

## Neighbourhood Participation as a Proxy to Civic Engagement

Sheau Tsuey Chong<sup>1\*</sup>, Wei Keat Ten<sup>1</sup>, Ah Choy Er<sup>2</sup> and Denise Koh<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Psychology and Human Development, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

<sup>3</sup>*School of Educational Methodology and Practices, Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

### ABSTRACT

Civic engagement refers to community involvement with the aim of community empowerment through collective actions. A community active in civic engagement tends to foster social capital that can be generalized into society as a whole. This study investigates the encouragement of civic engagement via neighbourhood factors. A total of 400 Malaysians, aged between 18 to 65 years, residing in Klang Valley, have been chosen to participate in the research using quota sampling. The results show that the neighbourhood, perceived as safe and high in neighbourhood social capital and active in organizing neighbourhood activities, are associated with higher civic engagement. It suggests the significance of promoting individual involvement in neighbourhood in order to enhance the process of successful citizenship training at the national level. Thus, local authority should look into the organization for more meaningful and regular neighbourhood activities.

*Keywords:* Civic engagement, neighbourhood, social capital, social cohesion, community

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of civic engagement can be traced back from Alexis de Tocqueville's visit to America and published "Democracy

in America" in 1835 to Putnam (2000) who argued that the involvement in civic life makes someone a better person, more self-confident and more caring. Civic engagement also brings a country towards democracy and precludes autocracy. Furthermore, civic engagement also stimulates the elite to be more concerned with the people (Wright & Berkman, 1986). The decision makers tend to hear the voices of those involved

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### *Article history:*

Received: 22 July 2013

Accepted: 29 October 2013

##### *E-mail addresses:*

stchong@ukm.my (Sheau Tsuey Chong),

stchong@ukm.my (Wei Keat Ten),

eveer@ukm.my (Ah Choy Er),

denise@ukm.my (Denise Koh)

\* Corresponding author

in civic activities (Bartels, 2002). In short, Wilson and Musick (1997) emphasize that civic engagement may possibly shape social trust and government trust, develop a deep sense of community, act as means of solving social and community issues, enhance the citizenship and other benefits.

According to the research on civic engagement level in 130 countries conducted by Gallup (2009), the civic engagement of Malaysians manage to get 75<sup>th</sup> place with the civic engagement index score of 29 as compared to neighbouring country, Thailand, that scores 50. Thailand's civic engagement index score places the country to ranking number 9, far more above Malaysia. The gap becomes an indicator for Malaysia to work hard in civic engagement as the development of Thailand is not much different from Malaysia. Malaysia should be able to match Thailand's achievement in this aspect

The researchers have underlined two units in society that have been always overlooked for their role in cultivating norms and values in the people: neighbourhood and formal group. Society has always put the entire responsibility on educating the people on the shoulder of parents and school. They have overlooked the effectiveness of neighbourhood and formal groups in delivering civic values. Therefore, this research will highlight the ways neighbourhood and formal groups work in promoting individual civic engagement.

From the neighbourhood perspective, most researchers agree that a community high in civic engagement is associated with low crime rates. In turn, a neighbourhood

that is perceived to be safe boosted the civic engagement of the residents. Mesch and Schwirian (1996) argue that residents will take action when they feel threatened in any kind that might affect their lives. They also claim that the built up of most of the neighbourhood association are merely the reaction toward the change of environment in community that might affect the residents' well-being, such as the rise of crime rates and town planning. Today, the neighbourhood association solves issues in a wider scope and carries out a variety of activities like *gotong-royong*\* (*neighbourhood helping activities*) to promote civic engagement (Kleiniewski, 2002). The researchers also believe that the norm of trust and reciprocity held by the community in the neighbourhood is able to strengthen the civic engagement of individual. Putnam (2000) claims that social capital is connected with civic engagement. Thus, the strengthening in neighbourhood social capital is expected to empower the civic engagement of the individuals who live in the area.

Furthermore, neighbourhood social capital can also be an important factor for a society to hold since it is associated with general social capital and confidence in large social organizations. In order to develop the social capital in a neighbourhood, the expectation placed upon every neighbour is that they will always act in the best interest of the represented neighbourhood. By doing so, this will allow members of the neighbourhood to interact with each other based on the feeling of trust. The building of neighbourhood social capital depends on

how neighbourhood tackle their issues and understanding the importance of the tackling actions. It is also to achieve the commonness that reflects the neighbourhood. While the interactions between members within a neighbourhood are not mechanical in nature, along the process of interacting, this will also allow the exchange of civic values among the members (Chong, 2007; Chong *et al.*, 2011a).

