

## COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOUR AMONG THE LOW INCOME GROUP WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO VILLAGE LEVEL COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIA

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### Sinopsis

*Komunikasi sebagai satu proses sosial berlaku dalam lingkungan pengaruh struktur-struktur politik yang spesifik. Lantaran itu, pola-pola dan jaringan komunikasi yang berkesan sesungguhnya bergantung kepada tahap infra-komunikasi yang digerakkan oleh suatu ruang perwakilan politik yang dominan.*

*Rencana ini cuba meninjau keadaan infra-komunikasi yang kini mempengaruhi suasana dan haluan pelakuan komunikasi di kalangan golongan berpendapatan rendah di bandar (di Kuala Lumpur) dan di luarbandar (di Tangkak, Johor). Adalah diperhatikan bahawa terdapat suatu ciri sosial yang sentiasa mengganggu pelakuan komunikasi di kalangan golongan ini. Meskipun **social-type** bandar yang terdiri dari golongan berpendapatan rendah telah mencapai tahap infra-komunikasi yang lebih dinamik daripada yang dicapai oleh golongan yang sama di luarbandar, namun demikian, di bawah pengaruh struktur-struktur politik dewasa ini golongan berpendapatan rendah secara keseluruhannya masih belum lagi terdedah sepenuhnya kepada alam sekitaran wujudulu yang selengkapnya.*

### Synopsis

*Communication as a social process takes place within specific political structures. As such, effective patterns and networks of communication very much depend upon the stage of infra-communication set in motion by the dominant field of political representation.*

*This paper tries to examine the nature of the infra-communication stage that sets the tone and direction of communication behaviour among the urban low income group in Kuala Lumpur and the rural low income group in Tangkak, Johor. Our observation reveals a pertinent social feature that restrains communication behaviour among the low income group, namely although the urban social-type in the low income group have gained access to a more dynamic infra-communication stage than that attained by the rural low income group, under the prevailing political structures the low income group as a whole have not yet been exposed to a sufficiently antecedent environment conducive to effective communication.*

Anyone attempting to understand and explain communication behaviour of any social group should begin by observing the dominant political structures prevailing in the community of the group. Communication as a social process and function does not exist by itself: its existence, both in substance and structure, is determined by the political structures that dominate the antecedent environment conducive to the development and promotion of effective patterns and networks of communication.

I look upon communication as both a social process and function, involving events and dynamic on-going relationships. As a social function, it constitutes an effect of dynamic relationships between communicating individuals or groups and an antecedent environment. By "antecedent environment" I mean a set of intervening antecedent factors that influence the capacity of a communicating individual or group to react upon available communication resources at any one time. According to Rogers (1969:49) antecedent factors precede the others in order of time and theoretically are expected to lead to or be followed by certain other variables. As a social process, it involves reciprocal interactions between individuals or groups in their pursuit for certain goals. Communication as a meaningful system therefore involves personalities, signs and symbols, dominant traditions and sociality centers acting as cultural codes in an exchange system. It is in this context I am here proposing to look upon a communication behaviour as a form of exchange, and the substance and structure of this behaviour are determined by the political structures dominating the antecedent environment.

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\*My study on communication behaviour started in 1975. Initially it began as a survey on interactional communication networks in a Malay peasant community in Perupok (Kelantan). See *Communication In Peasant Community: Inroads and Problems*, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1979. In May-June 1978, I was in Maludam (Sarawak) to conduct another survey on values, mobility and communication in a fishing community there. In October-November 1978 — 1979, I shifted my area of observation to Kuala Lumpur and Tangkak (Johore). This time I was interested in observing the communication behaviour among the low income group. From 1981 till present time, I am involved in a Research Project in Sabah. One of the things that I am doing in this project is to observe the value of relationships in social networks at the village-level communication system. For this paper, I shall be drawing my observations on the Kuala Lumpur—Tangkak study, with tangent references, whenever it becomes necessary, to the Perupok and Maludam surveys. I am indeed deeply indebted to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for enabling me to conduct these surveys through the award of research grants.

