



PLANNING MALAYSIA:
Journal of the Malaysian Institute of Planners
VOLUME 24 ISSUE 2 (2026), Page 138 – 152

PLANNING FOR URBAN POVERTY TRANSFORMATION: LIVELIHOOD TYPOLOGIES AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This study examines differentiated livelihood transformation pathways among urban poor households through a longitudinal analysis based on participants of project situated in an urban setting in the northern part of Malaysia. Using qualitative document analysis and income trajectory monitoring across three programme phases, households were classified based on patterns of livelihood strategies, programme engagement and adaptive capacity. Findings reveal four livelihood typologies: Progressive–Resilient, Fluctuating–Vulnerable, Stagnant–Dependent, and Women-Led Entrepreneurial households. These typologies are synthesised into a four-quadrant conceptual framework that integrates engagement intensity and adaptation capacity. The study advances empirical understanding of urban poverty dynamics and highlights the need for differentiated gender-sensitive and resilience-oriented policy interventions for sustainable urban poor community-based transformation.

Keywords: Urban Poverty, Livelihood typology, Community empowerment, Household adaptive capacity, sustainable community

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INTRODUCTION

Urban poverty is a complex challenge in rapidly urbanising Malaysia, where socio-economic shifts have concentrated low-income households in dense settlements. Despite improved infrastructure, families face income instability, limited opportunities, and social exclusion (Ismail et al., 2025). Traditional analyses often treat households as homogeneous, measured only by static income thresholds, overlooking diverse livelihood strategies and resilience (Kakwani & Son, 2025).

The MASA@Sungai Nibong project, a community-based initiative in Northern Malaysia, integrates lifelong learning with longitudinal household monitoring (Mokhtar et al., 2025). This study addresses the gap by applying a livelihood typology approach (Pham et al., 2021) to four years of data, constructing a differentiated framework of urban poor household trajectories for targeted, resilience-oriented planning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban Poverty

Urban poverty is widely recognised as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by economic, social and spatial dynamics. Rapid urbanisation may generate employment and infrastructure development, but it also intensifies inequalities through rising living costs, housing congestion and unequal access to public services. (Avtar et al., 2025; Sakketa, 2025). As a result, poverty tends to concentrate within specific urban localities such as low-cost housing areas and marginal neighbourhoods, where residents remain vulnerable despite proximity to economic centres (Kasula et al., 2026). Household dynamics play a critical role in determining how urban poor families navigate these structural constraints. Studies show that households frequently adopt diversified livelihood strategies such as informal employment, gig work and small-scale entrepreneurship to manage economic uncertainty (Hossain, 2024). In many cases, gender roles within households have also evolved, with women increasingly contributing as income earners while simultaneously managing domestic responsibilities.

Community Resilience

Community resilience refers to the ability of households and communities to absorb shocks, adapt to socio-economic pressures and reorganise livelihood strategies in changing urban conditions (Do et al., 2025; Kapucu et al., 2024). Within the context of poverty governance, resilience is not only reflected in income improvement but also in the ability of households to maintain economic stability and long-term development orientation.

Livelihood Typology

Livelihood typology analysis has emerged as an important approach for understanding the diversity of livelihood strategies among poor households by classifying families based on behavioural patterns, adaptation strategies and economic trajectories rather than income levels alone (Evans et al., 2025). This approach allows researchers and policymakers to identify differentiated livelihood pathways and design more targeted policy responses.

Monitoring and Poverty Governance

Recent studies emphasise the importance of systematic monitoring and data-driven decision-making in poverty alleviation programmes. Continuous monitoring allows institutions to detect stagnation or regression in household economic performance and to adjust intervention strategies accordingly (Esposito, 2025). In Malaysia, empowerment initiatives targeting asnaf and low-income communities have increasingly incorporated structured monitoring frameworks to track household progress and ensure sustainable livelihood transformation (Ismail et al., 2025).