In addition, safety is an important contributor to neighbourhood social capital. Previous research shows that perceived neighbourhood safety is related to neighbourhood social capital (Ross & Yang, 2000; Ziersch *et al.*, 2005). Safety issues can draw people further away and block information circulation between neighbours. In other words, the networking process might breakdown and in time the social mobility among neighbours might be limited. This vicious cycle leads to low trust and reciprocity, and possible increase of crime rate due to the lack of social sanction from the non-cooperative neighbours.

On the other hand, if the neighbourhood is perceived as safe and promoting the networking among the neighbours, this shall allow the process of development common civic engagement based on shared neighbourhood social capital. Nevertheless, Coleman asserts that the flow of information from one party to another is one form of social capital based on trust. He also states that if an individual is willing to relinquish his or her self-interest and place the interest of the group as his or her first priority, then such form of social capital will work (Coleman, 1998a).

Civic engagement involves attitude, behaviour, knowledge and skills that benefit the society and improve the well-being of all. Based on Youniss *et al.* (1997), individuals with civic attitude, civic responsibility, civic mind or civic identity show a sense of responsibility to the community. Each individual in the society has the role to bring change to the well-being of the society. Civic engagement involves civic attitude based on action that aims to solve the community issues and improve the welfare of community such as giving help through donation and volunteerism.

Putnam (2000) and Carpinì (2004) define civic engagement as an aggregate that involves formal and informal activities that bring toward mutual benefits. In addition, Zlatareva (2008) claims that civic engagement is closely related to involvement, partnership, and empowerment. It is about how the citizens form a collective action with local and national institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and public sectors. At the same time, it is about how the citizens articulate priorities and fight for their interest. Furthermore, UNDP (2002) defines civic engagement as a process which involves community in political, economic, social and cultural process that impact their lives. It ensures the involvement of citizens in making decisions and strengthening their roles to promote better governance.

With regards to various definitions mentioned earlier, Gibson (2000) argues that there is no single consensus on the definition of civic engagement. Consequently, Adler and Goggin (2005) manage to arrange the

definition of civic engagement into four categories: civic engagement as community service; civic engagement as collective action; civic engagement as political engagement; and civic engagement as social change. In the definition of civic engagement as community service, civic engagement is emphasized as an involvement in volunteer services to serve the local community where the individual belongs to. The services are either rendered individually or in a group through organization.

Civic engagement as collective action is defined in a limited way. It is an action done in a collective way to improve the society. Example of this definition is given by Diller (2001), in which he claims that civic engagement is an activity that involves everyone to play their roles as a citizen. Diller (2001) provides an example of this definition. He claims that civic engagement is an activity that involves everyone to play their roles as a citizen. In fact, civic engagement can be defined as a means where individuals act collectively to impact the civil society. Finally, Adler and Goggin (2005) agree that a comprehensive definition of civic engagement is about the ways active citizens participate in community life to improve conditions for others or to help shaping the community's future.

Similarly, civic engagement as political engagement is defined in a limited way. It is only specifically directed to political activities. In this definition, political activities make a big distinction from civic activities in their implementation ways. Civic activities are about how to get the

people to work together that include the element of social capital. Whereas, political activities lacks the element of interaction.

Meanwhile, the dimension of civic engagement as social change, based on Crowley (2007), focuses on the social change side in civic engagement. Civic engagement explains how an active citizen is involved in community life to help shaping the future of the community. Hence, civic engagement should include social change as the ultimate goal.

In conclusion, neighbourhood serves a platform for interaction that may possibly facilitate cooperation beyond kin and friendship. In turn; the neighbourhood social capital might contribute to the cooperation in wider society. This paper aims to explore how participation in neighbourhood activities may perhaps promote active civic engagement, and the relationship between neighbourhood social capital and levels of participation in civic activities.

## HYPOTHESES

- Ha1 Individuals who are active in neighbourhood activities show higher levels of civic engagement compared to less active individuals.
- Ha2 There is significant and positive relationship between neighbourhood social capital and civic engagement.
- Ha3 Individuals who perceive their neighbourhood area as safe show higher civic engagement compared to those who feel insecure in their neighbourhood areas.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

This study involves 400 Malaysians, aged between 18 to 65 years, residing in Klang Valley. The distribution of genders among the participants is 207 males and 193 females. They are from different backgrounds. Quota sampling is used based on the distribution of ethnics in Klang Valley.

