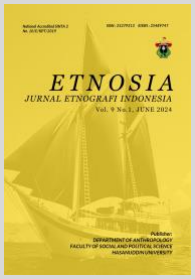
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# Beyond Networks and Trust: A Post-Structuralist Reading of Social Capital, Governance, and Inequality in Southeast Asia

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**ABSTRACT**

On a fundamental level, the conceptualization of social capital has been developed by various prominent thinkers. While previous studies have mainly discussed social capital through networks, trust, participation, and institutional access, This article offers a different reading by treating it as a classificatory discourse that ranks social relations and shapes how community life is recognized in development. It examines the concept of social capital in Southeast Asian development discourse. The objective is to reconsider social capital as a concept that not only describes cooperation, but also influences how development understands community, inequality, and institutional access. The study uses a qualitative and interpretive method based on critical document analysis. It reads theoretical works on social capital, critical development literature, and studies on Southeast Asian development through a post-structuralist approach. The analysis is organized around three themes: social capital as a governing vocabulary, the hierarchy of bonding, bridging, and linking ties, and the marginalization of informal and vernacular practices. The findings show that social capital became influential because it offered a practical language for participation, trust, and community-based development. However, this language can also recast structural inequality as weak community capacity. In Southeast Asia, kinship, religious mutual aid, migrant networks, adat authority, patronage, and informal welfare are often less valued when they do not fit formal development categories. The article argues for a more critical sociology of social capital that places networks within power, recognition, and inequality.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, the term social capital has become a central concept in sociology-anthropology, development studies, and political science and government studies. This concept is popular because it builds on a simple claim. Social relations fundamentally shape how humans work together, shape how institutions operate, and explain how development frameworks and models operate (Ferragina & Arrigoni, 2017). Furthermore, this concept is often used to explain how markets can function efficiently. Much of the literature defines this concept as resources embedded in social networks and relationships that generally intersect with trust, norms, and reciprocity (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009; Chan, 2019). Therefore, this concept is flexible and applicable across various fields of study.

On a fundamental level, the conceptualization of social capital has been shaped by several prominent thinkers. Bourdieu (1986) defines it as resources connected to durable networks of recognition and membership. Coleman (1988) places the concept within social structures and action through obligations, information channels, and norms. Putnam (1993) links participation, reciprocity, and institutional performance, while Portes (1998) notes that its benefits depend on context. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) translate the concept into development thinking through norms and networks that enable solidarity and collective action. It is therefore unsurprising that social capital became central to post-Cold War development studies.

This attention, however, blurred the distinction between social and economic capital within sustainable development and neoliberal policy agendas. Somers (2005) warns that social capital can function as a Trojan horse for neoliberalism when solidarity is defined as a community resource that substitutes for public responsibility. Rankin (2001) similarly argues that social capital is not merely a neutral language of trust, networks, or cooperation, but a political concept that works through power and discipline. In neoliberal development practice, it reorganizes relations among the state, civil society, and market. The state does not disappear, but some responsibilities are shifted downward to communities. Poverty, weak services, unemployment, and limited access can then be interpreted as weak networks, low participation, and insufficient capacity.

As social capital moved into development research, its role changed. It became part of the working language of governance reform, institutional diagnosis, and policy evaluation (Jayasuriya & Hewison, 2004; Coole, 2009). Social disharmony, failed development, and conflict could be explained through weak social ties, while inequality was translated into connection, trust, and participation. When social relations became variables and policy assets, the conditions under which they were formed could be obscured. Harriss and De Renzio (1997) questioned whether social capital had become a missing link in development thinking while leaving the political dimension underdeveloped. Bebbington (1999) and Bebbington and Perreault (1999) show that networks matter for resources and livelihoods, but their value depends on institutions, assets, and power relations.

Arthurson et al. (2014) emphasize the dark side of social capital, where dense ties may sustain cooperation, block access, and deepen exclusion.

This problem is important for Southeast Asia. The region has been shaped by neoliberal discourse, state-led development, transnational capital, uneven state capacity, migration, local authorities, religious organizations, and ethnic associations. Existing studies show the relational character of development in the region. Yeung (2000) demonstrates how Hong Kong firms rely on relationships and business associations. Chen (2000) explains how transnational ethnic social capital connects economic actors across the Asia-Pacific subregion. Carpenter, Daniere, and Takahashi (2004) examine trust, gender, and environmental management among urban communities. Caouette (2007) shows how advocacy networks connect local claims to transnational arenas, while Bebbington and Kothari (2006) show how development operates through transnational networks. Yet these studies often stop at connection. They describe embeddedness and coordination, but say less about control and benefit.

