

Research Note

Perception of Development: A Micro Study of the Poor in Terengganu, Malaysia

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Abstract: The surveys conducted in 1999 and 2004 in six poverty-stricken areas in Terengganu show that the poor perceive development in almost identical terms as those suggested by development experts. The poor's perception about the importance of social overhead capital has become stronger in 2004 compared to 1999. With minor variation, they have positive opinion about their leaders. The better educated among them seem to be better in preference for both material and moral considerations. The poor are poor in religiosity but that may be due to the nature of the profession and the distance of the shari'ah-based financial institutions. The government should pay attention to their demands for better physical and social infrastructural facilities.

Poverty eradication programmes must involve the poor and target them as the ultimate stakeholders in the development process. This requires understanding their needs and aspirations concerning aspects of development and efforts being undertaken to benefit the poor. This paper attempts to examine the perception of development of the Malays on social, cultural, material, and moral factors. The data come from two surveys conducted in one of the poverty concentrated areas of Terengganu in the district of Kemaman.¹

Perception of Development

Perceptions refer to a mixture of evaluative and non-evaluative understandings of a theme or a situation. The three most important

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elements of perceptions comprise a certain knowledge implying non-evaluative understanding, norms implying internalized ideas about appropriate roles, and values in terms of ideals about what might be.² Sometimes, opinion and perception are used synonymously. But scholars make a clear distinction between the two.³ The opinion about poverty changes very fast depending on short-term events or stimuli, the perception about poverty is more stable and does not change too quickly.

The values, norms and beliefs being part of a comprehensive concept like culture are also inter-related with self-interest encompassing both material and non-material, i.e., ideal motivation.⁴ Daniel Patrick Moynihan believes that culture, not politics, determines the success of any society.⁵ While some believe that politics can change culture, others feel that cultural factors can also be equally stronger so as to shape economic and political development. It, thus, appears that there exists not a one-way rather two-way causality between culture and development. Culture as an independent variable can affect development as much as development can affect culture being treated as a dependent variable.

The historical development experience of a miracle economy like that of Singapore suggests that political leadership can play an instrumental role in stimulating cultural change compatible to economic prosperity.⁶ This explains why despite extensive debate on the role of culture in development, Confucian culture is recognized to have played a dominant role in achieving a miraculous development in East Asia during the latter part of twentieth century.⁷ As a result of this development, there has been a shift from Survival Values to Self-expression Values. This shift has produced a culture of trust and tolerance, in which people place a relatively higher value on individual freedom and self-expression, and have activist political orientations. These are precisely the attributes that the political culture literature defines as crucial to democracy. This holds true for all the East Asian countries experiencing miraculous development since the 1970s.

The protagonists of Asian values debate—Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia and Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore—argue that collectivism as opposed to individualism and loyalty to as opposed to rejection of authority holds the Key to the success of Malaysia and Singapore

under a highly committed but strong leadership.⁸ Mahathir is of the opinion that in the absence of effective leadership and guidance, the Malays with fatalistic attributes to life will take generations to come out of the debilitating effect of lower achievements motivation compared to the non-Malays in general and the Chinese in particular.⁹ It is difficult to deny that as a result of government's interventionist strategy in terms of New Economic Policy to improve the condition of the Malays, the new breed of Malays developed higher aspirations about their prosperity and future. They, with better education and opportunities created by the government policies, not only have much higher expectations but also turn to be more critical of the government. This temporal change in perception resulting from development since 1970 is evident in the findings from two surveys conducted in Terengganu.

Methodology and Sample Profile

The empirical findings of this study are based on two surveys conducted in the district of Kemaman of Terengganu – one in 1999 and the other in 2004. The gap of five years will show the inter-temporal changes with regard to the relevant information collected from the poverty-stricken households. The area under selection is already identified by state government as the poverty concentrated area. The 1999 sample, composed of 291 households, mostly fisherman, were randomly selected from six kampungs: Kuala Kemaman (61), Paya Berenjot (60), Geliga (51), Tengah (26), Pantai Penunjuk (21), and mixed kampungs (72).

The second survey of 224 households was also conducted in the same area in 2004 using the same clustered sampling technique. Despite several attempts to reach the same households from the said kampungs in 2004, a number of the original respondents could not be reached. This explains why the sample size is smaller in 2004 compared to 1999. Each household was considered as the basic unit for collecting information. A highly structured questionnaire was used which was supplemented by the data collected through participant observation. The enumerators, after intensive training, lived in the area, mixed with the fishing households, and observed their income-expenditure patterns for a few days. Part of the findings of the study is presented below under three headings.

