

Community Social Capital in Malaysia: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Social capital is a vital concept in identifying resources in the social network, which has the capability to be used to improve life quality and to facilitate the society development process. It emerges in the form of individual asset and needs to be analyzed through collective lifestyle or a community. An initial process has been explored to identify social capital components. The outcome is translated into an instrument comprising of six social capital components based on survey items and past studies namely participation in community activities, proactivity in the social context, neighborhood connections, multi-racial tolerance, a sense of trust and protection, and life values. A pilot study involving 41 respondents was carried out in several neighboring areas in the northern part of Malaysia. The study results show that all six components have a high internal reliability value. These components of social capital are categorized into three levels namely low, moderate and high. The findings demonstrate that the majority of the four components are at the high level. They are participation in community activities, neighborhood connections, multi-racial tolerance, and, a sense of trust and protection whereas majority of the respondents for the components of proactivity in the social context and life values is at the moderate level.

Keywords: social capital, community, society

1. Introduction

Social capital is a concept related to the resources available in an individual or a community. It is an aspect which possesses the attributes of altruistic values shaped and utilized based on collective cooperation and benefit, that it is able to be molded at reasonable cost and with convenience, and that it has the potential to make various tasks and work easier. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), social capital is defined as “Networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups.” (OECD, 2001, p. 47; cited in Franke, 2005, p. 3). Krishna (2002) maintains that social capital serves as an individual and collective asset that can help improve the process of collective actions. Following Franke (2005), the importance of social capital can be seen when international bodies like World Bank, OECD, Asian Development Bank and Inter-American Development Bank make social capital one of the main policies due to its great potential in materializing the implementation of any given policy.

Social capital is said to have great potential when it can be adopted to identify the existing resources in the social network, and further improving life quality and ensuring that the development process can continue. Realizing this, several methods of measurement and instrument have been developed by various parties who have come to admit its potential and significance, such as the Social Capital Assessment Tool (SOCAT) produced by World Bank (Grootert & van Bastelaer, 2001, 2002), The Siena Group Social Capital Indicators (Zukewich & Norris, 2005), Australian Social Capital Framework and Indicators (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004) and General Household Survey 2005 (Office of National Statistics, United Kingdom, 2006).

Based on previous works, Lin (2001) explains that social capital is constituted by resources contained in the social network which comprises of two important components, namely (1) that it represents resources contained in social relationships, and (2) access and the use of the resources contained within the individual concerned. Knack (2002) defines social capital as a value, norm, an informal network and the membership in an association

that will leave an impact to the capacity of an individual to work and fulfill his or her general aim. Apart from that, social capital is also interpreted as a situation whereby an individual can take advantage of his or her membership in an association in the network to obtain benefit (Sobel, 2002).

Krishna (2002) states that one important thing in generating social capital measurement would be the adaptation of the measurement method with the context of the study done. He adds that, the form of indicator that will be used in the instrument produced needs to be based on the context of the study done. He disagrees with the use of standardized instrument as it is not appropriate for varying contexts of study. For instance, the instrument or the indicator produced in the context of study involving urban dwellers is said to be unsuitable for studies using rural or suburban communities. In another study, Cote and Healy (2001) propose that social capital has to be measured comprehensively covering several important dimensions which are network, values and norms, and it needs to be balanced between attitude and subjective elements in any given aspect (for instance, level of trust) with the behavioral aspects (for instance, membership in an association and the level of social relationships) in another aspect. According to them, the measurement used has to be related to the context of a given culture for behavior or attitude related to the social capital being measured (for example, surveys on a sense of trust may differ by country).

Other than that, the instrument of social capital measurement produced by most researchers is based on differing social levels namely individual (micro), community (meso) and institution (macro). Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (1997), and, Narayan and Pritchett (1997) have produced the social capital measurement instrument at the individual level (micro) using a network-based approach. Among the indicators used are the membership in Parents-Teachers Association, participation in voluntary work, conversations between parents (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 1997); the number of memberships in clubs and associations, and the level of satisfaction on a given issue (Narayan & Pritchett, 1997).