The difficulty lies in how these questions are framed. Hirsch (2013, p. 105) notes that Southeast Asian geography has often followed an idiographic tradition and tended toward planning rather than deeper engagement with the social sciences. Hall (2012, p. 1188) argues that critical political economy requires stronger theorization of institutions, agency, governance, and capitalist social relations. Khoo (2013, p. 237) shows that studies of politics and identity have begun to deconstruct hybrid, transnational, diasporic, and de-territorialized identities. Debates on social capital only partially address this gap. The concept remains used to describe networks, trust, coordination, and institutional linkages, while kinship, ethnicity, religion, migration, and vernacular practices remain less examined within hierarchies of recognition, expertise, and development knowledge.

A Foucauldian post-structuralist framework actually helps overcome these limitations, as social concepts are treated as part of practices that organize what can be seen, measured, improved, and regulated. This is evident in various studies that apply this framework. For example, Escobar (1995) shows how development discourse produces poverty, farmers, women, and the environment as objects of expert knowledge. Ferguson (1990:xiv–xv) explains how development practices can depoliticize questions of resource allocation and expand bureaucratic authority. Leading anthropologists such as Tania Li (2007), through her work on Indonesia, show how improvement schemes transform populations, landscapes, and livelihoods into governable problems.

Previous studies have shown that social relations in Southeast Asia matter for transnational business networks, ethnic ties, migration, urban trust, advocacy, governance, identity, and development institutions. Yet these studies have more often examined the function and effectiveness of networks than the discursive process through which some relations become recognized as productive, legitimate, and developmentally valuable. This is the basis for arguing that a comprehensive reading of social capital as a discursive arena in Southeast Asia remains limited. Rather than treating social capital solely as a concept of

networks and trust, this article approaches it as a discourse of recognition, hierarchy, and governance. It asks how social capital is reconstructed within development knowledge, how it ranks bonding, bridging, and linking ties, and how it makes certain vernacular practices appear informal, narrow, or deficient. The aim is to make relational analysis more accountable to hierarchy, exclusion, and unequal control over resources.

This article attempts to delve deeply into how this concept is reconstructed within the logic of socio-economic development and reexamine how it has been institutionalized as a dominant framework in post-Cold War sociology and development research in Southeast Asia. It then questions what happens when this framework is brought into Southeast Asian debates on governance and development. The aim is to make relational analysis more accountable to hierarchies, exclusions, and unequal control over resources. Social capital enters this study as a concept that carries both analytical power and governmental force. It names social relations and structures how these relations are interpreted, measured, and acted upon in development. This article reads social capital as a classificatory discourse that ranks bonding, bridging, and linking ties, legitimizing certain forms of collective life while rendering other practices informal, residual, or inadequate.

## 2. Method

This research is based on a qualitative and interpretive reading of documents. It examines social capital as a concept that moves through academic writing and development discourse, where its meaning is shaped by debates on governance, participation, inequality, and development in Southeast Asia. Social capital is approached as a category of knowledge that defines social relations, gives value to particular forms of participation, and shapes how development actors understand community, trust, and institutional linkage. This approach follows the main concern of the article, which is to understand how concepts organize meaning, classification, and power.

Southeast Asia is treated as the regional setting of analysis. The region offers an appropriate context because development is shaped by uneven state capacity, transnational capital, migration, informal welfare, ethnic and religious plurality, local authority, and persistent inequality. These conditions make the region a useful setting for examining the limits of social capital when the concept is used mainly through the language of networks, trust, and community. The corpus covers foundational writings on social capital from the late twentieth century and more recent scholarship on governance, inequality, poststructuralist critique, and Southeast Asian development published up to 2023.

The materials used in this study consist of academic books, journal articles, theoretical works, policy-oriented scholarship, and studies on development in Southeast Asia to examine particular meanings of social capital. The analysis focuses on how social capital is defined, how it enters development and governance discourse, how bonding, bridging, and linking become dominant

classifications, how the concept relates to exclusion and inequality, and how these debates appear in Southeast Asian studies.

The documents were selected purposively according to their relevance to the article's conceptual and regional focus. The research began with key texts that shaped social capital theory and its use in development studies. It then moved to critical works that questioned the concept through power, class, gender, migration, marginality, and inequality. The final stage examined Southeast Asian scholarship that connects social relations, governance, identity, and development.

The data were analyzed through close reading, interpretive analysis, and thematic comparison across the corpus. The reading traced the assumptions attached to social capital and identified which forms of social relations were treated as valuable, deficient, informal, or politically significant. The main themes were social capital as a governing vocabulary, the hierarchy produced through bonding, bridging, and linking, and the marginalization of kinship, ethnic, religious, migrant, and vernacular practices in Southeast Asian development. The credibility of the analysis was strengthened through cross-reading between theoretical texts, critical literature, and regional studies. Research ethics were maintained through accurate citation, careful representation of each author's argument, and caution in discussing identity, community, and marginality.

