



BEYOND GROWTH METRICS : THE SARONG INDEX AND UNGKU AZIZ'S HUMAN-CENTRED DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE IN MALAYSIA

Muhammad Suhaimi¹, Fuadah Johari²

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

Email : muhammadsuhaimi.ymh@gmail.com, fuadah@usim.edu.my

Abstract

In the past, developmental evaluations have been done in Malaysia on the basis of growth centric measurements and have thus often overlooked the real socio-human situation. This paper attempts to review Sarong Index, a groundbreaking account of the concept of development based on humanity in the Malaysian context by Ungku Aziz. Using a qualitative interpretative approach to the corpus of writings of Ungku Aziz and a contemplative evaluation of his policy propositions, the paper clarifies the functional aspects of the Sarong Index as a socio economic indicator that is able to predict poverty and dignity, and the material aspects that define daily life realities, rather than just a rise in aggregate income. The analysis places the Sarong Index in the larger context of human-centred development paradigm and discusses its usefulness as a locally-based substitute of the traditional measures that promote the adoption of *Maqasid Shariah* compliance. The argument is supported by aligning the views of Ungku Aziz to the development trajectory in Malaysia after gaining independence, hence the Sarong Index, which would be a logical, though ethically conscious assessment, can be considered rational. The contribution will enhance the academic discourse on the inclusive development by demonstrating how the local or indigenous-based indicators and context-specific frameworks can support the mainstream development indicators in measuring the human welfare.

Keywords: *Human-Centred Development; Sarong Index; Ungku Aziz; Poverty Measurement; Indigenous Development Indicators*

INTRODUCTION

Development measurement has for decades been dominated by aggregate economic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and national income growth. These are set measures that have played crucial roles in macroeconomic planning and comparative international analysis, as well as benchmarking policy outcomes.

However, a growing body of academic literature confirms the inherent limitation of these indicators to reflect the qualitative aspects of human well-being, particularly the lived experiences of poverty, dignity as well as social involvement. Although the latter may be inevitable, it does not imply that economic growth translates automatically into the equitable access to opportunities, social recognition, and substantive empowerment of the

historically marginalized groups. Consequently, the traditional indicators tend to provide an image of the development progress that is statistically consistent but socially fragmented (Azhar et al., 2022; World Bank, 2025; UNDP, 2025). This weakness is most evident when the breakdown of multidimensional deprivation is not captured by poverty lines that are based on income. Households can also be above official income standards, but they can be still deprived in terms of quality of education, access to health services, or housing quality and possession of assets. These anomalies have led to enduring criticism of growth-based paradigms and a revival of human-centred development models to consider development results in human capabilities and human dignity and lived material conditions along with income. It is in this wider transformation that measurement is no longer perceived as a neutral technical action, but rather as a normative action which is formed by a set of assumptions of what is a good and dignified life.

The developmental pattern of Malaysia exemplifies those tensions especially well. The official statistics record the striking reduction in poverty in income in the past 50 years. Applying the most recent national line income of poverty threshold of MYR2,589 per household each month, the absolute poverty rate in Malaysia dropped to around six percent by the year 2022 (OECD, 2024). This success is often used as a reference to effective development planning. However, disaggregated data show that there are still inequalities in the regional, ethnic, and rural-urban levels. States like Sabah and Sarawak are still registering poverty rates that are significantly above the national average and poverty income inequality among the bottom forty percent has been high with this group taking an embarrassingly low portion of national income (UNDP Malaysia, 2025). Such trends indicate that aggregate prosperity has been accompanied by structural deprivation that has not been adequately measured using income-based measures.

This analytical gap is what was the late Ungku Abdul, one of the most influential development scholars and economic thinker of Malaysia, was concerned with. Ungku Aziz argued that development measurements should be based on observable human conditions and wrote long before the Human Development Index (HDI) or the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) came into being. His Sarong Index was one of his efforts to operationalize poverty as experienced material insufficiency instead of implied monetary inadequacy. The index measured the ratio of the quantity of *sarongs* possessed by a household to the family members under the assumption that access to basic clothing was one of the indicators of minimum living standards, social dignity, and engagement in regular life (Ungku Aziz, 1958; Borhanuddin, 2018).