Political structures are founded upon two social networks. They are vertical and horizontal social networks. The horizontal social networks are built upon informal social interaction and kinship relations, while the vertical social networks are formed through the authority and power structures as manifested in the leadership structure of the community. The vertical social networks are therefore knotted around persons, who by virtue of their position in the leadership hierarchy or in the status hierarchy in society, command authority and power, respect, credibility and influence other members of society. These persons or groups make up the pool of resource persons or groups, and thereby being looked to, as important reference groups, for counsel (Dahlan, 1980:2). In my observation on emerging political structures in Malaysia,<sup>1</sup> I found that individuals or groups that dominate the vertical social networks are the ones who control the dominant political structures of the day. This also means that they are the ones who dominate the communication patterns at both the local and national levels. What it really means here is that the village as a social unit has been affectively brought under the tutelage of the supra-village elites through the governmental and political bureaucracy. The integration of the village unit into the Malaysian state is here seen as a product of a conscious effort to reduce it as a developmental unit with as minimal political challenges to the power elites as possible. This is achieved through a deliberate programme of political actions --- a process that I have termed as "a pillarization of power and authority that cuts through segmentally the peasant community" (Dahlan, 1980:4). Through this process, the sources and channels of communication that affect political communication, are dominated by individuals and social groups who have been assigned the role of political gatekeepers of the village community.

Evidently implicit in the above observation is the fact that antecedent environment plays an instrumental role in promoting or limiting the communication process. Individuals or groups who experience different antecedent environment will react differently towards available communication resources or opportunities. The antecedent environment comprises factors like different social-types in terms of technological-occupational category and social orientations, different areas in terms of rural-urban classification; different levels of attainment of antecedent social factors such as income, education, literacy, status, mobility, cosmopolitanism, age and urbanisation; different class

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See "Emerging Political Structures and their impact on Communication Patterns in Peasant Communities", *Conference on Development The Peasantry and Development In The ASEAN Region*, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, May 26-29, 1980

backgrounds; and different sub-cultures. I propose to call this antecedent environment as the *infra-communication stage* in any communication process.

Indeed this stage constitutes the most fundamental development in the communication process. It reflects the extent to which a given social group has the structural capacity to participate in the prevailing communication system. The relation between this stage of infra-communication and the established political structures is a function of the basic economic structures in society. What it means here is that any individual or group who has gained a positively privileged position in the antecedent environment has already acquired access to communication opportunities and resources,<sup>2</sup> and therefore is well prepared for take-off in the communication system.

The first step towards understanding the communication behaviour of any group should begin by ascertaining the nature of the infra-communication stage experienced by the group. The purpose of this paper is therefore considered accomplished if it is able to establish this fact about communication behaviour among the low income group in Malaysia with special attention to the village level communication.

Many researchers have hinted at the significance of this stage in communication, though they did not yet develop a comprehensive operational profile of antecedent environment as the infra-communication stage. Rogers (1960:101-114) and Lerner (1964:43-73) confined the antecedent environment to antecedent social factors such as mobility, urbanization, literacy, education, status, age and cosmopolitaness. This paper adopts the view that the antecedent environment consists of the other factors than just the ones singled out by Rogers and Lerner. These 'other factors' are social-types, class, area, and sub-culture.

In the Perupok (Kelantan) survey (1975), it was observed that the general trend of inroads of mass-media environment into the village community seems to produce a pattern, that is, the mass-media movement tends to flow through mainly the highest social stratum in the village community namely the rural salariat-cum-urbanite groups, comprising mainly the *salariat* social-type and the entrepreneurial or mercantile social-type. These social-types have acquired the urban middle class life-style and social orientations. The Perupok study, in

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Communication opportunities and resources constitute personalities who make up the pool of resources persons or groups; socialibility centers manifested in the use of personal and social space; signs and symbols; and social groups.

summary, raises three significant aspects regarding communication behaviour among the village folks or Perupok:

1. There is already a shift to media systems in rural communication.
2. The mass-media in roads are most dominant in a sub-social group that has already gained a fair control over the antecedent environment.
3. By and large, the sub-social groups that have not attained a control over the antecedent environment seem to be the least affected by the emerging mass-media environment in the rural setting. (Dahlan, 1979: 71)

My observation on the communication behaviour among the village folks of Perupok (Kelantan) supports the general claim that communications travel along paths which are in fact social relations (Belshaw, 1969: 52-53). When I concluded the Perupok study, I was encouraged to advance a hypothesis that the inroads of mass-media environment into the Malaysian village tends to correlate positively with an emergence of sub-social groups that have overcome the limitations of the prevailing antecedent environment.

