

Social Bonding and Power Dynamics in Wet Markets: The Role of Participative Decision-Making in Market Bandar Riyal, Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the social bonding and power dynamics between vendors and local authorities in the Bandar Riyal Wet Market, Sarawak. Focusing on the participatory decision-making approach in community governance, the research explored vendor and local authority relationships, informal negotiation, and organizational structures. While past literature has discussed participatory decision-making approaches to improve the effectiveness of local authorities, there is a lack of research on the functioning of wet market communities and their participation in decision-making processes. This research utilized qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and empirical observations, to understand the complex groups. The findings reveal that although vendors maintain strong internal social bonds that create a collective support system, their participation in market management remains limited. The Kota Samarahan Municipal Council holds primary decision-making power regardless of the vendor committee functioning as an advisory body with minimal influence. This research will clarify the role of social capital in managing small businesses that sustain local markets. Finally, this research emphasizes the need for more inclusive policy frameworks that empower vendor voices in local market management.

Keywords: Power dynamics, wet market, vendors, municipal council, social capital, governance, participative decision-making

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to examine the social bonding and power dynamic between vendors and management teams, particularly in the participatory decision-making approach in the wet market. In Malaysia, a wet market is a traditional open-air or semi-enclosed marketplace providing a local food source. Vendors play a unique role in collaborative relationships that are different from supermarkets and a sense of belonging that goes beyond transactional interactions. These social bonds among vendors are crucial in wet markets, as they support and maintain norms to form a supportive community. Thus, this concept of social bonding in social capital refers to interactions between homogeneous members of a community (Agampodi et al., 2015). The collective sense of social capital in networking enables individuals to cooperate and generate benefits collectively; therefore, it helps the wet market's vendor accumulate extra economic resources (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). According to Bourdieu (1985), social capital emphasizes the role of social networks, relationships, and norms of reciprocity within communities. Which social capital can be defined as the potential resources that are backed up by a network group formed with relationships through collective recognition or simply as the group membership (Bourdieu, 1985). By building up social relationships, the social capital may connect individuals, especially people who are in positions of power. This approach is effective in showing transparency and communication efficiency through community discussion that can lead to greater public confidence and support, especially for local authorities and community participants (Abas et al., 2023).

Malaysian wet markets have been perceived negatively due to their dirty environment, with wet and slippery floors, as well as toilets that are often non-functional (Kaur, 2023). The management group often inefficiently manages the cleaning facility process, and vendors lack the power to influence overall market management. The case of the Bandar Riyal wet market illustrates the situation where vendors consistently raised concerns regarding poor airflow and inadequate cleaning. Despite submitting multiple reports, their complaints went unaddressed (DayakDaily, 2019). It was only after local media coverage and intervention by a government representative that

the local council took action, directing its cleaning contractor to rectify the issue (New Sarawak Tribune, 2019). This case underscores prevalent issues of miscommunication, ineffective management, and the limited influence vendors have in the decision-making process. As noted by Kamarudin et al. (2011), local government functions as the third tier of governmental authority responsible for the management of wet markets. One of the primary challenges identified is administrative inefficiency, which arises from the vast size of the administrative area and its significant population, leading to a shortage of manpower for urban services. However, the core issue here extends beyond the scale of the administration; it also includes the frequent lack of communication between vendors and local authorities, which acts as a barrier to necessary improvements. The research suggests that fostering a closer relationship with stakeholders, such as the community vendors, is essential. Administrative inefficiency is a topic often debated among scholars. However, there exists a future research gap concerning the efficiency of local government. The power dynamics between the community and local authorities are particularly worthy of exploration (Bahardin et al., 2019; Zanudin et al., 2019).

According to Bardosh et al. (2023), the food and health safety narrative centered on local livelihood often conflicts with the food safety policy, and the lack of funding along with the fragmentation of the coordination system between local authority, agency department and community are the main problems of policy conflict. The study concluded that the conflicts at markets can trigger forms of grassroots political action as people work together to organize and address issues themselves. Furthermore, these literature reveals a demand to question how previous research has addressed the role of local government in market management and food safety policy. How can local authorities improve management efficiency in ways that not only empower market stakeholders but also support local needs and food security? This paper highlights a gap in existing studies, particularly in terms of integrating these efforts within a more inclusive and democratic political framework.

Mele et al. (2015) argue that commitment and bond are intrinsic to the uniqueness of wet markets; however, the study primarily emphasizes the importance of wet market culture. According to Zanudin et al. (2019), one of the challenges identified in participatory decision-making is the reluctance of local authorities to engage with the community, especially those who possess lower levels of education. This reluctance leads to a top-down approach that undermines community participation. Furthermore, the study highlights a lack of awareness and knowledge among community members regarding their involvement in the decision-making process, raising concerns about insufficient social interaction on the matter (Zanudin et al., 2019).

Thus, objectively, this article first explores the power dynamic between the vendors of Market Bandar Riyal and the authorities of the Kota Samarahan municipal council, which influences the participatory decision-making process. Secondly, it analyses the social bonds and interactions between the vendors and the municipal council.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social bonding in wet markets

The social bonding explored in this research pertains to the interaction between vendors and municipal council authorities, centering on the process of relationship building. Previous research by Agampodi et al. (2015) examined methods for measuring social capital in low- and middle-income countries, with the aim of understanding how networking can facilitate access to resources, particularly regarding health outcomes. This study underscored the importance of cultural adaptation, validation, and assessing the reliability of the measurement tool within the specific context of the research. According to Agampodi et al. (2015), the measurement of the bonding process focuses on the social interactions among individuals, as well as the norms, values, and beliefs that influence their participation in society.

However, Granovetter (1973) observed that weak ties are an important resource in creating a possible mobility opportunity, as they provide cohesive power with another group. This demonstrates that weak ties can offer a greater amount of fresh information compared to strong ties, which are typically overlapping and limited. Moreover, Granovetter (1973) highlights the close relationship between individual ties and larger-scale aspects of social structure in environments beyond personal control. In the context of wet markets, weak ties between vendors and municipal authorities can serve as bridges for information exchange, policy discussions, and market regulation. If vendors primarily rely on strong ties within their own social circles, they may struggle to influence

policies or negotiate with authorities. However, if they build weak ties with local officials, business associations, or policymakers, they increase their chances of participation in decision-making.