The Sarong Index was not put forward as a general measure, or an alternative to national accounts. Instead, it was a diagnostic instrument that was based on empirical observation of rural society where the flows of income were uneven and immeasurable. In this regard, Sarong Index foresaw subsequent multidimensional methods by predicting material use value and social meaning instead of nominal income. Borhanuddin (2015, 2018) states that the work of Ungku Aziz is not as technical novelty but rather epistemological orientation. Poverty was being considered as a condition that is being experienced within the specific social context, and it has to be measured accordingly.

The intellectual project by Ungku Aziz supports this interpretation. In all his works on rural development, education and structural adjustment, he always focused on institutional quality, formation of human capability and social equity as the key

determinants of development (Ungku Aziz, 1970; 1983: 1989). Development in this perspective could not be reduced to capital accumulation and growth rates but relied on the scale of human potential and elimination of structural limitations. Such view is close to subsequent human-centred development theories and is very much reminiscent of Islamic moral economy thought.

The Sarong Index, according to the view of Islamic economics, can be interpreted as implicitly consistent with the aims of the *Maqasid Shariah*, especially the human dignity and the provision of human needs. Islamic moral economy stresses that economic performance should be measured according to ethical goals, social justice, and human welfare and not just efficiency (Asutay, 2013). According to classical Islamic economics, the material adequacy and social justice are also necessary in order that humans can flourish (Islahi, 2006; 2014). Even though Ungku Aziz did not clearly present his work within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence, the normative inclination of the Sarong Index-practices indicates such guidelines by considering poverty as a moral and social state, and not as an economic deficit.

The current Malaysian studies support the fact that these insights are still relevant. A survey of poverty measurement procedures shows that the use of income-based measures systematically understate deprivation where non-income dimensions are not used (Azhar et al., 2022). Empirical implementations of the multidimensional poverty models demonstrate that there exist consistent deprivations of indigenous populations and low-income urban families that were not visible through income-only measures, especially in the areas of education, asset ownership and living standards (Abdullah et al., 2025). These observations echo the first teaching of Ungku Aziz and indicate that his work foresaw much of the issues that are now discussed in terms of development measurement.

Similar evidence in adjacent contexts only serves to reinforce the inadequacy of traditional measures. The level of poverty in Indonesia is still single digit, but the multidimensional measure shows that a significantly bigger proportion of children are deprived when education, health, and housing conditions are considered (UNICEF, 2025). Although the current research does not aim to develop a comparative analysis, these tendencies confirm the overall thesis that the increase of incomes cannot be used to grasp the scale and multifaceted nature of poverty in developing communities.

It is against this backdrop that a new wave of interest in Ungku Aziz Sarong Index is not merely a historical interest. His work has been recently re-examined within the context of recent academic debates as one of the early expressions of indigenous, human-centred measurement that is based on social reality instead of technocratic abstraction (Borhanuddin, 2018; Ungku Centre for Development Studies, 2025). This paper identifies Ungku Aziz as a pioneer of the human-focused tradition of development in Malaysia and makes the case that the Sarong Index represents an ethnically based addition to the currently applied multidimensional theories.

In this regard, the current study answers two questions that are connected to each other. To begin with, what does the Sarong Index tell us about the larger human-centred development philosophy of Ungku Abdul in the Malaysian context of post-independent Malaysia? Second, in what ways can the Index be perceived as an indigenous and normatively informed and approach that sheds light on structural aspects of poverty that

are hidden by traditional indicators? Qualitative interpretive analysis and the location of the work of Ungku Aziz in the context of current human development and discourse based on *Maqasid* can help to support the current discussions about inclusive and context-sensitive measurements of development, and this paper has fulfilled this purpose.

RESEARCH METHOD

The current study is qualitative interpretive research that is done with the objective of rebuilding and reinterpreting the human-focused developmental viewpoint of Ungku Abdul Aziz based on the Sarong Index theoretical framework. The choice of a qualitative methodology can be explained by the character of the research questions that aim at explaining the meanings, values, and normative assumptions inherent in the development concepts as opposed to testing the cause-and-effect relationships or creating predictive models. The human-centred development including its formulation in terms of indigenous and context-specific indicators presupposes interpretive depth to reveal the frames of the concepts of dignity, sufficiency, and well-being in the context of their socio-historical backgrounds.