### *Instrument*

The research tool uses closed question questionnaire. The questionnaire is divided into ten parts. The parts investigate trust among neighbourhood, trust among the people in general, trust among members in formal group, civic engagement, institutional trust, trust among friends, trust among family members, demographic backgrounds, perception on citizenship and social class boundary, respectively. However, only parts concerning on neighbourhood, formal group, civic engagement, newspaper readership, national identity and living area background are emphasized because only these parts are relevant to this research. In general, most questions are rated based on 11-point Likert scale: the scale of 1 means not at all; and the scale of 11 means definitely yes.

A total of 14 questions are designed in order to evaluate civic engagement. The questions included whether respondents have written to newspaper, signed on petition, contacted TV/radio program, made complaints on the services used, interacted with government, reported on property damages, participated in political

activities, participated in community meeting, contributed monetary donation, contacted people's representatives, involved in demonstration, participated in protest or picket, carried out charitable work and contributed supports to the general society in the past 12 months. Each question has to be rated using 11-points Likert scale. Those who respond with the scale of 1 are coded as "0" corresponding to never participated in the respective civic activity; while, scales from 2 to 11 are coded as "1" corresponding to participated in the respective civic activity. All the scores are summed up to get the value of individual civic engagement.

From the perspective of neighbourhood, respondents are asked with questions regarding to involvement in neighbourhood activities, perceived neighbourhood safety, and neighbourhood social capital. Cronbach's Alpha is used to find the internal consistency of the instrument. The results show that internal consistency obtained for civic engagement, perceived neighbourhood safety and neighbourhood social capital are 0.916, 0.813, and 0.915; respectively.

## RESULTS

### *Active Participation in Neighbourhood Activities*

A one-way ANOVA analysis is conducted to determine the difference of the tendency of individuals participating in neighbourhood activity and individual civic engagement. The mean score for individual civic engagement of three groups of subject are compared. The first group is individuals who never participate in neighbourhood

activity (Group 1: never). The second group is individuals who are less active in participating in neighbourhood activity (Group 2: less active). Whereas, the third group is represented by individuals who are very active in participating in neighbourhood activity (Group 3: very active). The results show that there is significant difference in civic engagement for the three groups [ $F(2, 396) = 10.61, p = .00$ ]. Post-hoc comparison using Tukey HSD test show that the mean score for Group 1 ( $M = 7.25, SD = 4.58$ ) is significantly different from Group 2 ( $M = 9.58, SD = 4.44$ ). It indicates that individuals who never participate in neighbourhood activity are less likely to be involved in civic activity as compared to individuals who at least participate once in neighbourhood activity for the past twelve months. In other words, participation in neighbourhood activity in a less active manner is sufficient to bring a significant effect in encouraging civic engagement. Therefore, hypothesis 1 stating that individuals who are active in neighbourhood activities show higher

civic engagement compared to less active individuals is accepted. Table 1 summarizes the analysis for this part.

*Neighbourhood Social Capital*

Table 2 shows the result of correlation between neighbourhood social capital and individual civic engagement. The result show that both variables are positively and significantly correlated ( $r = .280, p \leq 0.05$ ). It signifies that the higher the neighbourhood social capital, the higher the individual civic engagement.

*Perceived Neighbourhood Safety*

An independent t-test is used to compare the civic engagement of group of individuals who perceive their neighbourhood as unsafe (Group 1: Not safe) and group of individuals who feel that their neighbourhood as safe (Group 2: Safe). There is a significant difference between Group 1 ( $M = 6.85, SD = 4.57$ ) and Group 2 [ $M = 8.48, SD = 4.59; t(397) = -3.05, p = .002$ ]. It signifies

TABLE 1  
Difference of Individual Civic Engagement According To Tendency of Participating Neighbourhood Activity.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Civic Engagement					
Between Groups	434.631	2	217.315	10.609	.001
Within Groups	8111.640	396	20.484		

TABLE 2  
Relationship Between Neighbourhood Social Capital And Civic Engagement.

	1	2	3
1. Civic engagement	1		
2. Neighbourhood social capital	.280**	1	



that individuals who perceive their neighbourhood as safe may possibly be more involved in civic activities than individuals who feel that their neighbourhood as unsafe. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that there is a significant difference in civic engagement for individuals who feel that their neighbourhood is safe compared to those who feel insecure is accepted. Table 3 summarizes the analysis for this part.

