

The Role And Transformation Of Social Capital In The Mahalla System Of Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This research comprehensively analyzes the dynamics of social capital in Uzbekistan, its formation, development, and role in society under the influence of the mahalla institution. The study examines the components of social capital - trust, normative rules, and social networks - and investigates how they manifest and evolve specifically within the context of the mahalla. By assessing the impact of economic reforms, urbanization processes, and globalization on social capital through the mahalla, the research demonstrates the significance of social capital in economic growth, civil society development, and improving the population's well-being. The findings will serve as a foundation for developing policy recommendations to enhance social capital by strengthening the mahalla institution in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: New Uzbekistan, mahalla, social capital, trust, social networks, normative rules, economic development, civil society, urbanization, globalization.

Introduction: This study is based on a comprehensive review and synthesis of existing literature to analyze the dynamics of social capital in the daily lives of New Uzbekistan's population. The research combines theoretical foundations of social capital (works by scholars such as Putnam, Bourdieu, and Coleman) with empirical data, including the World Bank's "Listening to Citizens of Uzbekistan" (L2CU) survey [11]. The L2CU survey employs multiple methods, encompassing in-person national surveys, administrative data collected from mahalla officials, monthly telephone surveys, and qualitative data from focus groups. Additionally, other academic approaches such as ethnographic, sociological, and comparative studies were considered in analyzing changes in the mahalla. The acceleration of globalization and digitalization processes in the world is creating new networks in interpersonal relationships. These networks are increasing the importance of social capital as intangible wealth created within societies through networks, trust, and mutual interactions. Social capital is a positive outcome of human relationships and can be tangible or intangible, such as assistance, useful information, innovative ideas, and future opportunities. Despite its various conceptualizations in different social sciences, social

capital is generally understood as the characteristics of social organization that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit, such as networks, norms, and social trust.

Although the importance of social capital is widely recognized, the lack of consensus on how to measure it creates a peculiar paradox: it is difficult to reliably quantify a concept considered crucial for development. Relying on proxy indicators turns social capital measurement into a self-fulfilling process, as one finds what they are looking for but doesn't question the approach. This paradox necessitates a multi-methodological approach that combines quantitative surveys with qualitative data. This also means acknowledging the limitations and biases inherent to each method, as well as the need for "robust methodologies" and "careful analysis of local context" to ensure measurements that accurately reflect key concepts.

Since 2017, Uzbekistan has initiated a comprehensive reform program aimed at liberalizing the economy, attracting investments, and improving the well-being of the population. The main objectives of the "Uzbekistan - 2030" strategy include "joining the ranks of upper-middle-income countries by 2030 (raising GDP

per capita to \$4,000-5,000), doubling GDP, reducing poverty by half by 2026, attracting \$250 billion in investments, and achieving carbon neutrality"^[1]. The reforms are aimed at reducing the state's role in the economy, supporting small and medium-sized businesses, stimulating innovation, and improving overall connectivity. Significant progress has been achieved in currency liberalization, tax reforms, privatization, and the establishment of public-private partnerships. Special attention is being paid to improving the education, healthcare, and social protection systems.

The mahalla in Uzbekistan is a "traditional community-based structure" that has become an important socio-economic unit. Historically, it functioned as the "primary link of self-governance," organizing the life of the local population and uniting various ethnic and religious groups through a shared place of residence. Even in the post-Soviet period, former Soviet-era clans and traditional groups, such as mahallas, ashars, and aksakals, continued to exist, adapting to post-Soviet realities.

Today, the modern functions of the mahalla include mobilizing the population for reforms, developing entrepreneurship, creating jobs, providing social support, strengthening social cohesion, fostering intergenerational dialogue, and reinforcing humanistic values. It is supported by the state through the "Association of Mahallas of Uzbekistan" and the "Mahalla Seven" mechanism.

Along with traditional factors of economic growth, such as capital and labor, the importance of social capital for economic development, social stability, and overall well-being is increasingly recognized. This research aims to analyze the theoretical and methodological aspects of social capital on a global scale, as well as to study its significance, forms, and measurement challenges in the specific socio-economic and political conditions of Uzbekistan. The study consists of two main sections, first examining the general concepts and measurements of social capital, and then conducting a detailed analysis of its relevance in the context of Uzbekistan.

