

Surviving the City's Margin: Livelihood Strategies of the Urban Poor in Tallo, Makassar

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Abstract

Urban poverty in slum areas represents one of the most pressing social challenges facing major cities in Indonesia. Tallo District, Makassar City, is characterized by a population density of 13,930 people per square kilometer, a predominance of the informal economic sector, and limited access to basic services. This study examines the livelihood strategies employed by the poor in this area as a means of surviving amid economic pressures and structural urban inequality. A qualitative approach with a case study design was adopted. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observation, and documentary research involving five informants selected purposively on the basis of economic vulnerability and length of residence in the Tallo slum area. Data analysis followed a thematic analysis model interpreted through two theoretical frameworks: the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (Chambers & Conway) and quiet encroachment of the ordinary (Bayat). The findings reveal four complementary livelihood strategies: engagement in the informal economic sector; utilization of social networks grounded in community solidarity; women's dual roles as household managers and income earners, and appropriation of government social assistance programs whose distribution remains uneven. These four strategies form an integrated and mutually sustaining livelihood system. The findings affirm that the urban poor in Tallo are adaptive and creative social actors, not a passive group. This study contributes to understanding urban poverty dynamics in Eastern Indonesia and offers recommendations for local governments to design poverty alleviation programs that are more inclusive and responsive to the real needs of communities.

Keywords: livelihood strategies, urban poverty, slum areas, community solidarity, Makassar City

Introduction

Urbanization is one of the most defining social phenomena shaping life in the 21st century. In developing countries, including Indonesia, the rate of population migration from rural to urban areas is occurring at a pace that outstrips cities' capacity to provide employment opportunities, adequate housing, and basic infrastructure (Harahap, 2013; Istyawan, 2025). As a result, urbanization not only generates urban growth but also exacerbates social inequality and expands marginalized urban areas inhabited by impoverished populations. Urban poverty has thus become an increasingly pressing structural issue that demands deeper understanding, not merely as an economic phenomenon, but also as a complex social reality (Hadijah & Sadali, 2020).

The city of Makassar, as the economic growth hub of Eastern Indonesia, is experiencing significant urbanization pressure. According to data from Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) Kota Makassar, the city's population reached 1,485,077 in 2025, with an average density of 8,362 people per square kilometer. Although Makassar's Human Development Index (HDI) was recorded at a relatively high level of 85.66 in 2025, poverty remains a tangible challenge. The poverty rate in 2025 stood at 4.43 percent, representing approximately 71,630 individuals, with a poverty line set at IDR 610,536 per capita per month. Furthermore, Makassar's Open Unemployment Rate (OUR) reached 9.60 percent (BPS Kota Makassar, 2026), a figure that reflects the limited access of vulnerable groups to formal employment. This situation illustrates a development paradox: while the city grows rapidly on one hand, social inequality continues to widen on the other.

Among the various districts in Makassar, Tallo District most visibly embodies the face of urban poverty. With a population of 148,078 and a density of 13,930 people per square kilometer, Tallo ranks among the most densely populated areas in Makassar (BPS Kota Makassar, 2026). The area is characterized by dense slum settlements, limited access to basic services, and a predominance of the informal economic sector as the primary livelihood for the majority of its residents. These conditions make Tallo a relevant locus for understanding how the urban poor survive and adapt amid persistent structural pressures (Mardjuni et al., 2023).

The fundamental problem that serves as the starting point of this study is how the urban poor in Tallo District sustain and maintain their daily lives amidst economic inequality and structural constraints (Tahir G et al., 2025). This question is significant because the urban poor are often perceived as passive social burdens, whereas field realities suggest otherwise. They are active, creative, and adaptive social actors in responding to existing conditions. A more comprehensive understanding of their livelihood strategies is not only academically important, but also crucial for the formulation of more inclusive and responsive policies (Taun & Giffari, 2025).

