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ADDRESSING POVERTY IN MALAYSIA: ANALYZING 2022 POVERTY STATISTICS, GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES, AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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Abstract:

This study examines poverty in Malaysia using 2022 statistical data, focusing on disparities across states, ethnic groups, and urban-rural divides. The findings reveal that states like Sabah (28.5%) and Sarawak (14.6%) have the highest rural poverty rates, while Bumiputera households face a higher incidence of absolute poverty (7.9%) compared to Chinese (1.9%) and Indian households (5.4%). The paper explores challenges such as policy implementation gaps, economic volatility, and regional inequalities. It also evaluates government initiatives like Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH) and the Digital DESA Program, which have shown measurable success in alleviating poverty. The findings emphasize the need for targeted policies, enhanced digital infrastructure, and localized strategies to build long-term resilience and promote an inclusive Malaysia.

Keywords:

Poverty, Malaysia, Social Policy, Rural Development, Government Interventions, Capability Approach

Introduction

Poverty remains one of Malaysia's most enduring socio-economic challenges, despite decades of development and targeted intervention programs. As of 2022, 6.2% of Malaysian households were classified as poor, with disproportionately higher rates in rural states such as Sabah (28.5%) and Sarawak (14.6%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). These statistics

underscore the deep-rooted structural inequalities that continue to affect marginalized communities, particularly the Bumiputera, Orang Asli, and rural populations (Khalid & Yang, 2021; Ravallion, 2020).

Several systemic issues compound this problem, including income inequality, limited access to quality education and healthcare, and regional disparities in infrastructure and economic development (Zulkifli & Abidin, 2023; Ismail et al., 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated these vulnerabilities, pushing many households back below the poverty line (Zakaria et al., 2023).

This paper aims to analyze poverty in Malaysia using the latest statistics, evaluate key government initiatives (such as Bantuan Sara Hidup, STR, and IPR), and explore strategic frameworks for long-term and inclusive poverty alleviation. It applies the Capability Approach theory by Amartya Sen (2006), which emphasizes multidimensional poverty beyond income levels, as its guiding theoretical lens.

Research Methodology
The methodology adopted a multi-step approach beginning with the use of poverty statistics officially provided by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) for the year 2022. These national-level data sets offered reliable and comprehensive insights into poverty incidence across demographic segments and regions, forming the empirical foundation for the study.

Following this, an extensive literature review of 25 scholarly works published between 2015 and 2024 was carried out. These studies covered various dimensions of poverty in Malaysia, including structural, ethnic, educational, and economic aspects. The literature review was instrumental in contextualizing the current poverty situation within historical and theoretical frameworks.

The next phase involved policy analysis, focusing on key poverty eradication initiatives such as Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH), Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah (STR), Inisiatif Pendapatan Rakyat (IPR), and the Digital DESA Program. These policies were critically examined to assess their design, implementation, outreach, and effectiveness in reducing poverty, particularly among the B40 group.

To guide the conceptual structure of the study, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach was adopted as the theoretical framework. This approach shifts the focus from purely income-based metrics to a broader understanding of poverty that includes access to healthcare, education, employment, and the ability to live with dignity and freedom.

In synthesizing the findings, the study aimed to identify persistent patterns of inequality, regional and ethnic disparities, and policy implementation gaps that continue to hinder sustainable poverty alleviation. Analytical techniques used in this study included descriptive analysis of poverty rates across regions and demographic categories, comparative analysis of government interventions, and qualitative thematic synthesis derived from the literature. This triangulated approach ensured a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of poverty dynamics in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Previous research (see Table 1) has consistently highlighted that poverty is a complex and multifaceted issue, influenced by a combination of socio-economic factors (Zulkifli & Abidin, 2023; Ismail, Zailani, Muhamad, Alias, & Zailani, 2025). Key determinants include income inequality (Banna, Masud, & Rodrigo, 2020), access to quality education (Loganathan, Ong, Hassan, Chan, & Majid, 2023), healthcare accessibility (Abd Wahab, NurulHuda Mohd Satar, & Makmor Tumin, 2022), and regional disparities in economic opportunities (Rongen, Ahmad, & Lanjouw, 2024).

Among the most influential theoretical contributions to poverty analysis is the Capability Approach by Amartya Sen (2006). This approach argues that poverty should not be measured solely by income levels, but rather by the lack of freedom to live a valued life. Individuals are considered poor when they are deprived of essential capabilities, such as access to healthcare, education, meaningful employment, and participation in society. This multidimensional perspective emphasizes dignity, opportunity, and well-being, providing a broader and more humane framework for evaluating poverty.

