigating Diversity: Why Contextual MPIs Are Essential for Eradicating Poverty in Sarawak

by Associate Professor Dr. Wong Swee

It is a commendable effort by the Sarawak Development Institute (SDI) to carry out a Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) study among the urban poor, while acknowledging and concluding the limitations of standardized measurements to assess diverse local realities. However, the question remains: even with a Sarawak-specific MPI developed based on a study carried out in Kuching, can the instrument ensure attainment of SDG1: No Poverty, SDG2: Zero Hunger, SDG3: Good Health and Wellbeing, and SDG10: Reduced Inequalities, to leave no one behind in the development agenda? What are the empirical and methodological issues when attempts were made by the state (Sarawak) or even our country (Malaysia) to produce a common MPI for policy solutions? Is a one-size-fits-all approach applicable under one political system in the state or in Malaysia? If no, what are the limitations? This article tries to address the above questions based on the empirical and practical experience of the Multidimensional Poverty Study carried out among the Penan communities in Sarawak.

Though recommendations were made for separate MPI frameworks being developed to capture unique poverty challenges and needs between rural and urban Sarawak, the respective rural and urban MPIs alone might not adequately or sufficiently embrace the diversity in different localities with different geographical, cultural, and natural conditions. Sarawak has a vast geographical area with more than 23 ethnic groups and its rich cultural and natural diversity. This vast diversity might need contextual MPIs for different localities and different cultural backgrounds in order to accurately capture different poverty dimensions faced by different groups of the population, which, by nature, is complex and experiential. Thus, advocating for individual- or context-specific solutions to address multidimensional deprivations is crucial for more effective and relevant policy advocacy and solutions.

On the other hand, researchers and policy advocates must acknowledge that different segments of communities might have very different meanings for similar terms or terminology used. In this context, immersive research through active participation and observation might be more appropriate to apply in order to provide richer and more nuanced insights rather than conventional survey-driven studies with passive data collection methods for MPI studies. There is no single yardstick that could appropriately and accurately capture contextual definitions of the underpinning concepts and issues used in multidimensional poverty among different segments of the social fabric in Sarawak unless researchers are willing to use reflexivity to minimize preconceptions when dealing with either familiar or unfamiliar communities. In the case of rural Penan communities, for instance, the terms "work," "toilet," "savings," and "wealth" have very unique definitions and interpretations than what other rural folks or urbanites have, though all are living in Sarawak. Thus, adopting correct terms in the survey instruments is deemed highly crucial for meaningful findings for social policy interventions.

In summary, no single rural or urban Sarawak-specific MPI can universally be used to capture experiential and context-specific conditions and the multidimensional nature of MPI. To ensure undistorted decisions made based on accurate measurements to provide timely, target-specific poverty eradication solutions for policymakers to ensure attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals as advocated in PCDS 2030, one must acknowledge that a one-size(MPI)-fits-all approach is not applicable even if we are under a similar political system or living in the same state within the same nationality.

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