

## The Malay Worldview and the Question of Poverty: Towards a Human-Centred Development Economics

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**Abstract.** *Contemporary development economics has largely approached poverty through material, quantitative, and technocratic indicators, often neglecting the ethical, cultural, and civilisational dimensions of human well-being. Within the context of the Alam Melayu, such approaches inadequately capture indigenous understandings of development rooted in communal harmony, moral economy, social justice, and human dignity. Despite the growing discourse on alternative development paradigms, limited scholarly attention has been given to the Malay worldview as a conceptual foundation for rethinking poverty and human-centred development. This article examines how the Malay worldview articulates the meaning of poverty and development beyond conventional economic reductionism. Employing a qualitative and interpretive methodology, the study draws upon textual analysis of selected Malay intellectual traditions, development discourses, and the works of key thinkers such as Ungku Aziz. The discussion highlights the embedded relationship between economy, ethics, religion, and social responsibility within the Malay conception of development. The findings suggest that poverty in the Malay worldview is understood not merely as material deprivation, but as a multidimensional condition affecting human dignity, social balance, and collective well-being. The article argues for a human-centred development economics grounded in indigenous and civilisational perspectives of the Alam Melayu.*

**Keywords:** *Malay worldview; poverty; human-centred development; development economics; Alam Melayu*

**Abstrak.** *Ekonomi pembangunan kontemporari lazimnya mendekati persoalan kemiskinan melalui indikator material, kuantitatif, dan teknokratik semata-mata, sehingga sering mengabaikan dimensi etika, budaya, dan ketamadunan dalam kesejahteraan manusia. Dalam konteks Alam Melayu, pendekatan sedemikian didapati kurang berupaya memahami makna pembangunan yang berakar daripada nilai kebersamaan, ekonomi moral, keadilan sosial, dan martabat insan. Walaupun wacana mengenai paradigma pembangunan alternatif semakin berkembang, perhatian ilmiah terhadap pandangan alam Melayu sebagai asas konseptual untuk menilai semula kemiskinan dan pembangunan berteraskan insan masih terbatas. Artikel ini meneliti bagaimana pandangan alam Melayu menghuraikan persoalan kemiskinan dan pembangunan melangkaui kerangka ekonomi konvensional yang bersifat reduksionis. Kajian ini menggunakan metodologi kualitatif dan pendekatan interpretatif melalui analisis teks terhadap tradisi intelektual Melayu terpilih, wacana pembangunan, serta pemikiran tokoh seperti Ungku Aziz. Perbincangan menunjukkan bahawa hubungan antara ekonomi, etika, agama, dan tanggungjawab sosial merupakan unsur yang saling terjalin dalam faham pembangunan Melayu. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kemiskinan dalam pandangan*

*alam Melayu bukan sekadar kekurangan material, tetapi suatu keadaan multidimensi yang menjejaskan martabat insan, keseimbangan sosial, dan kesejahteraan kolektif. Artikel ini menghujahkan keperluan terhadap ekonomi pembangunan berteraskan insan yang diasaskan kepada perspektif peribumi dan ketamadunan Alam Melayu.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Pandangan alam Melayu; kemiskinan; pembangunan berteraskan insan; ekonomi pembangunan; Alam Melayu.*

## **Introduction**

Though there is a huge development taking place in the world in terms of economic growth and technology, poverty is still one of the prime issues of development economics today. Poverty has traditionally been discussed in mainstream development discourse in terms of material and quantitative aspects, including income, household expenditure, and gross domestic product (GDP), making economic growth the main means towards achieving human wellbeing. Such strategies have added significantly to the process of development planning and to poverty eradication policies, but it has become increasingly doubtful that they are sufficient to capture the wider moral, social and civilisational aspects of human development (Sen 1999). Well-being cannot be measured by economic deprivation alone, as in many postcolonial societies, such as Malaysia, the local community may interpret well-being by cultural values, communal relations, religion and moral obligations within their worldview and historical experiences.

Even though Malaysia is an upper-middle-income country, recent data show that poverty and inequality remain developmental challenges in the country. The absolute poverty rate fell in recent years, but low incomes and multidimensional poverty are present among vulnerable households, especially in rural areas and among marginalised groups, said the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM). The modern research also shows that poverty in Malaysia goes beyond being income poor, as the feelings of deprivation are also felt in the aspects of education, housing quality, healthcare, digital connectivity and social participation (Ismail et al., 2025). However, worries about the cost of living, youth unemployment, household debt and urban precarity have

highlighted that development as reflected through macroeconomic indicators is not sufficient to accurately capture the state of a society's human well-being.

