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REVISITING IMPOVERISHMENT: ISSUES IN THE EPOCH OF EXPANDING GLOBAL TRADE TARIFFS

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Abstract:

Poverty or impoverishment is a multidimensional issue which can cause social disruption if the poor are neglected. It is then unsurprising that countries around the world are concerned about alleviating poverty. Therefore, the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has 'No Poverty' as its first goal because all poor men, women and children experience well-being and mental health issues as well as general deprivation in accessing goods and services. As a microcosm of the world at large, Malaysia has been committed to overcoming poverty with successes for the past 40 years. For example, its absolute poverty rates declined from 20.7% (1984) to 0.4% (2016) only for it to surge again to 6.2% (2022) after the Covid-19 pandemic (OpenDOSM, 2023). Similarly, world poverty rates rose after the pandemic (The World Bank, 2022), reviving old challenges. Moreover, on 2nd April 2025, a new epoch of global trade protectionism began with the United States (US) announcing a 10% baseline tariff on all its trading partners and reciprocal tariffs on certain countries. Will this situation affect all impacted countries' economy, their prosperity and their poor? Will these poor be disproportionately affected more, just like how climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic have already adversely impacted them? In this preliminary paper, I have outlined a two-pronged goal: (1) to revisit poverty by outlining possible issues faced by the poor in this new epoch of global trade tariffs and (2) to briefly explore possible solutions to poverty. Methodologically, this paper is based on secondary research of existing literature. Finally, Gemini and DeepSeek, the two artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, were used for brainstorming.

Keywords:

Poverty; Multidimensional; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Solutions; Global Trade Tariffs

Introduction

Poverty or impoverishment has been explained in multiple ways by different scholars but the World Bank defined poverty as “pronounced deprivation in well-being” (Haughton & Khandker, 2009). It encompasses a wide range of socio-economic dimensions which affects the poor’s access to services, respectable careers, their ability to articulate viewpoints and preference, their social status, and their power to negotiate as well as to avoid human trafficking incidents and/or forced labour (United Nations Global Compact, n.d.).

When elucidating poverty, the economic definition usually categorizes scarcity or poverty into two aspects, i.e., either as absolute poverty where one’s survival is threatened or as relative poverty which measures one’s poverty in relation to others’ wealth or the national income average. There is also the psychological dimension of poverty which is known as subjective poverty when one feels deprived of something despite the economic indicators showing otherwise. Nonetheless, poverty is not only about having inadequate income or food to eat. Poverty can also indicate the poor’s lack of capability to live the life they want as espoused by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.).

The World Bank estimated that, economically, almost 700 million people live in extreme poverty around the world, and they survive on less than US\$2.15 per day (The World Bank, 2024). Eradicating extreme poverty by 2030 is also the first of the 17 United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Unfortunately, the World Bank in its Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2022 report mentioned that because of the Covid-19 pandemic and its subsequent negative economic repercussions, the SDG No. 1 ‘No Poverty’ and by implication, the SDG No. 2 ‘Zero Hunger’, cannot be achieved by 2030 (The World Bank, 2022).

To overcome poverty or impoverishment, free trade is lauded as a route in enhancing global wealth and prosperity for every country. In fact, the world’s wealth has risen tenfold since 1950 (Macionis, 2015). For example, in 2024, 92 countries in the world, including Malaysia, had enjoyed a comfortable trade surplus with the United States (US) (Caporal, 2025). However, on 2nd April 2025, the US government upended this arrangement by announcing the imposition of 10% baseline tariffs on all its trading partners and other reciprocal tariffs on certain countries (Ernst & Young, 2025). Malaysia, which mainly exported palm oil, machinery and electronics to the US (TheEdgeMalaysia, 2025), has been imposed with a 24% reciprocal tariff (except for semiconductors) but after the 90-day reprieve, the US government is actually imposing a 25% tariff beginning 1st of August 2025 (The Star, 2025a). However, on 1st August 2025, it was reported that the US government has finally reduced its tariffs on Malaysia to 19% under an executive order signed by US President Donald Trump (The Star, 2025b).