Conversely, reliance on weak ties may result in superficial connections that lack the depth required for meaningful engagement, which could hinder authentic collaboration. Additionally, strong ties within established networks can cultivate trust and solidarity among vendors, enabling them to advocate for their interests collectively in a manner that fragmented relationships may not facilitate. The intricate dynamics of vendor networks illustrate a compelling interplay between the nature of ties (both weak and strong) and their influence on decision-making processes. While weak ties with local officials can facilitate participation, they often lead to superficial connections that may hinder genuine collaboration. In contrast, strong ties cultivate an environment of trust and solidarity, empowering stakeholders to advocate collectively for their interests. Ultimately, recognizing the balance between these types of relationships is essential for promoting effective and meaningful engagement within vendor networks, as it can significantly shape the outcomes of collaborative efforts in decision-making contexts.

Power dynamics in wet market

Generally, power is the capacity to influence, lead, dominate, or impact the lives and actions of others in society (Munro, 2023). In the context of wet markets, this power is primarily held by municipal council authorities, who regulate market spaces, issue business licenses, and establish operational policies. Previous research, such as that conducted by Zhang and Pan (2013), examined the transformation of urban food retail in China as a result of policy changes implemented by the municipal government. The privatization of state-run vegetable retail, aimed at promoting modern supermarkets, resulted in stricter control over public spaces and increased policing against informal hawking on the streets. Although this decision benefited wet-market vendors who held the limited vegetable retail space, it also led to higher rents and fees. Consequently, these increased costs were passed on to consumers through elevated vegetable prices (Zhang & Pan, 2013). The study indicates that wet markets continue to be influenced by the state's assessment of the infrastructure connecting supermarkets and wet markets (Zhang & Pan, 2013). While this policy has benefited licensed wet-market vendors by increasing their market share, it has also led to higher rental fees, which are ultimately passed on to consumers. This raises an important question: To what extent do vendors in Bandar Riyal participate in policy decisions that impact their business environment?

In sub-Saharan Africa, many traditional markets encounter challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, poor waste management, and internal conflict, all of which affect their effectiveness (Davies et al., 2022). The paper investigates the governance structures that oversee these traditional markets. It concludes that effective institutional arrangements, which can enhance efficiency, include key indicators such as market formality, the role of the market committee, government engagement, and conflict resolution protocols (Davies et al., 2022). Furthermore, the studies tend to focus on the power of local authorities; however, insufficient attention has been paid to how vendors navigate these power dynamics and whether they possess a voice in decision-making. This oversight may hinder the development of more inclusive policies that could benefit both vendors and the communities they serve. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of these vendors is crucial for creating a more equitable framework that recognizes their contributions and challenges within the market system.

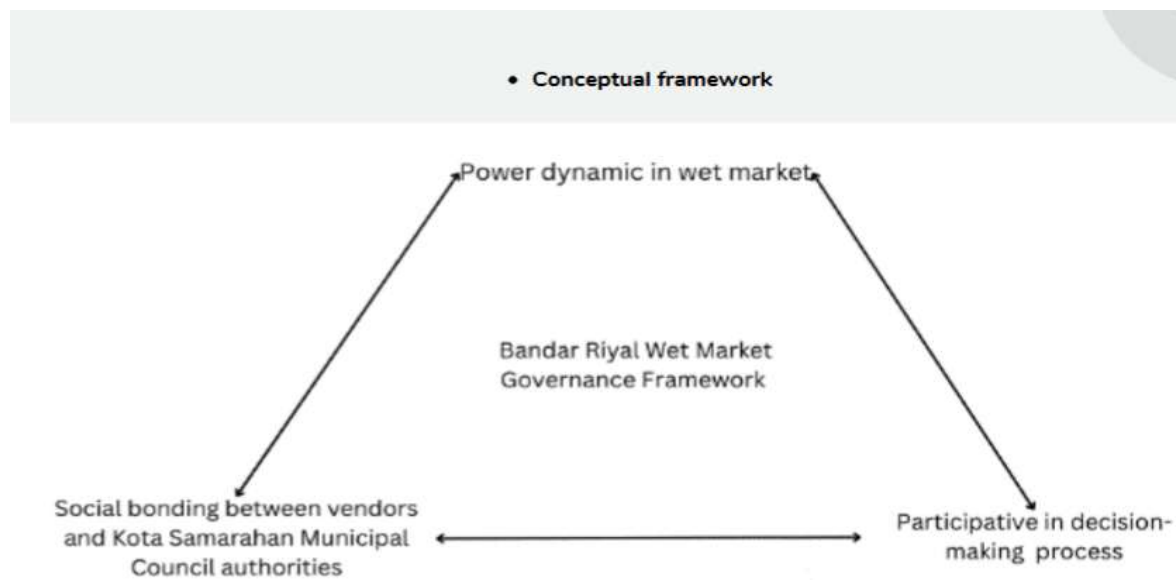
The studies conducted by Hermawati and Paskarina (2020) examine how street vendors forge and sustain power relations with the local community, city authorities, and NGOs. Their findings indicate that street vendors are unable to access aid from the city government due to existing regulations and policies. As a result, they cultivate informal power relations with government officials and more influential mass organizations to sustain their businesses (Hermawati and Paskarina, 2020). This implies that power negotiation occurs not only through formal governance structures but also via social networks and informal power dynamics.

Social Capital Theory

In wet markets, vendors rely on social capital to access new customers or suppliers to sustain their business, but this can be applied in power negotiations with municipal council authorities. According to Bhandari and Yasunobu (2009), Social capital is focused on relationships, where its major components include social networks,

civic engagement, norms of reciprocity, and trust. In general, social capital is defined as a collective asset in the form of shared norms, values, beliefs, trust, networks, social relations, and social units that ease collaboration and collective action for mutual benefits (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualizing form of capital explained how social capital provides potential benefits that arise from joining a network of relationships (Bourdieu, 1986).

This connection provides members with a form of "credential" that grants them access to various types of credit and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986). Putnam (1993) explained that social capital can be categorised into three types: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital refers to close ties among individuals who share similar characteristics. Bridging social capital encompasses more distant connections among similar individuals, such as remote friendships and colleagues. Linking social capital involves ties and networks between people and groups that occupy very different social positions and levels of power (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009).



