

Poverty Alleviation: The Absence of Understanding or the Understanding of Absence?

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Abstract: *Is the issue of poverty being dealt with effectively? This essay examines the range of perspectives towards poverty eradication efforts, from the foreign aid in Africa to the poverty eradication efforts conceived by Ungku Aziz in Malaysia. In so doing, the essay attempts to understand the most effective ways poverty can be reduced, and in the end, found that the mismatch between the expectation of solutions and the reality of the poverty problem to be the nucleus of the ineffectiveness of poverty eradication efforts in Africa, and how in the Malaysia, the initial match between the two has managed to propel the poor's standard of living to a better level.*

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1. Introduction

Economic performance is a common indicator or barometer for viability, effectiveness and good governance spanning nations, regions, states, and provinces. Whatever the means are - technological advancement, welfare enhancement, educational modification, social reformation – the ultimate end shared is largely identical; the solidification of economy, the superiority and economic competitiveness in relation to other nations. Yet, the zeal for economic advancement has, in modern times, ignored a deeper discourse on poverty. Facts and figures on poverty should encourage us to engage the issue of poverty better; however, governments and societies are more inclined to adopt the parochial view that offering more food and clothes are staple solutions that could alleviate the problems of the poor and elevate their living standards. The issue is not so much the principle that underlines this rationale, but rather, its execution that seems to, either willingly or unknowingly, disregards the realities of the poor.

Policy debates and discussions regarding poverty have focused on whether solutions should be initiated from the top (supply side) or the bottom

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(demand side). Put in simpler terms, should a government decides to tackle poverty today, should it do so by providing aid to the poor or let the poor demand for it since they know what works best for them? Although popular belief in poverty aid dictates the winner to be the “supplier”, over the years economists have lamented how this particular method does not necessarily lead to the intended result of alleviating poverty and how it has instead, had the adverse effect of perpetuating them.

Of particular interest to this essay is whether poverty could be alleviated solely by:

- i) Aid from an external source, or
- ii) is a structural amendment in the economy by way of trade or creation of government initiatives would offer a more effective method to escape the seemingly sempiternal grasp of financial inferiority, and
- iii) whether a combination of both aid and macroeconomics adjustment is possible

In answering these questions, the research methodology adopted is that of pragmatism advocated by Cherryholmes (1992) and Creswell (2003). Adopting this stance, the present study holds that to say poverty alleviation efforts through aid is thoroughly negative will only invite views as to why it has been successful. We opine the solution to poverty lies in first assessing the situation of the poor and the action by both the poor and the source from which the poverty alleviation efforts come from and secondly, study the consequences of the combination of these elements. In line with this, several case studies and publications on the effect of foreign aid on financially-stricken nations, specifically within the African region, have been scrutinised for comparative analysis between the viability and the effect of the practice. We also discuss Ungku Aziz’s contribution to the body of knowledge on poverty alleviation efforts which directly address the plight of the poor, the structural adjustments that followed and the impact it has generated on Malaysia’s poverty landscape and investigate the strategic similarities Ungku Aziz’s approaches share with other global poverty eradication methods. From the analysis, we will attempt to interpret whether the poor’s limitations to fully understand and utilise aid provided to them is a factor that hindered desired growth (absence of understanding) and the understanding at the side of interventionist – governments, aid foundations, social organisations - of the poor’s realities (their series of material and informational absences) would enable the design of more refined, effective approaches to ensure success in poverty alleviation efforts.

2. Foreign Aid: A Disaster or a Blessing in Disguise?

On the surface of it, it is almost an antithesis – how can aid, something that fills the poor’s vacuum of needs, be bad for them? One response to this baffling

question is the web of corruption that exists with the poverty eradication efforts. At the international level, Williams (2009) and Abugre (2013) for example, remark how the failure of foreign aid programmes in Africa is largely due to prevalence of corruption in the region. It is not only limited to the misappropriation of funds but also related to control of resources, barrier to economic entry and the leaders' personal economic interest as opposed to the nation's economic progress. This extensive reach of corruption frustrates any meaningful change foreign aids intend to achieve. In other words, the reason foreign aids have not been able to take Africa out from its poverty trap is because the money does not end up in the hands of the poor people in the first place.

