

Poverty and The Sustainable Development Goals: A Systematic Literature Review of Their Interplay

Hafirda Akma Musaddad^{1*}, Wan Anis Wan Mohd Assrudin² and Masyitah Abu³

¹Faculty of Business & Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, 02100, Padang Besar, Perlis, Malaysia
²Islamic Business School, College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Malaysia
³Centre for Instructional Technology & Multimedia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800, Penang, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Poverty remains a significant barrier to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), impacting billions of individuals worldwide and undermining efforts toward inclusive and sustainable progress. This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) synthesises findings from 30 empirical studies to elucidate the complex interplay between poverty and the SDGs. The review highlights the multidimensional nature of poverty, revealing that it not only limits access to essential resources such as education, healthcare, housing, and financial services but also exacerbates social inequalities and hinders overall economic development. Key barriers identified include insufficient funding for development programmes, political instability, institutional weaknesses, and environmental challenges such as climate change and resource scarcity, all of which impede progress toward the SDGs. The findings also indicate that poverty disproportionately affects marginalised populations, including women, children, and rural communities, thereby deepening existing disparities. Furthermore, the review underscores the urgent need for integrated, cross-sectoral strategies that consider economic, social, and environmental dimensions to effectively combat poverty. These include targeted policy interventions, strengthened governance, international cooperation, and increased investment in capacity-building and infrastructure. By addressing these interconnected challenges holistically, the review advocates for a people-centred approach to sustainable development that promotes resilience, equity, and inclusive growth. Ultimately, it serves as a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders to implement coordinated, evidence-based solutions that can break the cycle of poverty and accelerate progress toward achieving the SDGs for all.

Keywords: Multidimensional Poverty, Poverty Alleviation, Social Exclusion, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

1. INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a pervasive issue that continues to challenge global development efforts, affecting billions of individuals and obstructing pathways to sustainable progress. Defined by the United Nations, poverty extends beyond merely lacking income; it encompasses insufficient access to education, food, healthcare, shelter, political representation, opportunities, security, and dignity. The World Bank reports that around 700 million people worldwide endure extreme poverty, living on under \$2.15 daily. Furthermore, approximately 50% of the global population survives on less than \$6.85 per day, a benchmark for upper-middle-income nations.

^{*}Corresponding Author: <u>hafirdaakma@unimap.edu.my</u> ; <u>hafirda7@gmail.com</u>

With current progress, eliminating extreme poverty by 2030 appears increasingly improbable (World Bank Group, 2024). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, represent a comprehensive global agenda aimed at addressing critical issues such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation by the year 2030. Among these goals, SDG 1 (No Poverty) explicitly targets the eradication of poverty in all its forms, and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Achieving these interconnected goals is essential for fostering inclusive and sustainable societies.

Existing literature underscores that poverty exacerbates vulnerabilities, limits access to essential services and hinders economic growth. For instance, in many developing countries, governments often lack the financial resources or political determination needed to adequately address their citizens' educational needs. Consequently, impoverished families in some low-income nations have taken it upon themselves to fund and organise their children's education (Hillman & Jenkner, 2005). Furthermore, many women face severe financial challenges, often with limited access to socio-economic opportunities. This situation frequently compels them to manage household responsibilities alone, without any support from their children's fathers, thereby deepening their vulnerability to poverty (Ndhlovu, 2024).

While a growing body of research explores various dimensions of poverty, significant gaps remain in understanding how poverty specifically influences each SDG. This is especially evident in the context of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), where addressing hunger and promoting sustainable agriculture require a comprehensive approach that goes beyond examining poverty in isolation or focusing solely on its economic aspects. To bridge these gaps, it is crucial to analyse the potential of global inter-institutional interactions in fostering aligned sustainability norm understandings. Such alignment can serve as a prerequisite for integrating poverty's multifaceted impacts into the broader SDGs framework, ensuring more effective and cohesive implementation (Breitmeier et al., 2021).