These US tariffs 2025 vary from country to country – even within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – but they affect the entire free trade ecosystem globally. For example, the 19% tariff rate affects Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Cambodia while Vietnam is imposed with a 20% tariff, Brunei at 25% and Laos as well as Myanmar at 40% (The Star, 2025b). Singapore has been excluded in the latest round of modifications (Ibid).

This changed international trade scenario is a sign of more global trade protectionism which threatens the current thinking about more free trade collectively enhancing the wealth and prosperity of many small countries including Malaysia in ASEAN.

For example, the US tariffs 2025 could be as high as 3,521 percent on solar panels made in four ASEAN countries – Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam – to counteract unjust pricing and purported subsidies from China which these countries have received (Milad, 2025). Will such trade tariffs and protectionism be considered as globally sustainable? How will this impact countries, their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and in turn, their poor? Before the author outlines some possible impacts on the poor, let us take a look at the definition of poverty.

Literature Review

The viewpoints on poverty are diverse and can be categorized into two broad, polarized theories which outline (a) individual deficiencies and (b) expansive, macro theories such as Sociology's Structural-Functional Theory, the Social-Conflict Theory, and others which deal with socio-economic, geographic and political factors.

According to Wright (1992), the American general public usually view the causes of poverty in a dichotomy, with strong support for identifying poverty as personal failings due to the poor's purported lack of ability, low ambition and even low intelligence. The opposite spectrum of this dichotomy are those who see poverty as a structural or societal issue such as the lack of available jobs or educational opportunities, etc...

Wright (1992) also cited plentiful research showing that those in the upper and middle classes and those who have higher authority and affluence – Caucasian, men, above 50 and Protestant – generally have tendencies towards viewing poverty as personal failings of the poor themselves. Meanwhile, all income classes (including the poor themselves) show strong support for blaming the poor over their lack of good values in professionalism and commitment.

More importantly, Wright (1992) cautioned and critiqued the role played by scholars in the victim-blaming processes in their work. According to her, "academic victim blaming" [of the poor] is reprehensible and had named anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959, 1966) and American politician-cum-social scientist Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) as examples of scholars who had engaged in victim-blaming of the poor by cloaking their work as logical, scientific scholarship.

In subsequent paragraphs, the two broad but dichotomous theories of poverty will be elucidated.

Blame the Poor Theories

One of the most common views of poverty is that the poor are responsible for their own situation (Macionis, 2018). This is a theory which attributes poverty to the poor themselves and for those who show strong support for this perspective, they usually view the poor with disdain and view poverty as a stigma. This is because in cultures which value self-reliance such as in the US, class is a matter of individual talent and effort since they claim that society provides enough opportunities to those who seize the day (Macionis, 2018).

However, this theory is disputed by Merton's Strain Theory (1938) which suggests that society does not provide enough opportunities for all groups to achieve economic success. Therefore, Sameti et al. (2012) mentioned that marginalized groups have limited opportunities in their quest to realize the American dream of economic success.

Moreover, anthropologist Oscar Lewis who popularized the phrase 'culture of poverty' in his work had listed 50 traits which he considered as shared by 20 percent of the Latin American poor in his study (as cited in ScienceDirect, 2025). These traits were said to be transmitted intergenerationally within families and blamed for impeding such individuals from breaking out of their 'psychological pathology' and hindering these poor from capitalizing on available opportunities (as cited in ScienceDirect, 2025). The poor are said to be victims of their own dysfunctional subculture or culture (Addae-Korankye, 2019) as they transmit a set of beliefs, values and skills which continue to trap them and their descendants in intergenerational poverty. Nonetheless, Wright (1992) had called Lewis' 'culture of poverty' work as a type of "academic victim blaming".