The concerns raised by Abugre (2013) are shared by Bieker (2009), Moyo (2009) and Mwenda (2012) who asserted that what Africa truly needs is not foreign aid but a more targeted and refined help in the form of trade. Foreign aids, as the development economist examined, have created an adverse effect of feeding into the corruption ring and undermine the workings of market force in the recipient African countries. Supporting her argument, Bieker has cited the case of Tanzanian farmers who were forced to abandon their fields due to foreign food aid. At the surface level, this might seem to be positive. After all, the fact that the farmers do not have to work hard indicates the success of foreign aid in reducing their burden. If one is to look deeper, this situation also paints a negative picture on the future outlook of Tanzania's economy. If the people of Tanzania are forced into aid dependency, what will happen when the aids stop? The local market, already reduced to passivity due to the rigorous channelling of external aid, would face a harder time in reviving its activities.

Adopting a critical view, this cycle of perpetual dependency can also be viewed as among the 'softer' ways of maintaining the African political dependency on the West. In the case of corrupt political leaders of Africa who channel aid to their personal coffers, the role foreign aid has played as the 'emergency kit' to sustain the economies of their nations has provided the latter safeguards against further regression of their economy - the main catalyst that can lead to the much feared mass coup d'état. However, manipulation of foreign aids had also resulted in their dependency on aid, making the primary problem surrounding Africa - poverty - not just intergenerational, but also systemic. In a nutshell, the corruption, undermining of market forces, false dependence and poorly targeted help that form the background of the acquiescence of these economists towards its execution.

3. Rethinking Poverty Aid

Having observed the negative effects of foreign aid, it comes as no surprise why some economists are opposed to the idea either in execution or principle. To a certain extent, as Easterly (2001, 2006) highlighted, it betrays the ability of the government and the people to improve from within and device their

own ways of alleviating poverty. The best solution to alleviate poverty, as Easterly stressed in his book *The White Man's Burden*, was to "put the focus back where it belongs: get the poorest people in the world such obvious goods as the vaccines, the antibiotics, the food supplements, the improved seeds, the fertilizer, the roads, the boreholes, the water pipes, the textbooks and the nurses. This is not making the poor dependent on handouts; it is giving the poorest people the health, nutrition, education, and other inputs that raise the payoff to their own efforts to better their lives." (pp. 376).

The case that Easterly made was allowing the market to move independently by giving enough structural aids for its population to empower themselves is more effective than merely giving them food and monetary aid. Easterly's account is supported by Moyo's (2009) findings that Africa growth would be more intensive should it be moulded into a trading power that is able to establish its unique specialisation, and utilise it to project itself as a player in the international market scene.

Easterly, Moyo and other aforementioned scholars' conviction of the inimical nature of foreign aid, however, are not shared by Jeffrey Sachs. Sachs (2005a, 2009b) essentially saw foreign aids as helping to alleviate poverty and raise the standard of living of the poor and their economic condition. He cited how the number of HIV-infected Africans on donor-supported antiretroviral therapy has climbed from zero in 2000 to 800,000 at end-2005. Sachs is not alone in believing the effectiveness of foreign aids. In their study on the impact of nutritional aid in Kenya, Banerjee and Duflo (2011) found that better health was an effect of better nutrition which led to an increase of USD3,269 in lifetime salary for every Kenyan. This amount was arrived at by looking into the effect a good health has on the increase in learning and work productivity which has a direct effect on educational and career progress. Being development economists, Banerjee and Duflo also identified how the lack of education is one of the critical factors that led to intergenerational perpetuation of poverty; that just as wealth could provide 'invisible advantages' (access to better nutrition, education and career choices), poverty too, can be inherited which leads to the struggle for proper nutrition, education, career and other choices in life.

