



## Adaptation Strategies and Fishermen's Welfare: Local Wisdom in the Informal Economy in Jaring Halus Village, Langkat

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### ABSTRACT

*Although local wisdom is often romanticized as a pure communal asset, its dual role as both a survival mechanism and an instrument of structural reproduction within the informal economy has rarely been theorized in depth. This study aims to address this research gap by analyzing how local wisdom functions as social capital and a socio-economic adaptation mechanism for informal fishermen in Jaring Halus Village, Langkat. Using a qualitative meta-synthesis approach, this study systematically integrates findings from 25 reputable academic articles to construct a more robust sociological framework. The findings reveal that while local wisdom provides a crucial social safety net—functioning as an informal “community bank” and social insurance, this practice simultaneously reinforces structural inequality through an exploitative patron-client system. Analysis through the lens of Anthony Giddens’s theory of Structuration and Pierre Bourdieu’s Social Capital demonstrates that symbolic capital within local traditions is used to legitimize the dominance of capital owners over fishing laborers. From a development sociology perspective, this study concludes that inclusive coastal development must go beyond normative approaches by critically addressing the power inequalities hidden behind the local wisdom framework in order to achieve multidimensional well-being.*

**Keywords:** *Informal Economy, Local Wisdom, Social Capital, Fishermen’s Welfare, Sustainable Development.*

### ABSTRAK

Meskipun kearifan lokal sering dipandang secara romantis sebagai aset komunal yang murni, peran gandanya sebagai mekanisme bertahan hidup sekaligus instrumen reproduksi struktural dalam ekonomi informal masih jarang dikaji secara mendalam. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengisi kesenjangan penelitian tersebut dengan menganalisis bagaimana kearifan lokal berfungsi sebagai modal sosial dan mekanisme adaptasi sosial-ekonomi bagi nelayan informal di Desa Jaring Halus, Langkat. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan meta-sintesis kualitatif, penelitian ini secara sistematis mengintegrasikan temuan dari 25 artikel akademik bereputasi untuk membangun kerangka sosiologis yang lebih kuat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kearifan lokal menyediakan jaring pengaman sosial yang penting berfungsi sebagai “bank komunitas” informal dan asuransi sosial praktik tersebut secara bersamaan juga memperkuat ketimpangan struktural melalui sistem patron-klien yang eksploitatif. Analisis melalui perspektif teori Strukturasi Anthony Giddens dan Modal Sosial Pierre Bourdieu menunjukkan bahwa modal simbolik dalam tradisi lokal digunakan untuk melegitimasi dominasi pemilik modal terhadap buruh nelayan. Dari perspektif sosiologi pembangunan, penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pembangunan pesisir yang inklusif harus melampaui pendekatan normatif dengan secara kritis mengatasi ketimpangan kekuasaan yang tersembunyi di balik kerangka kearifan lokal guna



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mencapai kesejahteraan multidimensional.

**Kata Kunci:** Ekonomi Informal, Kearifan Lokal, Modal Sosial, Kesejahteraan Nelayan, Pembangunan Berkelanjutan.

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## 1. Introduction

The fisheries sector is a strategic pillar that shapes the social and economic identity of coastal communities in Indonesia, with a steadily increasing contribution to the fisheries Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which reached Rp 302.4 trillion in 2023. As of 2024, this sector supports the livelihoods of more than 2.4 million fishermen and fish farmers across Indonesia (Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, 2024). Despite fluctuations in the number of household fishermen, this sector remains a primary pillar for national food security and economic adaptation strategies in coastal regions such as Langkat Regency.

The concept of the informal economy, introduced by Keith Hart in 1974, describes the private sector operating outside the boundaries of the state, while Hernando de Soto (2000) explains it as a collection of intangible assets subject to bureaucracy, or what he calls "dead capital." In the Jaring Halus area, Secanggang District, Langkat, informal operations are not a major part of daily life; rather, they involve structural adaptation strategies to minimize social and financial pressures. Seasonal dependence on catches and the patron-client wage system require fishing households to continuously maintain themselves and preserve sustainability mechanisms.

According to this, local wisdom is very important and has a positive psychological impact. Local wisdom in fishing communities includes ecological knowledge about seasonal patterns and fishing areas, as well as social practices such as arisan systems for traditional products, or kinship-based lending mechanisms as social capital that reaches its full potential (Bourdieu, 1986). This social capital creates informal social networks that balance formal institutions (banking, insurance, and labor unions) that are not easily accessible to local communities. Local wisdom is an asset of resilience in the perspective of development sociology, which enables communities to work together to support economic and ecological development, thereby reducing their multidimensional poverty.

However, the impact of Indonesian construction studies is consistently seen in observing this situation. Top-down modernization efforts tend to weaken or even destroy social structures based on local knowledge, treating informality as a problem to be solved rather than a reality to be organized and evaluated. This has the potential to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those related to no poverty (SDG 1) and environmental conservation (SDG 14), which are crucial for the participation and resilience of local communities.