Research Gap and Contribution

Although urban poverty has been extensively studied, many existing studies continue to treat poor households as a homogeneous group, often categorised broadly under the B40 classification. Such approaches may overlook variations in livelihood strategies, adaptive capacity and programme engagement among households. Understanding these differences is essential for designing more effective poverty interventions. Furthermore, understanding these variations requires a deeper look into the underlying values of a community; for instance, Islamic values, particularly the concepts of Khalifah (stewardship) and Mizan (balance), provide a robust ethical foundation for urban communities to foster environmental responsibility and strengthen social resilience in the face of climate change (Al-Jayyousi et al., 2023). This study contributes to the literature by developing a longitudinal livelihood typology derived from four years of household monitoring within a community-based intervention programme. By integrating income trajectories, programme engagement and adaptive capacity, the study offers a differentiated analytical framework for understanding urban poverty transformation in Malaysia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Unit of Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative research design through document analysis of Projek MASA@Sungai Nibong, a community-based socio-economic empowerment initiative. The household is established as the primary unit of

analysis to capture the collective livelihood strategies of urban poor families. While the dataset includes information on 17 Household Heads (KIR) and 9 spouses (PKIR), the analysis evaluates socio-economic performance and adaptive capacity at the family level, allowing a more holistic understanding of how households navigate economic constraints. The core community profile is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile information of Projek MASA@Sungai Nibong community.

Metric	Details
Total Households (n)	17 households
Total Individual	26 (17 KIR & 9 PKIR)
Monitoring Period	Longitudinal Tracking (4 years / 3 phases)
Data Integrity	No missing data; verified via monthly monitoring reports

Data Quality and Definitions

To ensure analytical consistency, several operational definitions were applied. Zero Income refers to households without active earners due to chronic illness or total disability. Income Volatility denotes unstable cash flow resulting from reliance on informal or gig-based employment. Income Stagnation describes household income that remains static or grows less than 5% across monitoring phases despite continuous institutional support.

Data Triangulation and Ethics

In accordance with ethical research practices, all personal data has been strictly anonymised through the use of codes such as KIR1 and PKIR1 to ensure respondent confidentiality. The validity of the findings is reinforced through a triangulation process involving three primary sources as illustrated in Figure 1. These sources consist of documented income records for periodic tracking, programmed documentation regarding participation continuity, and participatory observations by the Liaison Officer, also known as the Penghulu. These observational insights were cross-validated against predefined indicators to minimise potential observer bias and ensure an objective recording of the participants' engagement.

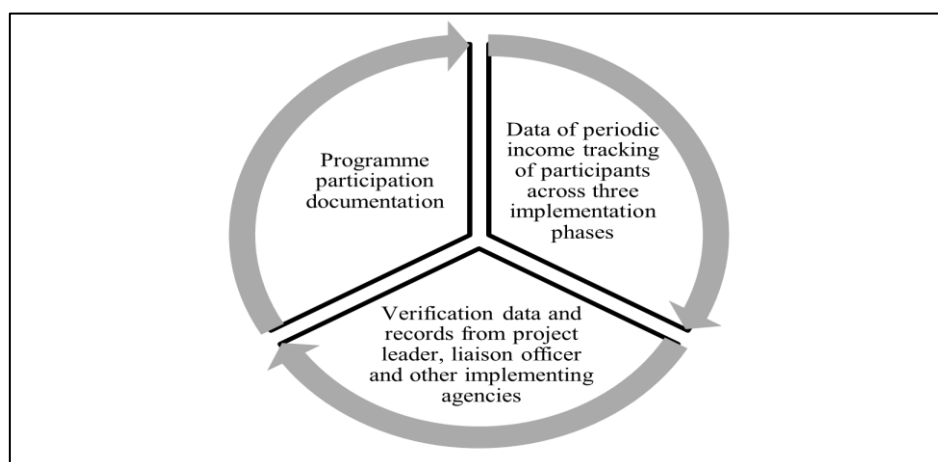


Figure 1: Triangulation process of the articles
 Source: Author's Illustration (2025)

Data Analysis: Descriptive and Typological Classification

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, descriptive analysis examined household income patterns, stability trends and growth trajectories across the three implementation phases. Second, a typological classification was constructed to group households based on shared economic behaviour, gender-based livelihood roles particularly the participation of spouses (PKIR), and levels of programme engagement. This approach allows urban poor households to be analysed as diverse livelihood units with varying adaptive capacities, rather than as a homogenous population.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from document analysis of participants' income records under the project from December 2020 to December 2024. Descriptive and comparative analysis was applied to examine income trends, household transformation patterns and economic trajectories. Based on these observations, several typological patterns of urban poor households are identified and discussed in relation to the effectiveness of community-based interventions and urban poverty planning.