## DISCUSSION

### *Active Participation in Neighbourhood Activities*

The research discovers that there are three factors that contributed to the high level of civic engagement at the neighbourhood level. The three neighbourhood factors are safe neighbourhood, trusting and helping, and actively delivering neighbourhood activities. While at the formal group level, the researchers find that trusting and helpful civic-based groups or members are vital for the improvement of individual civic engagement.

The results find that individuals who participate at least once in a neighbourhood activity show significantly higher civic engagement as compared to individuals who never participate in any form of neighbourhood activity. Based on this

finding, it is assumed that involvement in neighbourhood activities increases one's civic engagement through interaction with the neighbours. The increase of interaction between individuals and their neighbours means that the likelihood for the individuals to communicate and discuss with their neighbours regarding the local issues also increases. This interaction leads to the increase of community involvement and integration (Kang & Kwak, 2003). Community involvement serves as the foundation for individuals to integrate into society.

In addition, the researchers also find that neighbourhood activities and civic activities are similar in view of both activities deal with community issues through community's own effort (Schwirian, 1996). Through the process of working with other community members, one learns about his or her role as part of the community to make a change. This awareness fosters the sense of self-worthiness when the individual feels that the community need him or her. When the individuals realize that they are able make some changes to their neighbourhood through their actions, they are more likely to be involved in the same activities (Nath, 2013). Therefore, the probability of them to be involved in civic activities similar to neighbourhood activities increases.

TABLE 3  
Difference of Individual Civic Engagement According To Perceived Neighbourhood Safety.

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t value	Df	Sig. P
Group 1	97	6.8454	4.56969	-3.054	397	.002
Group 2	302	8.4801	4.59140			

Furthermore, the researchers also observe the people that one might encounter in neighbourhood activity. Those who participate in neighbourhood activity are generally more helpful, concerned, and taking action to work for a better future for the community. The spirit of these people, indirectly, influences others in view of the fact that they are generally influential. Furthermore, information exchange also takes place drastically through interaction. Civic information spreads while doing civic-based neighbourhood activity. Through the influence and encouragement of others, it is expected that individuals to be more prepared and willing for civic involvement in the wider society.

The results also show that individuals who frequently involve in neighbourhood activities show no significant difference from individuals who participate less frequently. This is probably due to the fact that neighbourhood activities on individual civic engagement have reached its maximum with less frequent involvement. Therefore, more vigorous participation will not bring any significant change to the individual civic engagement.

Respondents who participate, at least once, in a neighbourhood activity are more likely to interact and discuss local issues with their community. At the same time, they discover their potential in dedicating themselves to others and building up a sense of altruism to prove their value to the community.

### *Neighbourhood Social Capital*

The results discover that there is a positive relationship between neighbourhood social capital and civic engagement. It denotes that the higher the neighbourhood social capital and civic engagement among neighbours, the higher the levels of civic engagement in the wider society.

A neighbourhood can be considered as a living area along with a place of work and a family environment. It is a space where we learn about our neighbourhood through socialising or interactions as well as by performing economic activities such as visiting friends and shopping. Neighbourhood social capital is the norms where trust and reciprocity are shared by the community in a neighbourhood. Mutual trusting and helping within the members of a neighbourhood characterize neighbourhood social capital. Reciprocity allows neighbours to rely on each other based on mutual understanding within the neighbourhood. As the saying goes 'Today I scratch your back, tomorrow you scratch mine' or 'A help B today, and in the future A will receive help from others besides B'. These beliefs describe the good sense of people offering assistance to others in a continuous relationship. Helping each other out in the neighbourhood when in need creates the credit slips which function as the basis of social capital (Coleman, 1988a:S102).

This finding supports previous research findings which affirm that civic engagement is associated with neighbourhood social capital (Flanagan *et al.*, 2007). They state



that adolescents are reported to have higher commitment to civic participation when they perceive themselves living in a neighbourhood of individuals looking after each other and willing to collaborate in solving common issues. Lenzi *et al.*, (2012) also obtains the same findings. They find that the positive association between neighbourhood intergenerational closure and adolescents' sense of responsibility towards their community can be explained by the processes identified in traditional developmental theories: "in neighbourhoods where adults are available to look after youths, adolescents have the opportunities to interact with people having more experience and knowledge" (Lenzi *et al.*, 2012, p. 51). This interaction may result in adolescents having more opportunities to discuss issues regarding their local community, develop values and behaviours that are urged by the community and build up a set of values that is closely related with the well-being of the community.

