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FROM PROFILING TO ACTION: STRATEGIC PATHWAYS FOR ADDRESSING URBAN HARDCORE POVERTY IN KUALA LUMPUR


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Abstract:

Despite sustained national economic growth and a plethora of social safety nets, hardcore urban poverty remains an entrenched challenge in Malaysia's metropolitan landscapes. This study critically examines the dynamics of urban deprivation in Kuala Lumpur using primary profiling data collected between 2024 and 2025, focusing on 194 households

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registered in the national eKasih system across the Batu, Titiwangsa, and Bandar Tun Razak constituencies. The research was executed through strategic collaboration with the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Federal Territories, and Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL). Moving beyond mere descriptive analysis, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between empirical data and actionable policy pathways. Our findings reveal a significant paradox: while many impoverished households possess latent economic productivity, their upward mobility is stifled by acute livelihood pressures, mismatched intervention designs, and systemic governance gaps. To address these challenges, the study proposes six evidence-based strategic interventions, ranging from differentiated empowerment models and integrated data governance to community-led implementation and formalized exit strategies. Ultimately, this research offers a robust, policy-oriented framework specifically tailored to navigate the complexities of poverty within high-density metropolitan environments.

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Keyword:

E-Kasih, Evidence-Based Governance, Policy Pathway, Urban Hardcore Poverty



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Introduction

The trajectory of global economic development and rapid urbanization has evolved, marking a pronounced shift in the concentration of poverty from predominantly rural areas to increasingly dense urban environments (Almulhim, 2026; Oyeleye & Bigon, 2026). In the Malaysian context, urban poverty has become a persistent structural issue. Recent data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2024) shows that while national poverty rates are stabilizing, the cost-of-living crisis in urban centers remains a pressing concern. The Absolute Poverty Line Income (PLI) for Kuala Lumpur is significantly higher than the national average, with many households falling into the 'urban poor' category despite having employment, primarily due to the high costs of transportation, housing and food (Khazanah Research Institute, 2023). Consequently, the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (KL) embodies a profound economic glitch. As the nation's principal engine of growth, Kuala Lumpur exhibits robust economic dynamism; yet this prosperity coexists with persistent, entrenched pockets of chronic poverty.

Table 1: Incidence of Absolute and Hardcore Poverty in Kuala Lumpur, 1984–2022

Year	Absolute Poverty (%)	Hardcore Poverty (%)
1984	4.9	1.4
1987	5.2	1
1989	3.8	0.5
1992	1.7	0.3
1995	0.5	0
1997	0.1	0.1
1999	2.3	0
2002	0.5	0
2004	1.5	0.2
2007	1.5	0.1
2009	0.8	0.1
2012	0.1	0.1
2014	0	0
2016	0.2	0
2019	0.4	0
2022	1.4	0

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 2024

The data in Table 1 highlights a clear long-term decline in both absolute poverty and hardcore poverty from the mid-1980s to the 2010s. This scenario underscores the critical importance of conducting systematic poverty profiling to ensure that interventions are data-driven and responsive to shifting economic landscapes. By identifying specific demographics and localized trends, profiling allows policymakers to move beyond general assistance and instead implement targeted social safety nets that address the root causes of vulnerability, as seen in the slight resurgence of absolute poverty in 2022. This precision-based approach is essential for maintaining the city's zero hardcore poverty status and for effectively distributing resources to the urban poor who are most susceptible to inflation and rising living costs.

Literature Review

Urban Hardcore Poverty in the Metropolitan Context

In relation to the urban poverty issue, it is structurally unique and exacerbated by complex pressures, including the rapid escalation of living costs (Chen. Et al., 2026; Kaiser et al., 2024), the pervasive instability of informal labor markets, critical housing insecurity in low-cost housing schemes and various forms of socio-spatial exclusion (UN-Habitat, 2020; World Bank, 2023). These interconnected determinants contribute to a form of poverty that is experientially distinct from its rural counterpart, necessitating a substantially different and comprehensive policy that delves deeper than traditional measures of income deficits.

This study is underpinned by the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), which posits that poverty is not merely a lack of income but a deprivation of 'capabilities', the freedom to achieve the life one values. From this lens, the study moves beyond traditional income metrics to explore why productive households cannot translate their labor into economic escape. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the 'Policy Pathway' and 'Evidence-based Governance,' specifically

analyzing the e-Kasih database at a granular parliamentary level (Batu, Titawangsa, and Bandar Tun Razak) to identify structural barriers that standardized policies often overlook.