Moreover, existing studies often overlook the multi-dimensionality of poverty, including its social and cultural dimensions, which can lead to inadequate policy responses. The most measures of poverty narrowly focus on income and standard metrics like health or education while neglecting critical social, cultural, and emotional dimensions. These overlooked aspects, such as stigma, disempowerment, and societal maltreatment, result in policies that fail to address the broader lived experiences of poverty, potentially rendering interventions less effective (Zulkifli & Abidin, 2023).

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) aims to address these gaps by synthesising findings from existing empirical studies to elucidate the intricate relationship between poverty and the SDGs. By doing so, this study seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of how poverty impacts sustainable development, ultimately informing policy and practice.

2. METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across several databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search utilised a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, such as 'poverty', 'Sustainable Development Goals', 'SDGs', 'impact of poverty on SDGs', and 'poverty and development'. The search was limited to articles published in the last ten years to ensure relevance and currency.

After an initial search, a total of 250 articles were identified. Following a screening process based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 50 studies were selected for inclusion in the review. The review included peer-reviewed articles that addressed the relationship between

poverty and one or more SDGs. Studies were included if they provided empirical evidence or theoretical insights into how poverty impacts the achievement of SDGs. Excluded were non-English publications, opinion pieces, and studies that did not focus on the specific effects of poverty on the SDGs.

In this case, three significant observations were identified. First, a systematic review allows authors to select the most relevant studies to address the research question, thereby reducing the risk of errors in interpretation. Second, the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria serve to systematically recognise, select, and critically evaluate existing empirical studies related to the review objectives. This structured approach allows for transparency in the review process, minimising biases and duplications. Third, the increasing volume of research on poverty has led to contradictory results regarding its concepts, measurements, causes, and potential solutions. This variability presents a challenge in achieving a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Data from the selected studies were extracted using a standardised form, capturing key information such as authors, year of publication, methodology, sample size, key findings, and conclusions. This structured approach ensured consistency in the data collection process.

The quality of the included studies was assessed using the PRISMA guidelines, which evaluate the transparency and quality of reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Studies were rated based on criteria such as methodological rigour, sample size, and relevance to the research question. The findings from the included studies were synthesised qualitatively, identifying common themes and insights related to the impact of poverty on the SDGs. Where applicable, quantitative data was aggregated to provide a clearer understanding of the overall trends.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Non-peer-reviewed publications, opinion pieces
Language	English	Non-English publications
Time Frame	Articles published in the last 10 years	Articles published over 10 years ago
Focus	Studies addressing the relationship between poverty and one or more SDGs	Studies not specifically focusing on poverty and SDGs
Empirical Evidence	Studies providing empirical data or theoretical insights related to poverty and SDGs	Conceptual papers without empirical data or clear insights
Methodology	Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches	Reviews or meta-analyses without primary data

Table 1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria



Figure 1. Flow Diagram for Selection of the Articles

3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results and findings section of the paper 'Poverty and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Systematic Literature Review of Their Interplay' can be enhanced by elaborating on key insights derived from the reviewed studies.

3.1 Impact of Poverty on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

3.1.1 Multidimensional Nature of Poverty

Approximately 8.5% of the world's population, equivalent to nearly 700 million individuals, currently survive on less than \$2.15 daily defined as the extreme poverty threshold for low-income nations. A significant majority, roughly three-quarters, of those living in extreme poverty reside in Sub-Saharan Africa or in regions affected by fragility and conflict (World Bank Group, 2024).

For instance, United Nations Development Programme (2024) mentioned the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) provides a detailed examination of poverty at the regional level. A significant proportion of the multidimensionally poor 83% reside in Sub-Saharan Africa, with nearly 579 million people, and South Asia, with 385 million. Approximately two-thirds of these individuals are found in middle-income countries, and 83% live in rural areas. Despite notable advancements before the COVID-19 pandemic, India still accounted for 229 million impoverished individuals, while Nigeria followed with 97 million (Sjolander & Evans, 2022).