In Malaysia, the Poverty Line Income (PLI) has long served as a benchmark for assessing poverty (Bhari et al., 2023). However, as the socio-economic context becomes more complex, reliance on income-based metrics alone is increasingly viewed as inadequate. A multidimensional approach is needed to more accurately reflect the lived realities of poor communities and to guide more effective and inclusive policy responses (Wan Usamah, 2024).

In addition to capability deprivation, social mobility is a critical dimension of poverty. The Social Mobility Framework emphasizes the need for equitable opportunities that enable individuals and families to improve their socio-economic status over time (Saidon et al., 2022). In contexts where such mobility is restricted, poverty tends to become intergenerational, deeply rooted in structural inequalities. Furthermore, digital access has emerged as a key determinant of socio-economic well-being, influencing not only employment but also access to education and financial services (Mohamed et al., 2021). The quality of life, including access to adequate housing, healthcare, and social services, must also be integrated into poverty assessments, as these elements are intertwined with economic disadvantage and systemic exclusion (Zainal et al., 2012).

By incorporating these broader theoretical and empirical insights into poverty measurement frameworks, policymakers can develop more targeted, effective, and inclusive interventions. A multidimensional strategy will not only address immediate financial hardship but also lay the foundation for long-term poverty reduction through strengthened resilience and inclusive growth. In doing so, Malaysia can ensure that its poverty alleviation efforts are comprehensive, equitable, and responsive to the evolving needs of its most vulnerable populations.

Table1: Summary Table of Past Studies on Poverty in Malaysia

Author(s)	Focus Area	Methodology	Key Findings
Zulkifli et al. (2021)	Role of zakat in poverty alleviation	Qualitative	Zakat can significantly support low-income Muslim households
Ravallion (2020)	Ethnic inequality	Quantitative	Bumiputera suffer higher rates of poverty than other ethnicities
Loganathan et al. (2023)	Education access for marginalised children	Case Study	Marginalised children face systemic barriers in urban areas
Zakaria et al. (2023)	COVID-19 impact on low-income groups	Survey-based	Pandemic pushed more B40 households into financial distress

Source: (Self-developed Table)

Challenges in Poverty Eradication: Addressing Ethnic and Regional Disparities in Malaysia
Poverty eradication has been a central focus of Malaysia's socioeconomic development agenda. Despite various governmental initiatives and policies aimed at reducing poverty rates, significant challenges persist. These challenges are particularly pronounced due to regional and ethnic disparities, economic fluctuations, and policy implementation gaps. Understanding these issues is crucial in formulating effective strategies for sustainable poverty alleviation.

Rural and Urban Divide
One of the primary challenges in poverty eradication is the significant divide between rural and urban communities. Rural areas, particularly in East Malaysia, continue to experience high poverty rates. Sabah (28.5%) and Sarawak (14.6%) report some of the highest poverty incidences due to geographical isolation, which restricts access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). The lack of proper infrastructure and limited transportation networks further hinder economic development in these regions, making it difficult for rural populations to access job markets and essential services.

In contrast, urban areas generally have better infrastructure, improved access to public services, and more diverse employment opportunities, leading to lower overall poverty rates (Anarfi, Hill, & Shiel, 2020). However, urban poverty remains a persistent issue, particularly among low-income groups, who struggle with rising living costs, stagnant wages, and economic instability (Mueller, Brooks, & Pacas, 2020). High housing costs also pose a major challenge, as many low-income families are forced to live in overcrowded or poorly maintained housing units, often lacking basic amenities and proper sanitation (Haffner & Hulse, 2019).

Furthermore, limited social mobility exacerbates urban poverty, as individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter barriers to education and career advancement, making it difficult to escape financial hardship (Rains & Krishna, 2020). Unequal access to quality education, coupled with systemic labor market inequalities, restricts opportunities for upward mobility, perpetuating cycles of poverty across generations.

Ethnic and Regional Disparities

Ethnic and regional disparities present significant challenges to poverty reduction efforts in Malaysia. Bumiputera households, particularly those in rural areas, continue to experience higher poverty rates (7.9%) compared to Chinese (1.9%) and Indian households (5.4%), reflecting persistent socioeconomic inequalities (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). These disparities are deeply rooted in historical economic structures, unequal access to education and employment opportunities, and systemic barriers that hinder economic mobility (Aun, 2021).

Education plays a crucial role in bridging these disparities, as access to quality schooling significantly influences upward social mobility. However, marginalized communities often face structural barriers that limit their educational opportunities. A systematic review by Silva-Laya, D'Angelo, García, Zúñiga, and Fernández (2020) highlights that urban poverty further exacerbates educational inequalities, with children from low-income backgrounds encountering challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate learning materials, and insufficient teacher support. The study emphasizes that without substantial reforms to improve educational access and quality, poverty will continue to persist across generations.