To examine this issue, the study employs two complementary analytical frameworks. First, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF), developed by Chambers and Conway, which conceptualizes livelihood as the ability of individuals or groups to manage assets and capabilities in order to cope with pressures and shocks while sustaining long-term survival. This framework opens up analytical space for examining the various forms of capital possessed and utilized by the poor, encompassing human, social, physical, financial, and natural capital (Chambers & Conway, 1992). Second, the concept of the Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary, introduced by Asef Bayat, which describes how marginalized urban groups quietly yet consistently engage in everyday practices as a form of resistance and adaptation against social structures that are not in their favor. The combination of these two frameworks enables the study to view livelihood strategies not merely as economic responses, but also as socially meaningful practices (Bayat, 2000, 2013).

This study aims to examine in depth the livelihood strategies employed by the poor in Tallo District, Makassar City, as a means of surviving amid economic pressures and structural urban inequality. Specifically, the study traces residents' engagement in the informal economic sector, the utilization of social networks grounded in community solidarity, the dual roles of women within households, and the community's relationship with government social assistance programs. In doing so, this study is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of urban poverty in Eastern Indonesia, while also providing policy recommendations for local governments in designing poverty alleviation programs that are more inclusive and grounded in the real needs of the community.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the study is oriented toward a deep understanding of the lived experiences and social practices of the urban poor, which cannot be reduced to numerical data alone (Creswell, 2017). The case study design allows for an in-depth focus on Tallo District as a representation of urban slum areas in Eastern Indonesia.

The study was conducted in Tallo District, Makassar City, over a two-month period from October to November 2025. The selection of this location was based on three considerations: (1) it has the highest population density among all districts in Makassar; (2) it contains a significant concentration of slum settlements; and (3) the informal sector dominates the economic structure of its residents. Informants were selected purposively based on criteria of economic limitation and length of residence in the area, with five informants determined in accordance with the principle of qualitative data sufficiency (Sugiyono, 2013).

Data collection was carried out through three complementary techniques: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews to openly explore informants' survival strategies; (2) field observation to examine the physical conditions of settlements and patterns of daily economic activity; and (3) documentary research comprising statistical data, government reports, and policies related to poverty in Makassar City. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis model (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through the stages of initial coding, theme clustering, and interpretation within the theoretical frameworks employed. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking with informants (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Results and Discussion

• Informant Profiles

This study involved five informants selected purposively based on two primary criteria: economic vulnerability and length of residence in the slum area of Tallo District, Makassar City. The five informants consisted of both male and female participants with diverse occupational backgrounds, all of whom are engaged in the informal economic sector. Their occupations include fisherman, daily laborer, small-scale trader, and homemaker who simultaneously seek supplementary income. A complete profile of the informants is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Research Informant Profiles

No	Initial	Gender	Age	Occupation	Length of Residence	Criteria
1	Ibu NL	Female	42 years	Homemaker / Laundry Worker	± 20 years	Slum resident, economically vulnerable
2	Pak AD	Male	47 years	Daily Laborer / odd-job worker	± 25 years	Slum resident, economically vulnerable
3	Ibu AS	Female	38 years	Small-scale trader/ Homemaker	± 15 years	Slum resident, economically vulnerable
4	Ibu SL	Female	44 years	Homemaker / odd-job laborer	± 18 years	Slum resident, economically vulnerable
5	Pak SP	Male	51 years	Fisherman	± 30 years	Slum resident, economically vulnerable

Source: Field Data, 2025

As shown in the table above, all informants have resided in Tallo District for more than 15 years. This means they are not merely familiar with the area from the outside, but have personally experienced its various economic pressures and structural limitations over many years. The composition of informants,

comprising both male and female participants, also reflects the reality on the ground, where women do not only fulfill domestic roles but are also actively involved in sustaining family livelihoods.