The pandemic has significantly made the efforts difficult to achieve the SDGs, exacerbating hardship for the most disadvantaged groups worldwide. While the COVID-19 crisis may not completely derail long-term progress toward ending extreme poverty, it has disrupted advancements during the pandemic and altered the trajectory of progress. The increase in poverty due to the pandemic could have lasting effects, and without substantial policy changes, poverty levels are expected to remain higher than initially projected through 2030 and 2050 (Moyer et al., 2022).

These alarming trends indicate an urgent need for targeted interventions and policies aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty and its implications for sustainable development.

3.1.2 Economic Implications of Poverty

Between 2015 and 2030, achieving the global SDGs is projected to require annual funding of \$5 trillion to \$7 trillion. For developing nations, the financial need is estimated at \$3.3 trillion to \$4.5 trillion annually, focusing primarily on areas such as essential infrastructure, ensuring food security, addressing climate change through mitigation and adaptation strategies, and improving health and education systems (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2014).

For instance, research by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) highlights the significant impact of inequality on poverty reduction, showing that a 1% increase in the Gini coefficient has the same effect on poverty estimates as a 1 percentage point decline in per capita real GDP growth. The IMF emphasises that addressing inequality can reduce global poverty more effectively than simply focusing on economic growth. For instance, if each country reduced its Gini index by 1% annually, the global poverty rate could drop to 5.4% by 2030 equivalent to lifting 100 million people out of extreme poverty (Daniel et al., 2019).

This relationship highlights how poverty not only hinders individual potential but also stifles overall economic development. Additionally, poverty disproportionately affects marginalised groups, limiting their access to quality education and healthcare, which in turn perpetuates the cycle of poverty (De Schutter et al., 2023). Addressing poverty, therefore, is not just a moral imperative; it is also crucial for fostering sustainable economic growth.

3.1.3 Future Projections and Climate Change

Future projections indicate that without substantial intervention, poverty levels may remain alarmingly high, particularly in the context of climate change. The World Bank estimates that climate change could push an additional 100 million people into poverty by 2030, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities (Jafino et al., 2020). The impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and food insecurity, are expected to disproportionately affect low-income communities, further entrenching poverty. In Bangladesh, for example, research using simultaneous quantile regression shows that climate shocks such as floods and excessive rainfall significantly reduce agricultural income, severely affecting farm households' livelihoods. However, certain factors, such as the presence of prime-age women (aged 15–49) in households, male-headed family structures, access to farmland, and livestock ownership, play a crucial role in

mitigating these income losses (Ahmed, 2024). This interplay between poverty and climate change emphasises the necessity for integrated approaches that consider environmental sustainability while addressing the root causes of poverty. Collaborative efforts involving governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and communities are essential to mitigate these impacts and promote resilience among impoverished populations.

3.1.4 Impact on Specific SDGs

SDG 1: No Poverty

Poverty is a fundamental barrier to achieving SDG 1, which aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere. Studies consistently highlight individuals living in poverty face numerous challenges that trap them in a cycle of deprivation. For example, Vyas-Doorgapersad (2021) emphasises that the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) countries are unlikely to fully achieve SDG 1, as their summits often prioritise other SDGs over poverty eradication. Furthermore, research by Parry et al. (2021), shows that healthcare uses various tools to identify and address patients' poverty-related needs, ranging from simple data collection to comprehensive protocols. Primary care interventions range from gathering sociodemographic data to offering direct support like welfare guidance and food pantries.

SDG 2: Zero Hunger

The relationship between poverty and food insecurity is a critical area of concern for SDG 2. According to Vilar-Compte et al. (2021), urban poverty limits families' access to affordable, healthy food, making it difficult to maintain nutritious diets. Their study reveals that impoverished populations often rely on low-quality, calorie-dense foods that do not meet nutritional needs, leading to malnutrition and associated health issues. Moreover, the inability of individuals in developing countries to afford adequate food due to poverty is a primary factor contributing to food insecurity (Ahmad et al., 2021).