Methods and approaches

The research methodology adopted qualitative methods to achieve its objective. The aim of this research is to explore the social bonds and power dynamics that exist between vendors and management teams, particularly in the context of participatory decision-making. The research method must be capable of deeply contextualizing and remaining flexible to extract insights regarding power dynamics and relationships within wet markets. By adopting this approach, this paper offers a sociological and anthropological perspective on power relations and social capital within the governance culture of wet markets. According to Agampodi et al. (2015), the most appropriate methods and deficiencies in measurements of social capital in the health aspect are found by doing a qualitative literature search. Murray et al. (2012) employed qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) to investigate health crises and the dynamics of social capital from a trajectory-focused perspective. Agampodi et al. (2015) point out that the methodology to evaluate social capital at the individual or group level may rely on one's objective. Therefore, the qualitative methods are relevant to the research objective for showing the depth, complexity, and meaning behind social interactions and governance structures of wet markets. Compared to structured quantitative surveys, qualitative measurement allows the study to examine how vendors gain influence, access opportunities, or face marginalization in decision-making. In consideration of the philosophical paradigm, the interpretivism approach is utilized to understand the meaning behind wet market cultures and social realities. This social reality has a meaning for human beings, and therefore human action is meaningful with the influence of the acts of others (Bryman, 2012).

Research instrument: In-depth Interview

In this study, in-depth interviews are selected as the primary data collection technique to understand the social bonding, power dynamics, and participatory decision-making in the Bandar Riyal wet market. According to Boyce and Neale (2006), In-depth interviewing is the qualitative approach of conducting intensive individual

interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, experience, or situation. To retrieve detailed and rich data from an interviewee, appearing interested in what they are saying and creating comfortable conditions are needed as interviewing techniques (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The researcher used an audio recording tool and took paper notes during the interview session to capture the conversation with the participant. Prior to recording, the researcher sought permission from the participant, and the audio recording was saved for future analysis. To gather pertinent data aligned with the research objective, semi-structured questions have been employed. The interviews were conducted in Malay. The interviews focused on six dimensions: individual roles, issues, negotiation power, social interactions, relationships with others, and commitment to helping. Furthermore, this research adheres to the ethical guidelines established by University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). We obtained approvals from the supervisor and Dean's office prior to data collection.

Empirical observation

According to Bouchrika (2024), the term “empirical” means that it is guided by scientific experimentation or evidence. This observation method is to directly watch the phenomena to measure reality and generate truth about the world (Bouchrika, 2024). Empirical observation allowed the researcher to capture real-time interactions and behaviours between vendors and authorities, which interviews may not fully express. Thus, the researcher visited the wet market several times.

Research Population

The research population for this study consists of two groups. The first group is the Kota Samarahan municipal council authorities who are responsible for the wet market. Their role is important, as they are involved in the power relationship in the wet market. The second group consists of vendors from Market Bandar Riyal who have been actively involved in the market's operations for at least five years. This level of experience is essential for providing abundant data on the long-term developments and evolving social interactions within the market. Given the qualitative nature of the study, non-probability sampling was employed to select participants. This approach was to ensure the intended individuals can provide rich, detailed, and relevant insights into the research topic.

Research Sampling

According to Makwana et al. (2023), non-probability sampling is a sampling technique in which the likelihood of each member of the population being selected for the sample is not known. This study employed purposive sampling to determine interviewees who met the criteria mentioned in the research population. The purpose of using this sampling method is to identify which cases in the study yield the most valuable data and research results from the selected samples (Leavy, 2017).

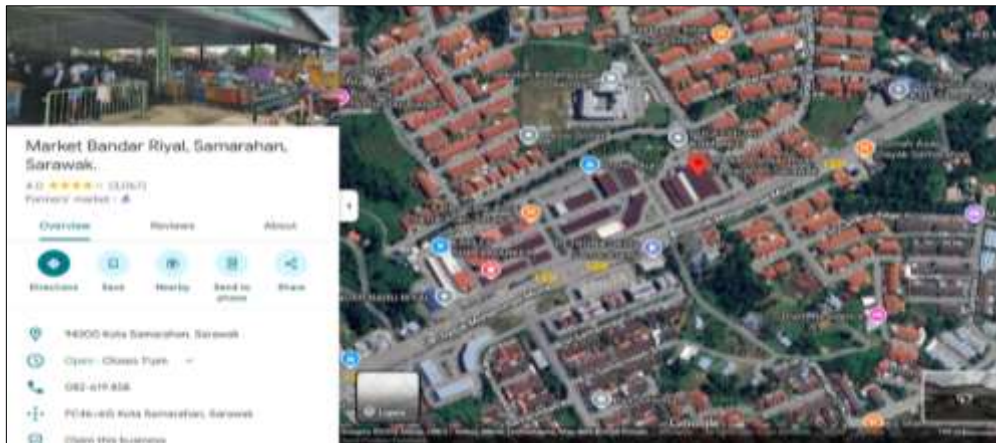
Sample Size

According to Makwana et al. (2023), non-probability sampling is a sampling technique in which the likelihood of each member of the population being selected for the sample is not known. This study used purposive sampling to select interviewees who met the specified criteria within the research population. The aim of employing this sampling method is to identify which cases in the study provide the most valuable data and research outcomes from the chosen samples (Leavy, 2017).

Study area

The study area is conducted at Bandar Riyal Wet Market, located in Kota Samarahan, Sarawak. The distance from the Sarawak state capital, Kuching, to Bandar Riyal Wet Market is approximately 12 kilometers. Based on observation, this market operates daily, but the weekend is the busiest period. According to Cheng and Pilo (2018), the initial market opened in 2015 to serve the local communities of Kota Samarahan town center and Desa Ilmu. According to Google Maps, the Bandar Riyal wet market competes with two local supermarkets. Farley being the nearest competitor at around 400 meters distant. Another supermarket nearby is Everwin, which is located around 1 kilometer from the market.