- **Research Findings**

- 1. Engagement in the Informal Economic Sector**

The first and most prominent finding is that all informants depend entirely on the informal economic sector for their livelihoods. None of them holds a permanent job with a reliable monthly income. Their work is irregular, coming and going according to availability, not by choice. This situation did not arise suddenly; rather, it is a direct consequence of limited educational attainment, insufficient capital, and narrow access to the formal labor market. Pak AD, who has worked as a daily laborer for decades in Tallo, described his daily reality:

"Most people here do odd jobs, sometimes bricklaying, sometimes carrying goods at the port. It's not steady, but as long as we can eat, right." (Pak AD, field interview, 2025)

The phrase *"as long as we can eat"* sounds simple, yet it carries profound meaning. Work is no longer about career advancement or self-development, it is solely about ensuring there is food on the table today. This is what is referred to as a subsistence orientation: surviving from day to day without the capacity to plan for the distant future. Ibu SL shared a remarkably similar experience:

"We have no fixed salary here, today there's work, tomorrow there isn't. Sometimes my husband goes fishing, but when it's not fish season, he looks for other work, whatever he can find." (Ibu SL, field interview, 2025)

For fishing families like Pak SP's, the challenge is even greater. Uncertainty is not only about whether work is available, but also about weather and seasons beyond one's control:

"During the west monsoon, we can't go out to sea, sometimes two or three weeks with no income at all. That's the hardest part. What do we eat? Fortunately, the neighbors help out." (Pak SP, field interview, 2025)

What is striking across all three accounts is that the informants do not stop or give up in the face of this uncertainty. They keep moving, searching for available work, shifting from one type of job to another, and adapting to ever-changing conditions. Within the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) of Chambers and Conway, this is understood as the adaptive capacity of the poor in managing their available assets (Chambers & Conway, 1992). The primary capital relied upon by the poor in Tallo is human capital, their physical labor and practical skills. When financial capital is absent and physical assets are unavailable, their bodies and competencies become the very tools of survival.

Beyond this, their persistence in the informal sector can also be read through Asef Bayat's lens of quiet encroachment of the ordinary (Bayat, 2013). The urban poor in Tallo do not march in protest demanding formal employment. They do not challenge the system. They simply show up every day, seek out whatever work is available, and fill the economic gaps of a city that has never formally made room for them. Quietly yet consistently, they carve out economic space for themselves. Data from the Makassar City in Numbers 2026 publication indicates that the Open Unemployment Rate in Makassar reached 9.60 percent in 2025 (BPS Kota Makassar, 2026), a figure that provides critical context for understanding why access to the formal sector remains so narrow for vulnerable groups such as the residents of Tallo.

- 2. Utilization of Social Networks Grounded in Community Solidarity**

The second finding reveals that social networks constitute an irreplaceable livelihood asset for the poor in Tallo. In the absence of formal safety nets and amid income instability, residents systematically rely on informal reciprocity networks to buffer themselves against economic shocks. These networks, built upon kinship ties, neighborly proximity, and shared experiences of poverty, function as an informal insurance system that enables households to endure even the most difficult periods. Ibu NL described how this reciprocity operates in everyday practice:

"When things are really hard and there's no rice, we usually borrow from a neighbor first, and pay it back when we have something, that's just how it is here, we help each other, because without that, we couldn't survive." (Ibu NL, field interview, 2025)

This account reveals the normative logic underlying social solidarity in Tallo. Reciprocity is understood as deferred exchange, not charity. The expectation that assistance will be returned, *"pay it back when we have something"* preserves the dignity of both parties while sustaining the functionality of the network over time. Ibu AS further elaborates this dynamic by explaining how kinship ties extend the reach and reliability of these networks:

"Most people here are all family, cousins, aunts, nephews, so when someone is struggling, everyone pitches in. That's what keeps us going here, even when times are hard." (Ibu AS, field interview, 2025)

Beyond material assistance, social networks also serve as a vital channel for accessing economic opportunities. Pak AD explained how job information circulates informally within the community:

"If there's work, a friend usually tells you, there's a construction project over there, let's go together. That's really how we find work, word of mouth, not through the internet or anything like that." (Pak AD, field interview, 2025)

The role of social networks as described above corresponds directly to what the SLF identifies as social capital, the relationships, networks, and norms of reciprocity that communities draw upon to pursue livelihood outcomes. In Tallo, social capital compensates for the near-total absence of financial and physical capital, functioning as the primary buffer against absolute poverty. The strength of this social capital is rooted in spatial proximity and historical co-habitation, families who have lived side by side for decades have built webs of obligation and trust that are difficult to replicate in more mobile communities.