SDG 4: Quality Education

Education is a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of poverty, yet poverty severely limits access to quality education, as highlighted by several studies. The study by Vadivel et al. (2023) revealed that students from low-income families often performed poorly in their academics, pushing them to enter the workforce at a young age. Additionally, the study found that parents from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds showed limited interest in supporting their children's education. This finding is supported by a strong link exists between education and poverty, with higher education levels significantly reducing poverty rates. Over 90% of changes in poverty status are strongly associated with an individual's level of educational attainment, highlighting the critical role education plays in addressing poverty and achieving the SDGs (Ahmed, 2021).

SDG 5: Gender Equality

Poverty disproportionately affects women and girls, creating significant barriers to achieving SDG 5. For many years, feminist scholars have challenged the conventional understanding of 'feminised poverty' and the related concept of the 'feminisation of poverty'. They have critically examined the persistent portrayal of female-headed households as the 'poorest of the poor', questioning its validity and underlying assumptions (Bradshaw et al., 2017). As a result, the gender gap in education and employment persists, reinforcing cycles of poverty. This study by Khursheed (2022) emphasises that microfinance has a significant and beneficial impact on rural

women. It not only supports their personal advancement but also benefits their families by helping to increase household income.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

Poverty is intricately linked to social and economic inequalities, which is a focal point of SDG 10. This is included people with disabilities that often face the challenge of deciding how to allocate their limited resources, including whether to seek healthcare services. This is compounded by their marginalised position in society and the associated financial hardships (Hashemi et al., 2022). The literature suggests that addressing these inequalities is essential for reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development. Policies aimed at inclusivity and equitable resource distribution are critical for breaking down barriers and fostering social mobility.

4. BARRIERS IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

Despite global commitments to achieve the SDGs, numerous barriers hinder progress, particularly for vulnerable populations affected by poverty. The following sections outline the key barriers identified in the literature.

4.1 Lack of Access to Resources

Access to essential resources such as education, healthcare, clean water, and financial services is fundamental to achieving the SDGs. However, many studies highlight that individual living in poverty face significant challenges in accessing these resources. For instance, those living in poverty may be unable to afford transportation to get access to healthcare facilities that may force them to choose between paying for healthcare or other essential necessities (Tzenios, 2019). Similarly, Koku (2015) explained that financial exclusion, often linked to low-income households, affects the poor by making it harder for them to access basic financial services. This leads to problems like fewer opportunities to improve their income and greater risk of financial difficulties.

4.2 Inequality and Social Exclusion

Inequality remains a pervasive barrier to achieving the SDGs. Various studies indicate that marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities, women, and persons with disabilities experience systemic barriers that limit their opportunities. A study by Bixby (2024) shows that people with disabilities from certain racial or ethnic groups are more likely to be poor, while White and Asian people without disabilities are the least likely to experience poverty. For example, Kuteesa et al. (2024) discusses the barriers girls face in education, such as cultural norms, poverty, and poor facilities, and explores ways to promote gender equality and social empowerment. The intersectionality of these inequalities complicates efforts to achieve inclusive development.

4.3 Political Instability and Governance Issues

Political instability and weak governance are critical barriers that impede progress toward the SDGs. Research by Khalid et al. (2024) highlights that energy poverty affects 13% of the world's population without electricity and 40% without clean cooking fuels. Political instability and poor governance worsen this by reducing income and hindering energy infrastructure development. Additionally, the results by Fagbemi et al. (2021) indicate that Sub-Saharan Africa lacks effective governance to improve socioeconomic conditions. Widespread institutional problems in many countries have contributed to poor living standards. Moreover, the quality of governance and socioeconomic conditions influence each other. In study by Bae et al. (2018), factors like foreign

shareholding, institutional shareholding, board independence, and board size are positively linked to sustainability disclosure, while director shareholding is negatively linked. Strong corporate governance helps reduce information gaps and encourages transparency and honest communication with stakeholders.