In addition to education, skills development initiatives are vital in empowering economically disadvantaged groups. Research by Akinola, Laosebikan, Akinbode, Afolabi, and Olamiti (2023) underscores the importance of vocational training and entrepreneurial programs in equipping individuals with the skills necessary to secure stable employment and improve their economic standing. Moreover, inclusive economic policies are essential in reducing disparities and promoting equitable growth. According to Erlando, Riyanto, and Masakazu (2020), targeted government interventions, such as microfinance programs and support for small businesses, can enhance financial inclusion, create job opportunities, and foster sustainable economic participation among marginalized communities.

Economic Volatility

Economic instability remains a major obstacle to poverty alleviation, as fluctuations in food prices, inflation, and external economic shocks disproportionately impact low-income households. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have further intensified these challenges, leaving many financially vulnerable. A study by Zakaria, Sabri, Satar, and Magli (2023) highlights that low-income households in Malaysia faced severe financial distress during the pandemic due to reduced income, job losses, and difficulties in meeting basic needs. Many families struggled to afford food, rent, and healthcare, forcing them to rely on external assistance or deplete their savings to survive.

Similarly, Clemente-Suárez et al. (2021) emphasize that the COVID-19 crisis not only disrupted economic activities but also widened existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. The pandemic led to widespread unemployment, increased household debt, and rising living costs, further pushing vulnerable groups into deeper poverty. The economic strain was exacerbated by supply chain disruptions, which caused food price inflation and limited access to essential goods.

Policy Implementation Gaps

Although Malaysia has implemented numerous poverty eradication programs, inconsistencies in policy execution hinder their effectiveness (Abdul Latiff, Jaapar, & Mat Isa, 2021).

Challenges such as inadequate localization of strategies, insufficient monitoring, and a lack of coordination among stakeholders limit the long-term impact of these initiatives (Azmi, 2024). Many policies fail to address the specific needs of different communities, leading to gaps in assistance and support (Khomsi et al., 2024). Research highlights that without an integrated approach that aligns policymaking with research-driven solutions, many poverty eradication programs remain ineffective in achieving sustainable results. Addressing these shortcomings requires stronger governance, transparent evaluation mechanisms, and community-driven strategies (Singh & Chudasama, 2020). Improving accountability in fund allocation and ensuring that poverty alleviation programs are tailored to local needs will be key in enhancing their overall effectiveness.

A Comprehensive Approach by the Malaysian Government in Tackling Poverty: From Cash Assistance to Entrepreneurial Initiatives

In recent years, the Malaysian government has implemented a robust suite of initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty and enhancing the economic well-being of its citizens, particularly those in low-income households. These initiatives range from immediate cash-based assistance programs to comprehensive entrepreneurial and capacity-building schemes, each tailored to address the diverse challenges faced by the B40 group.

Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH)

BSH is a direct cash assistance program designed to alleviate short-term financial distress among low-income households. The initiative has successfully provided financial aid to over 4.3 million recipients nationwide, with an allocation of RM4.738 billion in 2020. In 2019, the government spent RM4.727 billion on the program, benefiting 3.857 million people. Sarawak alone received RM523 million in 2019, supporting 443,000 households, while in 2020, the allocation increased to RM553 million, benefiting 491,000 households. The aid is targeted at the B40 group, defined as households earning below RM4,000 per month, and is distributed without discrimination based on race, religion, or political affiliation (Bernama, 2020).

Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah (STR)

STR is a continuation and rebranding of previous government cash assistance programs, including Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH). The government remains committed to prioritizing and supporting low-income households by providing the necessary financial aid to improve their well-being. The first phase of STR payments will be distributed to 8.2 million registered recipients in the STR database. These payments will be credited directly into recipients' bank accounts or disbursed in cash through Bank Simpanan Nasional (BSN) in stages, based on the eligibility category. For Phase 1, households earning RM2,500 and below will receive RM500, while those with an income between RM2,501 and RM5,000 will receive between RM100 and RM300. Additionally, senior citizens without spouses will receive RM150, and single individuals will receive RM100 (Berita Harian, 2024).

Inisiatif Pendapatan Rakyat (IPR)

The People's Income Initiative, better known as Inisiatif Pendapatan Rakyat or IPR, has proven to be a sustenance for many Malaysians. The programme that was launched by the government has eased the financial burden on many Malaysians by allowing them to earn a sustainable income.The People's Income Initiative (IPR) aims to eradicate poverty and increase income for the hardcore poor, poor, and B40 groups in Malaysia.The government is actively working to boost participation in the initiative. A total of 2,536 participants have been approved under

three schemes: the Agro Entrepreneur Initiative (IPR-Intan), the Food Entrepreneur Initiative (IPR-Insan), and the Services Operator Initiative (IPR-Ikhsan). Of the participants, 79.2% are Malays, 16.2% are from Sabah and Sarawak ethnic groups, 2.2% are Indians, 1% are Chinese, 1% are indigenous, and 0.4% are Siamese (Nor Ain, 2024).