Since then, I have been gathering village level data (Maludam in Sarawak 1978; Kuala Lumpur-Tangkok 1978-79, and Sabah 1981 until now) that are designed to throw light upon the issue of antecedent environment in communication. For this paper, as stated earlier, I shall be drawing my observations on the nature of the infra-communication stage that appears to set the tone and direction of communication behaviour among the low income group from the Kuala Lumpur-Tangkok survey (1978-79).

The major concern of this survey covers a wider area of inquiry than the limited scope of this paper. It is designed to cover three major aspects in the communication behaviour of the urban and rural low income group. These three aspects are: the nature of the infra-communication stage in the communication system; the patterns of communication as evolved by the accessibility to and use of available communication opportunities and resources; and the comparison between the urban low income group and the rural low income group in terms of their communication networks.

Kuala Lumpur represents the urban area while Tangkak the rural area. Both areas are too big for a total survey, and anyway not all the area is relevant for this study as the main purpose of this study is to observe the communication behaviour among the low income

group Each area is then subject to a reconnaissance survey which was guided by the available population sampling unit as used by the statistics department. The main purpose of this exercise was to locate the residential areas or villages which are poverty-prone. Having thus located and identified the poverty-prone areas, we then conducted the survey. The selection of household heads as our study sampel was done at random.

In Kuala Lumpur, we were able to net in 163 household heads from 15 population sampling units (PSU) and in Tangkak, we picked up 159 household heads from 19 population sampling units. From these sample, we were then able to classify them into three income groups as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Household Income-Groups

Household Income Group (Ringgit)	Kuala Lumpur/Urban Total Sample	Tangkak/Rural Total Sample
0 — 200	18	49
201 — 400	84	88
400 and above	61	22
	163	159

The study adopted the monthly household income of \$400/- (ringgit) and less as an index of low income group. While the focus of this study is on the low income group, it was also thought useful to make a tangent observation as well on those who belonged to the \$400/- and more income group.

The purpose of putting the urban group into this study is to see the extent to which the rural low income group have been restrained even at the stage of infra-communication, and thereby indicating to us the function of space, that is in terms of rural-urban classification, in the over all formation of antecedent environment conducive to communication.

Income and education are two distributive factors that strongly shape an individual's economic status in society. Subsequently, income, education and economic status form the fundamental base

for the infra-communication. In fact, these factors constitute the major components of the antecedent environment affecting the type and degree of exposure in communication. This study shows there exists a pertinent relationship between the level of income and exposure to educational status. In the urban area, 4 (2.5%) of our sampel did not go to school at all; 91 (55.8%) have been exposed to primary school education; 66 (40.5%) have attained secondary school education; and 2 (1.2%) have acquired college/university education. In the rural area, from the total sampel of 157, 18 (11.5%) have not been exposed to any form of formal education and the others have been exposed to some form of formal education: primary school education, 120 (76.4%); secondary school education, 18 (11.5%); and college/university education, 2 (1.3%).

From this observation, we could feel the dominant impact of a more widely diffused educational environment upon the urban group than it is on the rural group. We also see a more penetrating inroad of secondary school education among the urban folks than among the rural folks. The legacy of illiteracy is still high in the rural area. However, the majority of them have at least been exposed to primary school education. The educational environment prevailing upon these groups is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Educational Environment

Area	Total Sample	Exposure To Education			
		Do Not Go To School	Primary School	Secondary School	College/ University
Kuala Lumpur/ Urban	163	4 (2.5)	91 (55.8)	66 (40.5)	2 (1.2)
Tangkak/ Rural	157	18 (11.5)	120 (76.4)	18 (11.5)	2 (1.3)

A more gloomy scenerio reveals itself as we go deeper into the data, that is as we break it down into household income groups. First, we look into the \$200/- and less household income group and their response to education, as shown in Table 3.

Primary school education seems to consititute the most widespread educational environment for the group in both areas, with the inroad of secondary school education gradually making a greater impact upon the urban group than upon the rural group.