Longitudinal Income Patterns and Household Economic Trajectories

The document analysis indicates that household income trajectories among project participants vary significantly over time. Several participants demonstrated consistent income growth, reflecting successful adaptation to stable employment or micro-enterprise activities. For example, KIR8, KIR11 and KIR15 maintained income stability above RM1,200 across multiple monitoring

phases, indicating successful economic anchoring within the urban environment. In particular, the household of KIR8, with additional income contribution from spouse PKIR8, achieved an estimated combined monthly income of approximately RM3,500, illustrating a clear case of sustained economic improvement.

Moderate income growth was also observed among households engaged in micro-businesses or wage employment. Participants such as PKIR2, KIR3, PKIR6, KIR10, KIR12 and PKIR15 recorded gradual income increases through small-scale business activities, while others including PKIR1, KIR8, PKIR8, KIR11, KIR13, PKIR14, PKIR15 and KIR16 improved their income through paid employment. In both cases, livelihood improvements were closely linked to locality-based opportunities such as working as factory security guards, teaching at nearby preschools and selling food to factory workers. This highlights the important role of spatial proximity to employment opportunities in supporting incremental economic progress among urban poor households. However, several participants experienced fluctuating income due to health challenges and family transitions. PKIR2 continued supporting the household through her microbusiness while her husband KIR2 faced accident-related health complications. KIR4 experienced economic instability following the loss of a spouse, while KIR5 and KIR6 encountered work limitations due to spinal and nerve-related conditions. Nevertheless, spousal cooperation remained an important coping mechanism, as illustrated by KIR6, who assisted in his wife's enterprise (PKIR6) despite health limitations. A number of participants remained economically stagnant or recorded zero income due to severe health conditions, disability or age-related limitations. KIR1 was unable to work due to physical disability, while PKIR5 and PKIR14 faced serious illnesses including brain, bone and blood cancer. Elderly participants such as KIR7 and KIR9 were constrained by age and chronic health conditions, with KIR7 also prioritising caregiving for her adult child diagnosed with lung cancer. Meanwhile, KIR14 and PKIR16 experienced diabetes, visual impairment and mobility challenges that limited economic participation. These cases demonstrate how serious health burdens and caregiving responsibilities significantly restrict livelihood capacity and reinforce long-term dependency despite participation in empowerment programmes.

From a planning perspective, these findings demonstrate that urban poverty is dynamic rather than static, shaped by household capacity, access to opportunities, gender roles and levels of community engagement. The variation in household trajectories therefore highlights the need for differentiated and targeted planning interventions rather than uniform poverty alleviation strategies.

Identification of Urban Poor Family Typologies

The classification of households into typologies was guided by three analytical indicators: (1) income trajectory observed across the three monitoring phases, (2) intensity of programme engagement including participation in training, mentoring and monitoring activities, and (3) observable household adaptive strategies such as income diversification, spousal cooperation and livelihood adjustment. Households demonstrating consistent income growth and active programme participation were categorised as Progressive–Resilient, while those with unstable income patterns were classified as Fluctuating–Vulnerable. Households with persistent income stagnation or inability to generate income were categorised as Stagnant–Dependent, whereas households in which women emerged as the primary economic drivers through micro-enterprise activities were classified as Women-Led Entrepreneurial.

Based on consistent income movement patterns across the three project phases, four primary household typologies emerge. The identification of these four distinct typologies aligns with the necessity of adopting ethnographic and socio-cultural approaches in poverty studies, as conventional quantitative metrics often fail to capture the lived experiences and inherent dignity of households within their communal settings (Ahmad et al., 2025).

i. Progressive–Resilient Households

Progressive–resilient households refer to urban poor families that demonstrate a consistent upward trajectory in economic participation while maintaining adaptive coping capacities despite structural constraints. These households are characterised by stable or increasing income patterns, strong internal family support and active engagement in empowerment initiatives. In this context, resilience reflects not only the ability to withstand economic shocks but also the capacity to translate opportunities into sustainable livelihood strategies (Do et al., 2025). Within the project community, this typology is represented by families that consistently participated in skills training, entrepreneurship programmes and monitoring activities, demonstrating strong alignment between institutional support and household agency. Empirical patterns show that many progressive–resilient households achieved economic stability primarily through sustained wage employment rather than entrepreneurial expansion. Participants such as PKIR1, KIR8, PKIR8, KIR11, KIR13, PKIR14, PKIR15 and KIR16 transitioned from irregular income sources into more stable salaried or contractual employment in nearby factories, security services, educational institutions and service sectors. In several cases, both the household head (KIR) and spouse (PKIR) contributed economically, strengthening income diversification and reducing vulnerability to single-income shocks.