Blame the Society Theories

There is a widespread range of theories which place poverty squarely on structural issues. For example, these theories posit that institutions can engender systemic unfairness which disadvantages minorities such as the poor.

The Two Sides of the Structural-Functional Theory

The traditional structural-functional theory or paradigm suggests that instead of viewing poverty and inequities as dysfunctional, they should be viewed as serving important functions for the society because they allow 'dirty' work to be taken up by those in the lower hierarchies as well as motivate 'talented' people to undergo training and take up better paying jobs (see the Davis-Moore Thesis, 1945). This, in turn, ensures social harmony, equilibrium and social order. In other words, poverty serves an important function, ensuring the smooth operation of society. But criticisms of the Davis-Moore Thesis abound (Macionis, 2018).

In what I now call the 'post-modern' structural-functional theory with a critical lens, poverty and inequities are considered as dysfunctional because it can cause disharmony or conflict, criminality and social disorder. So, these two lenses of the structural-functional theory are equally important because they explain how social structures operate and how they can perpetuate and maintain poverty.

The Social-Conflict Theory

Drawing heavily from Karl Marx, the social-conflict theory is another macro paradigm which explains poverty. This paradigm views poverty as a result of dominant groups maintaining their power and wealth via labour exploitation, laws, policies and social norms which are in line with their dominant values and beliefs.

For example, the capitalist-industrial system, just like the agrarian system before it, is also inherently unequal due to technological advances, and only equal employment laws had helped mitigate poverty and inequities (see Gerhard Lenski's theory of inequality and the Kuznets Curve) (Macionis, 2018; Ricardo, 2025). Moreover, according to this theory, capitalism generates conditions which maintain poverty despite the poor's endeavours and striving. Sameti et al. (2012) concurred and attributed this view to the socio-economic and political systems of a society.

Other Macro Theories

Morrill and Wohlenberg (1971) suggested that there is a "geography of poverty" in the sense that there are regional and global differences in the incidence of poverty. For example, some

areas experienced more industrialization and became more prosperous than other places. Bradshaw (2006) concurred that poverty is very serious in certain areas compared to other parts of a country or region. In agreement, Knifton and Inglis (2020) found that their home city Glasgow, Scotland in the United Kingdom has the highest concentration of poor people with the poorest mental health outcomes. They also highlighted that there is a direct relationship between poverty and poor mental health. Furthermore, longevity in Glasgow is the lowest in the whole of Scotland.

Abdulai and Shamshiry (2014) also mentioned the Theory of Cyclical Poverty. In pre-industrial societies such as agrarian ones, cyclical poverty can happen to individuals and households when natural disasters such as flood or drought hit, leaving the families with food shortages. In industrial and post-industrial/postmodern societies, cyclical poverty occurs when there are economic fluctuations such as recessions or other economic crises.

Global Free Trade and Tariffs

The World Trade Organization (WTO), established in 1995, is a significant body which regulates global trade between countries by championing free trade, giving technical help and training to member countries as well as for promoting the world's economic growth (Jegade, 2023). Free trade has benefited trading member-nations globally resulting in overall higher quality of life (Patterns of Power, n.d.) via enhanced exports, lower consumer prices and a wider range of choices (Pettinger, 2019).

However, Bhalla and Silvio (2022) counter-argued that free trade has actually caused more poverty and inequality in the developing countries by giving an example of India where trade liberalization has led to higher poverty rates in rural areas while in Brazil it was in urban areas.

The US tariffs 2025 is aimed at addressing its current trade deficits (Ernst & Young, 2025) by imposing varying degrees of reciprocal tariffs on specific countries like ASEAN (i.e., from 25% to 49%), China, Canada and Mexico, leading to an unstable global trading scenario. These tariffs will expose countries to higher risks of poverty if not handled properly.