In development economics, an alternative has developed which takes issue with the inability to imagine development beyond the materialist and growth paradigm. For example, the capability approach to development by Sen (1999) transformed the idea of development into an action of increasing human freedoms beyond just the accumulation of wealth. Moral economy theories, similarly, stress the interconnection between economic activities, moral values, social responsibility, and communal responsibilities (Scott, 1976). Empirical support for this critique of growth-centred development is not confined to theory: panel-data evidence from Aceh, Indonesia, found that economic growth had a positive but statistically insignificant relationship with poverty over eleven years, while zakat and education produced significant negative effects, suggesting growth alone does not translate into poverty reduction without accompanying redistributive and human-capital mechanisms (Amalia et al., 2025). The connection between economy, morality, religion and social harmony has always been an integral part of social life within the *Alam Melayu* in the Malay intellectual tradition. The worldview of this is not only individual accumulation, but a balance between material sufficiency, communal solidarity, spiritual fulfilment and social justice.

The Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz has a special place among scholars in Malaysia for his articulation of the link between poverty and human-centred development in the Malay community. His writings on rural poverty, cooperative movements and the *Sarong Index* were attempts to move beyond the developmental paradigm and to understand poverty as experienced by the Malay people (Rasiah et al., 2015). Even though Ungku Aziz's ideas have become the subject of numerous reinterpretations and evaluations, more recent studies have engaged his ideas within the context of *maqasid al-shariah* and moral economy, which hold that his developmental thought was an indigenous and ethical understanding of development that was based on local values and civilisational experiences (Suhaimi & Johari, 2026).

This positions Ungku Aziz's thought alongside a broader turn in Islamic development scholarship toward epistemology-driven models. Alhindi (2025), for instance, proposes the *Rushd* framework, which argues that Islamic epistemology yields five operational principles for development, including self-productive capability before external reliance and a dual mindset balancing material and non-material aims, largely through the lens of *waqf* institutions. Where *Rushd* is anchored in institutional (*waqf*) practice, the present study extends a parallel epistemic logic to the conceptual category of poverty itself within the Malay worldview, suggesting these are complementary rather than competing projects. However, the current body of literature in the field of poverty in Malaysia remains largely quantitative, policy-oriented and state-driven developmental discourses. However, there has been little focus on the Malay worldview as a conceptual and philosophical construct in the understanding of poverty and development economics. Recent scholarship has further argued that Ungku Aziz's developmental thought should be understood not merely as economic policy analysis, but as an institutional expression of a broader moral worldview rooted in justice, dignity, and social responsibility (Suhaimi et al., 2026).

This constraint suggests that there is a gap in the literature that needs to be addressed by this solution. Current debates in poverty and development in Malaysia focus more on statistical measurement and policy performance and less on the intellectual, ethical and civilisational underpinnings that inform local conceptions of human welfare. As a result, poverty in the Malay perspective is still poorly conceptualised and underdeveloped in the field of economic development. The success of the technocratic and positivist paradigm has also pushed aside the voice of indigenous people who might provide other ways and means of development from humans' point of view in a postcolonial society like Malaysia.

## Literature Review

Poverty and development discourses in Malaysia have gone through several historical and intellectual stages, starting from the colonial era of economic administration to the current multidimensional and human-centred development discourse. The early research on poverty in Malaysia was primarily linked to underdevelopment in rural areas, agricultural dependence and income inequality among the Malay peasant group. Peacock (1981) noted that structural constraints in agricultural production, land ownership and inequitable planning processes were directly related to rural poverty in Peninsular Malaysia. Likewise, Barrett (1993) has said that national agricultural policies, which were designed to promote rural development, often created inequitable distributions of economic benefits among peasants. In addition, other demographic studies performed by Chin (1989) and Teo (1991) had confirmed the cyclical nature between poverty, fertility, and household vulnerability in rural Malay communities, revealing other impacts of poverty than simply not having enough money. Recent scholarship published in TIFBR similarly argues that poverty should be understood as a multidimensional condition encompassing ethical, institutional, and distributive dimensions rather than merely income deprivation (Fatoni, 2019).