From the perspective of quiet encroachment theory (Bayat, 2013), the maintenance of social solidarity networks represents a collective practice, albeit informal and unorganized of persisting in the city. This is not protest, nor is it organized resistance; it is something quieter and more pervasive: the everyday reproduction of communal bonds that enables marginalized households to survive in a city that has formally failed to accommodate them. Each act of borrowing rice, sharing job information, or offering temporary shelter constitutes a micro-level assertion of communal belonging and a practical refusal of the atomistic individualism that the formal urban economy tends to produce.

3. Women's Dual Roles as Household Managers and Income Earners

The third finding highlights the centrality of women's labor in sustaining household livelihoods. The female informants in this study do not conform to the image of passive domestic figures often assumed in discussions of urban poverty. On the contrary, they simultaneously function as caregivers, household managers, and economic actors, a dual burden that is formally unrecognized yet materially indispensable to family survival. These dual roles are not a matter of free choice, but rather a structural response to the insufficiency of male income in households dependent on informal, seasonal, and irregular work. Ibu SL described her daily routine in a way that reveals just how inseparable domestic and economic labor are in her life:

"I usually start cooking early in the morning, and once that's done, I go to wash and iron other people's clothes. If I make fifty thousand rupiah a day, I'm already grateful, that's the extra money for the children's snacks or school fees." (Ibu SL, field interview, 2025)

Her framing of this income as "extra money" is telling. It reflects a social norm that positions women's economic contributions as supplementary, when in reality these contributions are essential to household functioning. This discursive marginalization of women's labor obscures its actual significance. Ibu AS, who runs a small food stall in front of her home, revealed a similar pattern:

"I sell snacks in front of the house, the capital is small. Sometimes I also leave some with the neighbors to sell. Twenty to thirty thousand rupiah a day is decent enough, better than nothing, right." (Ibu AS, field interview, 2025)

In Ibu AS's case, the integration of social networks into her economic strategy is also clearly evident, she distributes her goods through neighbors, effectively expanding her market reach without any additional capital. This represents a creative combination of social capital and entrepreneurial initiative characteristic of informal economic actors. Ibu NL's economic involvement extends even further, into domains conventionally coded as male work:

"When my husband comes back from fishing, I usually help sell the fish at the market, because he needs to rest and get ready to go out to sea again. So I'm the one who handles the sales, it's better that way, we get more than if buyers came here to pick it up." (Ibu NL, field interview, 2025)

Ibu NL's involvement in fish marketing demonstrates that gender-based divisions of labor in slum households are pragmatic rather than ideological, when necessity demands it, women take on roles beyond the domestic sphere without institutional recognition or commensurate compensation. Within the SLF framework, women's dual roles represent the maximization of human capital under conditions of severe constraint (Chambers & Conway, 1992). Women deploy their time, energy, relational skills, and practical

knowledge across both reproductive and productive domains simultaneously, effectively doubling household labor output without doubling formal income.

Bayat's framework extends this analysis further. The quiet expansion of women into economic roles, working without formal employment contracts, without collective bargaining, without public recognition, constitutes a gendered form of quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2000). It is an encroachment upon economic spaces that patriarchal norms typically reserve for men, achieved through incremental daily practices rather than explicit claims. This gendered dimension of quiet encroachment has been insufficiently theorized in the existing literature and represents one of this study's contributions to the broader application of Bayat's concept.

4. The Unequal Distribution of Government Social Assistance

The fourth finding reveals that government social assistance programs, most notably the Family Hope Program (*Program Keluarga Harapan*/PKH) and the subsidized food staples program (*program sembako*), constitute a structural component of livelihood portfolios in Tallo, though their distribution is marked by significant unevenness that limits their effectiveness as poverty alleviation instruments. For many households, these programs function as a last line of defense against absolute poverty, particularly during periods when informal income collapses due to illness, adverse weather, or economic downturns. Ibu AS described the extent of reliance on social assistance in her community:

"Most people in my neighborhood here receive assistance, some PKH, some sembako. It's because even just eating is hard. Without the assistance, I honestly don't know where else we'd turn." (Ibu AS, field interview, 2025)