This study is based on the background mentioned above. Through literature analysis, this study aims to analyze in detail how local wisdom functions as a social regulation mechanism and economic adaptation strategy in the informal sector of Jaring Halus, and how this contributes to improving their socioeconomic stability. The main questions that describe this research are: how does local wisdom influence fishermen's strategies in the informal economy, and how can recognition of local assets improve coastal development formulas in Indonesia? By answering these questions, it is hoped that this research can provide valuable academic and practical contributions to development sociology.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **a. Informal Economy and Adaptation in the Coastal Sector**

The informal economy is not merely a residual sector operating outside the state's reach, but rather a complex arena of adaption. Drawing on Keith Hart's (1973) framework, informality in the Jaring Halus reflects operational autonomy amid the failure of formal institutions to provide a safety net for fisherman. However, this highlights Hernando de Soto (2000) perspective, which views informality as "dead capital", assets lacking legal recognition that hinder broader capital accumulation. Critically, contemporary development must recognize that the informal economy in the Langkat coastal region is not merely a technical bureaucratic issue, but the result of structural exclusion that forces communities to create their own rules to survive (Sutinah, 2022).

The informal economy contributes to fishing communities in terms of customer-client relationships (such as contracts between ship owners and crew) based on legal work, unreliable distribution systems and markets, and income that requires flexible adaptation strategies for businesses. Adaptation strategies not only increase diversity in the workplace but also manage risk through social media.

### **b. Local Wisdom as Social Capital: Pierre Bourdieu's Perspective**

The application of Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital in this study goes beyond a simple definition of reciprocity. Social capita; in Jaring Halus Village is analyzed as an accumulation of resources embedded within group networks that provide access to economic support through trust and mutual recognition. In the context of the Jaring Halus village, local wisdom is embedded in beneficial social networks such as:

- i. Trust Capital: Kinship networks and fishing groups build trust that enables quick loans based on a sense of brotherhood (replacing formal economic capital) and a mutually agreed profit-sharing system.
- ii. Social Control Mechanisms: customary rules on fishing (e.g., prohibitions during certain seasons) function as communal regulations that limit resource exploitation. This is a manifestation of social capital that maintains the sustainability of natural capital, which is fundamentally important for the community's survival.

However, analytically speaking, social capital does not operate in a power vacuum. In the field of informal fisheries, social capital (in the form kinship networks) is often converted into economic capital by the employers. Here, local wisdom such as the traditional profit-sharing system functions as symbolic capital that legitimizes the boat owners dominance over the fishing laborers. This explains why, although fishermen possess strong social networks, their bargaining power remains structurally weak due to inequalities in the ownership of cultural and economic capital (Setiawan, 2024).

### **c. Multidimensional Welfare and Criticism of Coastal Development**

Criticism of coastal development often focuses solely on monetary indicators (per capita income) and overlooks multidimensional well-being, which encompasses social security and resource sustainability. Top-down, technocratic development tends to view local wisdom as an obstacle to modernization. Sociologically, this disregard for social capital and local ecological knowledge actually increases the vulnerability of coastal communities to external shocks. The coherence of the arguments in this section underscores that inclusive development can only be achieved if state interventions are able to accommodate informal social structures without imposing formalities that destroy existing local resilience systems (Muhamad, 2023).

However, this literature review also needs to offer criticism of development. Formal development interventions (such as certification programmes or fishing gear assistance) are generally necessary because

they address existing informal and social structures. This may be due to the government's inability to recognize the value of local wisdom, which increases the structural vulnerability of fishermen and hinders the achievement of development goals. Consequently, this study emphasizes the importance of theoretical understanding and considers potential issues (e.g. inequality within the patron-client system) that arise in local practices.

### **3. Research Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach, using the qualitative meta-synthesis method. This method was chosen to integrate narrative and thematic findings from various primary studies, generating stronger theoretical propositions regarding fishermen's adaptation strategies. Unlike traditional descriptive literature reviews, this meta-synthesis reinterprets existing data to construct a new conceptual framework. To ensure transparency and replicability, the literature search process adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol. A combination of keywords was used to conduct the search in reputable databases (Scopus, Sinta, and Google Scholar): 'informal economy', 'local wisdom', 'social capital', 'fishermen's welfare', and 'coastal development'. The established inclusion criteria are: Articles published between 2021 and 2026 to ensure the literature's relevance. Studies focusing on informal fishing communities, particularly in Southeast Asia or Indonesia, that share characteristics with *Jaring Halus*. Additionally, we included journal articles resulting from empirical research or critical theoretical reviews that had undergone peer review.