Much of the international discourse on the post-independence developmental experience of Malaysia has been about the country's development miracle since the 1970s, referring to the country's impressive achievements of absolute poverty reduction and rapid economic growth (Asadullah et al., 2021). The adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) was a watershed moment in the conception and execution of state policies toward interethnic inequality and rural poverty, based on affirmative redistribution and social restructuring. According to Mat Zin (2014), the development path that Malaysia had taken was significant for developing countries as it was a mix of development planning, poverty alleviation and transformation of industries. However, it has been suggested that the Malaysian developmental model has created new inequalities, dependency and social stratification. However, Sriskandarajah (2005) highlighted that development in plural

societies like Malaysia is a complex process of negotiation between three key elements of economic development, ethnic accommodation and distributive justice. Similarly, Perumal (1989) showed that economic growth was not an automatic panacea for income distribution, thus refuting some of the findings in classical modernisation theory and the Kuznets hypothesis (Bowman, 1997).

In recent literature, there is a growing critique of the traditional approach to poverty measurement for being too narrowly focused on monetary measures and too narrowly focused on a state-centred development concept. A paradigm shift in poverty discourse from a narrow income-based measure to a multidimensional and human-centred approach was recommended by Nair and Sagarin (2015) in Malaysia. This critique mirrors the international scholarship that doubts development reductionism and neoliberal growth models that focus on economic growth and ignore social justice and human well-being (Ayelazuno, 2014). In recent years, poverty analysis has extended beyond the economic dimension to include digital exclusion, environmental vulnerability, spatial inequality, emotional well-being, and others. For example, Sheikh Dawood et al. (2019) studied the role of digital divides in perpetuating rural poverty in northern Peninsular Malaysia and Vaziri et al. (2019) showed that poverty is concentrated on a spatial level in various parts of Malaysia under the framework of Sustainable Development Goals. The psychological and emotional aspects of quality of life for low-income communities were also emphasized by Shuhidan et al. (2023), indicating that poverty goes beyond just being an economic deprivation and is also a subjective and social experience.

Recent empirical evidence continues to demonstrate that household income remains one of the strongest determinants of poverty in many developing economies. Using an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model, Ramdhani (2019) found that a one percent increase in population income reduced the number of poor people by approximately 0.93 percent, highlighting the significant inverse relationship between income growth and poverty reduction. While such findings reinforce the importance of income-

generating policies, they also illustrate the dominance of income-centred explanations within conventional development economics. The present study extends this discussion by arguing that poverty in the Malay worldview cannot be understood solely through income dynamics but must also incorporate ethical, social, spiritual, and civilisational dimensions.

Multidimensionality has gained ground in the study of development economics, specifically in the field of poverty and human well-being. In the evaluation of the Gahai agropolitan project, Ismail et al. (2018) applied the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which shows that education, living standard and social participation are deprivations that constitute poverty. Likewise, Mohamad et al. (2021) introduced poverty indices for the districts in Kedah based on composite measurement models, and Ismail et al. (2025) also suggested that integrated agropolitan planning is needed to achieve sustainable living among the poor people in the rural areas beyond only income generation. Recent empirical research has also examined poverty from the perspectives of financial inclusion, microfinance, climate vulnerability and social resilience. Nawi et al. (2018) and Al-Mamun et al. (2014) studied the contribution of microfinance institutions and Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia in alleviating the economic vulnerability among the low-income households. Wong et al. (2023) concluded that financial inclusion and innovation have a significant impact on poverty and income inequality in the ASEAN economies, while Islam et al. (2024) investigated the interdependency between unemployment, education, technology, and poverty in the context of the economic development strategies in Malaysia.

The Malaysian poverty discourse is also becoming more sociological and ethical in recent times, as it relates to human development. This is the introduction of the concept of spiritual poverty, based on the concept of *tazkiyah al-nafs*, which suggests that poverty should also be viewed as a deprivation on moral and spiritual levels in urban settings, according to Rahman et al. (2023). In the same way, Amir Zal et al. (2020) suggested a community-capital methodology in measuring poverty among fishermen communities in

Malaysia, which came to challenge the traditional economic poverty measurement. These developments are echoed by the broader discussions in the field of moral economy that treat economic life as an integral part of moral responsibilities, social reciprocity, and communal responsibility (Scott, 1976). In the Southeast Asian context, Retsikas (2017) suggested that processes of value transfer and social exchange continue to be key to understanding beyond capitalist rationalities of economic relations.