Also, there are studies done on the instrument of social capital measurement from the aspect of neighborhood connections. For instance, the study done by Mohd Yusof, Mohamad Shaharudin, Suraiya, and Abd. Hair (2011) establishes that neighborhood connections are crucial in producing a harmonious society. It can also be regarded as a determinant for the well-being of a society. This is because, through this, cooperation and unity in the community will materialize. The outcome of the study has shown that family relationships are insufficient to ensure life-long prosperity, whereas a good sense of neighborliness has been seen as being able to determine one's well-being.

Social capital is also associated with the aspect of multi-racial tolerance. According to Tesei (2011), studies on the formation of social capital in the metropolitan areas of the United States finds that social capital is low when there is an imbalance of income and racial disintegration. His work on the role of imbalance of income between races establishes that the greater the imbalance of income, the lesser the social capital. He adds that, racial disintegration is no longer significant in determining social capital when the factor of income imbalance is taken into consideration. Specifically, the study outcome shows that this imbalance can exacerbate the situation for a disintegrated society. It contributes to the fact that the sense of trust is more concentrated on the minority as compared to the majority when the disparity of income increases. Meanwhile, the study of Alesina and La Ferrara (2000) demonstrates that the participation in social activities is significantly low in the context of disunited, racially discriminatory society. It is found that individuals who voice their opinions on racial socialization have the tendency to take part in groups whose members are of different race in their community. Thus, the more the differences or diversity between residents, then the less social interactions there is.

This paper puts forth the findings of the pilot study of community's social capital based on the measurement instrument developed. It covers six dimensions namely participation in community activities, proactivity in the social context, neighborhood connections, multi-racial tolerance, a sense of trust and protection and life values.

2. Method

2.1 Sample of Study

Forty-one respondents were chosen as sample for this pilot study. They were chosen from several residential areas in the northern part of Malaysia through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was utilized for data gathering since only household leader would be able to provide information based on the questionnaire distributed. Even so, some respondents declined to participate. Therefore, random sampling technique was not suitable.

2.2 Instruments and Data Analysis

A questionnaire form was used to obtain data from the study sample. The formation of the questionnaire items was based on answers obtained from two focus group discussions done by the researcher in two residential areas in the northern part of Malaysia. The informants selected were the community gatekeepers, for example, the village heads, local leaders and those residing and being involved with activities of the community or voluntary works in the areas. The items employed in the questionnaire were formulated and adapted from previous studies namely the works of Bullen and Onyx (1998) in New South Wales, Australia and the study by Krishna (2002) in India as well as from the two focus group discussions. Based on the study conducted by Bullen and Onyx (1998), eight (8) dimensions for social capital have been identified, namely participation in the local community, proactivity in the social context, a sense of trust and protection, neighborhood connections, family and friends connections, tolerance of diversity, life values, working network. Meanwhile, based on the study done by Krishna (2002) in India, six (6) dimensions of social capital have been identified namely membership in labor-sharing groups, dealing with crop disease, dealing with natural disasters, trust, solidarity and reciprocity. Therefore, this study adopts several components that have been adapted from the works according to the suitability with the Malaysian society. The components are participation in community activities, proactivity in the social context, neighborhood connections, and multi-racial tolerance, a sense of trust and protection as well as life values. Items have been formed based on these six components.

The compilation of the data of this pilot study was conducted using a questionnaire form containing seven sections comprising of demographic information and the six aforementioned components.

There are 70 items in six components of social capital. They are divided into participation in community activities (12 items), proactivity in the social context (12 item), neighborhood connections (14 item), multi-racial tolerance (10 item), a sense of trust and protection (10 items) and also life values (12 items). The scale adopted for this study is based on the 7-point Likert scale starting from the scale of 1 which is strongly disagree up to scale of 7 which is strongly agree. The score for the overall item is categorized into three categories as follows:

Table 1. Minimum and maximum scores and distribution scores (actual value) for the dimension of social capital

Component	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Marks Distribution		
			Low	Moderate	High
1. Participation in community activities (12items)	28	84	28-46	47-65	66-84
2. Proactivity in the social context (12 items)	25	84	25-44	45-64	65-84
3. Neighborhood connections (14 items)	39	98	39-58	59-78	79-98
4. Multi-racial Tolerance (10 items)	14	70	14-32	33-51	52-70
5. Sense of trust and protection (10 items)	19	70	19-35	36-52	53-70
6. Life values (12 items)	28	84	28-46	47-65	66-84

Data gathered were analyzed descriptively using the SPSS software.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Instrument's Internal Validity

This pilot study aims at obtaining the internal validity for each component using the Cronbach's alpha value. The result of the reliability test shows that the Cronbach alpha value for every component is high which is, 0.917 for the component of participation in the community activities, 0.855 for the component of proactivity in the social context, 0.923 for the component of neighborhood connections, 0.864 for the component of multi-racial

tolerance, 0.880 for the component of sense of trust and protection, and 0.745 for the component of life values. Items were found to be easily understood by respondents.