Research Design and Epistemological Orientation

An interpretivist epistemology informs the study since it appreciates development indicators as representations within a society and not as objective technical tools. In this perspective, development measurement expresses moral evaluations regarding the contents of a decent human life. In turn, the Sarong Index is not only a proxy variable but a conceptual artefact, which captures the normative position of Ungku Aziz on the issue of poverty, material sufficiency, and human dignity in post-independent Malaysia. It is this view that allows the study to place the Index in the wider discussion of human-centred development, multidimensional poverty and *Maqasid Shariah* oriented models.

Data Sources

The sources of analysis are mostly the documentary and textual sources of the empirical material. They are published books, scholarly articles, public lectures, policy speeches, and archival writings by Ungku Abdul Aziz that cover poverty, rural development, education, and socio 2 economic justice. Special attention is paid to the writings, where the Sarong Index is directly stated or where the Sarong Index is indirectly expressed through the discussion of basic needs, material deprivation, and actual lives of the poor.

The use of secondary sources helps place the ideas of Ungku Aziz in context and also to triangulate. These include the current academic literature on human-centred development, measuring multidimensional poverty, development ethics, and the official policy documents and statistical reports by the Malaysian and international institutions. Indonesia comparative materials are also included, as is scholarly analysis of indigenous development strategies, indigenous community-based poverty alleviation strategies, and participatory measurement strategies. These sources have not been approached as parallel case studies but as reference points to the context which sheds light in common regional issues about locally based development evaluation.

Data Collection Strategy

The systematic review of documents was used as the method of data collection. On the criteria of relevance based on three main ideas, poverty conceptualization, development measurement and human dignity, the texts have been selected. Authoritative and peer-reviewed sources, official policy documents and primary texts by Ungku Aziz demonstrating intellectual development were included as privileged criteria. Recent scholarly contributions were also given preference in the study so as to come up with fresh debates on human development and measurement other than through income.

A repetitive reading of all documents was implemented, and this was to enable immersion into the intellectual context in which Sarong Index came into existence. It is through this process of iterative reading which made it possible to identify the recurrent concepts, metaphors and normative positions which form the basis of the development thinking of Ungku Aziz.

Analytical Procedure and Framework

Thematic interpretive analysis is an approach used in the analysis, as it is especially appropriate to analyze conceptual contributions and normative ideas in textual data. The analysis is not based on coding frequency or patterns that are related to the statistical patterns but rather on the meaning structures that show how the understanding and framing of development and poverty is perceived.

Three stages of analysis were carried out. The initial phase involved initial open thematic identification, where major concepts connected to material sufficiency, dignity, routine lives, and criticism of growth-based measures were found throughout the writings of Ungku Aziz. The second step was interpretive clustering which entailed grouping these themes into general conceptualized groups that depicted the human-centred development principles. The last phase involved analytical integration where Sarong Index was placed within the context of modern human development discourse and conceptually compared with indigenous strategies of measuring poverty in Indonesia. Such overlay analysis allows seeing the Sarong Index as a text that has its historical and analytical interpretation, proving its applicability not only to the contextual meaning of the text but also its applicability to the models of multidimensional and ethical development of the time.

Validity, Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

In order to gain greater analytical plausibility, the research uses triangulation of various sources and time spans and thus makes sure that interpretations of the ideas of Ungku Aziz are not based on single-text situations. Internal validity check the conceptual consistency is demonstrated in his writings. Reflexivity is also ensured by the consideration that the analysis is interpretive and influenced by the modern-day issues of human-centred and Islamic development paradigms. The study is very explicit on its normative orientation towards dignity-based development, instead of insisting on any level of neutrality.