This study synthesizes a comprehensive micro-level profiling effort involving registered hardcore poor households within the national eKasih system, the database for national poverty developed by the Malaysian government, across three pivotal Kuala Lumpur parliamentary constituencies: (i) Batu; (ii) Titawangsa; and (iii) Bandar Tun Razak. The central focus of this study moves beyond the reiteration of descriptive statistics to the analytical translation of empirical evidence into strategic policy orientation. Therefore, this study aims to achieve three core objectives: (i) to meticulously chart the economic capacity of these households by categorizing them into productive and non-productive statuses; (ii) to critically identify the structural and design barriers that restrict productive households from engaging with existing income empowerment programs; and (iii) to propose an evidence-based, differentiated policy framework for sustainable poverty. By rigorously linking granular household data to prescriptive policy recommendations, this study makes a substantial contribution to the urban poverty literature and promotes a more informed, knowledgeable and effective governance framework for handling pervasive deprivation within a large metropolitan context.

e-Kasih

The establishment of e-Kasih in 2007 serves as the primary National Poverty Data Bank in Malaysia. The system is designed to centralize and coordinate the distribution of aid through a unified registry. Managed by the Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU) under the Malaysian Prime Minister's Department, e-Kasih is essential for targeting accuracy, ensuring that government interventions reach the intended 'hardcore poor' and 'poor' categories based on the Poverty Line Income (PLI).

Nonetheless, the effectiveness of e-Kasih as a governance tool depends on the integrity and currency of its data. In Kuala Lumpur, the issue of high residential mobility and informal economic activities often leads to exclusion errors, whereby the eligible households are missed or data becomes obsolete. Based on those issues, micro-level profiling as conducted in this study is a crucial evaluative process, which has served as a verification layer for the national database, enabling a more nuanced understanding of household dynamics that a centralized digital registry might not capture. Therefore, by rigorously profiling the recipients from the e-kasih system, policymakers can transition from passive aid distribution to active, data-driven empowerment.

Policy Pathway and Evidence-based Governance

Evidence-based governance is an extremely pivotal framework for policy decision-making. It must be grounded through rigorous empirical data, rather than just ideological or generalized assumptions. In the context of poverty, this requires a policy pathway approach that recognizes the erratic journey households undertake as they escape deprivation.

Notwithstanding extensive national investments and a persistent dedication to poverty eradication efforts, existing policy responses in Malaysia often default to standardized and one-size-fits-all approaches. This fundamental mechanism has proven insufficient in tackling the multifaceted and vast diversity inherent in deep urban poverty (Sen, 1999; Alkire & Foster, 2011). Plausibly, existing interventions often fail to account for the crucial disparities in

livelihood potential, vulnerability profiles and immediate economic impediments experienced by diverse segments of the low-income urban households. Addressing these shortcomings, extensive profiling exercises have emerged as essential ground research tools, designed to identify the precise socio-economic characteristics and intrinsic livelihood potential of individual hardcore poor households. On the contrary, the descriptive generation of profiles alone is insufficient; its true value is only realized when empirical findings are systematically analyzed and strategically translated into evidence-based governance, where data is converted into concrete, actionable and targeted policy pathways.

Methodology

Research Design and Procedure

Methodologically, this study adopts a descriptive-analytical research design to evaluate the economic potential of urban hardcore poor households. The methodology is structured into a systematic three-step procedure to ensure data integrity and evidence-based results:

Step procedure 1: Case Selection and Sampling. A total of 194 households were purposively sampled from the national e-Kasih database, focusing on three parliamentary constituencies in Kuala Lumpur: (i) Batu, (ii) Titiwangsa, and (iii) Bandar Tun Razak.

Step procedure 2: Data Collection and Field Assessment. Primary data was gathered between 2024 and 2025 through structured field assessments. This involved physical interviews using the Borang Miskin Tegar (BMT), conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Economy, the Federal Territories Department and Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL).

Step procedure 3: Categorization and Analysis. Households were evaluated based on the Capability Approach. Data was cleaned and categorized into 'productive' and 'non-productive' statuses based on age, health, and willingness to work, followed by a barrier analysis for those unable to participate in existing programs.