3.2 Demographic Profile

From a total of 41 respondents, 19 respondents (46.3%) are male and 22 (53.7%) female. The item for age shows that the majority of respondents aged 40 to 44 years old, which are 12 respondents (29.3%). For the item on marital status, it is found that the majority of respondents or 31 people (75.6%) are already married. The item on race demonstrates that the majority of the respondents are Malay or 34 people (82.9%) whereas 5 (12.2%) are Chinese and the rest is Indian and others. Based on the item on religion, it is found that the majority or 34 (82.9%) respondents are Muslim and 5 (12.2%) respondents embrace Buddhism, and one (2.4%) respondent is a Hindu. Next, the item on occupation shows that the majority of respondents or 14 (34.1%) are self-employed, while 10 more (24.4%) work in the private sector, 9 (22.0%) work in the public sector and 8 (19.5%) are housewives. Based on the item on income, it is found that the highest respondents' income is RM2500 and above whereas the lowest is RM499 and below. However, it is discovered that the majority of respondents or 9 (22.0%) earned between RM 500 to RM 999. The item for the number of household shows that the majority of respondents which is 18 (43.9%) living in the household of 5 to 6 people. For the item on highest level of education, most respondents or 16 (39.0%) had completed their Malaysian Education Certificate (MCE/SPM), followed by 7 (17.1%) Lower Certificate of Education (LCE/SRP/PMR), 3 respondents (7.3%) had their Malaysian Higher School Certificate (HSC/STPM), 2 with Skills' Certificate (4.9%), 5 Diploma (12.2%), 5 Bachelor Degree (12.2%) and one completed his education with a Master's Degree (2.4%).

3.3 The Components of Social Capital

3.3.1 Participation in Community Activities

The analysis finds that the mean score of the participation of respondents in the community activities is 69.34, which is at high level. Based on Figure 1, most respondents have high level of participation in community activities which is 28 respondents (68.3%) while for moderate level of participation is 12 respondents (29.3%). Meanwhile, only one (2.4%) respondent had low level of participation in the community activities.

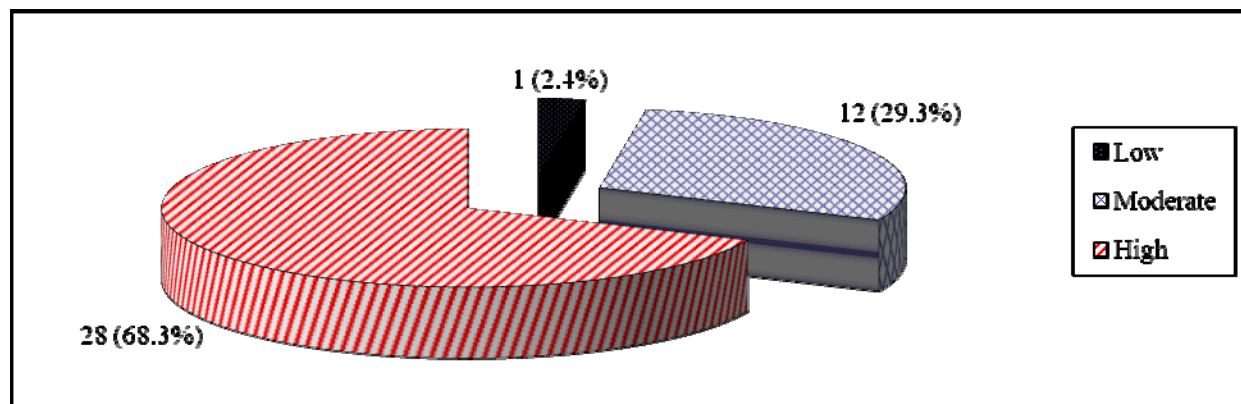


Figure 1. Level of participation in community activities

Based on the location of the neighborhood (residential and village areas) where this study was conducted, high level of participation typically portrays the reality of society life. Activities like collective cleaning, feasts and religious ceremonies are some of the common activities done by the residents in both areas. Thus, high level of participation is an expected outcome in such a social setting.