Between looking at foreign aid as a harmful step that should be stopped and looking at them as a case of misguided case needing readjustments and not a total halt, what is the way forward? In order to answer this, understanding the reality of being an African is crucial. Realising this challenge, Jessica Cohen and Pascaline Dupas took the initiative to establish their own non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Together against Malaria (TAMTAM), to act as an alternative supplier of mosquito nets to Population Services International (PSI) in Kenya. Their aim was to find out whether cost would influence buying decisions. To test this hypothesis, TAMTAM provided mosquito-proof bed nets to Kenyan villagers at different prices. What they

found was the villagers' decision to purchase the nets highly correlates to the cost of acquiring those (Cohen & Dupas, 2010).

Though the finding by Cohen and Dupas that the reason the poor does not have access to better livelihood is because they do not have enough financial capability signals just how helpful a monetary aid would have been in improving the population state of health, the findings by Onwujekwe et al (2004) revealed a paradox to this accepted popular belief; that even with an increased income, the poor would not necessarily be more likely to purchase a mosquito net to guard themselves against Malaria. In their study of the Achi autonomous community, a settlement located 45 kilometres from the state capital of Enugu, Nigeria, they found how a 15% increase in salary will only increase by 5% the likelihood of the villagers buying the nets.

So what do these researches show? From one perspective, it shows that if only the poor were given the opportunity to access ways to improve their health at a lower cost, the problem of vector diseases such as Malaria could have been prevented, which in turn would boost the efforts of the household to secure more income. From another perspective, even with a heightened financial capability, the poor might not necessarily view disease prevention apparatus as a top priority of their spending. This particular perspective uncovers an intriguing aspect of the poor's lives. As Onwujekwe et al discovered, the rationale behind the Kenyan villagers' not buying mosquito nets, a measure that can prevent them from contracting the deadly Malaria disease, despite having the financial capability to do so, is that most families do not have the awareness of the health benefits and the multiplier effect of mosquito-proof bed nets. This unawareness, as the researchers further explained, can be attributed to their lack of access to the right information. At this juncture, the role of education as an equaliser, as the key catalyst to break away from the poverty trap became strikingly apparent. More importantly, education also plays an important role in providing a legitimate way for the poor to escape the poverty trap, which could directly reduce crime rates and occurrences of violence in the public space.

4. Us Against the World: The Poor and the Realities Surrounding Them

The findings by Lee and Rasiah (2014, 2015) on the intergenerational occurrence of criminal acts among the poor unravel the reality that has been often overlooked in the discussion on poverty alleviation and the advantages the able possess. The poor face comparatively more challenges than the able, especially if they are born into it. The poverty trap faced by the older generation has a higher possibility of being inherited by the subsequent ones due to the hardships that hinder them from obtaining the necessary foundation to improving life – education. The absence of education, especially if it has been prevalent in the earlier generation, could conceal the awareness of how crucial education itself is in escaping poverty. Even when there is awareness,

the path is still obscured by the poor's inability to access education. As Osman and Rasiah (2011) have argued, poverty still affects poor students in Malaysian villages.

There are many factors that explain this. First, the financial capability of the poor. Financial scarcity is a heavy burden to the poor; given their economic situation, the risk any financial decision carries is unavoidably higher than the economically able, since they have very small savings to begin with. In this sense, the long and compulsory education period required by the formal education system demands a big investment from the poor which they are not able to shoulder. The second factor is social responsibility. This is especially evident in the case of big and poor families. Having been born not only in a financially stricken family, but with heavier burden as well, the head of the family might decide to send only one, if any, to acquire education. The rest of the family will help in maintaining the economic capacity of the family by looking for jobs resulting in them missing the opportunity to obtain education. Since the latter correlates highly with the sort of career and the level of income one can make, chances are the family, having made a very risky investment of sending only one of their family members to school, will only have enough to survive which is probably not enough for them to effectively pull themselves out of the poverty trap at least until their risky investment has yielded result, such as excelling in studies and securing a high paying job. The third factor is the social stigma which is common among poor families with female members. The patriarchal system, in addition to the already low level education of their parents, could have a negative impact on the female members by limiting their chance of obtaining education vis a vis their male siblings. The societal expectation that places a heavier emphasis of success on males rather than females could form a barrier in the self-actualisation process of the female members in a poor family institution.