The phrase *"I don't know where else we'd turn"* underscores the degree to which social assistance has become structurally embedded in the survival calculus of slum households. This is not dependency in any pejorative sense, but rather a rational response to a system that has failed to provide viable formal employment alternatives. Pak SP, whose income as a fisherman is inherently seasonal, elaborated on how social assistance functions as a temporal bridge:

"During the seasons when we can't go out to sea, that's what we rely on, the assistance. It's a blessing the government has these programs. But sometimes the disbursement is delayed, so we're forced to take credit at the warung first, and pay it off once the assistance comes through." (Pak SP, field interview, 2025)

Pak SP's account exposes an important structural gap: even when social assistance exists in principle, disbursement delays force households into informal credit networks with local shop owners. Social assistance programs thus generate a secondary dependency on community-level credit networks, further illustrating how formal and informal survival mechanisms are inextricably interwoven in the daily lives of the poor. Pak AD, however, raised a more critical concern regarding the accuracy of targeting mechanisms:

"What puzzles me is that some of my neighbors receive assistance but own decent motorbikes, while others who are genuinely struggling aren't even in the data. That feels really unfair, it should be those who truly need it who get it." (Pak AD, field interview, 2025)

Pak AD's observation points to a long-documented problem in Indonesian social assistance delivery: a persistent mismatch between official poverty data and lived economic realities. This mismatch arises from data collection methodologies that rely on static asset proxies rather than dynamic income assessments, producing both inclusion and exclusion errors simultaneously. As a result, as Pak AD's account illustrates, a sense of injustice takes root, one that erodes community cohesion and trust in government programs.

Within the SLF framework, social assistance programs function as financial capital, external resource transfers that can supplement household asset bases. However, the effectiveness of this capital transfer is compromised by distributional unevenness and institutional weaknesses in data management. From Bayat's perspective, the active pursuit by slum residents of social assistance registration, despite bureaucratic complexity and unreliable targeting, represents yet another form of quiet encroachment: a deliberate, if individually enacted, effort to access state resources that residents understand to be rightfully theirs. The acts of registering, following up, and navigating bureaucratic processes constitute low-level yet persistent claims upon the state, exercised not through protest but through the patient utilization of available channels.

• Discussion: Livelihood Strategies as an Integrated System

The four livelihood strategies identified in this study, informal economic engagement, utilization of social networks, women's dual roles, and the appropriation of social assistance should not be understood as

discrete, self-contained mechanisms. Rather, they form an integrated and mutually reinforcing system, built and reproduced by the urban poor in Tallo over decades of living under structurally disadvantageous conditions.

The informal sector functions as the primary economic foundation of this system, generating basic income, however irregular and at times insufficient, upon which all other strategies rest. When informal income collapses, as it inevitably does during illness, adverse weather, or market downturns, social networks activate as an immediate compensatory mechanism. Neighbors lend food staples, relatives share resources, and community members exchange information about available work. This layer of social networking does not merely supplement income; it actively sustains the conditions under which informal labor remains possible, by preventing households from falling below the threshold of physical functioning. A fisherman who cannot eat cannot go to sea; a laborer without shelter cannot work. Social solidarity thus reproduces the labor capacity upon which the informal economy depends.

Women's dual roles operate as a structural multiplier within this system. By simultaneously managing the household, reducing the friction costs of domestic life and generating supplementary income, women effectively expand the total livelihood output of the household without a proportional increase in formal expenditure. Crucially, women's economic activities are frequently embedded within social networks: Ibu AS sells her goods through neighbors, Ibu NL draws on community knowledge of the fish market, and Ibu SL accesses clients through neighborly relationships. Women therefore do not simply participate in two separate domains; they actively bridge the social and economic dimensions of the livelihood system, functioning as connective tissue linking the informal economy with community solidarity networks.