3.3.2 Proactivity in the Social Context

In terms of the proactivity in the social context, the mean score of the respondents is 63.27, which is at moderate level. Based on Figure 2, most respondents have moderate level of proactivity in the social context which is 21 respondents (51.2%) and high level of proactivity which is 19 respondents (46.3%). Meanwhile, only one (2.4%) respondent has low proactivity level in the social context.

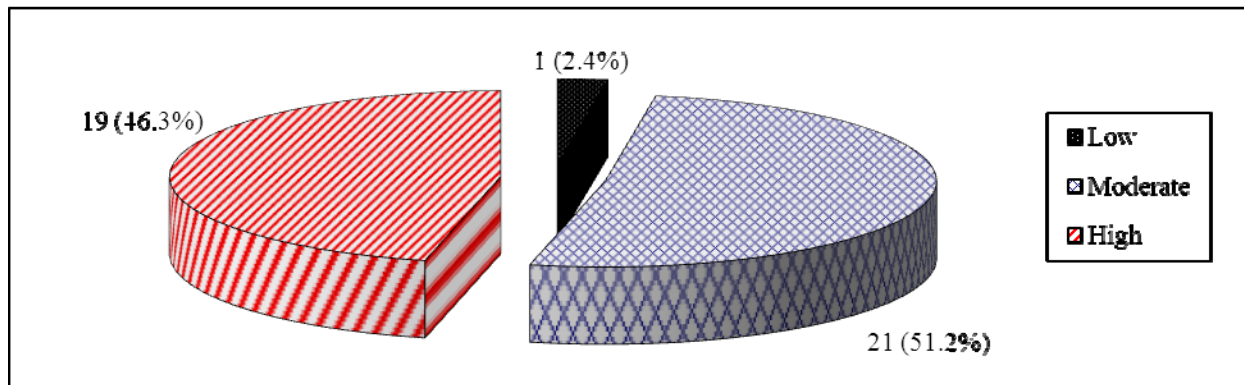


Figure 2. Level of proactivity in the social context

Unlike the participation in the community-based activities, proactivity as a construct carries an implication that leans more towards actions which require high level of concern. Thus, the moderate score noted in the study outcome in this pilot study is consistent with the common expectation for the kind of actions requiring the members of the society to take some initiatives to act, as to resolve any arising issues. However, this demonstrates that there is a positive impact by the life pattern of the community towards individuals in terms of their tendency to show a caring or altruistic attitude.

3.3.3 Neighborhood Connections

The analysis finds that the mean score for neighborhood connections of the respondents is high, which is 81.20. Figure 3 show that the majority of respondents have a high sense of neighborliness which is 27 respondents (65.9%). Other than that, 12 (29.3%) respondents have a moderate sense of neighborliness and 2 (4.9%) respondents have a low sense of neighborliness.

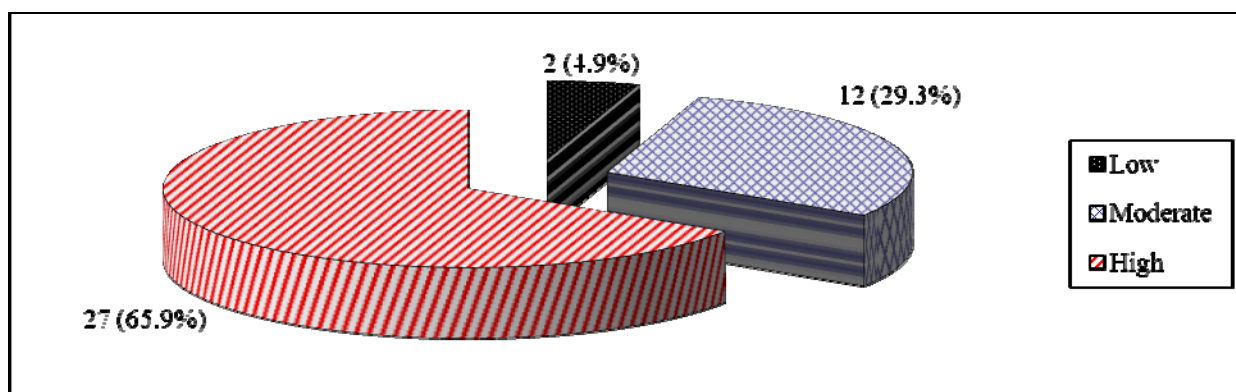


Figure 3. Level of neighborhood connections

The high score recorded in the dimension of neighborhood connections is in tandem with the high score recorded on the analysis of the participation of the community activities. In general, the community with a high sense of neighborliness has the likelihood to be involved positively in the community and community activities as a whole.