To seek the perception of the poor regarding development, we listed a number of dimensions that were classified under five major groups, namely, social, infrastructural, political, economic, and moral/spiritual. Taken separately, each of these components forms an integral part of what is implied by development in comprehensive sense. Each of these components was explained to the poor households.

The response from each household is recorded in tables 1, 2, and 3. The number of households supporting a particular statement implying the understanding of development is then transformed into one value in the form of percentages. The small 'a' indicates supports from more than 75 percentage of the sample, 'b' less than 75 but more than 50 percent, 'c' less than 50 but more than 33 percent, and 'd' less than 33 but more than 25 percent. The total score is calculated based on ranks like 4 for 'a', 3 for 'b', 2 for 'c', and 1 for 'd'. The higher scores, therefore, reflect stronger perceptions, i.e., preferences for the relevant indicator. This is done to show the importance attached to a particular aspect of what is meant by development to a poor household. The answer reflected in the total score shows that the poor man's perception of development is similar to the thinking of development experts of the World Bank.

Social Overhead Capital (SOC)

The provision of social overhead capital (SOC) comprising an umbrella of services such as education, health, housing, roads, water, and electricity has been found to be instrumental in creating opportunities for economic activities thereby reducing poverty.¹⁰ This comes out clearly as well from the responses to the items under SOC. As shown in Table 1, the respondents from the poverty concentrated areas of Terengganu gave priority to the physical infrastructure (i.e., good road, pipe water, and electricity) followed by social infrastructure such as easy access to education, health, and good house. However, in 2004, both the social and infrastructural factors received almost the same preference level. The overall score for social categories increased from 18 to 22. Such a heavy preference for SOC is an indication that the respondents feel that the current provision of all these indicators is not adequate. This implies that they are expecting more from the government.

Table 1: Changes in Perception by Household Heads on Social Overhead Capital (1999-2004)

Category of Indicators	Total Score	
	1999	2004
A. Social		
a. Easy access to education	20	23
b. Easy access to health	16	22
c. Having good house	19	21
d. Having own house	17	22
Average	18	22
B. Infrastructural		
a. Having good road	21	23
b. Having access to pipewater	23	24
c. Having electricity	21	24
Average	21	23

Source: Survey Report 2004.

Material (Economics) and Moral Perceptions (1999-2004)

It is generally understood that the economic indicators reflect the preferences for income generating assets like possession of more land, income earning opportunities like jobs for all and the desire to live a good life. Survey findings summarised in Table 2 seem to suggest that income earning opportunities hold the key to enjoy a quality life. In 1999, the overall score for material factors was high (11) compared to the moral/spiritual concerns (9). This means that they preferred jobs, electronic goods, and land holdings over a simple, peaceful and virtuous life.

However, based on simple average of the total scores for the relevant indicators, it appears that there has been a significant transformation in the preference patterns for moral/spiritual as opposed to purely material considerations (compare the average of A with that of B in Table 2) in 2004. Of the six indicators under moral/spiritual concerns, the ability to live a simple life (Bd) seems to be very predominant followed by the priorities for living peacefully and like a Muslim. The poor households living in an area of poverty concentration seem to be not much interested in copying the life

style of the affluent (score 9 in 1999 and 13 in 2004). Compared to 1999, however, they seem to be more vulnerable to the demonstration effect as far as the consumption habit of the affluent is concerned.

It is further evident that the poor demonstrate a balanced approach towards the fulfilment of both material and moral needs with a slight variation in the preference pattern. Two out of the six kampungs, Tengah and Penunjuk, having comparatively higher level of poverty incidence show a very clear preference for factors promoting moral/spiritual values. Even for material indicators, the respondents from these two kampungs show a different pattern in terms of higher preferences in 2004 compared to 1999. The discussion on factors determining perception formation might shed some light on the dissimilar patterns in perception formation.

Table 2: Changes in Perception by Household Heads on Material, Moral and Spiritual Factors (1990-2004)

Category of Indicators	Total Score	
	1999	2004
A. Material		
a. Having jobs for all	13	20
b. Ability to consume more	10	18
c. Ability to buy more modern electronic goods	5	16
d. Having enough land	10	18
e. Ability to live comfortably	15	22
Average	11	19
B. Moral/Spiritual		
a. Having high moral standard	18	22
b. Ability to follow life-style of well-offs	9	13
c. Ability to live peacefully	12	22
d. Ability to live simple life	8	20
e. Ability to live like a Muslim	11	19
f. Having small family	0	10
Average	9	18

Source: Survey Report 2004.