The concept of social capital is widely discussed in the social sciences, and there is no single, universally accepted definition. James Coleman (1990) introduces social capital as a capital asset for individuals, which exists in the structure of relationships between people. He emphasizes two important elements: "the degree of trustworthiness of the social environment" and "the actual extent of existing obligations"^[2]. Additionally, Coleman presents social capital as a public asset inherent to the social environment, while also

describing it as the individual's "secondary resources."^[3] The complexity in defining social capital is evident in the ambiguity between its function and its causal components. Some definitions explain social capital through its functions (such as the positive outcome of human interactions, facilitating coordination and cooperation), while others focus on its causal elements (such as networks, norms, and social trust, or the structure of relationships). As Durlauf (2002) points out, "many definitions conflate the functional and causal concepts of social capital"^[3], however, causal definitions are necessary for successful empirical analysis. The absence of this clear distinction can make it difficult to develop concrete, tangible evidence for quantitative analysis. Policymakers need causal definitions to develop interventions, which allows not only observing social capital but also shaping it.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977) considers social capital as a resource available to individuals in social networks and believes it can be utilized in social struggles or fields ^[4]. Furthermore, it links social capital with symbolic capital, where trust can be a component of symbolic struggle or its absence.

According to Robert Putnam's (2000) definition, social capital encompasses "features of social organization that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit, such as networks, norms, and social trust"^[5]. Thus, Coleman's contribution is positioned between Putnam and Bourdieu, emphasizing social capital as a quality that facilitates interpersonal cooperation.

In contrast, Nan Lin (2001) defines social capital as "a set of social connections that provide access to resources (such as information, assistance, and opportunities) in networks between individuals"^[6]. In his view, social capital, based solely on interpersonal connections, enhances the ability to access resources and opportunities. Another scholar, Tristan Claridge (2018), understands social capital as "people's natural ability, potential, and capacity to engage in cooperative, positive interactions and collective efforts"^[7]. Thus, Bourdieu's perspective focuses on the individual level and the instrumental use of social connections, which differs from the more collective approach of others.

These theoretical lenses serve as a solid basis for analyzing the specific dynamics of social capital in Uzbekistan, particularly how traditional structures interact with modern changes. The decline in social capital can threaten the quality of education, public safety, charity, economic development, and the responsiveness of civil institutions. This emphasizes its importance not only for individual well-being but also for the stability and progress of society as a whole.

(Table 1)

Table 1: The Primary Theoretical Components Of Social Capital And Their Manifestation In Uzbekistan

Theorist	Main components	Manifestation/Example in Uzbekistan	Implications for the dynamics of social capital in Uzbekistan
Putnam	Norms, trust, networks (voluntary associations, mutual relationships)	Mahalla system, hashar, religious institutions	Fostering collective prosperity, community stability, and self-sustaining cycles of cooperation.
Bourdieu	Resources in social networks, symbolic capital, struggle for resources	Family and kinship ties, informal networks, utilizing connections to access resources	Instrumental utilization of connections, potential for manipulation, and reinforcement of bridging social capital.
Coleman	Trust, mutual relationships, information, collective actions	Family, mahalla, informal information exchange networks, civic activism	Encouraging interpersonal collaboration, building consensus, and enhancing the efficacy of goal achievement.

Social capital is an integral component in the formation of social well-being in modern Uzbek society, ensuring the balance and coordination of individual and societal interests. It serves as a resource for obtaining socio-cultural, political, and economic benefits, based on systems of trust, mutual responsibility, norms, and values.

In Uzbekistan, social capital is deeply rooted in centuries-old history and cultural traditions. It manifests through stable institutions such as the family and mahalla, which have shaped everyday life and social relations over the centuries.

Uzbek society is traditionally organized according to patrilineal principles and has a very complex kinship terminology that distinguishes between siblings and paternal and maternal uncles and aunts. Extended families, especially in rural areas, often live together in large compounds. Newlyweds usually live with the husband's parents for some time after the wedding, and the youngest son is traditionally obligated to care for his parents in their old age. This demonstrates

strong family bonds and a system of mutual assistance, which form the basis of bonding social capital.