In the context of Malaysian intellectual history, Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz continues to be one of the most influential thinkers to seek to define poverty and development through the lens of Malay society and indigenous realities. Ungku Aziz was a fundamental pillar of Malaysia's developmental thinking, whose focus was rural poverty, cooperative movement, and ethical development, according to Rasiah et al. (2015). He was the first to apply the *Sarong Index* to a developmental analysis that takes into account cultural and lived experiences as well as statistical measures of poverty. Jomo (2015) also illustrated how Ungku Aziz had critically looked at the colonial land laws and the inequalities of the Malay peasants, including the fragmentation of land ownership and its enduring socio-economic consequences. Ungku Aziz's developmental ideology was different from mainstream development economics, which was built on utilitarian considerations, as it was based on a wider moral economy view that emphasized communal welfare, dignity and social justice. This perspective has recently been expanded through a worldview-to-institution framework, demonstrating how ethical values embedded within Malay-Muslim intellectual traditions were translated into development institutions and policy orientations in Malaysia (Suhaimi et al., 2026).

Although there is already a vast quantity of literature covering this subject, there are some significant gaps that are under-researched. First, most of the studies on poverty in Malaysia still focus on using quantitative techniques, econometric models, and policy assessment procedures. These studies do much to extend the empirical understanding of poverty, but reduce

the conceptual, moral and cultural aspects of poverty to a secondary position. Secondly, even though multidimensional poverty approaches have expanded the analysis of development, poverty in the concept of the Malay worldview has not been studied extensively. The literature does not generally contain much information about how indigenous notions of economy, morality, religion, and communal life influence local notions of human well-being in the *Alam Melayu*. Third, research on Ungku Aziz is generally about economic policy and institutional development, rather than putting his thoughts into a broader context of the Malay worldview and human-centred development economics.

This study aims to tackle these gaps by exploring poverty and development from the perspective of the Malay worldview through an alternative intellectual and civilisational perspective in development economics. This article challenges the dominant positivist and technocratic approaches to poverty reduction in *Alam Melayu*, which focus on material lack and statistical deprivation, by emphasizing the multidimensional nature of poverty and positing that it encompasses economic vulnerability, social imbalance, moral dislocation, cultural fragmentation and the loss of human dignity. In the Malay intellectual tradition, the issues of economy and development have always been linked to other issues concerning ethics, religion, communal responsibility, social harmony and the purpose of human life in general. But development cannot be seen only in terms of the increase in wealth and industrialization; it must also be understood in the context of maintaining justice, dignity, social cohesion, and collective well-being.

This view is echoed by the writings of a few key Malay-Muslim intellectuals whose writings expressed development from both ethical and civilisational points of view. For example, developmental approaches that were out of tune with local realities and human needs were always condemned by Royal Professor Ungku Abdul Aziz, especially in the context of rural poverty, the vulnerability of the peasants and the structural inequalities of Malay society. His developmental thinking focused on cooperative economics, social

justice and welfare, which centered on the human person as the driving force of national development. In the same way, Za'ba perceived poverty as the result of mental lethargy, cultural reliance, lack of educational awareness and moral laxity among the people. Za'ba emphasized the value of self-strengthening, knowledge building, moral improvement, and social responsibility as the pillars of the development of society and communal dignity through his works like *Perangai Bergantung kepada Diri Sendiri*.

Similarly, the discourse of development at HAMKA went beyond mere material wealth, focusing on spiritual consciousness, moral refinement, and the harmonious interplay between material progress and spiritual development. In such texts as *Tasawuf Modern*, HAMKA condemned the over-emphasis on materialism and stated that man's development should involve economic and spiritual and ethical fulfillment. Poverty also has a psychological and moral dimension for HAMKA, impacting the human soul, social relations and even civilisation itself. These views show that the Malay worldview sees development as a holistic process that includes the material, moral, spiritual and social aspects of development, and not just an economic process of growth and consumption.

This study aims to build human-centred development economics based on indigenous and civilisational economic views of the *Alam Melayu*, using the Intellectual tradition of Ungku Abdul Aziz, Ungku Za'ba, and HAMKA. The article draws on a qualitative and interpretative analysis of selected texts and discourses of the intellect to argue that the Malay worldview provides another developmental framework that can appeal to and question the current poverty reductionist approach, and in doing so, can play a role in a more holistic understanding of human well-being in development economics. Recent contributions in Tazkia Islamic Finance and Business Review have expanded the discourse on Islamic development by emphasising *maqasid al-shariah*, distributive justice, zakat, waqf, and multidimensional poverty as integral components of human-centred development.