Figure 1: Google maps location of Market Bandar Riyal



Research Limitation

This research faces several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study is context-specific and focused solely on Market Bandar Riyal in Kota Samarahan. Wet markets across Malaysia exhibit regional differences in terms of cultural practices, governance structures, and vendor relations. Therefore, the findings of this research cannot be fully generalized to represent all wet markets nationwide. Secondly, language barriers presented challenges during data collection. Some vendors used mixed languages, including Iban, which the researcher was not fully familiar with. This occasionally hindered communication, limiting the depth of interviews and affecting participant willingness to engage in the interview process. Thirdly, time constraints limited the scope of empirical observation. The researcher was unable to consistently observe daily interactions over extended periods, including potential meetings between vendors and municipal authorities or internal vendor committee activities. Consequently, some important insights into the negotiation processes and informal interactions may have been overlooked.

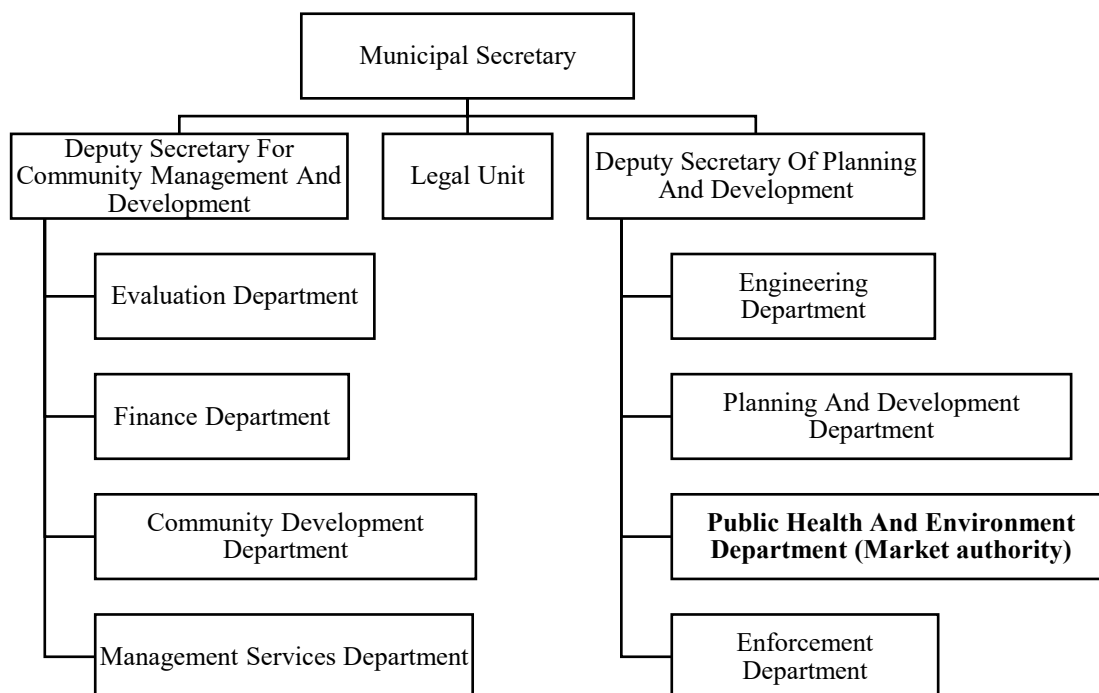
Research Findings

In Market Bandar Riyal, the municipal council set up a committee as mediator to represent vendors. This vendor committee, or AJK (Malay term), consists of the vendor's chairman and several committee members with specific roles, like cleaning and security, who were elected by vendors. The committee acts as a representative body, responsible for voicing concerns, negotiating issues, and relaying instructions or regulations from the council back to the vendors. Based on interviews and cross-examination with empirical observations, this governance setup reflects a one-sided dependency rather than an equal power structure. Secondly, the main authority for all wet markets in the Kota Samarahan district falls under the responsibility of the Department of Public Health and Environment within the Kota Samarahan Municipal Council (MPKS). According to the organizational chart below, this department is exclusively responsible for regulating market operations. This includes the implementation of health and environmental policies, waste management, stall licensing, market maintenance, and the enforcement of relevant local government bylaws. Thus, the department is tasked with making decisions regarding cleaning standards, upgrading infrastructure, managing vendor licensing processes, and taking enforcement actions. Officers from this department serve as intermediaries between local governments and the vendor community. They are also responsible for ensuring that markets consistently adhere to public health and regulatory standards.

The study found that the major power to decide is dictated by the council board of Kota Samarahan municipal council, but they provide orders to the department for execution. Additionally, the Department of Public Health and Environment serves as a platform for receiving vendor feedback, particularly concerning issues related to cleanliness, space arrangements, or operational disruptions. Based on empirical observations and feedback from respondents, the effectiveness of communication and the extent of vendor influence are contingent upon the institutional openness and the responsiveness of the municipal enforcement system. Consequently, the involvement of vendors remains informal or advisory, rather than being part of the decision-making process.

The organization chart of Kota Samarahan Municipal Council 2025

Figure 2: Vendor's stalls



In the context of market governance, both vendors and MPKS perceive their power as dynamic and multifaceted, particularly concerning authority and governance structures within the market. Firstly, most vendors indicate that their power within this market is confined to their individual stalls, which consist of designated concrete slab tables marked with their name and stall number. Figure 2 depicts the vendors' stalls, where the concrete tables offer ample space for storing items beneath them. Additionally, many vendors have enhanced their stalls by adding extra racks or tables to display a greater variety of products. This designated space is perceived by vendors as their sole area of control, with their sense of authority and power directly tied to the rights associated with their stall. In relation to business legitimacy, they have a valid license and pay monthly fees to the council. One vendor articulated this clearly:

“Oh! ini kira macam hak saya atas gerai... sebab ni saya dah ada lesen dari Majlis Perbandaran... lepas tu bayar bulanan semua tu, saya yang bayar. Ke mana meja ini sebagai stor dan hak untuk membuat bisnis macam ini sahaja...” [Oh, this can be considered my entitlement to the stall, since I already possess a license from the Municipal Council. I am also responsible for paying the monthly fees and related expenses. Therefore, this table serves as my storage space, and my right is limited to conducting this particular type of business.]” (Mr. Anthony)

He stated that they viewed their power as rights over the stall because he had obtained a license and paid a monthly fee for using it as his business place. So, Mr. Anthony feels they have a sense of ownership over their own stall areas, but they also understand that this does not affect the decision-making of the entire market. He further explained:

“Kalau hak untuk ubah market ini, saya tiada... Cuma hak untuk disini adalah untuk contohnya... mengaduan kerosakkan atau kebersihan kepada MPKS melalui Ahli Jawatankuasa dekat sini. [“I do not possess the authority to make any structural or administrative changes to the market. My role or right here is limited to, for instance, reporting issues related to damage or cleanliness to the Municipal Council (MPKS) through the local committee representatives.”]