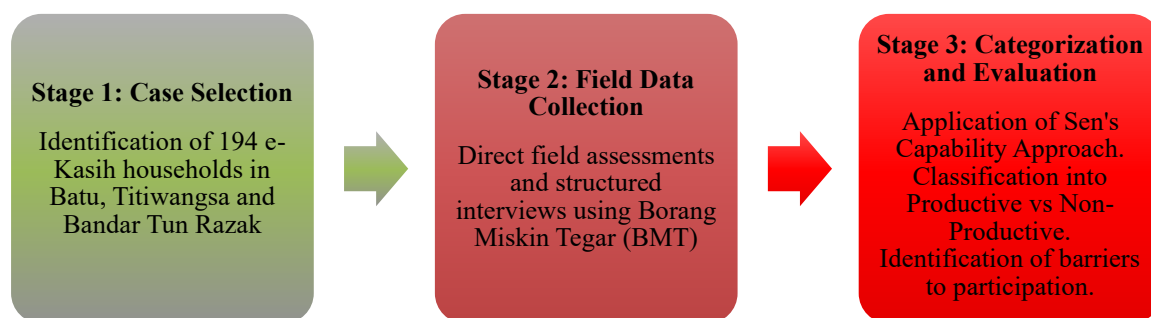


Figure 1. Methodological Framework and Data Collection Procedure.

Note: This figure illustrates the systematic three-stage process used to translate raw e-Kasih data into evidence-based policy pathways.

Ethical Compliance

To maintain confidentiality and strictly comply with ethical research standards, all individuals and the specific institutional participants involved in the data collection process are disclosed

anonymously. This study relies on primary, comprehensive profiling data gathered between 2024 and 2025. The sample consists of 194 households in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur's three parliamentary constituencies that are officially registered under the national eKasih database. Data collection was undertaken through structured field assessments and collaborative efforts with key public sector agencies operating under the Ministry of Economy, the Federal Territories Department and Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL). To maintain confidentiality and strictly comply with ethical research standards, all individuals and the specific institutional participants involved in the data collection process are disclosed anonymously. The hands-on nature of the study, which necessitates direct interaction with recipients in their urban environments, is essential for verifying the information gathered and is graphically represented in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Field Documentation of the Profiling Process with Hardcore Poor Households

Note: The KIR image cannot be displayed to maintain confidentiality.

Household Assessment and Categorization

Households were thoroughly evaluated based on a range of socio-demographic characteristics, including current employment status, general health condition, age of the head of household, dependency ratio, and most critically, their willingness and capacity to participate in income-generating activities. Based on these comprehensive criteria, households were systematically categorized into three distinct groups: productive, non-productive and unprofiled. Out of the total sample, 153 households were successfully profiled. In comparison, a significant proportion of 41 households (21.1%) could not be fully profiled due to incomplete information captured in the household assessment forms or also known as *Borang Miskin Tegar* (BMT form). This relatively high incidence of incomplete profiling immediately highlights a structural challenge in urban data collection and effective inter-agency coordination.

Economic Potential of the Hardcore Poor

Analysis of the categorization reveals that 115 households (59.3%) were classified as productive, indicating the confirmed presence of working-age members with tangible income-generating capacity. Conversely, 38 households (19.6%) were distinctly classified as non-productive, primarily due to severe health limitations or advanced age. These findings underscore the highly heterogeneous nature of urban hardcore poverty and fundamentally

challenge the traditional perception that hardcore poverty is synonymous with total economic inactivity. The following table summarizes the distribution of hardcore poor households by parliamentary constituency and productivity status.

Table 1: Distribution of Hardcore Poor Households by Parliamentary Constituency

Parliamentary Constituency	Total eKasih Households	Productive	Non-Productive	Unprofiled
Batu	103	59	16	28
Bandar Tun Razak	55	28	17	10
Titiwangsa	36	28	5	3
Total	194	115	38	41

Empirical Findings and Barriers to Participation

Underutilization Productive Capacity

The profiling exercise confirmed that 115 households (59.3%) possess underlying productive potential, a capacity that remains largely underutilized despite their status. The engagement with existing income-generating interventions was found to be remarkably limited. Only 24 households (20.9%) were found to be suitable and went on to obtain support with productive or equipment assistance. The low rate of participation was predominantly driven by complex livelihood constraints, expressed lack of interest, or a severe mismatch between the intervention design and the actual household needs, which strongly reflects structural hurdles rather than a simple refusal to work. Table 2 outlines the status of productive hardcore poor households regarding intervention participation.