Government social assistance programs occupy a distinct yet complementary position within this architecture. Unlike the other three strategies, which are generated endogenously through the community's own resources and relationships, social assistance represents an exogenous input: a state resource transfer that households actively seek to capture and integrate into their livelihood portfolios. When functioning properly, social assistance provides a temporal floor that prevents households from depleting their social capital reserves during prolonged income gaps. However, as the findings reveal, unreliable disbursement and inaccurate targeting mean that social assistance cannot be treated as a stable pillar of the system. Instead, it functions more as a contingent supplement, significant when available, yet insufficient to alter the fundamental vulnerability of household livelihoods.

Viewed through the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, this integrated system represents a sophisticated, if fragile, asset utilization portfolio. The urban poor in Tallo simultaneously draw upon human capital (labor skills, physical endurance, practical knowledge), social capital (reciprocity networks, community trust, shared information), and financial capital (social assistance transfers, informal credit from local warung). The absence of physical capital (secure land tenure, quality housing) and natural capital (clean water, uncontaminated fishing grounds) imposes structural ceilings on what this portfolio can achieve. The system sustains life and preserves minimum social dignity, but does not generate upward mobility. In the language of the SLF, this constitutes a survival livelihood, not a transformative livelihood.

From Bayat's theoretical vantage point, the integration of these four strategies constitutes a form of collective, if unorganized, urban claim-making. The poor in Tallo do not demand formal recognition of their labor, legal rights to the land they occupy, or structural reform of social assistance programs. They make none of these demands explicitly. Instead, through the daily accumulation of small acts, showing up for informal work, borrowing from neighbors, selling from their doorsteps, registering for government programs, they quietly assert their right to remain in the city and access its resources. This is the essence of quiet encroachment: not revolution, but persistence; not confrontation, but the patient and incremental occupation of economic and social space by those whom the formal city has failed to accommodate. The findings of this study affirm that understanding urban poverty in Eastern Indonesia demands attention to this quieter, more creative, and profoundly human dimension of survival.

Conclusion

This study examined the livelihood strategies of the urban poor in Tallo District, Makassar City, as a means of surviving amid economic pressures and structural inequality. Based on the findings and discussion presented above, three principal conclusions can be drawn.

First, the urban poor in Tallo District rely on four complementary livelihood strategies: engagement in the informal economic sector, utilization of social networks grounded in community solidarity, women's dual roles as household managers and supplementary income earners, and the appropriation of government social assistance programs whose distribution remains markedly uneven. These four strategies do not

operate in isolation; rather, they form an integrated livelihood system in which each component mutually sustains the others and fills the gaps left by the rest. The informal sector serves as the primary foundation; social networks function as a buffer when income collapses; women's roles act as a structural multiplier that bridges the two; while social assistance operates as a contingent external supplement.

Second, the findings of this study affirm that the urban poor are neither a passive nor a powerless group. They are adaptive, creative, and continuously active social actors in responding to economic uncertainty. Within the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (Chambers & Conway, 1992), the poor in Tallo demonstrate a tangible capacity to manage and combine available capital, most notably human and social capital to sustain their livelihoods despite the near-absence of adequate physical and financial capital. At the same time, through the lens of quiet encroachment of the ordinary (Bayat, 2000), these livelihood strategies represent a form of urban claim-making that is quiet yet persistent: an incremental occupation of economic and social space by a group that the formal city has yet to formally accommodate.

Third, the livelihood system constructed by the poor in Tallo is adaptive but not yet transformative. The existing strategies are sufficient to sustain life and preserve minimum social dignity, but have not proven adequate to generate upward social mobility or break the cycle of structural poverty. This suggests that policy interventions for poverty alleviation in urban slum areas cannot rely solely on the provision of physical infrastructure or social assistance. What is required is a more inclusive, needs-based approach, one that recognizes and strengthens the adaptive capacities communities already possess, broadens their access to formal labor markets, improves the targeting accuracy of social assistance programs, and creates greater space for women to receive formal recognition and protection for the economic roles they have long performed quietly yet consequentially.

This study contributes to the understanding of urban poverty dynamics in Eastern Indonesia while offering relevant policy implications for the local government of Makassar City in designing more responsive poverty alleviation programs. For future research, it is recommended that similar studies be extended to other slum areas in Makassar with a larger number of informants, so that the livelihood strategy patterns identified in this study can be confirmed and explored more comprehensively.

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