Ethical Considerations

Since this is document-based qualitative research, no human subjects are involved in this study hence no formal ethical clearance will be necessary. However, the intellectual ethics is supported by proper referencing, the depiction of ideas of Ungku Aziz accurately,

and the process of contextualization of the Indonesian indigenous practices to prevent cultural generalization or instrumentalization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rebuilding the Sarong Index as a Human Centred Development Indicator

The interpretive essays of the writings and interventions in the policy by Ungku Abdul Aziz prove that the Sarong Index was never meant as a proxy of income poverty and a technical substitute of national accounting indices. Rather, it was a moral and epistemological attack on development orthodoxy. Ungku Aziz did not accept the fact that economic growth and income expansion necessarily equated to human well-being. His worry was the conceptual blindness of growth-oriented measures that have disembodied poverty of the realities of everyday life. Development planning emphasized aggregate income or macroeconomic averages, which made it prone to the false identification of deprivation that continued to manifest at the household and community levels.

The Sarong Index was the result of the close interaction of Ungku Aziz with rural society and his practical sense of observation to the noticeable circumstances of life. Ownership of clothes and in particular a simple sarong was found to be a material sign of bare material adequacy. It was not a figurehead but a calculated move of a methodology. Dress code was a symbol of warmth, decency, social acceptance, and the capacity to stand in front of the crowd without disgrace. Poverty was therefore theorized as concrete and manifested but not as a statistical abstraction. This method is very close to modern arguments against income poverty that point to the gap between monetary measures and real standards of living, particularly in rural and informal economies (Alkire et al., 2023; Mokhtar and Mustafa, 2015).

The results of this paper suggest that Sarong Index represents three principles, which are intertwined and which expect subsequent human-centred developmental models. The first principle is the put value before exchange value. The income measures can only provide an indirect measure of purchasing power and in most cases do not give the correct picture of whether households are able to access basic commodities and services. Ungku Aziz rather enquired what they could use, wear and depend on in their everyday lives. This reasoning resembles more closely the approach to well-being developed later by Sen, whereby well-being is measured by accomplished functioning as opposed to the levels of income. According to recent empirical investigations, income poverty and material deprivation do not always coincide, especially in a situation that is typified by price fluctuations, informal labour and skewed access to markets (Zailani et al., 2025a; Selvarajan and Chandran, 2024).

The second principle that is entrenched in the Sarong Index is the centrality of dignity as an analytical category. Ungku Aziz saw poverty as not merely a state of material inadequacy but also a state that destroys self-respect and social belonging. In this regard, clothing was a sign of membership. People were unable to conform to basic standards of appearance, which resulted in stigmatization and marginalization, which cannot be

represented by income rates. The current literature in human development is slowly acknowledging dignity, agency and social recognition as fundamental elements of well-being. More recently the United Nations Development Program has claimed that poverty measurement should capture lived experiences of exclusion and vulnerability and not just consumption thresholds (UNDP, 2024).

This point of view is supported by empirical evidence in Southeast Asia. The research on multidimensional poverty in urban and rural Malaysians has shown that deprivation in the quality of housing, education, and property ownership tends to produce a social marginalization even within households that do not fit the definition of low-income groups (Zailani et al., 2025b; Tedong et al., 2022). The same results are observed in the Indonesian situations, where material indicators like housing material and access to common resources are strictly interconnected with social participation and voice (Utami et al., 2024). The Sarong Index therefore predicts a dignity-based conceptualization of poverty that has been emerging in the international development discourse of late.

The third principle is methodological strength as contextual specificity. Ungku Aziz did not suggest Sarong Index to be used as a universally applicable measure. Instead, he indirectly stated that development indicators should be anchored on local material culture and social norm. This is contrary to the universalist orientation of most global indices that use standardized indicators in different societies. In recent criticism of global poverty measurement, it is cautioned that too much standardization might result in epistemic injustice (the marginalizing of local explanations of sufficiency and well-being) (Hickel, 2024). In this regard, the Sarong Index is an indigenous epistemology of development measurement based on daily life and not on technocratic abstraction.

Locating Sarong Index to the Malaysia Development Trajectory

The Sarong Index when placed in the context of the Malaysian post-independence development process may be interpreted as a reaction to the strains of fast economic growth and structural inequality that is endemic. Since the 1970s, Malaysia has experienced stunning success in lessening the income poverty through industrialization, export-oriented growth and redistribution led by the state under New Economic Policy. Nevertheless, the indicators based on income have tended to conceal the persistent differences in relation to regions, ethnicities, and social classes.