Family networks have dual consequences for economic development. On one hand, they can reduce competition in education and the labor market, leading to inefficient workforce distribution. This means that potentially highly qualified specialists may be left without appropriate education or jobs, while these positions are occupied by less qualified individuals. On the other hand, the family serves as an important informal support system, providing social protection and mutual assistance in everyday life. The family is the primary point of interaction where social capital is initially formed and accumulated at a small scale.

The deep integration of social capital into family structures and the mahalla system has historically served as a key mechanism for social stability and resilience, especially under conditions of weak or absent formal state institutions. This informal system, based on trust and mutual assistance, allowed communities to manage resources, resolve conflicts, and adapt to external pressures, including Soviet

attempts to dismantle traditional structures. Such resilience is a key feature of Uzbek social capital, making it an important factor in the population's ability to overcome modern challenges.

However, the dual nature of family social capital is also evident. While strong bonding social capital within families ensures vital support and security, it can simultaneously limit bridging social capital (connections with different groups) and hinder broader social progress, prioritizing kinship ties over qualifications or market efficiency. This suggests that modernizing Uzbekistan needs to find ways to leverage the internal strengths of family networks without perpetuating inefficiency or inequality in the formal economy.

In the Uzbek context, the mahalla institution was an ancient neighborhood community institution traditionally led by elders (mahalla-aksakals) elected by the community. Initially, mahallas possessed all the characteristics of a collective organization, mediating between the interests of ordinary citizens and the government, even protecting the interests of the former. They were also seen as a platform for uniting and expressing collective identity.

The historical functions of the mahalla included collecting taxes, delivering orders, ensuring security, resolving disputes, and assuming guardianship of orphans and widows.

The traditional mahalla gradually transformed, becoming increasingly integrated into formal legislation and appropriated by the government to exercise control over citizens. This process began during the Soviet era when mahallas, despite the Soviet government's attempts to eradicate religious and traditional structures, managed to maintain their "informal" self-governing functions through informal networks of the population engaged in information exchange and voluntary mutual assistance.

After gaining independence, the mahalla gained legal recognition in the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and then in legislative acts such as the Law "On Citizens' Self-Government Bodies" (1993, with subsequent amendments in 1999, 2013, and 2021). These reforms created a legal framework for providing mahallas with specific administrative, social, and economic functions, transforming them from informal networks into integrated nodes of state infrastructure. The existing social system of the mahalla evolved into an administrative system, as it was assigned more state functions and responsibilities, and international donors began to use it for program implementation. This led to the transformation of almost every aspect of former voluntary activity and contribution into the (legal)

responsibility of the mahalla, its institutions, and its residents. This process changed the institutionalization of the mahalla and its role in state-society interactions. The mahalla serves as a microcosm of state-society relations in New Uzbekistan. Its evolution is not merely an institutional change but a profound reflection of the broader relationship between the state and society. The state's strategy of assimilating traditional institutions instead of completely replacing them demonstrates a pragmatic approach to governance, which strives to maintain social stability and control using existing social structures. However, the success of this strategy depends on the state's ability to balance administrative effectiveness with maintaining basic legitimacy and trust for the mahalla. The mahalla's ongoing capacity to resolve conflicts and provide services effectively indicates some success, but ongoing scholarly debate emphasizes the inherent fragility of this hybrid model, which, if the balance shifts too far towards state control, may undermine the very social capital it seeks to utilize.

An important characteristic of social capital is that it exists not within individuals themselves, but in relationships and social structures. It can be both a public good and a personal resource. It facilitates cooperation, information exchange, and collective action. Its value is context-dependent. In Uzbekistan, mahalla systems formed in both traditional and modern contexts represent a vibrant and significant segment of social capital.