Political Awareness

Like the preference for SOC, material and moral considerations, the respondents prefer good governance manifested through good and sincere leaders with transparency. Given the non-complaining attitude of the Malays in general, it is not surprising that people exhibit more concern for good leadership rather than for their rights to criticize political leaders as shown in Table 3.

That an honest political leader is instrumental in bringing improvement in the life of the people also becomes evident from a very high preference given to the good and sincere leadership with scores of 22 and 23 in 1999 and 2004 surveys, respectively. However, less political awareness of the poor in general and the Malays in particular is also apparent from one of the lowest priorities expressed in favour of the rights to complain against the inefficient and insincere political leaders. It should be evident from the table that the percentage of the poor showing confidence in good and sincere leadership has increased marginally from 22 in 1999 to 23 in 2004. The score for their ability to complain against any wrongdoings by local leaders has changed quite significantly (from 14 in 1999 to 18 in 2004).

Table 3: Inter-temporal Changes in Perception on Political Awareness

Category of Indicators	Total Score	
	1999	2004
E. Political		
a. Having good and sincere leader	22	23
b. Ability to complain against any wrong doings by local leaders	14	18
Average	18	21

Source: Survey Report 2004.

However, though not shown in Table 3, our findings in 1999 show that the better-off among the poor, being the greater beneficiary of the development programmes, are more critical about the honesty of the political leaders in 1999 compared to the poor who are always docile despite being deprived and by-passed. However, in 2004,

the respondents from Tengah and Penunjuk experiencing higher poverty incidence are also found to be more critical of the moral standard of local political leaders compared to the rest. As shown in Table 4, it appears that about one-tenth of the respondents feel quite strongly against their local leaders and a quarter of all the sample households do not show any clear opinion (no idea and no comment) about the moral standard of their political leaders. This is not to belittle the positive findings of about the three-fifth of the households who speak in favour of their leaders.

Table 4: Opinions about Community Leaders by Villages

Name of Village	Level of Moral Standard of Local Political Leaders				Total
	Good	Not so Good	Unfair	No Comment	
Mixed Kampung	21	4	1	7	33
Pantai Penunjuk	5	1	3	2	11
Paya Berenjut	44	6	9	19	78
Geliga	19	3	1	10	33
Tengah	18	4	4	7	33
Kuala Kemaman	13	6		11	30
Total	120	24	18	56	218

Source: Survey Report 2004.

Education, Religiosity and Perception Formation

Of the many factors that impinge upon perception formation, faster rate of urbanization and the access to educational opportunities are considered to be vital. Over five-year period (1999-2004), the percentage of members of the poor households having more than 5 years of education (6 years to 11 and above) seem to have increased quite appreciably by 12 percent (55.7 percent in 1999 compared to 62.4 percent in 2004). In this regard, Penunjuk emerges as the top-performer both in 1999 (66 percent compared to an average of 52 percent) and 2004 (70 percent compared to an average of 62.4 percent) followed by Tengah.

These two kampungs with better education demonstrate a conspicuous change in perception formation with higher preference for material rather than moral indicators of development in 2004.

Another two Kampung, Berenjut and Geliga, also demonstrate greater priorities both for material than moral indicators compared to Kemaman during the corresponding period.

Interestingly, the better educated kampung also score better on moral/spiritual factors. These respondents score highly on the degree of religiosity measured by the average time spent in performing five daily prayers. The poor households in Geliga seem to have spent shorter time in formal prayers, 1.38 hours compared to the longer time by those from Tengah (2.2 hours) followed by 2.1 from Kemaman, 1.9 from Penunjuk and 1.8 hours from Berenjut. The poor households from Mixed kampung seem to have spent the shortest time of only around 1 hour out of 24 hours. Likewise, the relatively smaller percentage of the poor households from Tengah, Penunjuk, Kuala Kemaman and Mixed Kampung reportedly deal with interest-based banks. The average percentage of the poor households having transactions with *shari'ah*-based banks like Tabung Haji and Islamic banks seems to have declined in the survey area in 2004 (12 percent) compared to 1999 (19 percent).