Empirical analysis by Ravallion shows that ethnic and regional inequalities have been firmly held, especially in rural zones, and among Bumiputera people, notwithstanding the general decrease in poverty (Ravallion, 2020a; Ravallion, 2020b). Further research validates these claims, showing that the growth has not been equally beneficial on all groups and that increases in income have coincided with asset poverty and food insecurity and that quality education has not been equally accessible to every group (Banna et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2022). These results confirm the long-standing position of Ungku Aziz that growth-oriented development policies are inadequate to deal with structural deprivation.

This conclusion is supported by recent multidimensional poverty measurements. Studies that used Multidimensional Poverty Index to calculate urban poor and destitute *asnaf* in Kuala Lumpur have shown that education, housing and work stability deprivation continues to affect households that are under zakat support (Zailani et al., 2025a; Zailani et al., 2025b). These findings indicate that income transfers cannot eliminate more fundamental ability limitations. Such granular and human-centred measurement as observed in Sarong Index as a diagnostic tool is based on the expectation of observable living conditions.

Institutionally, the Sarong Index also indicates the criticism of the top-down policy design by Ungku Aziz. His argument was that development planning often did not connect with the realities of rural families and thus their interventions were disconnected with real need. This criticism can be applicable even nowadays. The research on rural governance and poverty reduction in Sarawak proves that recipients often view development programs as not related to their priorities and cultural contexts (Tedong et al., 2022). The same issues are replicated when reviewing initiatives of financial inclusion, which show an unequal distribution of access and less developmental effect in the peripheral areas even in countries with national-level achievements (Selvarajan and Chandran, 2024).

In the Islamic economic thinking, the Sarong Index may be said to be implicitly consistent with the goals of *Maqasid Shariah* especially the maintenance of dignity, basic needs and social harmony. Even though Ungku Aziz did not directly position his work in terms of Islamic jurisprudence, his morality orientation is close to modern Islamic development models that put human welfare above profit maximization (Hasan and Ahmad 2022). Recent research on the use of zakat to measure poverty further offer implication in the relevance of multidimensional and dignity-based indicators in Islamic social finance (Zailani et al., 2025b).

Comparative Reflections by the Indigenous Approaches in Indonesia

The analytical relevance of the Sarong Index is further supported by the fact that it can be compared with the Indonesian practices of development. Indonesia has become more integrated in terms of community-based and indigenous strategy in poverty reduction and development measurement, especially in rural and adat-based communities. Such ways focus more on local defined indicators including housing materials, access to common land, involvement in traditional institutions, and household resilience as opposed to income.

Recent empirical studies prove the fact that these locally based indicators usually give a better deprivation representation than money does. Research on the conditional cash transfer programs in Indonesia show that income support positively affects short-term consumption but fails to prioritize child labour, education standards, and intergenerational vulnerability unless there are complementary community-based interventions (Utami et al., 2024; Hartarto et al., 2025). These results reflect the interest of Ungku Aziz when she points out that income measures do not reflect structural and social aspects of poverty.

This disparity is also demonstrated by national data. Although there are still signs of official income poverty at less than ten per cent in Indonesia, multidimensional measurements indicate much higher levels of deprivation in terms of education, sanitation

and quality of housing (UNICEF Indonesia, 2025). This trend is quite similar to the Malaysian experience, and it highlights the applicability of indigenous measurement frameworks to the rest of the Southeast Asian context. Sarong Index is therefore able to be placed in a local tradition of contextualized development thinking that criticizes technocratic universalism.

The community involvement comes out as an important process that connects indigenous indicators and sustainable development outcomes. The studies on community-based ecotourism and marine conservation areas show that local participation contributes to the ecological sustainability and added security of livelihoods (Rahman et al., 2022). These discoveries support the implicit argument by Ungku Aziz that measurement of development and policy development should not be imposed and based on a top-down approach but instead on local knowledge and social relations.