According to H.F. Akramov, "Social capital is formed and accumulated through the interaction of multiple individuals. For instance, every person initially engages in primary relationships within the family, thus creating and accumulating social capital at the nano-level. Today, the mahalla, as the main protective mechanism and focus of social policy, stands at the center of numerous social issues. Therefore, the mahalla serves as the primary space, or *socium*, that forms the foundation for the development of social capital at both micro and meso levels. At the micro-level, social capital mainly manifests in the form of individual trust (confidence in oneself and one's future) and friendship (the presence of friends in people's lives). At the meso-level, it appears as civic engagement (active participation in public affairs, responsibility) and mutual assistance (the existence of reciprocal help in people's lives)"[8]. Although the mahalla is recognized as an important source of social capital in Uzbekistan, it should not be forgotten that its excessive integration with state policy sometimes limits the mahalla's role as an independent civil institution and risks turning it into a system that places social trust and activity under artificial bureaucratic control.

In Rustamjon Urinboev's research, two structures of the mahalla are distinguished: formal and informal. In the official mahalla, the chairman acts as the state's executor, while in the informal mahalla, the elder works for the benefit of the community, for example: organizing community work (hashar), helping those in need, and providing services based on tolerance and trust. According to the scholar, "...it is necessary to distinguish between an 'administrative' (formal) mahalla and a 'social' (informal) mahalla: the first refers to the mahalla's role as a state institution functioning as a subdivision of local government, while the second is used to describe community practices that allow the population to access state goods, services, and means of social protection"[9]. Although the separation of formal and informal functions of the mahalla is theoretically justified, in practice, the intersection of these two directions is leading to the formation of the mahalla not as a platform for independent collective initiatives, but as a hybrid institution controlled from above and linking civic activity to bureaucratic procedures.

Timur Dadabaev, Yutaka Tsujinaka, and Murod Ismailov emphasize that "social capital in Uzbekistan should be understood as the result of both formal state structures and informal social connections. This necessitates situational approaches rather than the direct application of Western theories"[10]. They also note that a model of social capital specific to Uzbekistan is taking shape, and the interaction between state, mahalla, and civil society institutions plays a crucial role in this process. Researchers emphasize the need for a deeper understanding of the complex structure of social capital, advocating for mixed methods in the methodological approach - surveys, interviews, and network analysis.

The territory of Uzbekistan has historically been one of the centers of world civilization, where many cultures have intermingled for centuries. This contributed to the development of a unique national culture, which not only assimilated the positive experiences of other cultures but also significantly enriched them and served as a catalyst for further development. National and religious tolerance have been characteristic traits of the Uzbek people, who have been nurtured in the humanistic traditions of their great ancestors since ancient times. Today, this commitment to multiculturalism and tolerance, elevated to the level of state policy, is an inexhaustible source of spiritual growth.

The region was also a major center of enlightenment and education that gave the world Ibn Sina, Al-Khwarizmi, Al-Biruni, Al-Farghani, Alisher Navoi, Mirzo Ulugbek, and many other scholars. This demonstrates

the historical value of knowledge and intellectual exchange, which shaped social norms and contributed to cultural development. In the 1980s, there was a resurgence of religious practices, especially Islam, which influenced cultural life through increased activity of religious schools, mosques, and Sufi orders. This illustrates the enduring role of faith in shaping social norms and values, which are an integral part of social capital.

Since 2017, Uzbekistan has initiated large-scale reforms aimed at transitioning to a market economy. These reforms include reducing state dominance in the economy, accelerating private sector growth, and improving financial intermediation. Key achievements include currency unification, price liberalization, and tax reforms. There is also an expansion of the social protection system and increased fiscal transparency. Economic reforms are altering the balance of social capital. In the early stages of independence, corruption and limited formal opportunities strengthened bonding social capital (close networks and informal connections). This made patronage networks and informal connections crucial in economic activity. Current reforms are aimed at developing bridging social capital (connections between various groups and official institutions) based on transparency and the rule of law. Although these reforms are intended to transition to effective institutions, those who benefited from the previous informal system are resisting this change. In this situation, the only solution is to transition to a system of official and reliable institutions without losing the beneficial aspects of informal networks.