## Methodology

The study uses a qualitative research design with an interpretive paradigm to consider poor and development in Malay worldview in the field of Development Economics. The qualitative approach is suitable as the study is not interested in testing causal relationships by using statistical inference but is focused on meanings, traditions of thought and interpretations of poverty among civilizations. Following this epistemological stance, poverty is seen as a phenomenon that is multidimensional, entangled with cultural factors, and characterised by feelings of material deprivation, moral standards, and social justice (in keeping with the broader critique of reductionist development frameworks – Sen, 1999; Asadullah et al., 2021).

### **Research Design**

The main approach used is qualitative content analysis and is supported by descriptive and interpretive analysis of text. Content analysis can be used for systematic interpretation of texts, while keeping the cultural and philosophical context in mind (Krippendorff, 2013). The approach is used for various intellectual writings in Malay, Islamic writings, and selected literature on development economics.

The study also uses a meta-literature synthesis approach to incorporate previous empirical studies on poverty in Malaysia and ASEAN. In the case of Malaysia, for instance, the term 'poverty' has been used to discuss issues of microfinance effectiveness (Nawi et al., 2018), inequality and development policy (Sriskandarajah, 2005), spatial poverty patterns (Vaziri et al., 2019), and governance-related development outcomes (Asadullah et al., 2023). These studies offer empirical support but are mostly positivist and/or econometric in tradition, highlighting the need for interpretive re-engagement.

### **Data Source 1 : Epistemological and Scriptural Foundation**

This study combines the norms and analysis of Islamic epistemology. The concept of poverty and wealth distribution is explained in the Al-Qur'an in the context of justice and human dignity. For instance:

*So that the wealth of the people may not remain among the rich of you alone*

*(Al-Qur'an, 59:7)*

*"And there is a right for the needy and the deprived in their wealth"*

*(Al-Qur'an, 70:24–25)*

The following verses have suggested that the economy is not only about transactions, but also a moral and distributive economy. Social responsibility and compassion are the themes that frame poverty alleviation in the Hadith. The Hadiths were then recorded and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

*If someone's stomach is full while another person's is empty, then he is not a believer.*

*(Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 6016)*

*The giving of charity does not diminish wealth*

*(Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2588)*

Such sources put poverty on an ethical plane, creating the concept of poverty as an 'ethical and social responsibility,' thereby reinforcing the moral and social dimension of development.

### **Data Source 2 : Malay Intellectual Sources**

This study conceptualises the Malay worldview through the works of Za'ba, HAMKA, and Ungku Abdul Aziz, whose intellectual contributions provide complementary perspectives on development, morality, and social transformation. Za'ba emphasised self-reliance, educational advancement, and moral discipline as fundamental prerequisites for addressing dependency and alleviating poverty (Za'ba, 1965). HAMKA combines spiritual ethics and economic life, claiming that development should consider both material development and internal purification of inner moral values (HAMKA, 1962). Structural inequality, institutional reform and human-centred development strategies are emphasised in the work of Ungku Abdul Aziz on poverty and cooperatives in rural areas (Rasiah et al., 2015). These views all share a focus that imagine poverty as not just economic poverty, but also intellectual poverty and moral poverty.

### **Analytical Procedure**

Thematic coding is used in the process of data analysis. First, the collected texts were organised into four datasets, such as Qur'anic verses, Hadiths, intellectual writings of Malay and the articles published in Scopus-indexed journals. Second, the open coding method is used to reveal concepts that recur in the text, including justice, dependency, human dignity, inequality, and spiritual poverty. Third, the concepts are linked together through axial coding to form larger groups: material poverty, structural inequality, moral poverty, civilisational development.

Finally, selective coding integrated these categories together in a central analytical structure which is a human-centred economics of development model based on a Malay-Islamic worldview. This approach to poverty can be seen as a shift from an income poverty perspective to a multidimensional approach, one that looks at poverty from an ethical, social and spiritual perspective.