As the analysis relies solely on published literature and policy-oriented documents, it did not involve human participants, interviews, personal data, or field-based interaction. The ethical concern therefore lies less in informed consent than in the responsible representation of texts, concepts, and marginalized social practices. To address this concern, the article uses accurate citation, contextual reading, and careful engagement with each author's argument. Particular caution is taken when discussing identity, community, gender, migration, adat authority, religious networks, and marginality, so that these practices are not reduced to fixed cultural traits or treated as signs of deficiency. The interpretation is also limited to the documents examined and does not claim to represent the lived experience of all Southeast Asian communities.

## 3. Result and Discussion

- **Social Capital, Governance, and the Management of Development**

Modern development works by transforming social suffering into manageable problems. Poverty, exclusion, vulnerability, and welfare issues are often simplified as historical conditions shaped by land ownership, class relations, unequal provision of public facilities, or the subordination of political subjects. These are translated into categories that can be targeted by neoliberal development projects or logics. These categorical terms derive from diagnoses that do not fit within the neoliberal paradigm. For example, a community becomes "low capacity." A village becomes "poorly connected." A group becomes "less participatory." Welfare issues become issues of local resilience. This translation defines what is considered a problem, who is held responsible for

solving it, and what interventions seem reasonable. Ferguson (1990) calls this the depoliticizing effect of development, as questions of power are often transformed into questions of planning, training, and management.

Tania Murray Li's perspective reinforces the critique of social capital because she does not read development as a neutral technical process. In her book, The Will to Improve, Li examines development practices in Indonesia, showing how experts, state institutions, and development organizations transform landscapes, livelihoods, and community behavior into objects that can be diagnosed, measured, and then improved through specific programs. Development works through the production of knowledge about community "problems," then devises interventions that appear rational because they are based on technical categories such as productivity, capacity, participation, and local institutions. This perspective is actually an elaboration of Foucault's thinking on governmentality, explaining how power operates through this common language of improvement. Governance does not only operate through command. It also operates through expertise, categories, institutions, and everyday practices that shape how people understand their own behavior. Development governs when it teaches communities to see themselves as responsible, productive, resilient, and participatory subjects. Power and knowledge converge at this point. The categories used to describe a problem also shape the solutions attached to it. When poverty is understood through weak participation, the cure becomes mobilization. When institutional failure is seen as a lack of trust, the remedy is social cohesion. When welfare pressures are seen as a lack of community capacity, the solution is local self-reliance.

Social capital is central to neoliberal development because it fits this mode of governance. The concept appears social because it reminds development institutions that markets and states operate through networks, norms, trust, and cooperation. Its policy value lies in its ability to transform social relations into manageable assets. Social capital allows development to speak about communities while avoiding a complete return to redistribution, public rights, class structures, and state responsibilities. It paves the way for policy to acknowledge that development depends on people's relationships with one another, and then transforms these relationships into indicators, program targets, and conditions for success. This is why social capital has moved from Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam into the vocabulary of the World Bank and community-based development. The concept has entered policy as a practical grammar for identifying useful relationships.

The typology of bonding, bridging, and linking ties illustrates how this grammar works. Bonding ties refer to close relationships within a group. Bridging ties connect people across social groups. Linking ties connect communities with institutions, officials, donors, or other authoritative actors. In the policy realm, this classification ranks social relations based on their usefulness for interventions. A kinship network may support survival, care, credit, and migration, but it can be treated as a narrow tie when it does not easily connect to institutions. A village association gains value when it is able to produce reports,

attend meetings, manage funds, or communicate with government agencies. Linking ties appear more developmental because they make communities visible to programs and funders. Social relations become valuable when they are legible to institutions.

Participation is the primary route through which this logic enters everyday development practices. It is usually presented as voice, ownership, and inclusion, but it can also regulate the way communities express their claims. Through meetings, committees, consultations, monitoring systems, and project cycles, people are invited to take part while the acceptable language of demand is already partly shaped by institutional procedures. Grievances about land, labour, debt, or public neglect may be translated into project proposals, capacity gaps, or requests for facilities. Cleaver (2001:36–55) cautions that participatory approaches often rely on idealized assumptions about community and agency while giving insufficient attention to unequal institutions. Cooke and Kothari (2001:15) similarly warn that participation can reproduce control when the terms of inclusion are defined before communities enter the process. Participation may therefore open a space for engagement while narrowing the terms through which development itself can be questioned.

Trust operates in more subtle ways. Development programs often treat trust as a civic resource that enhances coordination. Trust is attractive because it lowers the costs of governance. Communities that trust local leaders, NGOs, facilitators, or project committees are easier to mobilize. Partnerships become more stable. Programs become easier to implement. However, trust is also produced, tested, and undermined by governance itself. A consultation that fails to change decisions can breed distrust. A committee that distributes benefits unequally can deepen suspicion. A project that solicits local contributions without sufficient public support can make cooperation feel extractive. Trust is simultaneously an object of policy and a measure of how communities experience power.