Beyond financial stability, these households also demonstrated stronger behavioural transformation and long-term developmental orientation, particularly through participation in lifelong learning activities, faith-based programmes and regular performance monitoring. These patterns reflect findings by Esposito (2025) and Kapucu et al. (2024) that resilience among urban poor households is reinforced through social capital, disciplined household management and future-oriented planning. A clear example is KIR8, who transitioned from unstable income to consistent earnings above RM2,000, with additional contribution from spouse PKIR8, resulting in an estimated combined household income of approximately RM3,500 per month. This case illustrates how strong institutional engagement combined with household discipline can produce sustainable economic stabilisation.

ii. Fluctuating–Vulnerable Households

Fluctuating–vulnerable households represent families experiencing unstable yet adaptive economic trajectories. Their livelihoods are characterised by irregular income patterns, job insecurity and reliance on multiple informal or semi-formal income sources. As described by Li et al. (2024) and Sun et al. (2025), these households operate within conditions of persistent vulnerability where periods of recovery and regression coexist.

Within the project community, participants such as KIR4, KIR17, KIR5, PKIR2 and KIR10 demonstrate this pattern. Income records show alternating phases of improvement and decline, particularly among households dependent on daily-wage employment, small-scale food trading, ride-hailing services or seasonal micro-business activities. Participants PKIR2 and KIR10, for instance, experienced income improvements during periods of active entrepreneurship training or favourable market demand but faced downturns due to health interruptions and childcare responsibilities. Despite income volatility, these households display adaptive capacity through labour flexibility, skill diversification and reliance on institutional support networks. However, their ability to consolidate long-term economic gains remains limited due to continued exposure to labour informality and household vulnerabilities. From a planning perspective, fluctuating–vulnerable households require stabilisation-oriented interventions, including employment security pathways, childcare support, income-smoothing mechanisms and financial management assistance. Systematic monitoring within the project has proven valuable in identifying these income oscillations and enabling targeted mentoring and programme adjustments. The experience of KIR10, whose income remained volatile despite active programme participation, illustrates that engagement alone is insufficient without structural buffers to support sustained transformation.

iii. Stagnant–Dependent Households

Stagnant–dependent households represent families experiencing minimal or inconsistent economic progress and remaining highly reliant on external assistance despite prolonged exposure to empowerment programmes. Their trajectories are typically shaped by multiple constraints including poor health, caregiving burdens, limited education and reduced adaptive capacity.

Within the project community, participants such as KIR1, PKIR5 and PKIR16 consistently recorded zero or near-zero income across monitoring phases despite participation in community initiatives. Similarly, KIR2 and KIR14 initially participated in training programmes but were unable to sustain economic activity due to health challenges, family crises or limited access to market opportunities. KIR7 and KIR9, both elderly single mothers, also remained economically inactive due to age-related limitations, with KIR7 further constrained by caregiving responsibilities for her adult child diagnosed with lung cancer. These cases illustrate how severe health conditions, caregiving responsibilities and structural disadvantages can significantly limit livelihood capacity. As noted by Blocker et al. (2023) and Hu and Xu (2025), persistent poverty often occurs when individuals lack the capability to convert available opportunities into sustainable outcomes. From a planning perspective, this typology highlights the limitations of standardised empowerment programmes. Stagnant–dependent households require long-term social protection, personalised mentoring and continuous psychosocial support, rather than productivity-driven interventions alone. The case of KIR1, who consistently recorded zero income due to severe physical disability, illustrates how deeply rooted health constraints may necessitate welfare-oriented protection alongside community support systems.

iv. Women-Led Entrepreneurial Households

Women-led entrepreneurial households represent a typology in which women emerge as the primary economic drivers through micro-enterprise activities. In these households, wives assume active income-generating roles either as household heads (KIR) or as spouses (PKIR), reflecting a shift from traditional male-centred income structures towards dual-earner or women-led livelihood strategies (Mohan, 2024).