These three factors - limited financial capability, social responsibility and social stigma, among many others - together separate the poor and the able in their outlook, opinion and decision. The invisible advantages of the able – being born in a surrounding that understands the value of education with a balanced expectation of social responsibility towards their family, unshackled by the imbalances of the social dogma has certainly increased their possibility to reap success, or at least to not fall victim to the crippling snares of poverty. Though it is true that genetics account little in the case of success, it is important to note that and financial capability can strongly influence the poor's outlook, opinion and decision. A family with a good financial standing has a higher tendency to have a broad outlook on life stemming from intergenerational awareness on education and the ability to afford it. The latter (ability to afford education) and the benefit of having a sound knowledge paves the way for the financially able to absorb more information along the course of their education, which then leads them to formulate more refined opinions that take into account a

wide range of perspectives. Thus, these two elements - the ability to adopt a broader outlook and formulate more refined opinions function – act as the key enablers for the financially able to arrive to a more systematic, extensive decisions that cater to both short-term and long-term goals. More importantly, this is what separates them from the financially stricken, whose outlook is severely limited by their inability to formulate informed opinion due to their limited access to information, and when they do have access, there is little knowledge on how to draw out meaningful guidance from it. What all of this boils down to is the apparent limitation of the poor to make a decision that can effectively pull them out of their poverty trap. It is crucial, however, to understand that this eventual result is not entirely voluntary, for the poor's limited conscience towards how education can significantly alter their lives is the result of the many other struggles they are facing. At this point, the intergenerational occurrence of crime among the poor that Lee and Rasiah found can be attributed to the criminals' (who come from poor families) acceptance that crime - however violent or unlawful - could provide a way out of or to survive the snares of poverty. The possibility for this 'acceptance' to occur would be relatively lower if the poor are instilled with the awareness of education and the ease of access in obtaining one, since by having that they would have been able to chart a different course to provide their family with more adequate, or at least legal source of income.

These factors are largely missing in discussions on poverty, which resulted in most poverty reduction and the general economic development efforts being reduced to mere food and monetary assistance. As Afwerki, the President of Eritrea, pointed out, the donors' tendency to view what would be helpful to Africa in their own definition and not by a thorough understanding of Africa's realities is the chief reason why aid fails to achieve its intended goals despite having Africa being a recipient of large amounts of foreign assistance spanning many decades (2000). His words carries the same message as Ungku Aziz in his observation that 'change' in foreign cultures should be preceded by identifying the version of change that could best benefit the material as well as the spiritual coffers of the benefactors (1983). Though the context were different – Afwerki was talking about the mismatch of aid and the real need of African countries - in principle, he shared the same conviction with Ungku Aziz; a belief that the best change is a change that corresponds to the overall psyche of the benefactors. The results of the successful implementation of this principle can be discerned by the different progress made in poverty eradication efforts by Africa and Malaysia.

5. Bridging the Demand and Supply Gap: Ungku Aziz and Malay Poverty

Long before economists became aware of the benefits and dangers of a single solution (supply/demand), Ungku Aziz's stance has provided the incentive for

both top-down and bottom-up approaches to work. By focusing on the need for community education that is, the importance of proper nutrition, Ungku Aziz helped in encouraging the intervention from the supply side namely, the Malaysian government. Meanwhile, the educational awareness among the community on the effect of good health had triggered a change and a demand from the Malaysian public on the importance of good health. This two-way approach – demand and supply – managed to sustain the effectiveness of Malaysia's human capital (due to their good health) at an optimum level.

Extrapolated onto the national building canvas, Ungku Aziz's observation is not only an unorthodox and a thought provoking perspective of solving critical societal issues from his time to the present. His observation on the important link between proper nutrition and education has had the effect of reducing poverty in the shores of poverty-stricken countries. Instead of relying entirely on hindsight, Ungku Aziz's insights had allowed Malaysia the room to improve its economy without sustained foreign aid by external powers. His introduction of the Sarong Index, an index that assesses the level of Malay rural poverty by the number of Sarong each household possesses, (sarong is the staple clothing of a traditional Malay), is a brilliant show of ingenuity in measuring the impact poverty alleviation initiatives on the poor. Multi-purpose traditional attire with a fair price value, the availability of Sarong or the absence of it is highly indicative of the financial capability of the poor. Additionally, calculating the number of Sarong a household has also serves as a tool to detect corruption and the decision making process of the poor. The ability of the poor to afford more Sarongs indicates the success of the overall structure of the aid institution – the government, the intermediaries and the village heads - to execute poverty alleviation initiatives at their respective level.