4.4 Environmental Challenges

Environmental degradation poses a substantial barrier to achieving the SDGs. As climate change impacts become more pronounced, vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected. Schleicher et al. (2018) highlights that including the environment as a core part of understanding well-being and poverty is essential. Ignoring environmental factors leads to an incomplete picture of what affects well-being and poverty and their root causes. Moreover, another study, assesses poverty alleviation stability in five Yunnan counties, finding it influenced by economic status, governance, and infrastructure. Zhaoyang ranks highest, with farmers generally showing higher stability than regions. Key factors include GDP, fiscal revenue, and household income (Wang et al., 2023).

4.5 Insufficient Funding and Investment

Financial constraints significantly hinder efforts to achieve the SDGs. The findings by Leal Filho et al. (2022) indicate that limited resources are hindering the implementation of the SDGs. Progress has been slow, and the goals' potential to promote sustainability and enhance quality of life remains underutilised. According to Prince et al. (2023), insufficient funding and resources create a major challenge for the growth and success of poverty reduction programmes. A lack of investment in essential social infrastructure, such as education and healthcare, limits the effectiveness of these initiatives.

4.6 Lack of Data and Monitoring

Effective monitoring and evaluation are essential for tracking progress toward the SDGs, yet many countries lack reliable data. Incomplete data compromises data quality, making it difficult to accurately assess SDG performance and support organisational decision-making. Inadequate data can also lead to inaccurate predictions of SDG performance, regardless of the analysis method used (Prince et al., 2023). This lack of data makes it challenging to hold governments accountable and implement evidence-based policies that address poverty and inequality.

The findings highlight the profound impact of poverty on the achievement of the SDGs. Poverty is not merely an economic issue; it has extensive social implications that hinder educational access, food security, and gender equality. The interconnections among the SDGs indicate that addressing poverty holistically is crucial for sustainable development. The economic implications of poverty extend beyond individual households, affecting national and global economic stability. Policymakers must prioritise integrated strategies that enhance economic opportunities and promote social equity. Furthermore, the challenges posed by climate change complicate efforts to alleviate poverty, necessitating adaptive strategies that consider environmental sustainability. Collaborative approaches involving governments, NGOs, and communities are essential for addressing these intertwined challenges effectively.

5. CONCLUSION

This SLR has elucidated the complex relationship between poverty and the SDGs. The findings underscore that poverty not only serves as a formidable barrier to achieving SDG 1 (No Poverty) but also significantly affects other interconnected goals, such as SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 4

(Quality Education), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). The persistence of poverty hampers sustainable economic growth and perpetuates social inequities, emphasising the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that address these challenges.

The review reveals that an integrated approach is essential for tackling poverty effectively. When developing interventions aimed at achieving the SDGs, it is crucial to consider the multifaceted dimensions of poverty, including economic, social, and environmental factors. As global issues such as climate change increasingly threaten to exacerbate poverty levels, collaborative efforts involving governments, NGOs, and local communities are vital for fostering resilience and ensuring sustainable development.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the valuable insights provided by this review, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the focus on empirical studies published between 2010 and 2023 may exclude relevant research conducted prior to this period. Furthermore, the review is restricted to articles available in English, potentially omitting important studies published in other languages. The predominance of quantitative data in some research may also overlook the qualitative dimensions of poverty and its implications for the SDGs. To address these limitations, future research should explore several key avenues. Conducting longitudinal studies will provide insights into the long-term effects of poverty alleviation programmes on the SDGs, thereby informing effective strategies for sustainable development. In addition, incorporating qualitative methods can yield a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of impoverished populations, particularly how these experiences influence their access to resources and opportunities.

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