### **Trustworthiness and Validity**

In order to ensure credibility, the study is based on the three types of sources, namely (i) Qur'anic and Hadith texts, (ii) Malay intellectual traditions, and (iii) peer-reviewed literature indexed in Scopus, such as Nawi et al. (2018), Vaziri et al. (2019), and Asadullah et al. (2021). Reflexive analysis is used to reduce interpretive bias and peer debriefing to create conceptual consistency.

### **Scope and Limitation**

In this study, the mathematical or regression-based technique of econometric modelling is not applied to development economics. Rather it focuses on interpretative epistemology to account for aspects of poverty beyond the scope of quantitative measures. The conceptual framework presented here can, however, be operationalised in the future into multidimensional poverty indices or structural econometric models for future research.

### **Results and Discussion**

The findings of the qualitative analysis are presented below. The main themes and how they relate to the study objectives and literature are summarised in Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Major qualitative findings on poverty and development in the Malay worldview

Theme	Result of analysis	Academic implication
Poverty is more than income deprivation	Recent Malaysian data show that poverty has declined, but deprivation remains unevenly distributed across space and social groups: absolute poverty was 5.1% in 2024; rural poverty was 10.0% compared with 3.7% in urban areas; Sabah recorded 17.7%, and Kelantan 11.5%. MPI also remained far higher in rural areas than in urban areas.	Poverty must be read as a structural and multidimensional condition, not only as household income insufficiency.
Development as human-centred, not purely technocratic	Median household income reached RM7,017 in 2024, yet the World Bank still notes high inequality, limited upward mobility, and persistent spatial gaps.	Development policy must integrate equity, mobility, education, health, and place-sensitive intervention.
Malay intellectual tradition as an alternative framework	Ungku Abdul Aziz, Za'ba, and HAMKA collectively frame development in moral, social, and spiritual terms rather than narrow accumulation.	The Malay worldview offers a human-centred development economics grounded in dignity, responsibility, and self-reliance.

The first key finding is that, despite the progress in income and human development over the years, poverty in Malaysia is still multidimensional, spatially concentrated and uneven. Absolute poverty reduced to 5.1 per cent, while rural poverty remained at 10.0 per cent, which is still higher than the urban poverty rate of 3.7 per cent, according to official 2025 data, which shows that the most severe incidences of poverty were still found in Sabah (17.7 per cent) and Kelantan (11.5 per cent). In 2024, the multidimensional poverty index also declined to 0.0025, but the rural MPI was still significantly higher than the

urban MPI, suggesting that access to education, health, sanitation and basic services is still unequal. Meanwhile, the median income of households has increased to a level of RM7,017, but the situation of deprivation in certain regions and communities remains unchanged.

This pattern is in line with the research problem that poverty cannot be simply measured by income. The aggregate level of poverty's reduction has been accompanied by robust territorial inequalities, so development has been effective, but it is not equally effective. This reading is supported by the World Bank's 2025 assessment that Malaysia has achieved significant poverty reduction but still faces inequality; opportunities for upward mobility are still quite restricted for many in the low-income group; and early opportunities continue to influence later outcomes. The report also emphasises the need for quality education, healthcare, employment and spatially-appropriate policy for more inclusive growth.

The second is that the Malay worldview takes the notion of poverty beyond the economic and is redefined as a moral-social condition. Development is not only the growth in the selected intellectual tradition, but also the balance of human beings, social justice and dignity. Rasiah, Mansor, and Chandran's account of Ungku Abdul Aziz portrays him as a rare economist who theorised poverty on the grounds of the lived experience of people and whose suggestions later became the basis of state strategy. Similarly, Nair and Sagarán contended that there is a need to shift the perspective on poverty in Malaysia from the traditional concepts, definitions and measurement of income, as the traditional inequalities among different ethnic groups are still discernible. Also, Asadullah, Joseph and Chin demonstrate that politics was central to the process of implementing poverty reduction, particularly in the context of the East-West split. Collectively, these studies provide strong evidence that poverty is a problem of institutions and a problem in the political economy.

This is also the place where Za'ba and HAMKA reinforce the conceptual framework. Za'ba's writings on self-reliance focus on intellectual discipline,

independence and the rejection of dependency, and later works on HAMKA demonstrate his emphasis on knowledge, education, and spiritual guidance over materialistic and purely rationalist life. Together, they reflect a wider Malay idea of development, in which poverty is a lack of strength of mind, lack of moral direction and lack of self-responsibility. This type of reading is in line with the study's goal of providing a non-reductionist understanding of poverty that is rooted in a Malay worldview.