The above findings linking religiosity, *shari'ah*-based dealings and perception formation apparently lend credence to the positive relationship between religious commitment and greater preference for material over moral/spiritual considerations. Such a linkage needs to be tested with a larger random sample of households. The selection of respondents living a bit far from the Islamic, i.e., non-interest bearing banks might partly explain the declining trend in transactions with shariah-based banks. Similarly, religiosity variable might have been affected by the nature of profession together with the possession of assets. The fishermen, most of whom go for fishing in deep seas for quite some time on daily or weekly basis, are likely to have less opportunities for fulfilling religious obligations like prayer on time and that, too, in congregation in the mosque. This happens to be true for Tengah, Penunjuk, Berenjut, and Mixed Kampung with some exception of Kemaman and Geliga. Indeed, the family background, the age of the household and deeper understanding of religion, among others, also matter in religious commitment. The survey found the percentage of the older-household heads (ranging between 38 and 62) spending longer time in religious activities compared to the younger household heads.

Conclusion

Two surveys conducted in the six poverty concentrated district of Kemaman, Terengganu suggest that access to social overhead capital (SOC) forms the core of perception of development of the poor. They prefer good roads, pipe water, and electricity as well as easy access to education, health, and good house. These preferences should be viewed not simply as pious wishes but rather as indications of not having enough and of asking the government to do more.

There is also evidence that the conditions of the poor have improved somewhat. This has prompted them to be aware of the need for good and sincere leaders. They have also shown greater confidence in their ability to complain against any wrongdoings by local leaders. As the data show, their score on the ability to be critical of the leadership has moved upward quite significantly in 5 years. Yet, about three-fifths of the households speak favourably about their leaders being good. Only about one-tenth of the respondents feel quite strongly against their local leaders. Despite this, the authorities should take their complaints seriously.

There are many factors that might be associated with the perception of development of the poor. Education seems to have a positive relationship with the preference for the material concerns. However, the same group has shown preference for moral concerns better than the poor and the uneducated. Apparently, poverty and religiosity being defined rather simplistically seem to be inversely related. This can be explained by the nature of the profession, age of the household, and the distance from the *shari'ah*-based financial institutions.

Notes

1. This article is based upon a survey conducted in the district of Kemaman of Terengganu. Altogether, 288 households from six Kampung (villages) namely, Paya Beranjut, Geliga, Penunjuk, Tengah, Mixed Kampung, and Kuala Kemaman, were surveyed in October 2004. This survey was an extension of the original survey conducted in 1999. The report of the first survey in 1999 (unpublished) conducted by a team of four researchers namely, Ataul Huq Pramanik, Aslam Haneef, Ahmed Kameel, and Wan Ahmad of the Department of Economics, IIUM (forthcoming) is available on request from the author. Henceforth, it will be referred to as "Survey Report 2004." The entire project

was part of a study entitled “Multi-Dimensional Aspects of Poverty in 4 States with Poverty concentration in Malaysia.”

2. See Reis, E. P. & Moore, M. (eds.), *Elite Perceptions of Poverty & Inequality* (London: Zed Books, 2005), 3.

3. Ibid.

4. For a detailed discussion on culture as crucial factor in development see Harrison, L.E. & Huntington, S.P. eds., *Culture Matters – How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Book, 2000).

5. Cited in Ibid.

6. Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First – Singapore Story, 1965-2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

7. Harrison & Huntington, *Culture Matters – How Values Shape Human Progress*, chs. 7-9.

8. See Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story – Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1978). For Lee Kuan Yew’s contribution to the development of Singapore, see World Bank, *The Asian Miracle – Economic Growth and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); A.H. Pramanik, *Malaysia’s Economic Success* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publication, 1994).

9. According to Mahathir, a Malay has “the attitude of the fatalist. He resigns himself to his own death and to the death of others. He seeks solace in prayer. He delivers himself completely to the mercy of God, for he is not prepared to do anything more for himself.... Often he withdraws into himself and refuses to make any great effort for worldly well-being.” According to Mahathir, although the urban Malay is only slightly better compared to rural Malay, “they are not and will not be socially fully integrated with non-Malays.” Mahathir bin Mohamed, *The Malay Dilemma* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1999), 164, 169.

10. The World Bank Study has made an in depth analysis of the relationship between infrastructure and development. The infrastructure productivity in the early 1990s measured by the percentage change in output with respect to 1 percent change in the level of infrastructure appears to be high in the US (ranging from .34 to .39), followed by Taiwan (.24), Japan (.20) and developing countries in general (.16). Quite consistently, the implied rate of return from infrastructural investment also seems to be quite high for countries experiencing higher elasticity with the exception of few developing countries having a very low elasticity of .07 and a high rate of return of 95 percent. See World Bank, *World Development Report* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).