Community self-reliance extends the governance effects of social capital to the realms of well-being and risk. While communities are portrayed as holders of social capital, they are also made responsible for activating it. They are asked to mobilize labor, share information, monitor programs, absorb shocks, and compensate for the scarcity of public provision. Peeters (2013:583) calls this a form of responsibilization, as responsibilities are reframed through the language of autonomy and participation. Communities are encouraged to solve problems through their own networks under conditions they did not choose. Empowerment can expand local initiatives, but it can also shift the burden of well-being downward.

Southeast Asia presents a full range of effects, as community-based development often operates through villages, neighborhood groups, religious organizations, migrant networks, NGOs, and local intermediaries. In the Philippines, Fox and Gershman (2000) show that rural development projects create an institutional environment in which social capital can be formed and recognized. Labonne and Chase (2011) find that community-driven development can increase contact with officials and some forms of participation, while its social effects remain uneven.

In Indonesia, Olken's (2010) field experiments show that direct participation in village decisions can increase satisfaction and knowledge, even though participation still operates through formal rules and local authorities. Tania Li (2007:7–8) further points to deeper problems in Indonesian improvement schemes. Development does not simply help communities use their capacities. It also classifies which capacities are taken into account.

Social capital-based interventions do not provide equal benefits to all groups. Local elites, recognized leaders, NGOs, and groups with strong linking ties are often better positioned to translate their relationships into program value. They know how to attend meetings, manage documents, speak the institutional language, and maintain contact with officials. Marginalized groups may have dense relationships of care, obligation, migration, faith, or survival, but these relationships may be less visible to development logic. Poor households, migrants, women with limited public authority, ethnic or religious minorities, and informal workers may be asked to participate without equal say in decisions.

Social capital governs development by making community relations useful to policy. It frames social problems as deficits of connection, trust, participation, and capacity. It turns community into both the site of intervention and the agent responsible for adjustment. Its usefulness should not be dismissed, because networks and trust do shape development outcomes. Its governing effects become visible when responsibility moves away from the state and toward communities already marked by unequal resources, authority, and recognition. The critical task is to ask which relations become valuable, which actors gain institutional voice, and which forms of social life are downgraded because they do not fit the program language of participation, trust, and self-reliance.

- **Discursive Hierarchies and the Normalization of Social Relations**

Bonding, bridging, and linking became the main typology for organizing social capital in development studies. Bonding refers to dense ties among people who share family, locality, ethnicity, religion, class position, or everyday proximity. It is usually associated with solidarity, support, and survival, although it is often read as inward-looking when compared with wider forms of connection (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). Bridging refers to ties across groups and identities, and is valued because it suggests openness, wider information, mobility, and access beyond the immediate community (Woolcock, 1998; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Linking refers to vertical ties with institutions, officials, donors, NGOs, and actors who control resources or public authority (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). These categories create a scale of value. Inward support is placed below cross-group connection, while institutional access receives the strongest developmental meaning.

Normalization begins when diverse practices are renamed through one vocabulary of ties, networks, trust, and participation. Family obligation, religious giving, migrant support, neighbourhood labour, customary authority, patronage, rotating credit, and everyday reciprocity are translated into social capital. These relations are then compared according to whether they remain

internal, cross social boundaries, or reach institutions. Programs convert them into indicators such as associational membership, trust, collective action, access to officials, empowerment, community capacity, and participation in decision-making. Evaluation then asks whether those relations improve project performance, service delivery, institutional inclusion, market access, or poverty reduction. After repeated use in scholarship, donor manuals, survey instruments, and project reports, the typology begins to function as common sense. Some relations appear productive, while others appear local, informal, narrow, or insufficiently connected to modern governance.

A Foucauldian reading explains how these classifications generate truth effects. Foucault described a regime of truth as the "*types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true*" (Foucault, 1980:131). Social capital works in this sense when bonding, bridging, and linking become accepted categories for identifying, measuring, and improving community life. The categories define which relations are visible, fundable, and accepted as evidence of civic capacity. A community with linking ties appears capable because it can interact with institutions. A community with bridging ties appears open because it can cross social boundaries. A community whose relations remain embedded in kinship, faith, locality, migration, or survival can appear dense but limited. Social capital produces truth effects because it shapes the field in which social relations are known before they are judged.

Global development institutions helped stabilize this truth. The World Bank was especially important through its Social Capital Initiative, poverty reduction work, social funds, and community-driven development programs. Social capital was carried into policy through studies, measurement tools, and operational guidance. Grootaert and van Bastelaer (2002) treated social capital as something that could be understood and measured for development practice. Grootaert et al (2004:5) translated the concept into survey dimensions such as groups and networks, trust and solidarity, collective action, information and communication, social cohesion and inclusion, empowerment, and political action. These instruments made social capital usable for project design and evaluation. They also taught institutions to look for relations that could be documented, compared, and linked to program outcomes.