Furceri, Hannan, Ostry, and Rose (2019) reported that higher tariffs led to significantly lower domestic output and productivity in an analysis of 151 countries between 1963 and 2014. Tariff increases also caused more unemployment, enhanced inequality and increased real exchange rate, but have only small consequences on the trade balance. Dinopoulos, Heins and Unel (2024) concurred by stating that the 2018-2019 global trade war had caused an overall lower welfare and more unemployment as well as income inequality.

The following is a table summarizing the literature review:

Theories / Narratives	Explanation
Blame the Poor theories	The poor are responsible for their own predicament and there exists a 'culture of poverty' transmitted from one generation to another generation. However, the Merton's Strain Theory asserts that society provides goals but doesn't furnish enough opportunities for everyone to succeed.

Blame the Society theories	Poverty is due to structural failures and systemic unfairness. Many theories support this narrative.
Free trade	Free trade promotes overall economic growth and well-being in the whole world. Increases in tariffs caused more unemployment and inequality everywhere.
Anti-free trade	Free trade has caused more inequality and poverty in developing countries. For example, in India and Brazil.

Methodology

This paper has used secondary data analysis of existing literature such as online peer-reviewed journal articles and other Internet resources. The author has searched the Internet using terms such as ‘poverty’, ‘consequences of poverty’, ‘perspectives on poverty’ and ‘American Trump tariffs’. Moreover, the author has utilised Gemini and DeepSeek, the artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, for brainstorming and feedback. The answers provided by these two chatbots were double-checked and verified using peer-reviewed articles and other Internet sources.

Results and Discussion

This part of the paper outlines (1) possible problems faced by the poor in view of this new era of global trade protectionism and (2) to explore possible solutions to poverty. Global trade protectionism or the US tariffs 2025 has many repercussions and one country imposing tariffs often leads to reciprocal tariffs from other countries, causing a trade war. Recent examples include the US-China and the US-Canada trade wars.

High tariffs on small countries can affect their coffers and this in turn will affect welfare payouts for the poor, the sick, the disabled, the elderly and children. Moreover, trade wars between the US and China placed smaller countries, such as ASEAN, in a difficult position because they are juggling between these superpowers to avoid backlash from seemingly siding one superpower over the other. Also, in Malaysia, the solar panel manufacturers from China are expected to leave the country due to the US tariffs (Choy, 2025).

It’s important to help the poor because historically, poor governance, economic problems and in turn poverty can cause social unrest and disorder. For example, this has happened in many countries such as old Russia, France, Cuba, Germany and China. Additionally, Marx is famously quoted as advising the working class to start a revolution because they have nothing to lose but their shackles.

Factors Giving Rise to Poverty

The poor experience numerous problems in today’s more digital world, increasingly threatened by climate change, and an escalating global trade war induced by the US tariffs 2025. The following are a list of factors which cause poverty or impoverishment. Therefore, it is still important to grow an economy but with more earth-friendly, sustainable strategies.

Joblessness

In Malaysia, the Goodyear tyre manufacturing plant in Shah Alam shuttered its plant at the end of 2024 with 550 job losses (Fernandez, 2025). At the end of 2025, Continental Tires will also

close down its factory in Kulim, Kedah causing about 950 job losses. Moreover, the entire supply chain of businesses associated with these plant closures will be negatively impacted as well (Ibid). In societies where men are expected to be primary breadwinners, unemployment and the loss of income can lead to increased risk of divorce or separation (Gonalons-Pons & Gangl, 2021), lower self-esteem (Alvaro, Garrido, Pereira, Torres & Barros, 2019), significant stress and high rates of mental disorders (Yang, Niu, Amin & Yasin, 2024) as well as suicides (Franke, Schmidt & Neumann, 2024).

Without adequate financial planning, a breadwinner's joblessness can also cause a household to suddenly plunge into debt (making them vulnerable to predatory financial loans) and poverty, resulting in higher incidence of mental distress like low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and loneliness (Antipova, 2021; Petersen et al., 2022).