As of 2024, there are more than 9,400 mahallas in Uzbekistan, each led by a mahalla chairperson who is supported by staff specializing in women's affairs, youth affairs, social support, and civil status registration. Mahallas have now become advanced institutions of public administration, responsible for providing social services, monitoring family well-being, and resolving community disputes.

They play a central role in state programs aimed at reducing poverty, ensuring gender equality, and creating jobs, while also helping to provide targeted services through initiatives such as the "Iron Notebook," "Women's Notebook," and "Youth Notebook." "In 2023, over 1.9 million people received social services with mahalla support, and more than 60% of low-intensity domestic disputes were resolved without resorting to formal court proceedings"[12]. The "Mahalla Seven" system integrates seven state representatives (from law enforcement, healthcare, education, women's affairs, youth affairs, social protection, and civil status registration) into each

mahalla's operational structure, ensuring a multidimensional, localized response to citizens' needs. Mahallas also participate in digital literacy programs and public health campaigns, such as COVID-19 vaccination. These functions reinforce the mahalla's role in the polycentric governance model.

Throughout Uzbekistan's history, the mahalla has been a central institution not only socially but also economically. Particularly through traditions of collective labor (hashar) and mutual assistance, the mahalla has developed its own unique economic management model. Through hashar, important infrastructure projects such as road construction, canal digging, crop irrigation, or housing restoration were carried out through community initiative and unity. This has been an ancient yet effective method of achieving economic efficiency even with limited resources.

The mahalla institution has long served as the primary form of local self-governance in Central Asian societies. This institution ensured citizens' direct participation in

socio-economic life and established a governance mechanism founded on principles of collective labor, mutual aid, and social responsibility. However, the colonial policies of Tsarist Russia, and subsequently the rigid centralized management system implemented during the Soviet era, severely restricted the functional autonomy of the mahalla institution. The top-down administrative command system minimized citizens' involvement in decision-making processes and dampened local initiatives.

As a result, traditional forms of collective labor, such as hashar, lost their socio-economic essence and often took on a compulsory or formal character. This situation led to a decline in the levels of trust, mutual cooperation, and solidarity, which are crucial components of social capital. Although the mahalla institution's functions of social control and social support have been preserved under centralized governance, its role in local economic management has been significantly restricted. (Table 2)

Table 2: Evolution of the Mahalla System: Traditional and Modern Roles and Their Impact on Social Capital

ASPECT	Traditional role (pre-Soviet/early independence period)	Contemporary role (after 2017, "New Uzbekistan")
Management structure	State-appointed chairman (rais) / salaried employees	Elders (aksakals) elected by the community
Financing/Resources	Voluntary contributions / Hashar, community resources	State Budget/International Aid, Targeted Programs
Main functions	Conflict resolution, ensuring security, social welfare, organizing communal labor (hashar)	Provision of social services, implementation of state policy, data collection, conflict resolution, digital programs
Basis of authority	Informal norms / Moral authority, collective legitimacy	Legal mandate/Administrative authority, state decisions
Nature of participation	Voluntary / Communal, based on mutual relationships	Mandatory/State-directed, fulfillment of legal obligations
Interactions	Mediator / Advocate for citizens' interests, "bottom-up governance"	Integrated node of state infrastructure, "bridge between the state and citizens"
Impact on trust/networks	Bonding social capital, high internal trust, strong informal networks	Hybrid social capital, potential for erosion of voluntary trust, but increased formal efficiency and transparency

In the New Uzbekistan, the dynamics of social capital

are facing a number of challenges that require a strategic approach to ensure its sustainable

development and positive impact on society. These challenges include combating negative manifestations, strengthening institutional trust, and promoting the inclusive use of digital technologies.

The fight against negative social capital and corruption. The mahalla system, while generally positive, can also generate negative social capital, where people are manipulated or used to achieve socially harmful goals. Early post-Soviet economic reforms led to illegal currency trading and corruption, creating an unattractive business environment and demonstrating to foreign investors an unwillingness to conduct business.