Fine (2001, 2010) criticized this expansion because social capital became a flexible vocabulary that moved across too many fields while weakening political economy. Harriss (2002: 1–20) argued that the World Bank's use of social capital displaced attention from structural inequality and public responsibility toward community capacity and institutional trust. Cooke and Kothari (2001) showed that participation can become managerial when development agencies define the terms of inclusion before communities enter the process. Mansuri and Rao (2013) later showed that participatory and community-driven development depends heavily on local power, facilitation, inequality, and the risk of elite capture. These critiques show that social capital becomes powerful when it turns political questions into questions of capacity, connection, trust, and participation.

The hierarchy discussed above can be summarized through the way bonding, bridging, and linking ties are differently valued in development discourse. Table 1 does not present these categories as neutral descriptions of social life. It shows how each form of social capital is attached to a particular institutional meaning, and how this meaning can devalue relations that remain informal, customary, gendered, mobile, religious, or locally embedded.

Table 1. Discursive Hierarchies of Social Capital

| Form of social capital | Dominant reading | Institutional value | What tends to be devalued |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Bonding** | Dense ties within family, kinship, ethnicity, religion, locality, or shared identity | Useful for support, solidarity, and survival | Its role in protection, welfare, political belonging, and everyday security under exclusion |
| **Bridging** | Ties across groups, communities, or identities | Valued as open, inclusive, mobile, and socially expansive | Unequal capacity to build cross-group ties and the risk of forced integration into dominant norms |
| **Linking** | Vertical ties with officials, donors, NGOs, state agencies, and formal institutions | Treated as strategic because it gives access to resources, recognition, and decision-making | Dependency, gatekeeping, patronage, and unequal power within institutional access |
| **Discursive effect** | A neutral-looking typology of relations | Produces a hierarchy of productive, modern, and legitimate sociality | Relations that remain informal, customary, gendered, mobile, protective, religious, or locally embedded |

The table above shows that the issue is not only the distinction between bonding, bridging, and linking ties, but also the hierarchy created through it. Bonding ties support solidarity and survival, yet they are often seen as limited when they remain within local networks. Bridging ties are linked to openness and inclusion, although not everyone has the same ability to build them. Linking ties receive the greatest value because they connect communities to formal institutions. As a result, some social relations in Southeast Asia are recognized as development assets, while others remain important in everyday life but receive less recognition in development discourse.

Southeast Asia shows how this hierarchy works inside different political settings. In Indonesia, *gotong royong* is often invoked as communal cooperation. Bowen

(1986) showed that it has also been politically constructed and reorganized through state projects. Suwignyo (2019) traced how *gotong royong* was shaped through mass development programs from the 1940s to the 1990s. Mutual aid can therefore be praised as community spirit while being reorganized as labour, discipline, and local responsibility. In development language, *gotong royong* becomes valuable when it supports project delivery, village planning, infrastructure work, or community mobilization.

The Philippines shows a different configuration through patron-client relations and local bossism. Sidel (1999) and Hutchcroft and Rocamora (2003) show how local power, patronage, and bossism shape access to protection, employment, welfare, and public resources. These relations are often treated as distortions of good governance because they appear personalistic, unequal, and resistant to formal accountability. Poorer groups nevertheless navigate the state through these relations because formal access remains uneven. Patronage can reproduce domination, but it also mediates documents, work, security, credit, and emergency assistance. When development programs recognize only registered associations, barangay procedures, and formal participation, these everyday channels of survival are pushed into the category of informal or problematic bonding.

Vietnam shows how linking social capital can be shaped by a socialist party-state. Social relations are strongly mediated through local administration, party structures, and mass organizations such as the Women's Union and Farmers' Union. These organizations provide channels for welfare, credit, mobilization, and policy implementation. Relations become more visible when they pass through recognized institutions. Family networks, migrant ties, village-origin relations, and informal support remain important for work, care, and mobility, yet they gain development value more easily when they connect with administrative channels or mass organizations. Vietnam therefore shows that linking social capital does not always mean liberal civil society. It can also mean recognized access to state-mediated institutions.

At the regional level, ASEAN shows how social capital can be built through official procedures rather than organic regional solidarity. Bastari and Rivai (2023) argue that regional convergence requires interaction, trust, and shared understanding among regional actors. The problem is that ASEAN trust is largely produced through blueprints, official forums, accreditation, consultation, and state-managed participation. As seen in the two ASEAN pillars to strengthen its 'centrality'. ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) speaks in the language of solidarity, belonging, resilience, and people-centred community, while ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) ties regional integration to market connectivity, regulatory adjustment, competitiveness, and global value chains. This makes ASEAN community fragile because its social basis is still shaped from above. Acharya (2017, p. 36) warns that ASEAN identity remains too elite-driven. Collins (2008, p. 313) questions the limited opening given to civil society. Gerard (2013, pp. 411–426) shows that civil society participation is often managed and used to legitimize ASEAN's people-centred claim. ASEAN social capital

therefore turns trust into regulated participation and community into institutional compliance.