Table 2: Status of Productive Hardcore Poor Households and Barriers to Participation in Income Empowerment Interventions

Category	Considered (Received Equipment)	Livelihood Constraints	Not Interested	Outside Intervention Scope
Total Productive Households (115)	24	36	43	12

Key Constraints Hindering Intervention Uptake

Thirty-six (36) households (31.3%) were completely unable to engage in economic programs due to immediate and severe livelihood pressures, especially the necessity to prioritize daily subsistence and immediate income generation over participation in long-term skill-building programs. Additionally, 43 households or families (37.4%) expressed a clear lack of interest, which is probably due to a substantial program misalignment with their actual household preferences, a legitimate risk aversion to new programs and schemes, or previous bad experiences with inefficient aid programs, as well as ineffective assistance schemes. Twelve (12) more households (10.4%) were excluded because the aid demanded entirely fell outside

the scope of their existing skills, potential markets or was unrelated to their present economic activities. These results are in line with existing literature highlighting that income poverty is frequently intertwined with severe time poverty, high vulnerability, and critical behavioral constraints, particularly within fluid urban settings (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011; Ravallion, 2016). Consequently, conventional asset-based assistance, when delivered rigidly or without robust livelihood sensitivity, is structurally predisposed to failing to reach and benefit its intended beneficiaries.

Differentiated Policy Needs for Productive and Non-Productive Households

The empirical evidence highlights the inherent heterogeneity of urban hardcore poverty, necessitating a dramatic shift towards highly differentiated policy mechanisms. Productive households require flexible, strategically phased income empowerment interventions that are fundamentally designed to accommodate urban livelihood realities, including irregular employment patterns and immediate subsistence pressures. On the other hand, non-productive households require sustained, long-term social protection, resilient healthcare support, and a community-based care system, rather than productivity-oriented or short-term economic programs.

According to the profiling results, the 38 households categorized as non-productive (31 households) had health-related constraints. At the same time, the main and only limitation for the others was senior age. Many members of the sizable health-related group stated that they were genuinely unable to engage in any economic activity because of severe physical limits or the constraints of a chronic illness. These results firmly support the claim that a uniform strategy to economic empowerment is completely unsuitable and detrimental for all hardcore impoverished demographic segments (OECD, 2018). Rather, non-productive households need long-term welfare procedures, extensive healthcare support, and ongoing social protection. In addition to further marginalizing disadvantaged people, failing to distinguish policy tools properly runs the risk of guaranteeing the wasteful and inefficient use of limited public resources.

Strategic Policy Recommendations

Six highly connected and strategic policy proposals are presented to significantly enhance the efficacy, accuracy, and equity of urban poverty interventions in Kuala Lumpur. These recommendations are directly based on the empirical evidence produced by this thorough profile study. The first critical recommendation is to establish a decisive policy pivot from the current blanket interventions and toward a mechanism that can clearly and methodically implement differentiated and targeted responses. This necessitates formally distinguishing between the high-potential productive households and the constraint-limited non-productive households. Furthermore, this process should involve implementing geographically sensitive interventions that accurately reflect the unique, constituency-specific poverty drivers identified in Batu, Titiwangsa, and Bandar Tun Razak, ensuring that resources are precision-matched to the distinct needs and latent potential of each household type.

The second and third recommendations focus on redesigning the support mechanisms for productive households. The focus on policy needs to be carefully shifted from prolonged, potentially distorting financial aid towards phased, market-oriented income empowerment initiatives. This transition requires the creation of support models that strategically incorporate

short-term income stabilization components, a crucial step to address the immediate livelihood pressures that currently prevent participation, followed by tailored skill-building and customized equipment assistance meticulously aligned with contemporary urban market demands. In addition, intervention designs need to be considerably more adaptable to accommodate the irregular employment patterns and time constraints typically of urban livelihoods. This flexibility includes exploring adaptable participation models, such as micro-training modules, and actively addressing non-economic barriers by providing subsidies for essential services like childcare or transportation, thereby enabling productive members, particularly mothers, to participate in human capital development programs.

The fourth recommendation addresses the systemic weakness in managing poverty data. Given the substantial presence of unprofiled households (21.1%), effective data governance must be strengthened through robust inter-agency integration. This requires the implementation of dynamic profile systems that appropriately capture the high residential mobility and fluid character of urban poor livelihoods, as well as frequent and thorough data verification. To increase the dependability and usability of poverty data, welfare agencies, local authorities like DBKL, and statutory bodies like Zakat institutions must coordinate more effectively and share data seamlessly. This will greatly reduce exclusion errors and improve targeting accuracy.