Evidence from the project illustrates this transformation clearly. Participants such as KIR3, PKIR6, KIR12 and KIR15 transitioned from full-time homemakers into entrepreneurs following structured capacity-building, mentoring and institutional networking. These women accessed catalytic financial assistance through the Geran Bangkit Perniagaan (RM5,000) from Sadaqa House of Bank Islam Malaysia Berhad, alongside RM1,000 from Yayasan Aafiyat, enabling them to establish small-scale food businesses, service-

based ventures and home-based retail activities. In several households, entrepreneurial activities were further strengthened through spousal collaboration. For example, KIR6 and PKIR12, husbands of PKIR6 and KIR12 respectively, contributed operational support within the businesses, reinforcing income stability. These outcomes support findings by Alayed and Alateeg (2025) that women's economic participation enhances household income, decision-making capacity and long-term resilience.

Beyond income generation, women-led entrepreneurial households also demonstrate shifts in family roles, with women balancing economic responsibilities alongside childcare, education supervision and community engagement. As noted by Gad and Leone (2024), this productive–reproductive balancing reflects the multidimensional role of women in sustaining both household welfare and economic resilience. Within the project context, women entrepreneurs also actively participated in entrepreneurship training, faith-based development sessions and market exposure programmes, highlighting the importance of integrated economic and psychosocial empowerment in supporting sustainable poverty transformation.

The Constructed Family Livelihood Typology Framework

This study synthesises longitudinal income trends, programme participation and adaptive behaviours observed over a four-year project period to construct a four-tier typology of urban poor households. The framework demonstrates that urban poverty is not a uniform condition but evolves through differentiated livelihood strategies shaped by varying levels of adaptive capacity, vulnerability, gender dynamics and engagement with empowerment interventions.

Within this framework, Progressive–Resilient Households demonstrate the highest level of programme engagement and adaptive capacity. These households successfully translate empowerment opportunities into sustained livelihood gains through stable employment, income diversification and long-term household planning. In contrast, Fluctuating–Vulnerable Households experience persistent income instability and rely on short-term adjustments across informal, gig and seasonal activities. Although these households display coping flexibility, their inability to consolidate economic gains exposes them to recurring cycles of vulnerability. Stagnant–Dependent Households represent the most structurally constrained group. Their trajectories are characterised by prolonged income stagnation, heavy reliance on welfare assistance and limited engagement with empowerment initiatives. Multiple constraints, including poor health, caregiving burdens, psychological stress and low human capital, contribute to a dependency-lock pattern that restricts livelihood transformation. These households therefore require personalised and protection-oriented interventions beyond conventional entrepreneurship programmes.

The fourth typology, Women-Led Entrepreneurial Households, highlights a gender-driven restructuring of household livelihoods in which women emerge as primary income generators through micro-enterprise activities supported by targeted entrepreneurship assistance. This typology reflects adaptive economic transformation occurring primarily within the household unit, often driven by women's initiative rather than continuous institutional engagement. Together, these four typologies are synthesised into a four-quadrant conceptual framework structured along two analytical axes: programme engagement and adaptive capacity, as illustrated in Figure 2. Households were classified into each typology based on two dimensions: (1) the level of programme engagement reflected in training participation, mentoring attendance and utilisation of financial assistance, and (2) household adaptive capacity reflected in income diversification, livelihood stability and behavioural adaptation over time.

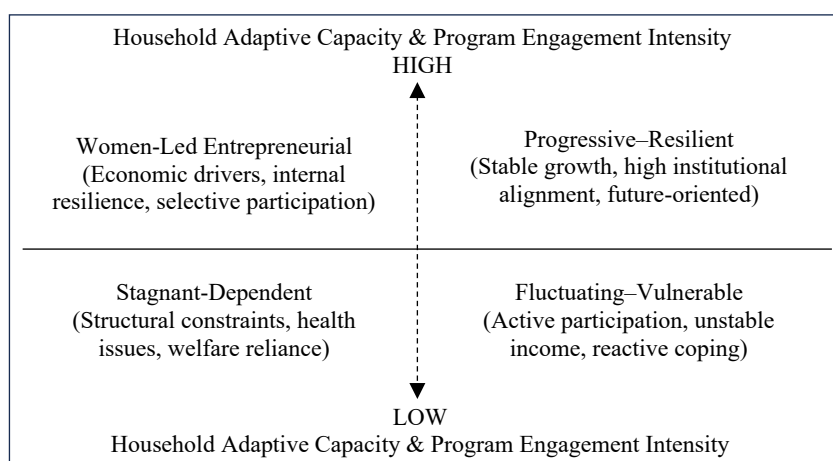


Figure 2: Four-Quadrant Livelihood Typology Framework of Urban Poor Household
 Source: Author's Illustration (2025)