These examples show that the hierarchy of social capital adapts to different political settings. In Indonesia, communal labour can be absorbed into village development and state projects. In the Philippines, patron-client ties can be condemned by governance discourse while remaining central to welfare access. In Vietnam, state-recognized organizations can define which forms of linking are legitimate. At the ASEAN level, regional trust can be presented as social capital while civil society remains filtered through elite-led and state-managed procedures. The political forms differ, but the discursive effect is similar. Social relations become more valuable when they are formal, visible, measurable, outward-facing, and institutionally connected. Relations that sustain life outside those channels remain important but less easily recognized.

Marginalization follows from this unequal grammar of recognition. Poor households often rely on borrowing, childcare, food sharing, rotating labour, and emergency assistance. These ties maintain survival, but they rarely look strategic when programs value registered groups and upward institutional access. Women with limited public authority may sustain neighbourhood welfare, ritual exchange, and household survival while formal meetings remain dominated by male leaders, officials, or recognized representatives. Molyneux (2002) warned that social capital discourse often carries silences around gender and family power. Healy et al. (2006) also showed that gender and location shape access to networks in unequal ways. Migrants show the same limit. Silvey and Elmhirst (2003) demonstrated that women's rural-urban networks in Indonesia during crisis were shaped by gendered obligations, risk, and unequal access to support. Silvey (2004) showed that migration networks operate across household, local, national, and transnational scales. These networks move money, information, jobs, and protection, yet policy often reads migration through remittances rather than social knowledge. Indigenous and adat communities may carry claims to land, authority, memory, and redistribution, but state and donor frameworks often recognize them only when they fit conservation, livelihood, or participation templates. Ethnic and religious minorities may possess dense systems of care, credit, education, and moral authority, yet those systems can be judged as closed when dominant institutions expect visible integration. Informal workers organize trust, apprenticeship, credit, and protection outside official associations, while program design more easily recognizes cooperatives, registered groups, and documented participation.

Social capital therefore becomes a regime of truth when its categories define the proper form of community life. It normalizes relations that are measurable, documented, outward-facing, institutionally connected, and useful to program delivery. It marginalizes relations that carry survival, obligation, memory, faith, locality, and protection but do not translate smoothly into indicators. The critical issue is how these categories became authoritative, whose relations they make visible, and whose social worlds must be translated before they can be recognized as developmentally valuable.

- **Inequality, Erasure of Marginalized Practices, and A Critical Research Agenda In Southeast Asia**

Social capital discourse becomes problematic when poverty and exclusion are explained through weak networks, low trust, poor participation, or limited community capacity. This language sounds neutral because it seems to describe what communities possess. Its political effect is deeper. It shifts attention from the structures that produce inequality toward the relational life of marginalized groups. Poverty appears as a shortage of useful ties. Exclusion appears as weak bridging. Limited access to institutions appears as poor linking. Inequality is softened into a language of community capacity.

Class inequality shows this shift clearly. A poor household may have many relations, but those relations are not always convertible into wages, secure work, land access, credit, legal protection, or institutional voice. Kinship, neighbourhood help, informal borrowing, and labour exchange may keep a household alive during crisis, but they rarely change the conditions that make the household vulnerable. When this situation is described as weak social capital, poverty is moved away from wages, debt, landlessness, informal employment, and uneven state services. The household appears poorly connected rather than structurally constrained.

Gender inequality is softened in a similar way. Women's work often sustains the relations that development later praises as community strength. Food sharing, childcare, savings groups, ritual obligations, neighbourhood welfare, religious charity, and household care depend heavily on gendered labour. Social capital discourse can value these practices as reciprocity or participation while leaving the unequal authority behind them underdescribed. Molyneux (2002, pp. 167–188) warned that social capital discourse often romanticizes family and community while giving too little attention to gendered power. Healy et al. (2007, p. 110) add that gender and location shape access to networks, so community cannot be treated as a flat field of shared benefit. Women may produce community welfare without gaining authority in village meetings, project committees, land decisions, or formal institutions.

In Southeast Asia, the narrative of weak or lacking social capital is especially misleading because poverty and exclusion are often managed through the very relations that development language tends to downgrade. Families, religious groups, migrant circuits, informal brokers, adat institutions, neighbourhood ties, rotating credit groups, and patron-client relations are practical infrastructures of survival where formal welfare, labour protection, and public services are uneven. They provide food, loans, job information, childcare, documents, protection, transport, ritual support, and emergency assistance. These practices are recognized when they help programs run smoothly. They are praised as community participation, local cooperation, resilience, or cultural solidarity. They receive weaker recognition when they expose the limits of state protection, insecure labour, unequal services, and the absence of reliable public guarantees.