Inflation

According to Iacurci (2025), the higher US tariffs 2025 for the world will likely hurt the American poor more than the rich because they raise food and clothing prices within the US. Food and clothing make up a larger share of a poor household's budget than a rich household. This also holds true for the poor in Malaysia where they spend 40% of their income on food (Wong, 2022).

Similarly, in countries where elevated tariffs are imposed, an even higher cost of living is forecast for the poor. This is because food, clothing, and utility prices are expected to soar while the margin of earnings and the salary increase have not caught up. This widened the at-risk population if unforeseeable events were to happen to a family.

Furthermore, Nur Farah Zafirah et al. (2022) reported that inflation correlates positively with Malaysia's crime rate in the short-run. For example, they forecast that if the inflation rate were to rise by 1%, crime rate in the country would spike by 0.7 percent. In other words, inflation leads to reduced purchasing power, higher cost of living and stronger feelings of deprivation which induce criminal activities.

Climate Change

Climate change is deeply unequal and affects the poor and poor countries more badly than other better-off nations (Bhargawa & Bhargava, 2023). Increased incidence of natural disasters in the past 10 years as a result of climate change have displaced people and pushed many into poverty since their livelihoods were affected. This, in turn, has affected their mental and physical health outcomes. They also experienced food and water shortages and many decided to migrate, unravelling their respective countries' development attainments, and creating a dire climate refugee situation (Bhargawa & Bhargava, 2023).

According to Scopp (2025), climate-displaced people are not recognized in the 1951 Refugee Convention and as a result, they don't enjoy the rights and privileges accorded to conventional refugees in foreign lands, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and deprivation. For example, refugee children don't have access to formal education in Malaysia (Choong, 2024).

Digitization

While the gig economy – created by computerization – generated more flexibility and good chances for its workers to balance multiple roles and diversify their income, it also highlighted

vulnerabilities in times of crises such as the gig workers' lack of social protection benefits which exacerbated their monetary insecurity (Nurul Syifaa, 2024; Uchiyama et al., 2022), potentially creating pockets of poverty.

Moreover, the digital literacy gap disadvantages the poor unless training and better Internet connectivity are given to equip them to compete and find suitable employment. The Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation Sdn Bhd (MDEC), a government body, has quite a few such programmes to help bridge the digital gap in the country.

Consequences of Poverty

The implications of poverty are varied, and they are briefly listed in the following paragraphs.

Predatory Financial Loans

The unemployed and the poor easily fall victim to non-collateral financial loans and other such scams. In Malaysia, there is the infamous issue of loan sharks, the high interests they charge and their intimidation tactics in ensuring repayment (Jassmine Shadiqe, 2025; Mohd Farhaan Shah, 2025). These loans are fatal attractions for the poor. On the other hand, micro-loans or micro-finance offered to the poor by Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, pioneered by the renown Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, are so beneficial for its community and encourages entrepreneurship amongst the poor, especially women (Grameen Bank, 2025).

Mental Health Issues

The most pressing problem associated with poverty is that of poor mental health such as anxiety, depression, alcohol or drug abuse and suicides as a result of unemployment, climate-induced crises and digitization such as increased usage of social media. For example, in the study by Knifton and Inglis (2020), the poor in Glasgow were commonly found to experience stigma and have had adverse childhood events (ACE) like abuse and family dysfunctions leading to psychological problems. For children with ACE, it is a strong predictor for higher risk of mental health problems and drug as well as alcohol abuses in their adulthood (Hughes et al. 2017), further trapping them in poverty.

Therefore, it is suggested that a strong network of social support among its population and government aid are needed to mitigate such negative outcomes. This will be in line with the United Nations' 17 SDGs that have highlighted the importance of goal no.3 'Good health and well-being'.