Against the myriad of challenges that exist in poverty alleviation efforts, a unique characteristic that Ungku Aziz has with his approach to eradicating poverty via education is that it engages the public holistically. This is unique since it departs from the conventional perception that the public are citizens to the understanding and realisation that it is also a pool where political leaders are a part of. While it can be argued that the success of Ungku Aziz's top down approach was partly contributed by his blood ties with the Malay aristocrats (Borhanuddin, 2015), ultimately what made such an approach momentous was Ungku Aziz's own practical ingenuity and relentless pursuit of the Malay economic development. His handprint is visible in many successful government initiatives such as the Muslim Pilgrims Economic Improvement Plan (*Rancangan Membaiki Ekonomi Bakal-bakal Haji*) in 1959. This economic improvement plan is a strong evidence of how Ungku Aziz's efforts in eradicating poverty goes beyond the public domain, of how his pursuit of development also includes the elucidation of the best way for the government to serve the majority's (Malay) interest as well. Within the framework of

that particular plan, Ungku Aziz had analysed how the Malays prefer to save their money individually instead of creating a saving account with the bank to avoid *riba*' (interest). The money that they saved was mostly used to buy cows which are then sold to cover the cost of performing pilgrimage. He also observed how the Malays would go to the extent of selling their land in order to perform the fifth pillar of Islam. The economic implication of such practices is that often the Malays returning from pilgrimage find themselves edging on the abyss of poverty by losing most of their critical assets. With this in mind, the purpose served by the Muslim Pilgrims Economic Improvement Plan is to remedy the Malay fears towards institutional saving by providing them with an alternative form of saving that does not practice *riba*'. In doing so, the development plan, which led to the establishment of the Pilgrimage Fund (Tabung Haji), has allowed the Malays the opportunity to perform the pilgrimage without sacrificing their assets as collaterals. These critical assets, as the development plan envisioned, should be better utilised to provide education for the Malay families.

In retrospect, while this has contributed to the over-solidification of political economy, it has nevertheless managed to overcome the dilemma in developing an economy of Malaysia's stature then by allowing the state the power to devise effective policies based on the specialist knowledge of the local economy, as opposed to relying on the rational of the still nascent state of public sphere and the market at that particular point of time. Indeed, Ungku Aziz's rationale for a managerial revolution in addressing Malaysia's economic needs preceded even the views of famous western business historian, Alfred Chandler, who only began to write about the effectiveness of modern managerial institutionalism in his book, *The Visible Hand*, in 1977.

6. Redefining Poverty Aid

Ungku Aziz's realisation of the critical issues surrounding poverty eradication efforts in Malaysia preceded even the contemporary school of thoughts in poverty aid. His observation on the disconnect between poverty eradication efforts and their recipients surfaced at a time so different than the present; the time when the technological and information chain is still underdeveloped, the moment when not just Malaysia, but most developing economies of the region are still struggling to re-establish their economic footing. Linking poverty with the systematic negligence practiced by the British colonial administration in Malaysia in addition to the exploitation by middlemen and money lenders (Ungku Aziz, 1964) is identical to the situation currently witnessed by development economists in Africa. The difference is, while most foreign aid economists see trade as the way out of the current problem, Ungku Aziz foresee education as the best investment to tackle the painful grip of poverty.