Hypothetically speaking, he lacks the authority to change the market; his only recourse is to voice complaints through the vendors' committee to MPKS. Mr. Anthony believes that vendors are solely accountable for their individual business spaces. They perceive their participation as limited, which leads them to feel they possess little power in the market. Therefore, their role in market governance is coordinated through vendor committees, through which complaints (e.g., damaged infrastructure, theft, and hygiene issues) can be forwarded to the city council. In addition to being regular vendors, some interview participants also hold memberships in the Vendor Committee (AJK). As mentioned earlier on, this committee is a representative body for the vendor community to communicate with the municipal council. A respondent, who holds dual roles as a vendor and AJK member, elucidated the definition of responsibilities and boundaries within this governance structure:

“Kuasa saya ada sebagai penjaja, cleaner, dan AJK... Macam gerai saya yang jaga, saya cuma urus dan jual di kawasan gerai saya sahaja... Jadi sebagai cleaner, saya akan membersihkan kawasan laluan gerai sahaja... Kami dapat mengajukan aduan melalui Whatsapp kepada penyelia pasar dari pihak MPKS. Kami buat surat bantahan ataupun mesyuarat.” [“My authority is mainly as a hawker, cleaner, and committee member (AJK). I only manage and sell within my designated stall area. As a cleaner, I am responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of the walkways. We can channel complaints through WhatsApp to the market supervisor from MPKS, and when necessary, we prepare formal objection letters or hold meetings to address concerns.” (Ms. Rebecca)]

She stated that, as a vendor, cleaner, and AJK committee member, she possesses the authority to manage her stall business, maintain cleanliness around the stall, and communicate with both vendors and MPKS regarding issues through WhatsApp, official letters, or meetings. Ms. Rebecca's responses to all the questions, in conjunction with those of other committee members and the cross-examination of empirical observations, confirmed that they possess specific responsibilities. These include participative power in negotiations, maintaining order between both parties, and relaying concerns. However, their actual power is still localized to their stall and immediate duties. Another respondent, Ms. Sofia explained:

“sejak market ini buka, saya sudah buat bisnis di sini, jadi tidak banyak perubahan kuasa di sini... Saya angkat barang jualan dari supplier, bukan dari kebun sendiri. Macam ada beberapa kipas rosak di area sini, sudah lama lah tak dapat baiki, panas saya di sini, jadi saya bawa la kipas sendiri... kawasan kami okay lah, kami jaga kebersihan kawasan gerai sendiri.” [One respondent reflected on the continuity of their role and working conditions within the market: “I have been operating my business here since the market first opened, and there has not been much change in terms of authority. I obtain my products from external suppliers rather than from my own garden. Some fans in this section have been broken for a long time and have yet to be repaired, so I brought my own fan to cope with the heat. Overall, our area is manageable—we maintain the cleanliness of our own stall spaces.” (Ms. Sofia)].

She suggests that all vendors, including herself, operate according to their agendas, and this power dynamic has remained unchanged since the market's inception. For example, the broken fan in her area has remained unfixed for a long time, so she brings her own fan instead of relying on MPKS. An issue such as power imbalance is considered acceptable because the vendors can manage their responsibilities as long as the problem is not serious. Ms. Rebecca explained that they have a clear boundary of responsibility within cleaning duties. If she cleans someone else's stall area and their belongings disappear, we, the cleaners, will bear the blame. So as a cleaner, she will only clean the stall walkway area. The cleaning contractor will assume responsibility for the area beyond the stall boundary. Consequently, Ms. Rebecca and her fellow participants hold the belief that market vendors

equally distribute power. Although they have many roles, each one has very specific and limited power. Therefore, their perceived power is rooted in daily work situations that are relevant for them. Although the vendor committee is formally structured with elected positions, it primarily serves as a means of internal coordination rather than exerting governance influence over MPKS decisions.

Across the interviews, a recurring view among vendors was that their power involvement was limited to maintaining their stalls, complying with rules, and submitting complaints via the vendor committee. Vendors shared that they were often informed of new policies or changes only after decisions were finalized by MPKS. While some acknowledged the usefulness of having a committee as a communication channel, others were uncertain whether their feedback reached the authorities or had any real influence.

To understand how these dynamics are viewed from the other side of governance, an interview was also conducted with Mr. Scott, who is the head of the Department of Public Health and Environment under MPKS and has five years of experience in these positions. According to Mr. Scott, not all decisions are made solely at the department level. Instead, idea proposals must be presented and deliberated in management meetings that include all departments. The Ahli Majlis (Council Board), which is composed of politically appointed committee members, then makes the final decisions. In this power structure, MPKS departments such as Mr. Scott's are responsible mostly for the operational implementation side. Therefore, he acknowledged several logistical challenges that MPKS faced in managing the markets he had mentioned:

“Salah satu cabaran dalam pengurusan pasar ini ialah support logistik dari segi resources seperti sumber kewangan... dan keduanya, sumber tenaga penyelia untuk memantau kawasan tersebut sangat tidak setimpal dengan tahap majlis perbandaran... Ini sebab MPKS kita ada 19 buah market; kalau ikut peringkat perbandaran, satu market ada satu penyelia, tapi kita ada dua orang penyelia sahaja.” [“One of the key challenges in managing this market is logistical support in terms of resources, particularly financial resources. Secondly, the number of supervisory personnel assigned to monitor the area is not proportionate to the scale of the municipal council's responsibilities. This is because MPKS oversees a total of 19 markets; ideally, each market should have one supervisor, but in our case, we only have two supervisors in total (Mr. Scott)"]