Furthermore, the role of neighbourhood as an agent of education and socialization is empowered in a neighbourhood high in social capital. Neighbourhood is one of the social units that instil values in young people in the community. One learns the social orders and norms in the community and it serves as a standard to integrate into the general society. For an example, neighbourhood teaches one not to violate the rules by throwing rubbish into set up facility; this value shall be passed on to the general society in future. Similarly, if the neighbourhood instils the norms of being

a good citizen, one shall work towards being a trusted person as expected by their neighbourhood.

Moreover, neighbourhood is considered as the closest strangers to individuals other than peers in school. If individuals have unpleasant experience with their neighbours, they have lower tendency to be involved in civic activities aimed to help people in general. This is the basis of strong mutual trusting and helping in neighbourhood able to foster individual civic engagement

#### *Perceived Neighbourhood Safety*

The results find that individual who feels that their neighbourhood is safe, generally, shows higher civic engagement as compared to those who feel insecure. It supports the finding of Crowley (2005). In his research, he discovers that safety is the third important factor that prevents one from participating civic activities after the factor of inflexible working hours and lack of information or ignorant of the participation process. However, his finding states that underprivileged group of respondent, either poor or with low education level, rate safety factor as being the first factor preventing them from participating in civic activities.

People's sense of selflessness decreases and self-consciousness increases when they feel unsafe. They become more concerned about themselves before they think about others. For example, poor people requiring to fulfil their needs have to prioritize in confronting and solving their own problems; thus, unable to donate money to others. Whereas, rich people, generally, do not

have to worry about their needs. As such, they are liberated to be more involved in various forms of civic activities. The exact same rationale applies to perceived neighbourhood safety. When one worries about his or her own safety, he or she has to ensure it is taken care of. It decreases his or her concern about others. As a result, his or her civic engagement decreases.

Likewise, one probably stays home more often to avoid any possibility of being victimized when he or she is out of home. Such possibility hinders the person from participating in civic activities. The interaction with general society is also gradually reduced due to the behaviour of staying home more often. The restriction of mobility decreases information exchange about civic activities and reduces the tendency of civic activities participation. Hence, preserving safe environment in the neighbourhood eliminates the feel of restlessness, increases the interaction of people, provides more space to people to participate in civic life, and ultimately increases individual civic engagement.

## CONCLUSION

This research provides a guideline to approach a better civic engagement among the people in a social institution. Neighbourhood activities should be focused and diversified to involve the local community directly in developing their own community development planning. At the same time, the effort builds up the community civic engagement. Cultural festivals, family celebrations and religious

activities, requiring concerted effort from all families, seem to be disappearing from the neighbourhood. Instead of cooking together for festivals, families might choose to cater or hold the events in hotels outside the neighbourhood. Thus, event organisers need to reinvent new neighbourhood activities to suit the needs of people in this fast pace era.

This research suggests that instead of holding seasonal activities, more organised and regular activities can be introduced to the neighbourhood. Neighbours may possibly have a better chance of interacting via hobby groups, informal or formal classes such as language, computer skills, cooking; voluntarily programs such as blood donation, recycling projects; and sport activities. Neighbourhood programs like RELA, a neighbourhood voluntarily group, and neighbourhood watch should be encouraged to foster a safe community. It is vital considering safety serves as a basis for better civic engagement. Besides, formal groups should be promoted more in the rural area especially if the people have limited internet access. Otherwise, the flow of information might be truncated and there is less chances for them to interact and build social capital. Thus, The Ministry of Rural Development should have more information technology projects, both in hardware and software, for geographical marginalised residents. At the same time, the government should utilize more media channel like using the electronic board in metropolitan areas such as in Kuala Lumpur to broadcast news, civic activity announcement and civic educational videos, apart from besides

commercial advertisements. The civic education has to be included in the young population's education agenda. It should be a mandatory subject and practice in schools. The curriculum of civic education should be improved and include more activities that can inspire people to develop their sense of civic responsibility. As a conclusion, neighbourhood activities could be a proxy of the civic engagement in wider society; however, this common goal of cooperation among society members cannot be achieved without taking safety as a key factor.

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