Ungku Aziz's rationale is not without basis. His conviction synchronises with the belief held by Paulo Freire, one of the world's most influential thinkers of education in the late 20th century. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire emphasised how knowledge is the single most important element that can help society tackle prolonged oppression, be it in economic, social or political settings (1973). This hardly comes as a surprise, since a scrutiny on the role of education would reveal that it is the basis of almost every strategic decision. The African perspective of trade as the most effective tool to escape the harmful effect of corruption and poverty is based on the knowledge that it would create a strategic link of interdependency between Africa and the world, rather than the narrower one-way dependency the region currently has with the US through foreign aid. However, even this perspective ignores the resulting complexity in participating in the global supply and demand system, primarily the fact that it needs to equip the regional, or at least the national capability of the market to participate in the international market system. The more immediate concern that African economists should adopt is not merely pushing for trade but preparing the appropriate skills and capability that could meaningfully contribute to the current global market system as well.

Seva Mandir, one of India's leading non-profit development organisations, has demonstrated that a push towards education in various sectors could lead to wondrous results. Based on its latest annual report, the organisation has managed to send 12,000 poor children into a proper educational institution that it has established, provide 8,000 women and children who are deprived of proper healthcare with important health services, helped 9,000 woman secure access to better gender equality and assist thousands of others in achieving sustainable livelihood through land cultivation (Seva Mandir, 2015). The nucleus of this change lies not so much in trade activities, but largely on education as an important tool in poverty eradication to create awareness on the issues indispensable towards a creation of sustainable, strong communities – education, health, youth development, women empowerment, child care and sustainable natural resources. The programmes related to these issues are carefully planned and executed by Seva Mandir through the establishment of the Village Fund and 532 Village Forums. Together, the fund and forums ensured the citizens have continued access to information regarding their responsibility for their respective villages.

While the issues addressed by Seva Mandir are only part of the bigger determinants of economic advancement in society, their combination serve the purpose of differentiating between a society still mired in poverty trap and a society well-balanced in its living standards. The organisation serves as an example of how positive changes in an economically deprived community can be effective and sustainable, even with the absence of help from the government. The fact that Seva Mandir can survive and effectively carry out its poverty eradication efforts in the midst of corruption is a testament to

the possibility of change even in the absence of governmental intervention, and how awareness – instilled by education – can establish a virtuous cycle of economic improvement. A child who is given education would be aware of his/her interest and develop his/her skills at an early age which could, in return, fill the absence that exists around him/her. A woman who is aware of the many other roles she could play and the avenues where she can derive income, aside than what the traditions impose on her, would find spaces where she could realise her potential, or at the very least, better contribute to the general livelihood of her family. Thus, women who have experienced the positive impact of education would be more incentivised to encourage her children to pursue similar education and in turn, her children, both male and female, would grow to ensure the sustenance of the trend, having experienced first-hand how education benefitted their lives.

7. The Centre of Poverty and Development: Towards a Future Free of Poverty

At the core of this cycle, the availability of a system that could help both the women and the child to understand the importance and impact of education and provide the necessary assistance to transform the resulting knowledge as a source of income, as what Seva Mandir does, is crucial in effectively shaping a future free of poverty. In Malaysia's experience, Ungku Aziz's dedication towards providing the citizen with education as both a barrier against and to propel them to fight poverty has culminated in the establishment of the Centre of Poverty and Development Studies (CPDS). Located within the grounds of the most prestigious university in Malaysia, University of Malaya, CPDS was established on 27th January 2007 as the successor to the Centre for Economic Development and Ethnic Relations (CEDER).

The CPDS is an integrated poverty eradication centre with a far-reaching network of like-minded organisations. Its Board of International Advisors has among others, professionals from world renowned educational institutions such as Professor Frances Stewart of University of Oxford, Dr. Takahara Akio of University of Tokyo, Professor Xue Lan of Tsinghua University and Professor Jayati Ghosh of the Jawaharlal Nehru University. The inclusive nature of the centre serves the purpose of achieve the following objectives:

- To act as a critical reference point for academic work, research and consultancy for poverty and development serving the academic community, the general public, policy makers and the international community.
- To chart new research directions and enhance academic excellence in the area of poverty studies at the University of Malaya and in the broader academic community.