He said that the main challenge in managing wet markets is the logistical support in terms of insufficient financial resources and a lack of supervisory staff. They are only equipped with two market supervisors to handle 19 markets, instead of one supervisor per market as ideally required at city council levels. These limitations affect MPKS's capacity to monitor the market site, leading to a slow response and difficulties in efficiently resolving ground-level problems. Mr. Scott also explained that the vendor committee approach is better than dealing with one person at a time and easier to communicate. This committee will serve as the link between the council and the vendors; if an issue arises, MPKS will invite the committee to attend the meeting, while individual vendors can also address their own issues in the meantime. During meetings, MPKS will have at least once a month to discuss issues, payments, and maintenance. These committees serve as the official communication channel between the council and vendors, helping to consolidate issues and coordinate responses. Additionally, other interviewed MPKS members supported or confirmed Mr. Scott's views. However, two such respondents go further to state that such problems are not common only in the Bandar Riyal market but are experienced in most wet markets in Malaysia. They said that because of this, most Malaysian wet markets are run in a way that lacks rigidity in the relationship between management and vendors. One respondent noted that vendors have evolved a process to settle problems internally and peacefully.

Based on Mr. Scott's interview and other participant responses, findings support that regular meetings are held monthly to address matters, with the AJK expected to represent vendor interests in these forums. However, MPKS expressed hope for a stronger partnership-based relationship between the council and vendor community, especially as MPKS is moving toward a “green market” policy that requires cooperation for the market's sustainability.

“Saya lihat pihak penjaja sebagai partnership yang saling bekerjasama... Kami tetap berharap mengeratkan hubungan partnership untuk kemampanan pasar.” [“I see the hawkers as partners who work together with us... We continue to hope for a stronger partnership relationship to ensure the sustainability of the market.” (Mr. Scott)]

According to Mr. Scott, people view the vendor community as an effective collaborative partnership. This institutional perspective contrasts sharply with the experiences of the vendors, as another respondent expressed uncertainty regarding how their concerns are acknowledged and noted a lack of involvement in decisions that directly impact their livelihoods. While MPKS promotes the idea of collaboration, vendors perceive their role as predominantly passive and reactive, influenced more by compliance than by co-creation in market governance.

Figure 3 dry goods' stalls



Figure 4 fish and vegetable's stalls



Informal negotiation power and everyday influence

The gathered perspectives reveal a pattern of vendors using informal negotiation power. Numerous vendors recounted instances where they or their committee representatives engaged with MPKS officials to negotiate changes or request action on specific market issues. One respondent highlighted how resistance to modifications of stall structures became a focal point for informal negotiation with the council's architects.

“Ada, macam ada satu hal dengan ubah suaian gerai untuk letak rangka besi ini. Saya berbincang secara langsung dengan arkitek. Dia mahu kami menyelaraskan gerai kami, tetapi kami tidak dapat bercakap dengan arkitek itu. kalau remove rangka besi ini macam mana kami mau bawak balik, kalau barang banyak... akhirnya architech pun fikir balik, jadi ini pun tidak dirubahkan.” [“Yes, there was an issue regarding the modification of the stall to install this metal frame. I discussed it directly with the architect. He wanted us to standardize our stalls, but we couldn't communicate properly with him. If we remove this metal frame, how are we supposed to bring our goods back, especially when there's a lot? In the end, the architect reconsidered, so it was not changed.” (Ms. Mary)]

Ms. Mary mentioned that there was a concern regarding the MPKS's intention to remove the modified iron frame from the stalls used by vendors to display additional goods. She engaged in a face-to-face discussion with the architect, deliberating on the stall and the necessity of adhering to their regulations. Ultimately, the architect reconsidered his stance on the market stall structure to prioritize vendor convenience. Based on empirical observation, daily interactions in the wet market are often characterized by friendly and informal exchanges that reflect the vendor's capacity to influence outcomes beyond formal channels. This aligns with Ms. Rebecca's

account regarding MPKS's attempt to remove the modified iron frames used by vendors for displaying additional goods. She took the initiative to approach the appointed architect directly. Through face-to-face discussions and negotiations, she challenged the decision, highlighting the importance of vendor convenience. Ultimately, the architect reconsidered and allowed the modified stall structures to remain for practical use. Referring to Figure 3, dry goods' stalls, and Figure 4, fish and vegetable stalls, it is evident that each vendor's stall in the wet market is physically distinct and personally modified. Vendors use various racks, iron frames, and display systems to maximize their limited space, adapting the stalls for their individual business strategies but also showing the vendors' agency in informal negotiation that shapes the market environment. But when involving complaints about broken fans and sanitation problems it often comes with delayed action:

“Macam masalah kipas kita orang ada komplain... Namun, prosesnya mengambil masa yang lama walaupun melalui pengerusi. [“It’s like the issue with the fan — we already made a complaint... However, the process takes a long time even when it goes through the chairman.” (Ms. Sofia)]

Ms. Sofia mentioned that, similar to the issue with the broken fan, there have been complaints; however, the resolution process through the vendor committee is lengthy. Other respondents' experiences indicate that negotiations tend to be slow and dependent on outcomes, primarily due to budget constraints or management priorities. Additionally, one respondent highlighted their involvement in addressing issues related to unauthorized or unlicensed vendors. The respondent noted:

“Kalau ada isu, kami akan membangkitkan melalui jawatankuasa komuniti dan lepas itu kami bawa masuk dalam meeting dengan MPKS. Contohnya, isu penjaja haram kami bagitau majlis perbandaran melalui telefon dan diaorang datang check.” [“If there’s an issue, we raise it through the community committee, and then we bring it up during meetings with MPKS. For example, in the case of illegal hawkers, we inform the municipal council by phone, and they will come to inspect.” (Mr. George)]

He stated that the vendors' committee would raise the issue in a meeting with the MPKS. For instance, regarding the issue of illegal vendors, he informed the municipal council by phone, and they conducted an inspection. However, several respondents voiced their frustration over the slow responses or perceived neglect of matters such as lighting, cooling systems, and safety infrastructure. Similarly, Ms. Rebecca shared her past experience of complaining about fan issues to the Member of Parliament for Sarawak, but they were unable to provide a response. Additionally, discussions were held with the MPKS about the installation of CCTV, but they were left waiting. Consequently, most participants indicated that the negotiation power within the wet market involved navigating bureaucratic pathways to secure minor victories or avert further disadvantages. This negotiation power illustrates that vendors aim to influence the implementation of policies or delay enforcement through interpersonal strategies and a collective voice.