The initial search yielded 92 articles after their screening stages (title, abstract and full text), 25 articles were selected for synthesis. Data validity was ensured through peer debriefing and by checking the consistency of findings across the literature to minimize publication bias. Data analysis was conducted through the following stages:

1. Reading and re-reading: Understanding the sociological context of each selected study.
2. Determining relationships: Identifying the interconnections between local wisdom, social capital and power structures.
3. Translating studies: Translating concepts from one study to another in order to identify patterns of domination and resilience.
4. Synthesizing: Creating a final synthesis using the theoretical perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu (social capital) and Anthony Giddens (structuration)

As a form of methodological transparency, this study also acknowledges the limitations of the literature review method used, such as the potential for publication bias, limited access to empirical field data, and the dominance of English-language literature, which may influence the interpretation of the local context. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to serve as a conceptual basis for further research with an empirical approach in coastal areas of Indonesia, particularly in efforts to strengthen understanding of local wisdom and socio-economic adaptation strategies of fishing communities in the informal sector.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

#### **a. Social capital as a collective “safety net” in the informal sector**

A meta-synthesis analysis indicates that the *Jaring Halus* community's limited access to formal institutions compels them to draw upon local wisdom social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Contrary to common assumptions, this adaptation strategy relies not on digital networks, but in offline social networks based on kinship and reciprocity. These findings confirm that local wisdom functions as:

1. Informal Community Bank: A system of peer-to-peer lending among fishermen and traditional savings groups that provides quick liquidity without formal collateral.
2. Social insurance: A reciprocity network that ensures or catches failures.
3. Risk mitigation: livelihood diversification through utilizing local talent to process marine by-products.

#### **b. Structural Criticism: The Reproduction of Domination in Social Practices**

Although social capital provides resilience, Anthony Giddens (1984) Theory of Structuration reveals that these practices also reproduce structural inequalities. The patron-client system embedded in local wisdom, such as traditional profit sharing, serves as a form of signification and legitimation that reinforces the dominance of capital owners (boat owners) over fishing labourers. In this context, the agents (fishermen) unconsciously continue to reproduce the structures that impoverish them through debt dependency and symbolic capital, which has become a tradition and is often used to justify the disproportionate distribution of profits, where the employer's prestige as a "protector" obscures the economic exploitation that takes place. As a result, local wisdom in this region has two functions: first, as a source of resilience, and second, as a tool for determining stratification and poverty at the sub-class level of fishermen.

#### **c. Development Perspective: Towards Multidimensional Well-being**

The assertion that local systems are frequently more effective than state regulations is reinforced by the shortcomings of top-down, technocratic development initiatives. Formal policies often fail because they cannot account for the complexities of the informal economy, which relies heavily on local ecological knowledge.

In line with SDG 14 (Life Below Water), the traditional fishing zones of Jaring Halus have proven more effective in safeguarding resource sustainability than the government's command-and-control system, which lacks on-the-ground oversight. For coastal development in Langkat to be inclusive, however, the government must act as a facilitator, strengthening the positive aspects of social capital (resilience) and implementing policy interventions to break the chain of exploitation within the local patronage system.

The contextual neglect of social and natural capital forms the basis for development. Ultimately, this will only increase the vulnerability of fishermen to structural change. This is because local wisdom is not used as a productive element, but rather as folklore or a tool for modernization. Therefore, in order for coastal development in Langkat to be inclusive and achieve multidimensional welfare goals, there needs to be a formal workspace and guidelines on effective local wisdom practices to ensure resource sustainability and communal resilience.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study concludes that the local wisdom of Jaring Halus Village in Langkat Regency is not a static cultural entity, but rather a sociological instrument that plays a dual role in sustaining the informal livelihoods of fishermen. Through qualitative meta-synthesis analysis, the study successfully demonstrated that local wisdom effectively operates as social capital (Bourdieu), functioning as a social insurance mechanism and an informal 'community bank' for groups of fishermen who are excluded from formal state institutions. In the face of economic vulnerability and ecological crises, these offline social networks, which are rooted in trust and kinship, serve as the primary pillars of coastal communities' resilience. They enable communities to survive through emergency lending systems and communal risk-sharing.

However, this study also makes a critical contribution by revealing the dark side of the use of such local wisdom. Using Anthony Giddens' Theory of Structuration as a lens, it was found that these traditional practices simultaneously serve to reproduce structural domination. The patron–client system, deeply embedded in traditional profit-sharing rules and debt–credit ties, is not just an economic issue, but also a means of signification and legitimisation that perpetuates social stratification. Here, symbolic capital in the form of the employer's prestige and status as a 'protector' is often used to justify the disproportionate distribution of profits, thereby subtly persuading the labourers to remain within a structure that impoverishes them.

The novelty of this study lies in its deconstruction of the romanticized view of local wisdom in coastal development. This research asserts that adaptation strategies in the informal sector are not power-neutral; they are an arena where resilience and exploitation are closely intertwined. This finding has important implications for the sociology of development: future policy interventions, including efforts to achieve SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 1 (No Poverty), must not focus solely on technical assistance or administrative formalities.

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