Development discourse misrecognizes vernacular practices when it reads them only through the categories preferred by policy. Kinship may be described as bonding and treated as too narrow. Religious mutual aid may be valued for service delivery but treated cautiously when it carries its own moral authority. Migrant networks may be reduced to remittances, even though they move information, care, jobs, and protection across places. Adat institutions may be recognized when they fit conservation, livelihood, or consultation programs, while their claims to land, authority, and redistribution remain constrained. Informal workers may organize trust, apprenticeship, credit, and protection outside official associations, while programs more easily recognize cooperatives, registered groups, and documented participation.

The phrase "lack of social capital" turns this misrecognition into a diagnosis. Poor communities are said to lack bridging ties, confidence, trust, civic culture, leadership, or institutional connection. The remedy then becomes training, facilitation, empowerment, mentoring, networking, and participation. Responsibility moves downward. The poor are invited to become more connected and more active, while land, wages, public goods, documents, citizenship, and labour protection receive less attention. Harriss (2002) criticized this use of social capital because it can depoliticize poverty by replacing structural explanation with community-level capacity. Fine (2001, 2010) also shows how social capital became an elastic concept that allowed political economy to disappear behind a broad language of networks and cooperation.

Poststructuralist critique begins by refusing the innocence of these standards. It asks who defines the valued form of social capital, who measures it, and what becomes deficient once the standard is fixed. Foucault's concern with power and knowledge matters because development categories make people and practices visible in particular ways. Escobar (1995) showed how development discourse produces objects of intervention through expert knowledge. Ferguson (1990) showed how development can turn political questions into technical problems. Li (2007) brings this argument into a concrete Southeast Asian setting. In her analysis of improvement schemes in Indonesia, populations and livelihoods become governable when they are rendered technical. Experts identify a problem, define the population attached to it, separate the issue from its political conditions, and design an intervention that appears practical.

Read through this tradition, social capital is a category that helps determine which communities become legible to development. A community with formal leaders, registered groups, meeting minutes, project committees, and links to officials can be seen as participatory and capable. A community whose welfare depends on kinship, religious obligation, migrant support, adat authority, informal work, or patron-client mediation may be seen as lacking the right kind of social capital. The problem is not the absence of social relations. The problem is that only some relations match the institutional grammar through which development recognizes social value.

Migration makes this especially clear. Silvey and Elmhirst (2003) shows that women's rural-urban networks in Indonesia during crisis were shaped by gendered obligation, risk, and unequal access to support. Their work indicates that networks can be active and dense while still carrying burden and insecurity. Silvey (2004) later shows that Indonesian migration networks operate across household, local, national, and transnational scales. These networks move money, information, care, jobs, and protection, but policy often reads migration through labour supply or remittances. Migrants become visible as economic actors, while their social knowledge, political vulnerability, and practices of survival remain secondary.

Ethnic, religious, and indigenous communities face a related problem. Their networks can organize education, charity, credit, moral authority, dispute mediation, land claims, ecological knowledge, and collective memory. Development frameworks often recognize these relations when they fit program language, such as community consultation, conservation, livelihood support, resilience, or inclusion. Their claims become harder to recognize when they challenge property regimes, state categories, majority norms, or market projects. Social capital discourse can praise community while narrowing the political meaning of community practices.

A critical research agenda for Southeast Asian sociology should begin from this misrecognition. The task is not merely to prove that marginalized groups possess social capital. That would leave the standard of recognition untouched. The stronger task is to ask how social capital is defined, who authorizes the definition, and why some relations must be translated before they can be valued. Khoo's (2013) call to deconstruct fixed ideas of community and identity in Southeast Asia is important because it pushes analysis away from static categories. Hall (2012) also reminds us that institutions, governance, and agency require stronger theorization in Southeast Asian political economy. Social capital must be treated as a field where power names, ranks, and disciplines social relations.

This agenda also needs to study privilege, not only marginality. Inequality is reproduced by groups whose relations already match institutional expectations. Urban professionals, local elites, NGO brokers, majority religious actors, male community leaders, and state-connected associations often possess ties that appear productive because they are documented, outward-facing, and linked to officials. Their social capital looks like capacity. The networks of poor households, women, migrants, informal workers, and minority communities often look like dependence, informality, or survival. Kathiravelu and Dorairajoo (2022) argue that studies of Asia need to examine privilege directly because inequality cannot be understood only from the position of those excluded. Romani et al. (2020) make a related point by warning that class and privilege should not disappear behind softer vocabularies of diversity or inclusion.