**Table 3**  
The \$200/- And Less Household Income Group  
And Their Response To Education

Area	n	Do Not Go To School	Primary School	Secondary School	College/ University
Kuala Lumpur/ Urban	18	3 (16.7)	10 (55.6)	4 (22.2)	1 (5.6)
Tangkak/ Rural	47	7 (14.9)	37 (78.7)	3 (6.4)	0 (0.0)

Table 4 shows the response of the \$201 - \$400 household income group to education.

**Table 4**  
The \$201 — \$400 Household Income Group  
And Their Response To Education

Area	n	Do Not Go To School	Primary School	Secondary School	College/ University
Kuala Lumpur Urban	84	1 (1.2)	56 (66.7)	27 (32.4)	0 (0.0)
Tangkak/ Rural	88	9 (10.2)	70 (80.0)	10 (11.4)	0 (0.0)

The scenerio changes with the change in the level of income. The legacy of illiteracy is cut down, especially in the urban area. This group are more exposed to the secondary school education than the \$200/- and less income group. However, the inroad of the secondary school education is more widespread among the urban group than among the rural group.

That education is indeed the privilege of the rich, and that privileged education is urban-biased, is further borne by our data showing the response of the \$400/- and more household income group to education as shown in Table 5.

This group are more exposed to the secondary school education than the low income group. More importantly, the secondary school educational environment is most dominant in the urban area than in the rural area.

Our observation on the interaction between income and education leads us to conclude that the economic status of the household indeed plays a critical role in exposure. High economic status households tend to be more exposed to secondary school education than do the



**Table 5**  
The \$400/- And More Household Income Group  
And Their Response To Education

Area	n	Do Not Go To School	Primary School	Secondary School	College/ University
Kuala Lumpur Urban	61	0 (0.0)	25 (41.0)	35 (57.4)	1 (1.6)
Tangkak/	22	2 (9.1)	13 (59.1)	5 (22.7)	2 (9.1)

low economic status households. More importantly, the urban households of similar economic status as those in the rural area experience greater exposure to secondary school education. The rural households, especially the low income group, still experience limited life chances as derived from or made possible by their attainable educational environment. It is therefore safe to conclude that the rural low income group experience a state of compulsion not wholly similar as that experienced by the urban low income group: they are still lagging behind the urban low income group in terms of exposure to secondary school education.

## V

Economic status, income and education attained by an individual set the basis for his mobility in society. Mobility is another important social antecedent factor in the formation of the infra-communication stage. This study views mobility as a dynamic social process which involves the movement of individuals or groups from one point in time and space to another point. This movement may or may not effect his original status.

It is a sociological truism that some people move from one place to another and this movement through time effects his status. It is not uncommon for this sort of geographical mobility to be identified as a means of improving one's status. It is therefore assumed here that mobility among the low income group is motivated principally by a desire to improve one's socio-economic status, and this is achieved largely through geographical mobility. The focus on mobility as an antecedent factor in communication is necessary because mobility reflects the capacity of an individual to meet known, unknown or perceived risks accrued in the experience of mobility. There are many factors which influence a person to make a personal choice to seek elsewhere his version of a better life but the important single factor that makes it easy for him to reach a decision that would literally bring

him to a new environment is the presence of "a mobile sensibility so adaptive to change" (Lerner, 1964:49). A person who is prepared to move out of his traditional setting must have acquired the mobile sensibility. Such a person has then acquired a mobile personality: The mobile person is distinguished by a high capacity for identification with new aspects of his environment; he comes equipped with the mechanisms needed to incorporate new demands upon himself that arise out of his habitual experience. (Lerner, 1964:49)

This study hopes to see what really is the situation of mobile sensibility among the low income group, by observing the state of economic compulsion prevailing upon their mental frame as regards their efforts to ameliorate their socio-economic well being. In order to establish the state of economic compulsion undergone by the low income group, we asked them to state their reasons for choosing to migrate; their views and reasons supporting these views, regarding youth migration; and their preparedness to allow their female household members and their reasons for not allowing them, to migrate to urban centers. From their responses to these questions, we made inferences on the level of psychic mobility that they are now experiencing.