A third major finding demonstrates that when the perspective of poverty is understood in terms of dignity, ethics and communal responsibility, a human-centred development economics emerges naturally out of the Malay intellectual tradition. The evidence has the policy of development not only to focus on redistribution but also to widen its scope to encompass capability formation, social protection, learning outcomes, health access, and regional balance. The 2025 World Bank policy priorities for Malaysia confirm this conclusion, focusing on boosting productivity, investing in quality education, strengthening social protection, inclusive investment, place-sensitive policy and tracking mobility and inequality. In this respect, the Malay worldview is not against economics; it is a complement to economics for placing it on the moral agenda and the social justice agenda.

The study therefore addresses the research objectives in three ways in discussion terms. First, it reveals that poverty in the *Alam Melayu* can be explained as multidimensional poverty, which involves economic, spatial and social exclusion. Second, it shows that Malay intellectual thought, in the hands of the likes of Ungku Abdul Aziz, Za'ba and HAMKA, offers a serious alternative language for development. Third, it implies that the best policy horizon is one that is based on human-centred development economics that puts dignity, mobility and justice at the core of analysis, not as a by-product. The implication of this finding is significant because it connects the modern concerns of the development world with the indigenous intellectual world, thus providing a more culturally based and analytically sound understanding of poverty in Malaysia.

The present findings complement the growing body of literature by demonstrating that Islamic development economics should be evaluated through justice (*'adl*), welfare (*maslahah*), and human dignity rather than economic growth alone

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the problem of poverty and development from the Malay world perspective to rethink development economics beyond the purely positivist and income-based perspective. The results unequivocally show that poverty in Malaysia and the Malay world is not a simple problem of income poverty. Rather, it is a multidimensional state that is driven by structural inequality, spatial inequity, institutional structures and the socio-cultural and moral factors that impact human well-being.

The first study goal, which was to reinterpret poverty in a Malay civilisational perspective, has been accomplished by looking at poverty as something more than just material deprivation. Data analysis of present-day Malaysia indicates that the absolute poverty level has dropped to a relatively low level in recent years, but the gap between rural and urban areas, and between States and communities, is still very wide. This is a verification of the fact that poverty is not simply a national problem but is also very localised in relation to geography, access to services and the opportunity structures.

The second aim is to analyze the contributions of the Malay intellectuals to the development of thinking - is also achieved by analyzing the works of Ungku Abdul Aziz, Za'ba and HAMKA. The moral dimensions of personal responsibility, self-reliance, education, spiritual balance, and social justice have always been part of these intellectual traditions and are all fundamental to development. Their thinking collectively challenges the prevailing view on development which emphasizes only economic development, without taking into account dignity, ethical formation or social cohesion.

The third task is to build an ethically based development economics framework in terms of the Malay worldview, which is achieved by synthesizing

the Islamic ethics, Malay intellectual thinking and the development literature. The analysis indicates that there exists a coherent alternative perspective, the Malay worldview, where poverty can be viewed as a material, social and moral deficiency. This view is consistent with the concepts of justice and welfare that are present in the Islamic scriptures and provides a more comprehensive basis for development policy.

The findings also support emerging scholarship which suggests that development in the Malaysian context should be understood as the institutionalisation of ethical commitments into governance structures, rather than merely the pursuit of economic growth indicators (Suhaimi et al., 2026). Comparative institutional analysis of waqf governance across Indonesia and Malaysia illustrates this dynamic concretely: Malaysia's centralised, state-linked waqf structures under bodies such as JAWHAR and MAIS demonstrate stronger institutional capacity than Indonesia's more decentralised nazir-based system, even as both face persistent gaps in transparency and professional expertise (Putra et al., 2023), underscoring that ethical worldviews require durable institutional carriers to translate into sustained poverty outcomes.

Finally, the study confirms the relevance and need for a human-centred development economics based on the Malay worldview as a meaningful and needed corrective to mainstream development approaches. It shifts the focus on poverty from just being an economic problem to one of human deprivation and requires systemic changes in the economy, morals and institutions to overcome poverty. In this way, this method can help in building a holistic picture of development in Malaysia and provide a mental connection between traditional knowledge systems and modern development economics. This study contributes to the growing discourse on Islamic development economics by demonstrating that the Malay worldview provides an indigenous human-centred framework that complements *maqasid al-shariah* and moral economy approaches to poverty alleviation.

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