Figure 2 illustrates a conceptual framework that reframes urban poverty as a dynamic transformation spectrum rather than a linear condition. The framework provides a theoretically grounded lens for understanding diverse livelihood trajectories, including survival, stagnation, adaptation and transformation within constrained urban environments. Within this framework, Progressive-Resilient Households occupy the high engagement-high adaptive capacity quadrant. These families actively leverage empowerment programmes, training, mentoring and financial support to establish stable and diversified income systems. Strong behavioural discipline, consistent programme

participation and long-term livelihood planning enable them to absorb shocks and sustain economic stability. In contrast, Fluctuating–Vulnerable Households fall within the high engagement–moderate adaptive capacity quadrant. Although these households participate actively in training and development initiatives, structural vulnerabilities such as labour informality, health risks, caregiving responsibilities and seasonal employment limit their ability to achieve stable transformation. Their livelihood strategies therefore remain reactive, characterised by recurring cycles of income improvement and regression. Stagnant–Dependent Households are positioned in the low engagement–low adaptive capacity quadrant, representing the most structurally constrained group. Chronic health problems, psychological stress, caregiving burdens and prolonged income inactivity restrict their ability to participate consistently in empowerment programmes or convert available opportunities into sustainable livelihood outcomes. As a result, long-term welfare dependency persists. Meanwhile, Women-Led Entrepreneurial Households occupy the moderate engagement–high adaptive capacity quadrant, where economic transformation is primarily driven by women’s micro-enterprise initiatives supported by targeted entrepreneurship programmes and catalytic financial assistance. Supported by small grants and short-term training, women in these households develop sustainable income-generating activities while balancing caregiving responsibilities. Although institutional engagement may be selective or intermittent, these households demonstrate strong adaptive capacity through opportunity recognition, market participation and income expansion.

Overall, the framework highlights that livelihood transformation among urban poor households is shaped not only by access to empowerment programmes but also by the interaction between institutional engagement and household adaptive capacity.

Policy and Planning Relevance

The construction of these livelihood typologies provides urban planners and policymakers with a strategic decision-support instrument that moves beyond the conventional, one-size-fits-all B40 classification. The need for differentiated planning interventions as proposed in this framework is consistent with Malaysia's structured planning system, where global sustainability goals are integrated into national policies to ensure that local development remains inclusive and responsive to specific household needs (Dariah et al., 2020). First, the framework enables Precision Targeting in urban poverty governance, where resources can be differentiated: providing long-term social safety nets for the Stagnant–Dependent Household while focusing on business-scaling and market access for the Progressive–Resilient Household and Women-Led Household groups. Second, the findings highlight the need for Inclusive Urban Housing

Design; the success of women entrepreneurs in this study suggests that low-cost housing policies should incorporate home-based enterprise (HBE) spaces and community childcare facilities to support gender-activated economic restructuring. Third, by adopting the Longitudinal Monitoring Logic used in this research, local authorities can develop an "Early Warning System" to detect household stagnation or regression in real-time. This shifting of the paradigm from reactive welfare to proactive, family-entered developmental planning ensures that urban intervention strategies are responsive to the actual adaptive capacities and structural constraints of the urban poor.

CONCLUSION

This study proposes a four-quadrant family typology to explain the fluid livelihood trajectories of urban poor households, showing that poverty shifts with engagement, adaptive capacity, and institutional support. Findings highlight that sustainable poverty exit is driven by consistent participation, income diversification and behavioural transformation. The typology offers policymakers a practical tool for designing differentiated, adaptive and gender-responsive urban poverty interventions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was supported by Zakat Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Pulau Pinang (or Zakat MAINPP) through the Projek Makmal Sosio-Akademik di Sungai Nibong (or Projek MASA@Sungai Nibong) grants. The authors extend their sincere appreciation for this support, which enabled the successful execution of the study.

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Received: 27th January 2026. Accepted: 13th March 2026