The level of psychic mobility among the rural and urban low income group is high as shown in Table 6. This is inferred from the reasons they gave for migration. Almost all of the reasons they gave for leaving for another place, either to another village or an urban center, are economic in nature. It is therefore safe to conclude that the low income group have already experienced a high level of psychic mobility and this is mainly due to their economic plight. We further observe that the development of this mobility has made this group to perceive migration as a means of improving their life. In other words, this group would naturally experience or are prepared to make a series of migration episodes for as long as they feel their household economic status has not been corrected. As a tangent observation, the level of psychic mobility is highest among those who have already attained a more stable economic status and also among those who experienced the general environment of economic depression as shown in Table 7.

Their preparedness to move out of their traditional setting is further evidenced by their approval for youth migration. They feel young people should move out from their present depressed condition to urban centers which, they think, could guarantee them better life chances. This attitude towards youth migration is clearly demonstrated by their response as shown in Table 7.

**Table 6**  
Reasons for Migration

Area	Household income-group (Ringgit)	No.	Migration	To urban centre	No Response	Reason for migration
			To another village			
Kuala Lumpur/urban	0 - 200	18	1 (5.6)	9 (50.0)	8 (44.4)	1. To find better jobs 2. Near to working place 3. Can study as they work 4. Can move out at any time
	200 - 400	84	10 (11.9)	26 (30.6)	48 (57.1)	1. Follow husband 2. Find job elsewhere 3. Find appropriate jobs 4. Secure land 5. Near to working place 6. Educational facilities
	401 and above	61 163	14 (23.0) 25 (15.3)	13 (21.3) 48 (29.4)	35 (57.4) 91 (55.8)	1. Follow husband 2. Find jobs 3. On job transfer 4. Better job opportunities 5. Educational facilities
Tangkak/Rural	0 - 200	49	14 (28.6)	35 (71.4)	0 (0.00)	1. Seeking jobs 2. Follow husband 3. Development projects 4. Educational facilities 5. Urban way of life 6. Salaried employment
	201 - 400	88	12 (13.6)	59 (67.0)	17 (19.3)	1. Follow husband 2. Development projects 3. Find jobs 4. Educational facilities 5. Urban way of life 6. Don't like to work in the village 7. Salaried employment
	401 and above	22 159	4 (18.2) 30 (18.7)	16 (72.7) 110 (69.2)	2 (9.1) 9 (11.94)	1. Find jobs 2. Urban way of life 3. Salaried employment 4. Development project 5. Follow husband 6. Job opportunities

**Table 7**  
Willingness to Allow Young People  
Move out to Urban Centres

Household Income Group (Ringgit)	Kuala Lumpur/Urban (%)	Tangkak/Rural (%)
0 - 200	45.5	63.3
201 - 400	57.4	62.7
401 and above	55.6	75.5

Another dimension of the level of psychic mobility is revealed from their response to our question whether or not they approved the female members of their household to migrate to urban centers. This is shown in Table 8.

**Table 8**  
Willingness to Allow Female Members of Household  
to Migrate to Urban centres

Area	Household Income-group (Ringgit)	No.	Allow female members to migrate to urban centers				Reasons given
			No Res- ponse	Yes	No	Discou- raged	
Kuala Lumpur (urban)	0 - 200	12	6	8 (66.7)	4 (33.3)	0 (0.00)	1. Job oppor- tunities
	200 - 400	68	16	57 (83.8)	5 (7.4)	6 (6.6)	1. More job oppor- tunities
	401 and above	48	13	39 (81.3)	5 (10.4)	4 (8.3)	1. Educatio- nal facili- ties 2. Job oppor- tunities
		128	35	104 (81.3)	14 (10.9)	10 (7.8)	
Tangkak (Rural)	0 - 200	49	0	38 (77.6)	10 (20.4)	1 (2.0)	1. Job oppor- tunities
	201 - 400	86	2	67 (77.9)	7 (8.1)	12 (14.0)	1. Educatio- nal facili- ties 2. Job oppor- tunities
	401 and above	21	1	17 (81.0)	2 (9.5)	2 (9.5)	1. Job and educa- tional oppor- tunities
		156	3	122 (78.2)	19 (12.2)	15 (9.6)	

What we observe here is an interesting development of psychic mobility, especially that relating to their perception of out-migration. As the level of income increases, the level of psychic mobility also increases as can be seen in Table 9.