Strengthening institutional trust and formal mechanisms. It is crucial for Uzbekistan to actively restore and strengthen trust in its official institutions (government, legal system, markets). Without doing so, citizens will continue to rely on informal, often less efficient or fair networks (bonding social capital) instead of interacting with and benefiting from formal systems (bridging social capital). The success of large-scale reforms depends on their ability to bring about significant improvements in transparency, fairness, and accountability, thereby strengthening institutional trust at the macro level. This is a key challenge for developing social capital, as society cannot fully develop if its citizens do not trust the structures designed to serve them. The transition from a state-enterprise-dominated economy to one oriented towards the private sector requires a reliable legal foundation and fair competition. Digitalization, especially e-government services, has the potential to increase trust in the government by enhancing the efficiency and transparency of public services.

Utilizing digitalization for the development of inclusive social capital. While digitalization expands communication opportunities, the digital divide is widening, especially in rural and remote areas. This disparity can exacerbate existing social inequalities. Lack of Internet access and digital literacy excludes people from new information and online services, resulting in limited access to digital social capital. Consequently, a two-tier digital society is forming, further marginalizing vulnerable groups. Therefore, targeted policies are necessary to reduce the digital divide, aimed at creating equal opportunities and developing inclusive social networks.

The dynamics of social capital in the daily life of Uzbekistan's population presents a complex and multifaceted picture, shaped by deep historical roots and modern changes. This study analyzed the main aspects of these dynamics and identified both its stable foundations and emerging challenges.

The analysis revealed that traditional social capital, embodied in strong family and kinship ties, as well as in the unique mahalla system, plays a key role in the daily life of Uzbek society. These structures have historically served as vital informal social networks, providing mutual assistance, conflict resolution, and collective solidarity.

However, modern trends such as economic reforms, digital transformation, and urbanization are profoundly impacting these traditional structures and generating new dynamics. In particular, the mahalla has undergone a complex transformation, becoming a hybrid socio-administrative unit. While maintaining its collective legitimacy, it is integrating into the state system to perform social protection and governance functions. This dual nature creates tension between the organic, voluntary nature of social capital and the state's drive for formalization and control.

Social capital in Uzbekistan demonstrates a dual nature: it is capable of both fostering positive collective actions and improving well-being, as well as enabling negative manifestations such as manipulation and reinforcing corrupt connections.

Social capital in Uzbekistan is not static: it continuously evolves in response to socio-political and economic changes. The interaction between traditional, informal networks and emerging formal institutions continues to shape its trajectory. This ongoing interplay determines how effectively society can adapt to new circumstances, address collective challenges, and ensure the well-being of its citizens.

Given the complex and often contradictory dynamics observed in Uzbekistan, a piecemeal approach to developing social capital will not suffice. Uzbekistan requires a holistic and integrated policy framework that acknowledges the interconnectedness between economic, digital, and urban development strategies and their impact on social capital. For instance, economic reforms should aim not only at GDP growth but also at strengthening trust and creating equal opportunities that reinforce social ties. Digitalization initiatives must actively combat digital inequality to ensure inclusive social capital. Urban planning should consider how to foster collective solidarity in new urban environments, possibly by adapting elements of traditional neighborhoods or facilitating the emergence of new civic associations. This integrated approach is crucial for overcoming complexities and ensuring that modernization efforts positively influence both the overall volume and distribution of social capital.

Thus, it is crucial for Uzbekistan to strike a balance between "top-down" reforms and "bottom-up"

initiatives that draw on the strength of local communities. Policies should be aimed at reinforcing institutional trust, fostering transparency, and bridging the digital and urban-rural divide. The strategic utilization of Uzbekistan's unique social capital, while preserving its rich cultural heritage, is key to achieving its development goals and building a more unified and prosperous society.

Indeed, as our President emphasized, "Currently, we are focusing our main attention on five priority areas in building a New Uzbekistan. These are, first and foremost, establishing a quality education system, developing business, creating a corruption-free and fair judicial system, radically improving the healthcare sector, and ensuring environmental sustainability" [13].

These words of our President demonstrate the harmony between top-down and bottom-up reforms. While he emphasizes the modernization of state governance and policy through top-down reforms, he also encourages local communities and citizens to actively participate in order to promote bottom-up initiatives.

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