- To develop new approaches and methodologies in the study of poverty as well as provide consultancies and technical assistance in improving the understanding of life in the rural areas and among poverty-stricken communities.
- To help increase accessibility to and dissemination of information pertaining to rural communities and poverty groups through the creation of databases, publications, seminars and conferences as well as through the internet and the media.
- To help foster strategic alliances between stakeholders by creating a tripartite framework of cooperation between academics, the government and the non-governmental organisations (NGOs).
- To act as a platform for strengthening the links between stakeholders through knowledge transfer, networking, and dissemination of information on poverty and development.
- To contribute towards capacity building in the rural areas especially among the poor and encourage the incorporation of local and indigenous knowledge in the development process.

These objectives are executed by the CPDS through research and consultancies, outreach and action research, extensive stakeholder networks, inputs into policy making and critical involvement in innovative poverty and sustainable development academic programmes carried out with multiple universities across Malaysia – Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Multimedia University (MMU), Harvard University Alumni Club, Science of Life Studies 24/7 (SOLS 24/7) and the Economic Planning Unit (EPU).

The centre's research partnership is a testament of the unwavering effort of CPDS in conducting research and offering meaningful ways to tackle poverty. With involvement from both private and public universities as well as governmental and non-governmental entities, the formulating poverty eradication initiatives no longer hinges on one particular approach – demand or supply – but instead, caters to both ends of the spectrum. The inclusion of the EPU (Economic Planning Unit) as part of the research network, for example, allows for the harmonisation of poverty research efforts with the governmental economic planning. Within this equation, not only the understanding obtained from the research initiatives carried out by universities could be shared with the government, the process of translating this understanding into a meaningful course of action also harbours a great chance of realisation. This rationale is equally applicable in the case of the centre's collaboration with NGOs such as SOLS 24/7. Being an active humanitarian organisation, the link

CPDS established with SOLS 24/7 has effectively added yet another channel in broadening centre's poverty eradication analysis. As Nair (2015) pointed out, this strategic research collaboration consequently gave birth to numerous publications such as *Poverty Alleviation: Challenges for the Islamic World* (2007), *Managing Sustainable Development and Poverty Alleviation in the Islamic World* (2008), *The Economic Impact of Gastro-Intestinal Disorders in Malaysia: The Role of Ethnic and Social in Health Care Seeking Behaviour* (2009), *Impact and Effectiveness of SMI Financial Assistance Programme in Malaysia* (2009) as well as implementation of programmes directed towards alleviating poverty in Malaysia such as the arrangement of Motivational Workshop for Orang Asli School Children (28-29th March 2008), International Conference for Indigenous People (29-31st July 2008), Effective Learning Method and Answering Techniques Programme for Orang Asli (7-10th October 2008), and the International Islamic Conference of Managing Sustainable Development and Poverty Alleviation in the Islamic World (14-15th October 2008).

Commemorating Ungku Aziz's lifelong pursuit of poverty eradication in Malaysia, the centre also hosts the Royal Professor Ungku Aziz Chair. Dedicated towards addressing poverty in Malaysia, the chair was officially established by the University on 9th November 2006, following the approval of the Cabinet led by Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The significant role played by the institute in addressing past and the current issues related to poverty has attracted numerous contributions from ministries, government agencies, financial institutions and government-linked companies, notably the Ministry of Higher Education, Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB), Petroliaam Nasional Berhad (PETRONAS), Sime Darby, Employees Provident Fund (EPF), Yayasan Pelajaran MARA, Yayasan Tun Razak, Bank Rakyat and the University of Malaya itself. With an endowment fund amounting to RM22 million, CPDS and the Royal Professor Ungku Aziz Chair have played an integral role in the research and publication of numerous articles on poverty in Malaysia.

Central to the functioning of the Royal Professor Ungku Aziz Chair is the appointment of distinguished development economists as the holder of the Chair. On March 9, 2009, the Chair witnessed the appointment of Professor Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute, Quetelet Professor of Sustainable Development and the Special Advisor to United Nations Secretary Ban Ki-Moon, as its first holder. Nominated by Time Magazine as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World, Sachs has delivered talks and public lectures regarding the global and local (Malaysia) development scene. The introduction of Global Classroom and the proposal for the establishment of Masters in Development Practice (MDP) programme under Sachs' tenure, along with his insight to create a development corridor to expedite poverty alleviation efforts have enhanced the focus and perspective of poverty

eradication efforts in Malaysia; it has also been instrumental in helping CPDS enhance its operational effectiveness.