3.3.4 Multi-Racial Tolerance

The mean score for multi-racial tolerance of the respondents is high, which is 53.10. The outcome of analysis shown in Figure 4 finds that the majority of respondents which is 22 (53.7%) have high tolerance level of racial diversity and 19 respondents (46.3%) have moderate level of tolerance towards multiple races.

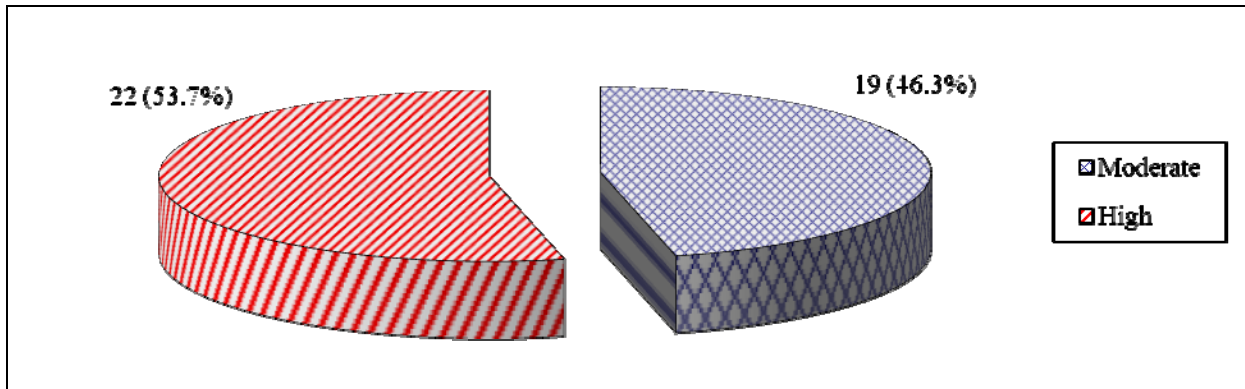


Figure 4. Level of multi-racial tolerance

The restricted social relationships owing to the different backgrounds serves to be one of the main challenges in the social life of the society in general and the generation of social capital in particular. The existence of multiple races in the setting of the community is often linked with negative elements such as discrimination and dispute stemming from the lack of understanding between races. Nonetheless, the analysis of the outcome has pointed to a positive trend demonstrated in the inter-racial relationships in the community setting being surveyed. The study findings have shown that there is a sense of readiness among the races in accepting other races at the expense in living harmoniously in a bigger society.

3.3.5 Sense of Trust and Protection

The mean score of the respondents developing this sense of trust and protection is high, which is 54.15. Based on Figure 5, most respondents have high level of trust and protection which is 24 (58.5%) while 16 respondents are at the moderate level (39.0%). Only one (2.4%) respondent has a low level of trust and sense of protection.

A sense of trust is a concept that is most frequently mentioned as the primary component of social capital. The majority representing high and moderate scores show that these two feelings are the main outcomes for community-oriented lifestyle. The outcome of this analysis is in line with the sentiment shown in the focus discussion that was conducted earlier. Among the factors mentioned by the respondents which can help support this findings are the striking proximity of the houses in the residential area. Due to this close proximity, they feel more secure and more confident when they happen to be in the area alone. With the existence of trust and sense of protection, there is a probability that there exists a social capital investment in the community concerned.