Social bonding and interactions

The social structure of the Bandar Riyal wet market consists of collaborative relationships among vendors themselves. Most vendors reported that they have known each other for years, some even before relocating to the current market. Based on empirical observation and interviews, they had developed a strong bonding with each other after a long-standing familiarity and years of working experience together in that market, which can be seen through mutual help, sharing of resources, and emotional closeness. Although every vendor operates independently, their business life revolves around structural cooperation and trust. By doing so, they are able to help each other sustain their resilience in the competitive retail environment. All respondents commonly mentioned that “kami semua kenal antara satu sama lain,” meaning that we all know each other very well and that relationships within the market are generally peaceful and cooperative. Vendors frequently described each other as “Kawan”Rapat”—close friends. Some mentioned helping each other with small tasks such as exchanging money for change, lending equipment, or watching over stalls. For example, Mr. Anthony stated:

“Hubungan semua okay, kami saling tolong menolong... kalau kita ada lebih sayur kah boleh bagi atau pertolongan barang...”

His relationship with all vendors is satisfactory; they often help each other, for example, sharing products to sell

together. Their behaviour reflects that mutual goodwill and practical support are common in their community, which is also a form of social capital bonding. In addition to their emotional closeness, the vendors enjoy participating in a culture of sharing goods and supplies. For example, some vendors mentioned that if someone has excess vegetables or packaging materials, they are likely to share them with a neighbour. There are also others who described informal price discussions and sourcing practices that are not totally collective but based on trusting networks.

“Kalau kawan saya nak, saya akan bagilah... itu kira hubungan sesama komuniti kita ialah saling bekerjasama.” (Mr. Anthony)

Mr. Anthony enjoys sharing products with his friends, reflecting the community's spirit of collaboration. In more serious circumstances, vendors described their collective efforts to address personal or community-wide challenges. When faced with illness, death, or conflicts with authorities, they often respond together through initiatives such as donation drives or joint complaints. Similarly, Mr. George mentioned that in the event of a death or illness, the vendors come together to collect contributions; if an issue arises, they collaborate to find a solution with the support of the community. People perceive their interactions as collaborative, and fostering social bonds with one another is essential for organizing their daily operations.

Interviews and observations indicate that vendors and MPKS officers (market supervisors) maintain a professional and respectful relationship, although it lacks a personal dimension. Most vendors perceive their interactions with MPKS as formal, maintaining basic communication but without deep familiarity or trust. Supervisors typically visit the market once or twice a week to monitor cleanliness and operations. During these visits, vendors have the opportunity to raise complaints or discuss minor issues directly. However, some vendors noted that if officers do not visit the market regularly, their problems might remain unresolved, leading to uncertainty about the timeline for problem resolution. Referring to Ms. Sofia, she doesn't see MPKS coming much anymore; it's been a long time since she saw them come to market. However, Interactions between vendors and MPKS authorities in the Bandar Riyal wet market are generally characterized by professionalism, politeness, and functional cooperation. Several vendors, especially committee members, described their interactions with officers as regular and friendly. Vendors observed that officers are approachable and receptive to listening, especially when they raise issues through the appropriate channels. Based on interviews, it appears that familiarity and repeated contact over time have built informal trust. Two respondents expressed this viewpoint in the following quotes:

“Saya kenal juga pegawai MPKS yang selalu datang, semua okay saja, kalau ada isu kami beritahu dan mereka akan maklum semula.” (Mr. George)

“Kalau ada masalah, AJK yang akan sampaikan... biasanya pegawai pun akan datang tengok dan berbincang secara baik.” (Ms. Rebecca)

As expressed by Mr. George, he maintains a positive relationship with the MPKS officers, who consistently respond to his concerns. When an issue arises, they are receptive and respond courteously. Similarly, Ms. Rebecca stated that when a problem arises, the committee will communicate it, and the officers generally respond by coming to assess the situation and discussing it amicably. These statements suggested a cooperative and respectful relationship between vendors and executive officers. From an observational perspective, interactions between officers and vendors appeared to follow a routine pattern, usually involving discussions and responses to issues such as cleanliness or maintenance complaints. There was no visible tension or resistance, and AJK members typically acted as the primary liaison during such visits. Interviews and observations indicate that the vendor committee (AJK) often engages with municipal officers in a respectful manner to maintain order, cleanliness, and the overall function of the market. This is due to their understanding that MPKS officers do not possess ultimate authority over market control but instead follow directives from higher authorities.

DISCUSSION

The first major finding identified in this study shows that MPKS holds the formal decision-making authority over market regulation, and vendors' roles are largely restricted to stall-level autonomy. These findings reflect

Kamarudin et al. (2011)'s recommendation that councils should improve relationships with community stakeholders (NGOs, businesses, and the public) for better urban management, showing the challenge of centralized control in participatory governance. Most vendors interviewed expressed that their only meaningful power lies in maintaining their stall space, complaining about issues, cleaning responsibilities, and following rules written in their contracts. As illustrated in Chapter 4, this sense of power is closely tied to their licensed rights over individual stalls with minimal market governance due to wet market policy and the Local Authorities Ordinance (1996). Section 104 of the Local Authorities Ordinance (1996) states that a local authority shall have power in:

Subsection (b) to establish, erect, maintain, let, control and license markets and market buildings, lodging houses, houses, rooms or buildings kept for public refreshment, shops, stalls and stands, and to control the occupation and use thereof;

From the perspective of a municipal council constrained by financial resources, there are still pathways for participation available through vendor committees (AJK) and regular meetings aimed at sustainable operations. This situation aligns with the argument presented by Kamarudin et al. (2011), which states that without adequate financial provisions such as grants, assigned revenues, or capital credit, the objectives outlined in the Local Government Act are challenging to implement effectively. Within the context of Market Bandar Riyal, these financial limitations have resulted in diminished logistical support, exemplified by a reduction in the number of market supervisors overseeing multiple markets and slow responses to vendor requests concerning infrastructure maintenance or improvements in sanitation.