The Global Classroom project, launched on 22nd January 2008, have allowed Malaysia, through CPDS, the opportunity to engage and interact with the global body of poverty eradication operators in emerging economies through an integrated, online development practice programme. The participants of the Global Classroom project came from a diverse set of countries - United Kingdom, United States of America, France, Brazil, India, China, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana, with each country representing a different type of economy. This has allowed a livelier, more informed deliberation of poverty alleviation efforts between Malaysia and the international sphere which subsequently led to the proposal for a Masters in Development Practice programme.

The views of Sachs and CPDS on how development corridors is a more concrete response in eradicating poverty has served as the foundational block of the establishment of the East Coast Economic Region Development Council (ECERDC). The subsequent development of the East Coast Economic Region (ECER), a development corridor aimed at uplifting the socio economic status of Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and the district of Mersing in Johor through a strategic thrust in the manufacturing, oil, gas and petrochemicals, tourism, agribusiness and human capital development sector, has provided the local residents the opportunity to wriggle out of the poverty trap and enhance their living standards. This initiative not only opened up employment opportunities, but also led to a wider base of trade creation, which can be seen as the probable consequence of the sectors ECER is focusing on.

Although Sachs' tenure as the First Holder of the Royal Professor Ungku Aziz Chair has ended, his contributions have left a lasting impact on poverty eradication efforts in Malaysia. As Malaysia extends its economic reach to the surrounding regions and solidifies its economic base, its economic performance will inevitably function as a barometer of the effectiveness of the nation's administration and nation building efforts. The CPDS in particular the Royal Professor Ungku Aziz Chair serves as a crucial barrier, the strand of intellect, insight and determination that bind together as an important assurance against the mounting challenges of economic depravity.

8. Conclusion

Does the history of poverty alleviation efforts at the international and local level portray an absence of understanding, or an understanding of absence? In Africa's case, it can be argued either ways. Foreign aid has certainly helped African countries to meet some of its needs, but it has done so at the expense of a larger reform. A thorough assessment of the African case would reveal how the efforts are still bounded in the realm of curative, rather than preventive.

Meanwhile, the on-going efforts of eradicating poverty in India, as well as the initial works of Ungku Aziz in poverty eradication efforts in Malaysia, which are inherited by CPDS, are an attestation of how the understanding of absence – of the unfilled void in the poor’s needs based on the careful observation of their realities - can leave a deep impact on poverty eradication efforts and the national economy, if one indeed strives to achieve it. All matters considered, there is no single, most effective way of mitigating poverty. While education has been proven to be a critical catalyst of escaping poverty, the task of providing education should be carried out by both the government (supply side) and the citizens (demand side).

In this era of globalisation and heightened capabilities, it is important to note that the power to eradicate poverty does not exclusively lie in the domain of governments anymore; that by concentrating their efforts, ideas and actions, organisations and individuals can equally deliver a high degree of impact in eradicating poverty. The response to poverty is never as simple as the expression ‘give a man a fish, he will last for a day, teach him how to fish, he will last a lifetime’. Empirical evidences have pointed out that the path towards a lifetime liberation from the poverty trap entails a much more intensive action, that efforts need to be channelled into instilling the ‘man’ with the awareness of how impactful the ‘fish’ is to his livelihood, and during the course of teaching him how to fish, assistance should still be provided until he successfully learns to not only how to fish, but to expand his skills and knowledge in fishing to ensure his lifetime prosperity. This analogy encapsulates the understanding, spirit and vision of Ungku Aziz in eradicating poverty, and the same understanding, spirit and vision are the crucial currencies that poverty eradication efforts need to adopt. Indeed, the need to understand the reality of poverty is becoming more urgent especially, in this time of increasing competitiveness and tougher challenges.

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