**Table 9**  
Willingness to Allow Female Members  
to Migrate to Urban centres

Household Income Group (Ringgit)	Kuala Lumpur/Urban	Tangkak/Rural
0 - 200	66.7	77.6
201 - 400	83.8	77.9
401 and above	81.3	81.0

When we put this observation under the wider scope of antecedent environment comprising such factors as income, education and economic status, then we get an idea about the development of psychic mobility in relation to these factors. In relation to migration especially it appears that the level of psychic mobility follows quite closely the level of income and education and the economic status. This means that people who have achieved a high income and a high level of education and economic status, experience a high level of psychic mobility.

From our observation on the development of psychic mobility among the urban and rural low income group, a general situation of mobility can then be inferred, that is, the low income group have indeed become habituated to the sense of change and subsequently found themselves unbound from their traditional setting.

This situation of a fairly developed state of psychic mobility among the low income group indicates the extent to which they place their hopes on achieving vertical social mobility through geographical mobility. There are two categories of people who seem to share this attitude: firstly, those who are experiencing a state of economic compulsion and secondly, those who feel their economic status is not yet stable. The low income group belong to the first category as can be seen in Table 10.

Table 10 also clearly shows that the rural low income group make more migration trips than do the urban low income group. It further denotes that the rural and urban low income group may experience similar constraints of economic depression, but the rural low income group tend to look beyond the village for a chance to improve their economic status.

**Table 10**  
Household Members Who Have  
Experienced Out-Migration

Household Income Group (Ringgit)	Kuala Lumpur/Urban	Tangkak/Rural
0 - 200	50.0	58.7
201 - 400	30.3	45.3
400 and above	10.6	40.6

## VI

From our observation on the interaction between income, education, economic status and mobility at the level of behaviour among the urban and rural low income group, we can then describe the situation of infra-communication stage prevailing upon them.

1. Both the urban and rural low income group have been generally exposed to primary school education, but the urban social-type are more exposed to secondary school education than the rural social-type. The situation of illiteracy is more rampant among the rural social-type.
2. Both the urban and rural low income group now experience a high level of psychic mobility generated by two major forces: firstly, a state of economic compulsion and secondly, a generalised perception that their economic status is critically unstable. The development of increased psychic mobility has psychologically prepared this group to out-migrate as a means of achieving social mobility. Both the urban and rural social-types are now making or are now prepared to make, migration trips as a means of getting out from their present state of economic depression, especially the 18 - 37 age-group from the rural setting.
3. Consequently, the infra-communication stage prevailing upon the low income group is built upon a combination of the following forces: low economic status, low level of education, high level of psychic mobility, and a presence of mobile sensibility.

A profile of the infra-communication stage prevailing upon the urban and rural income group is shown in Table 11.

What we have established here is that the urban social-type in the low income group have gained access to a more dynamic infra-

communication stage than that attained by the rural (village) low income group. This situation alone has set a structural set back to the communication behaviour among the village low income group, in terms of their participation in the dominant communication systems as well as of their political (civic) participation at both the local and national levels.

**Table 11**  
 Profile of Infra-Communication Stage Prevailing  
 Upon the Low Income Group

General characteristics of infra-communication stage	Among the urban social-type	Among the rural social-type
1. Low economic status	1. Low economic status	1. Low economic status
2. Low Level of education	2. Widespread primary education, with <i>increasing</i> and extensive inroads of secondary education. Legacy of illiteracy is significantly reduced	2. Widespread primary education with <i>limited</i> inroad of secondary education. Legacy of illiteracy is still fairly high
3. A high level of psychic mobility	3. High level of physic mobility. Prepared to out migrate as a means of attaining social mobility	3. High level of physic mobility. Prepared to out-migrate, especially to urban centres, as a means of attaining social mobility
4. Presence of mobile sensibility	4. Geographical mobility as a major vehicle for attaining social mobility. Predominant migration age-group: 18-37	4. Geographical mobility as a major vehicle for attaining social mobility. Predominant migration age-group: 18-37

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