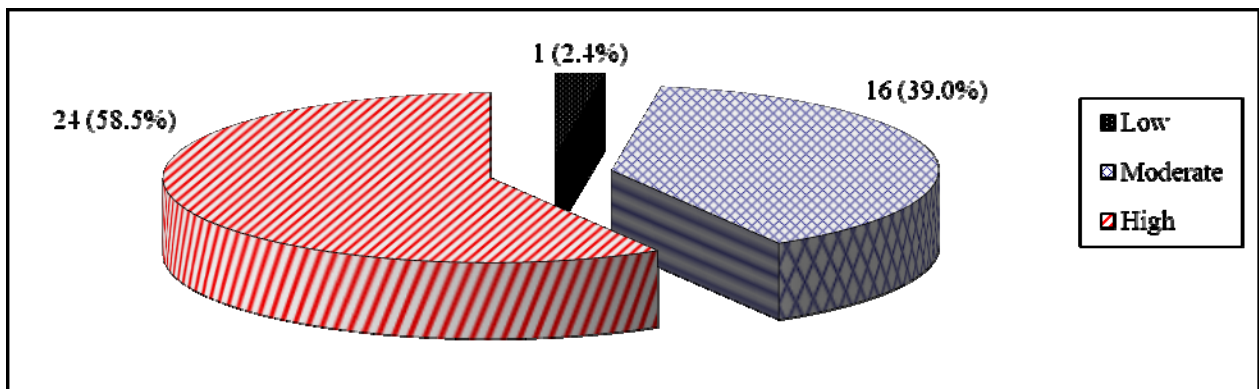


Figure 5. Level of sense of trust and protection

3.3.6 Life Values

Based on life values component, the mean score of the respondents is seen to be at moderate level, which is 62.63. Looking at Figure 6, it is found that the majority of respondents have moderate level of life values which is 20 (48.8%) and high level of life values which consist of 19 respondents (46.3%). The remaining 2 respondents (4.9%) have low level of life values.

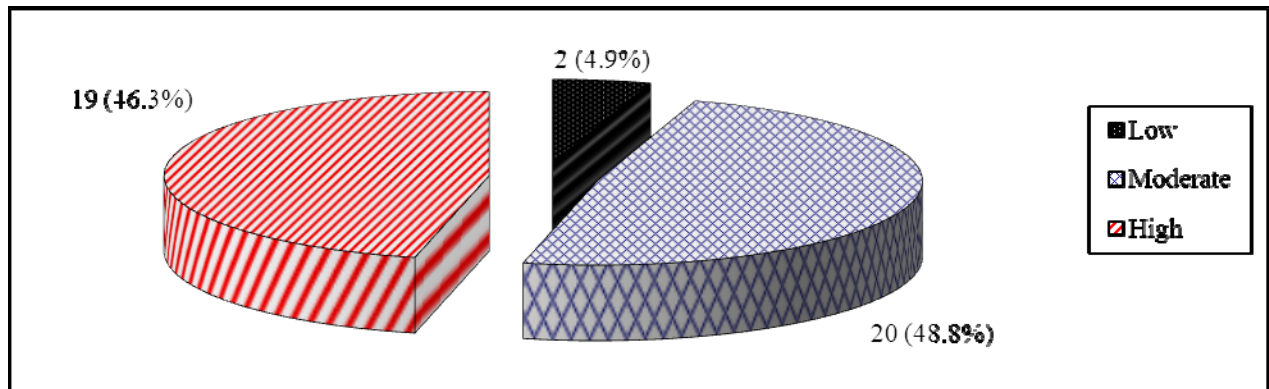


Figure 6. Level of life values

This component refers to one of the impacts of the presence of social capital, denoted by the feeling that one has upon realizing that life will be more meaningful if people always take care of each other. This refers to the characteristics of social capital that is related to one's self-esteem when he or she is appreciated or valued by others. Individuals who think positively about life will be more open about contributing their energy to community activities and also are more concerned with the charity of others. This will occur when the surrounding is enriched with social capital investment. Community with social capital has the capacity to create positive attitude and this is followed by positive actions.

4. Conclusion

Two main findings can be concluded from this pilot study. Firstly, the test on the instrument shaped to measure the community's social capital has shown a positive outcome. Based on the scores aforementioned, the instrument of this study has shown high level of reliability. Six dimensions or components of social capital involved in the instrument have been tested and they have produced satisfactory reliability scores. Secondly, the study has produced a significant finding for the purpose of measuring the social capital of the community in this country. Most of the dimensions of the social capital measured demonstrate that there exists high tendency for the community life setting to generate high social capital. This includes one's participation with the community, caring, inter-racial relationships, sense of neighborhood, a sense of trust and perception on life values. Nevertheless, since this is only a pilot study that utilized a small number of respondents, generalizations should be treated with caution.

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