The final two recommendations focus on delivery mechanisms and long-term sustainability. Fifth, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) must be formally institutionalized as primary delivery and monitoring partners. Local organizations and community actors possess crucial, tacit contextual knowledge that is invaluable for effective policy execution. Leveraging this local insight can dramatically improve program uptake, foster greater trust among beneficiaries, and ensure much more accurate and adaptive monitoring effectiveness on the ground (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Lastly, every program design must include explicit and organized escape pathways from extreme poverty from the beginning. This necessitates the establishment of clear, quantifiable markers, such as reaching steady income thresholds, proving a specific decrease in reliance on government aid, and maintaining formal employment involvement. To guarantee long-term policy responsibility and enable beneficiaries to make durable transitions out of poverty, such clear and organized frameworks are crucial.

Strategic Pathways Forward for Urban Hardcore Poverty

Drawing upon the combined weight of the empirical findings and the necessity for the policy recommendations outlined previously, this study proposes several strategic pathways essential to fundamentally enhance the impact and sustainability of urban hardcore poverty interventions in Kuala Lumpur. The first critical pathway involves the mandatory adaptation and refinement of economic empowerment models. Specifically, targeted and highly flexible economic empowerment programs must be designed to genuinely accommodate the complex and often precarious livelihood realities of productive households. This operational flexibility is paramount, requiring the adoption of phased participation models, where involvement in training or enterprise development is gradually introduced, while simultaneously offering necessary short-term income stabilization support. In order to ease the immediate subsistence pressures that currently force households to forgo long-term training in favor of immediate, low-wage jobs, this support serves as a financial bridge. Additionally, aid must be highly tailored and precisely matched with particular family capabilities, current economic activity, and realistic market preferences, going beyond simple asset transfers.

The second pathway requires that a differentiated set of policy instruments be fully institutionalized within the government's poverty eradication apparatus to create a formal and clear operational separation between productive and non-productive households. This institutional commitment ensures that resources are allocated with precision: while the former critically requires structured and strategic pathways toward long-term income sustainability and self-reliance, the latter necessitates a robust guarantee of long-term social protection, continuous healthcare-oriented interventions, and comprehensive welfare support to manage their structural limitations related to age or chronic health issues. This formal institutionalization prevents the misallocation of resources that arises when economic empowerment programs are applied inappropriately to those who structurally cannot participate.

The third strategic pathway demands that community-based delivery mechanisms must be significantly reinforced throughout the metropolitan region and all three parliamentary constituencies. Utilizing the priceless contextual knowledge that local organizations and community leaders possess is not only complementary but fundamental to enhancing the efficacy of policies. This local embeddedness can significantly enhance program relevance and design, ensure higher rates of program uptake by fostering essential trust, and, crucially, establish much more accurate and adaptive monitoring effectiveness on the ground, a factor proven to increase program success (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Establishing formal partnerships with these local actors bridges the gap between centralized policy design and the diverse realities of implementation in high-density urban settings.

Finally, the fourth and most crucial strategic pathway for long-term accountability is that clear, defined exit strategies from hardcore poverty must be permanently embedded within every program's design. This necessitates the establishment of transparent exit criteria, focusing on quantifiable results, such as obtaining a steady income that is continuously over a predetermined threshold, proving a persistent decrease in dependency on government aid, and attaining ongoing formal employment involvement. The development of such structured frameworks is not only essential to ensure policy accountability and the wise use of public funds, but it also actively guides households toward sustainable independence, marking a genuine and permanent transition out of the hardcore poverty classification. These four pathways, when integrated, create a robust and adaptive system designed for the complex challenges of poverty in vibrant, populated areas and metropolitan settings.

Conclusion

Urban hardcore poverty in Kuala Lumpur is not a monolithic issue; it primarily reflects deep-seated economic vulnerability and structural constraints rather than universal incapacity. The 2024–2025 profiling exercise across the three constituencies makes it abundantly evident that while most hardcore poor households possess viable productive potential, they are profoundly constrained by structural barriers, inappropriate intervention designs, and governance constraints. Addressing these systemic challenges urgently requires a decisive shift to address these systemic issues

By integrating targeted income empowerment, strengthened data governance, robust community-based delivery, and structured exit strategies, policymakers have the potential to significantly enhance the effectiveness, precision, and sustainability of urban hardcore poverty alleviation efforts. This study offers policy-relevant insights that apply not only to metropolitan

contexts within Malaysia but also to similar rapidly urbanizing areas worldwide. Ultimately, the successful eradication of urban hardcore poverty necessitates policies that accurately reflect the complex lived realities of the urban poor, supported by dynamic and robust data governance and highly adaptive implementation frameworks.

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