Contemporary Development Measurement Implications

The results of this paper indicate that the Sarong Index cannot be reintroduced with the literal approach but as a conceptual model to derive context-specific indicators. It has made a long-lasting contribution in showing that development measurement is normative and value based by nature. The decisions on measurement are a consequence of the assumptions about what is a good life. The demands by Ungku Aziz on observable living standards and dignity are a challenge to the superiority of abstract economic measures and an appeal to more epistemic humility in development economics.

The recent discussions about the necessity to go beyond gross domestic product also focus more on the idea of the pluralistic measurement system that includes the universal standards and the locally based indicators (OECD, 2024; Hickel, 2024). Sarong Index provides a good initial and strong illustration of how this pluralism may be operationalized. Ungku Aziz recommended not to discard global metrics but supplementing them with those based on daily life.

Policy wise, this means that the policies that deal with poverty alleviation should be guided by indicators of material sufficiency, social inclusion and agency. Although significant, financial inclusion, microfinance, and digital banking programs should be considered depending on their contribution to the lived well-being instead of institutional reach (Banna et al., 2021; Banna et al., 2022). Correspondingly, the policies of food security should consider the access to food and nutritional sufficiency at the household level, and not aggregate output (Rahman et al., 2022).

Altogether, the Sarong Index is a groundbreaking but underestimated input in human-centred development thinking in Malaysia. It is not its simplicity, but its moral clarity, its contextual perception, that makes it relevant. Through foregrounding lived material reality and dignity, Ungku Aziz came up with a vision of development measurement, which is very much relevant in modern debate of inclusive, just, and humane development in Malaysia and the Global South in general.

CONCLUSION

The Sarong Index has been re-examined in this paper as a foundational but underdeveloped contribution to human-centred development thinking in Malaysia that indeed puts Ungku Abdul Aziz at the heart of defining the ethically based alternative to growth-centric development measurement. The analysis has shown that the Sarong Index was not a descriptive measure of material poverty but a normative intervention that questioned the common assumptions about what development progress is. Ungku Aziz pioneered a vision of poverty by preempting visible living standards and social dignity by foregrounding the expected future multidimensional and capability-based approaches, as anticipated today.

The results point to the fact that the Sarong Index reflects some of the most essential principles that are still very popular in the current development discourse. These consist in prioritization of the material sufficiency of lives over abstract aggregates of incomes, visibility of dignity as a fundamental element of human well-being, and demand of specificity of measurement practices. These principles are close to the contemporary criticisms of Gross Domestic Product and income-based lines of poverty, which are becoming more aware of their incapacity to account for structural deprivation, vulnerability, and social exclusion (Alkire et al., 2023; UNDP, 2024). The ethical clarity of the approach taken by Ungku Aziz can be found especially educative in the context of the Malaysian environment, where the official data on poverty reduction coincides with multidimensional deprivation of the rural and marginalized groups.

In the comparative perspective, the discussion of the practices of indigenous and community-based development in Indonesia also highlights the value of indicators that are context-based. Indonesia empirical findings reveal that poverty measures based on social institutions and material culture and communal engagement are often found to identify aspects of deprivation that are hidden behind standardized national statistics (Pramono & Nugroho, 2024; UNICEF Indonesia, 2025). The convergence in the region would suggest that the ideas of Ungku Aziz should not be viewed as an aberrant and outdated thinking but as part of a larger intellectual tradition in Southeast Asia, which values contextual intelligence as the prominent tendencies in development thinking.

The findings of this research have theoretical and policy implications. In theory, it requires a new level of interest in indigenous development thinking as a source of conceptual originality not a marginal addition to international constructs. Policy-wise, the Sarong Index cannot be restored as a literal measuring tool but instead should be used as a directing logic on how to construct context-sensitive indicators that can supplement national and international measurements. This method in Malaysia organically complements frameworks of *Maqasid Shariah*-oriented development that anticipate human dignity, sufficiency, and social justice as the end-of-goal of development (Chapra, 2008; Hasan and Ahmad, 2022).

To sum up, the human-centred development perspective developed by Ungku Abdul Aziz has long-term implications to the modern discussion of inclusive and humane development. This input to develop Malaysia development literature and improve the

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international desire to go beyond the traditional growth measurements by reintroducing the Sarong Index as a serious analytical tool.

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