Agropolitan Projects

To address rural poverty, the government has launched Agropolitan Projects, which provide agricultural training, land access, and market connections to increase household income. These projects have been instrumental in enabling rural communities to adopt modern agricultural practices, leading to a 30% increase in participants' household incomes. Additionally, the Malaysian government has recognized urban poverty as a growing issue and has initiated urban farming programs to empower low-income communities in cities. These programs, supported by agencies such as MARDI and the Agriculture Department, aim to integrate agricultural solutions into urban settings, ensuring that even city dwellers can engage in farming to supplement their income and food supply (New Straits Times, 2024).

Menu Rahmah Initiative Digital DESA Program

In response to rising food insecurity, the Menu Rahmah Initiative was introduced to provide affordable, nutritious meals to low-income individuals, particularly in urban areas. More than 15,000 food premises nationwide now offer RM5 balanced meals, ensuring accessibility to essential nutrition for vulnerable populations. The initiative is a collective effort supported by various restaurant associations, including Mydin, the Malaysian Indian Restaurant Owners Association (Primas), the Malaysian Muslim Restaurant Owners Association (Presma), and the Malaysian Tom Yam Restaurant Owners Association (Pertom). Despite reducing their profit margins, these organizations have committed to sustaining the initiative as part of their corporate social responsibility. The government has also pledged to assist participating restaurants by addressing operational challenges such as rental costs and workforce shortages to ensure the program's sustainability (Luqman Hakim, 2023).

Digital DESA Program

Recognizing the importance of digital inclusion, the Digital DESA Program was launched to bridge the digital divide in rural areas by providing internet access and digital skills training. Since its inception three years ago, the program has trained 3,249 rural entrepreneurs, helping them expand their market reach through online platforms. Additionally, 6,000 rural entrepreneurs' products have been integrated into Desamall, an e-commerce platform aimed at boosting rural economic activities. Under the 12th Malaysia Plan (RMK-12), the government has allocated RM20 million to train an additional 4,000 rural entrepreneurs to enhance their competitiveness in the digital economy. Furthermore, collaborations with Alibaba Cloud offer AI-driven solutions tailored to micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), enabling rural entrepreneurs to improve productivity and sales. As of now, 67,508 rural entrepreneurs have registered under various agencies within the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKDW), with efforts focused on helping them transition from micro-enterprises **to** small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Bernama, 2024).

Conclusion

Poverty in Malaysia remains a complex and multifaceted issue that requires holistic and sustained efforts to address. While significant progress has been made in poverty reduction, particularly through targeted programs such as Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH), Sumbangan Tunai

Rahmah (STR), and Inisiatif Pendapatan Rakyat (IPR), challenges persist due to regional disparities, ethnic inequalities, and underlying economic vulnerabilities. The urban-rural divide, systemic barriers in education and employment, and policy implementation gaps continue to hinder inclusive development and equitable social mobility.

This study set out to analyze Malaysia's poverty trends in 2022, evaluate the effectiveness of government interventions, and propose a multidimensional approach to future poverty alleviation. In doing so, the objectives of the study were achieved, as it successfully identified key demographic and geographic disparities, evaluated the impact of programs such as BSH, STR, IPR, and the Digital DESA initiative, and highlighted the need for structural reform alongside the expansion of inclusive digital access. Furthermore, the study applied Sen's Capability Approach as a theoretical lens, emphasizing the importance of assessing poverty beyond income metrics by considering access to essential services and opportunities for meaningful participation in society.

Moving forward, poverty eradication policies must be grounded in accurate data, tailored to the local socioeconomic context, and focused on long-term capacity building rather than short-term financial assistance alone. A shift towards a multidimensional poverty framework is not only necessary to reflect the lived experiences of marginalized communities but also to ensure that interventions are genuinely transformative and sustainable.

Addressing poverty will require structural reforms that enhance social mobility, improve access to education and digital resources, and ensure comprehensive service delivery. Additionally, stronger coordination among stakeholders, improved policy implementation at the grassroots level, and governance based on continuous monitoring and evaluation will be crucial. By embracing these strategies, Malaysia can move toward a future where poverty is not merely alleviated in the short term, but sustainably eradicated, fostering a more inclusive, resilient, and equitable society for all.

Acknowledgement

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