From a structural perspective, social capital necessitates a vertical connection that provides individuals with access to decision-makers and formal institutional influence, which is referred to as social capital's linking (Putnam, 1993; Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). This perspective highlights the gap between vendors and the actual decision-makers, particularly the Ahli Majlis, whose members are politically appointed elites from various sectors. The effectiveness of AJK structures in genuinely linking vendors to power remains limited, with their primary function being to facilitate the bridging of social capital. According to Zanudin et al. (2019), a structurally weak participatory process and a lack of transparency prevent meaningful local community involvement in planning decisions. For instance, despite the AJK's ability to aggregate complaints, vendors frequently remain uncertain about whether their concerns receive attention or action. The study also revealed instances of informal negotiation power, particularly through consistent complaints, direct interactions, and the influence exerted by vendors due to their long-term presence in the market. This underscores the notion that power is not static; rather, it can be dynamic, especially in the context of informal efforts to establish grassroots movements. Such movements may involve resistance to changes in stall layouts or requests for improved infrastructure, as discussed in the findings. These actions reflect what Scott (1990) might describe as 'infrapolitics', which is a small-scale or low-profile form of informal resistance performed by a subordinate group within the structures. The key implication of these findings is that they do not sufficiently empower vendors as stakeholders in the governance of their working environment, which suggests that the current hierarchical and bureaucratic governance structure leaves little room for grassroots actors like vendors to shape decisions that affect their daily livelihood. This systematic power is ultimately controlled by institutions that operate in multi-administrative layers to dilute vendor voices. To move toward a more democratic form of market governance, there must be a structural shift that grants vendors direct avenues for participation beyond consultation. This could involve formalizing the role of vendor committees in joint planning, delegating minor infrastructure or sanitation decisions to vendor representatives, and establishing transparent mechanisms for decision feedback and accountability.

The wet market policy in Malaysia is often associated with narratives of modernization that require assessments regarding the inclusivity of grassroots voices. Current national frameworks, such as Malaysia's MADANI philosophy, indicate a shift from a top-down, state-driven development model to value-driven governance that prioritizes participatory and inclusive practices. However, findings from Market Bandar Riyal reveal ongoing structural asymmetry, characterized by high trust levels among peers (bonding social capital) but low trust in hierarchical relationships (linking social capital).

Social Bonding and Collective Support System

According to Mele et al. (2015), interpersonal relationships are not formed hierarchically but ad hoc, thus allowing for trust and reciprocity to develop into social bonds. The findings reveal that the vendor community displays a strong form of bonding social capital, which is a horizontal network of support, trust, and familiarity that sustains daily life in the market. These internal social relationships function as practical support systems in the face of administrative disempowerment. Vendors rely heavily on one another to cope with physical hardship, business challenges, and the complexity of navigating market regulations. Most vendors stated that they had known each other for a long time, some even before they were relocated to the current Bandar Riyal wet market. Vendors also reported that when a peer encounters difficulties or requires business supplies, others are quick to reach out and offer assistance. Conceptually, such an arrangement reflects a high level of bonding social capital that has strong ties and shared norms among market participants. There is also evidence of bridging social capital as the AJK connects vendors to external institutions. However, linking social capital remains weak because there is no direct relationship between vendors and higher authorities such as the Ahli Majlis. In Bourdieu's sense, the capital that vendors possess is mostly social and cultural, shaped by community respect and familiarity, but they lack power to shape institutional outcomes. This bonding allows vendors to create unofficial systems of cooperation, although it is not mandated by MPKS as they are driven by trust and shared responsibility. Secondly, the bonding among vendors creates a collective voice that can respond to challenges. For example, when multiple vendors experience the same issue, like road closures or cleanliness problems, they can raise it collectively through the vendor committee. Finally, bonding gives vendors a sense of identity in the local authority system where they are marginalized in terms of power dynamics. Thus, bonding organizes their everyday lives with autonomy and meaning, even when larger systems are not responsive to their needs.

Vendor social capital, understood as networks, trust-based relationships, and reciprocal ties among and between vendors and external actors, plays a critical role in shaping pathways for policy influence and collective bargaining. At the most immediate level, bonding social capital within vendors at the Bandar Riyal wet market strengthens solidarity and provides a foundation for collective identity. This solidarity allows dispersed and often informal actors to articulate common grievances and demands, thereby transforming individual vulnerabilities into collective bargaining power. Such connections help vendors translate local struggles into policy-relevant narratives and gain visibility in public debates. In this way, vendor social capital functions in the Bandar Riyal wet market not only as a mechanism for mutual support but also as a strategic resource that enables them to transition from informal survival strategies to formalised channels of representation. This enhances their ability to participate in collective bargaining with the MPKS and secure rights that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

RECOMMENDATION

For the Market Bandar Riyal recommendation, this research reveals a clear gap between institutional governance structures and the agency of vendors in shaping their market environment. To bridge this gap, MPKS can formally constitute the vendor committee (AJK) as a participatory body in decision-making processes. Secondly, enable participatory budgeting at the local council level to allow vendors to propose small-scale improvements based on collective priorities. These suggestions aim not only to improve vendor conditions but also to encourage a democratic and grounded form of governance where community voices are more integrated.

Although previous studies have focused on wet market hygiene or cultural settings, this study uncovered the relational structures of governance, including social capital, informal negotiation, and bureaucratic management. The study also adds value by providing a bottom-up perspective that is often overlooked in modernization narratives. Instead of treating vendors as passive subjects of development, it reveals them as active agents who organize, resist, and survive through collective action and embedded relationships. This approach contributes to scholarly discourse on power, everyday resistance (infrapolitics), and local-level governance in Malaysia.

In future research, this study recommends further exploration of the wet market community because of its qualitative nature and the limited existing studies on it. For example, conducting comparative studies between different wet markets in Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia could help identify regional differences in governance models, committee structures, and social capital. The next research area should focus on the external influences or constraints that affect vendors' businesses, especially in response to policy changes or modernization of digital

shopping. This research also recommends studying more about the perspectives of the council board (Ahli Majlis) or upper-level municipal decision-makers. These extensions could help enrich the understanding of wet market governance and offer grounded insights into the realities of development in public markets that face harsh competition with supermarkets and online shopping platforms.

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