High Suicide Rates

According to Bantjes et al. (2016), about 75% of suicides happen in low- and middle-income countries where poverty rates are high. Moreover, they mentioned that the correlation between economic variables and suicide is obvious.

Globally, men disproportionately has a higher risk of suicide due to mental health problems such as depression with symptoms like aggression, alcohol use and risky behaviour (Cleary, Griffith, Oliffe & Rice, 2023).

Elevated Crime Rates

Crime rates usually go up when unemployment and/or inflation rates go up as reported by Sringa (2023) and Nur Farah Zafirah et al. (2022) respectively. For example, Picardo (2024)

stated that unemployment affects the spending income of families, cuts into their purchasing power and reduces an economy's output. Inflation also negatively affects a household's purchasing power.

Gender Inequality and Violence

Poverty exposes women and girls to increased vulnerability such as child or early marriages, domestic violence, sexual exploitation including trafficking (UN Women, 2014) and prostitution (Meshelemiah, 2005). Children born of child and early marriages are also more likely to remain poor and don't enjoy an education (Cornish-Spencer, 2018).

In low-income countries, poverty is the main factor which prevents girls from attending school and acquiring good life skills which can in turn help them get out of poverty (Girls' Education Challenge, 2024; World Bank Group, 2025). Gender equality is also the fifth goal in the United Nations' 17 SDGs while reduced inequalities is the tenth of the SDGs.

Other Social Problems

There is a general agreement in research findings that despite multiple other factors, poverty is a significant predictor of higher crime rates, especially in Africa (Sringa, 2023) and of drug abuse/addiction in the US which then lead to more poverty, serious illnesses and poorer mental health outcomes for the destitute (Kleinkopf, 2022).

Children and adolescents living in poverty also experience malnutrition which can cause stunting and lower cognitive development (Wong, 2022). For example, Malaysia has among the highest cases of childhood stunting in the region where children aged 5 years old and below are too short for their age while 1 in 12 adolescents experience stunting (Parenthood, 2022).

Exploring Ways to Overcome Poverty

If poverty were personal failings, Addae-Korankye (2019) suggested that the poor should be encouraged to increase their self-help strategies and governments should stop aid for those who can work except for the disabled, the elderly and children. Furthermore, social and educational programs should instil self-awareness and self-motivation in the poor so that they have the strength and confidence to reshape their visions, re-train in new skills, and start new trades.

Meanwhile, smaller countries with scarce resources should strengthen trade relationships with countries of their regions, such as ASEAN, and with other parts of the world in the face of the US tariffs2025 as suggested by the Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong (Times of India, n.d.). This will minimize the impact of this new global trade protectionism era.

According to Addae-Korankye (2019), if poverty was structural, governments should institute policies which address social disadvantages and enhance the poor's capabilities by investing in good quality education, healthcare and strengthening the social protection system. Countries should also support the development of micro, small and medium-sized (MSMEs) enterprises by giving them low interest rates, training and technical assistance to stimulate growth and alleviate poverty.

The experience of Bangladesh via Grameen Bank's microfinance for the poor should be emulated. Finally, governments should encourage economic sustainability via the Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) approaches, address labour exploitation issues and promote good governance such as promoting corruption reduction drives.

Conclusion

As the world grapples with the US tariffs 2025, countries should take note of authors Bhalla & Silvio (2022)'s counter argument that free trade has actually impoverished some developing countries. As such, there is no sure certainty that all is doom for small countries even though the Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has warned us of an upcoming storm (Times of India, n.d.). There is a need to prepare mentally and change "business as usual" mindsets in this 'end of the free trade' era in order for countries like Malaysia and ASEAN to ride out this tide successfully. Finally, in crises, countries have the opportunity to be more creative, innovative and proactive in finding solutions to their problems.

This paper has achieved its goal of elaborating on the existing literature on poverty, and its causes as well as outlining the consequences of poverty. However, for future studies, it should include interviews with the poor or a survey with stakeholders.

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