The critical direction proposed here can be organized through several analytical shifts. Table 2 summarizes these shifts not as separate topics, but as connected ways of moving social capital analysis away from deficit-based explanations and

toward questions of structure, recognition, authority, privilege, political economy, and theory-making.

Table 2. Directions for a Critical Research Agenda on Social Capital

| Analytical shift | Main focus | Purpose |
|---|---|---|
| **From deficit to structure** | Poverty, land, labour, citizenship, public provision, and institutional hierarchy | Prevents exclusion from being explained as weak community capacity |
| **From network to recognition** | How some ties become convertible into resources while others remain socially useful but institutionally weak | Shows that connection alone does not create power |
| **From participation to authority** | Who defines inclusion, consultation, leadership, and legitimate claims | Reveals how participation can regulate community conduct |
| **From marginality to privilege** | How elite, urban, male, majority, and institutionally connected networks gain value | Makes advantage visible as a social process |
| **From local practice to political economy** | Kinship, religion, migration, adat, patronage, and informal work | Connects vernacular practices to material inequality |
| **From application to theory-making** | How Southeast Asian practices revise imported concepts | Treats the region as a site of conceptual production |

Taken together, these analytical shifts show that a critical agenda on social capital in Southeast Asia cannot stop at asking whether communities have strong or weak networks. It must ask how poverty is tied to land, labour, citizenship, and public provision; how some ties become convertible into institutional value while others remain socially useful but weakly recognized; and how participation can include people while still limiting authority. It also shifts attention from marginalized groups alone to the privileged actors whose networks already match institutional expectations. In this sense, kinship, religion, migration, adat, patronage, and informal work should not be treated as incomplete forms of modern association. They are entry points for theorizing how inequality is organized, recognized, and contested in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian sociology can make a stronger contribution when it treats vernacular practices as sites of theory-making. Kinship, migration, religious mutual aid, adat politics, patronage, informal welfare, and gendered labour are not incomplete forms of modern association. They show how social life is organized under unequal state capacity, market dependence, and contested recognition. Social capital remains useful only if it is returned to these conditions. It cannot serve as a shortcut for explaining poverty. It must be read as a terrain where inequality is named, negotiated, and struggled over.

## 4. Conclusion

Social capital remains useful only when it is kept close to the unequal conditions that give social relations their value. Networks, trust, reciprocity, and participation are formed through labour markets, land relations, gendered households, migration regimes, ethnic hierarchies, state institutions, and donor procedures. A relation that opens access for one group may bind another group to dependency or obligation. Trust may support cooperation, yet it may also grow from patronage, fear, or the absence of reliable public provision. Participation may create a forum, while leaving recognition and decision-making in the hands of officials, donors, local elites, or accredited intermediaries.
A post-structuralist reading is necessary because the problem is not located only in the unequal distribution of networks. It also lies in the categories through which those networks are made visible and valuable. Social capital does not merely describe community life. It helps decide which relations count as capacity, which practices are treated as informal, and which groups are seen as lacking trust, participation, or institutional connection. The language of bonding, bridging, and linking therefore cannot be treated as a neutral typology. It forms a scale of recognition in which relations connected to institutions, projects, and formal procedures appear more valuable than relations rooted in kinship, religion, adat, migration, patronage, neighbourhood reciprocity, informal work, and everyday survival.

Southeast Asia gives this problem a layered form. In Indonesia, *gotong royong* can be absorbed into state projects as labour, discipline, and local responsibility. In the Philippines, patron-client ties do not only express local elite domination. They also become channels through which poorer groups seek protection, work, documents, and public resources when formal procedures do not work evenly. In Vietnam, relations that pass through mass organizations and party-state structures receive stronger recognition than family, migrant, or informal support networks outside official channels. At the regional level, ASEAN shows how trust can be produced through official forums, accreditation, consultation, and elite-led procedures that narrow the space of civil society.

These examples show that social relations in Southeast Asia cannot be read only as participation, resilience, or community capacity. They reveal how people negotiate access, protection, and recognition within uneven arrangements of state power, market dependence, and development authority. Future research should move further into these uneven sites of recognition. It can examine how women's informal labour, migrant circuits, adat claims, religious welfare, patronage, and informal urban work become valued or devalued across different institutional settings. Such work would help Southeast Asian sociology treat vernacular practices as sources of theory, not merely as local examples of imported concepts. Social capital can still explain cooperation and survival, but it should not turn inequality into a story of weak community life. Its critical value appears when it is used to examine how social relations are named, valued, governed, and contested.

## Conflicts of Interest

The founding sponsors had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, and in the decision to publish the results. All decisions were made independently by the research team. No sponsorship influence was demonstrated on the reported findings or conclusions. We did not receive any personal payment or have any other financial interests that could compromise the integrity of this research. This statement was prepared in accordance with guidelines and has been approved by all authors.

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