Journal of Humanity Studies
Volume 4 (2), 2025, 79 - 87

Meaningful Productivity Strategy: The Key To Reducing Poverty In The 3t Region Of The Mentawai Islands

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ABSTRACT

The Mentawai Islands, as one of Indonesia's Frontier, Outermost, and Disadvantaged (3T) regions, face the challenge of structural poverty that contradicts its rich natural resources. This study aims to formulate the concept of "Meaningful Productivity" as a poverty alleviation strategy that integrates local cultural values with modern economic efficiency. Using descriptive qualitative methods, this study found that conventional productivity, which focuses solely on physical quantities, often fails because it ignores the socio-cultural context of Arat Sabulungan. The results of the discussion indicate that downstreaming of local commodities (sago and coconut) and the development of community-based ecotourism are key pillars of meaningful productivity. This strategy has been proven to increase income while maintaining cultural identity, which is key to economic sustainability in the 3T region.

Keywords: *Meaningful Productivity, Poverty, 3T Region, Mentawai Islands, Arat Sabulungan*

INTRODUCTION

Productivity serves as a critical barometer for the economic health of a region, whether it is analyzed at the national, provincial, or municipal level. In the realm of development economics, productivity is not merely a technical ratio of output to input; it is a profound indicator of a society's capacity to generate wealth and sustain human dignity. Economists have long established a symbiotic, yet often painful, link between productivity levels and the prevalence of poverty. When a region exhibits low productivity, it signifies that its resources—be they human, natural, or technological—are not being utilized to their full potential. This inefficiency is the primary driver of regional stagnation. In essence, a region's poverty status is often a reflection of its "productivity gap," where the inability to generate high-value goods and services keeps the local economy anchored in a state of underdevelopment.

The relationship between low productivity and poverty is best encapsulated in the concept of the "vicious circle of poverty," a term popularized by thinkers like Jhingan (2016). This cycle functions as an endless chain of causality that traps a population in a state of deprivation. The mechanics of this circle are as relentless as they are logical: low productivity inevitably leads to low real income. When income is barely sufficient to meet basic subsistence needs, the capacity for the population to save is virtually non-existent. Without savings, there is no pool of internal capital available for investment. This lack of investment means that the economy cannot upgrade its tools, machinery, or human skills, which in turn ensures that productivity remains low. Thus, the cycle completes itself, creating a self-reinforcing mechanism where poverty breeds more poverty. For a

country or district caught in this loop, the "endless chain" described by Jhingan acts as a structural barrier that market forces alone often fail to break.

To understand how to break this chain, one must look back to the foundations of economic thought. Adam Smith, in his seminal 1776 work, *"An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations,"* identified the starting point of economic progress: the division of labor. Smith argued that the wealth of a nation is not found in its gold reserves, but in the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which its labor is applied. By breaking down complex production processes into specialized tasks, the division of labor allows workers to become highly proficient in specific roles. This specialization serves three main purposes: it increases the individual skill of the worker, saves time that is typically lost when switching from one task to another, and facilitates the invention of specialized machinery. For Smith, this was the "lever" that could lift a society out of stagnation.

However, Smith's analysis also touched upon a more complex social dynamic regarding the fruits of productivity. Under the Smithian framework, a worker is deemed highly productive if they generate substantial profits for the employer or the company. Yet, a historical and contemporary tension exists where increased productivity does not always translate into immediate or proportional increases in worker remuneration. In many developing economies, the gains from high productivity are often captured by capital owners, while wages remain suppressed due to an oversupply of labor. This creates a paradox: while the firm becomes wealthier through the worker's efficiency, the worker's personal economic status may remain stagnant. Addressing this gap is crucial for poverty reduction, as the benefits of productivity must eventually flow back to the labor force to increase the aggregate purchasing power of the region.

The assumption at the heart of modern development strategy is that increased productivity is the ultimate engine for income growth. As workers enhance their skills and adopt time-saving technologies, the production of goods and services is maximized. This shift moves the economy from a "subsistence" mindset to a "surplus" mindset. When a worker produces more than they consume, the resulting surplus creates the possibility for higher wages and, crucially, higher savings. In the long run, these savings are the lifeblood of investment. Whether it is a small-scale farmer investing in better irrigation or a city investing in digital infrastructure, the transition from low-productivity labor to high-productivity industry is what allows a region to accumulate the capital necessary for sustainable growth.

Ultimately, the phenomenon of productivity must be understood as the primary lever for economic growth and poverty reduction. When a district or city focuses on enhancing the productivity of its citizens—through education, health, and technology—it is effectively attacking the "vicious circle" at its most vulnerable point. By increasing the output per person, the region raises the ceiling of what is economically possible. Higher productivity leads to more competitive products in the global or national market, which brings in external wealth. This influx of capital, if managed correctly, funds the social services and infrastructure that further enhance human capital, creating a "virtuous circle" of growth. In this light, productivity is not just an economic metric; it is a tool for social liberation.

The path from poverty to prosperity is paved with improvements in productivity. As Jhingan warned, the "vicious circle" is a formidable opponent that keeps many regions in a state of perpetual lack. However, by revisiting the principles of Adam Smith and focusing on the division of labor, skill enhancement, and time-efficiency, regions can ignite the engine of economic growth. The goal of any regional economic policy must be to ensure that the increased productivity of the workforce leads to higher incomes and reinvestment. Only by breaking the endless chain of low savings and low

investment can a society transition from a state of poverty to a state of wealth, ensuring that the nature and causes of the wealth of nations are realized in the lives of every citizen.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to explore and understand the meanings of individuals and groups of people related to social or humanitarian issues (Creswell, 2010). This study utilized literature studies and field observations of the economic patterns of communities in Siberut and Sipora. The data obtained was then analyzed, interpreted, and concluded. The method used for content analysis was content/data analysis, with conclusions drawn from the findings (Ary et al., 2005). Secondary data were obtained from BPS reports and local government documents. The analysis was conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing to map the productivity variables that most impact poverty alleviation in the 3T (frontier and outermost) regions. In collecting data, the researcher employed a triangulation technique (combined technique), which involves inductive data analysis, with the results prioritizing meaning over generalization (Sugiyono, 2015). The data criteria used in this study were based on the actual data that occurred during the study. In other words, data that contains the meaning behind what was seen and said by the research informants (Rhee, 2008).

In line with Orong's (2017) opinion, the descriptive method is carried out by describing facts, followed by analysis. After that, the researcher analyzes the collected data using an interactive analysis model that begins with data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and ends with drawing conclusions. In line with Sugiyono's (2015) opinion, data analysis in qualitative research is carried out continuously, starting before entering the field, while in the field, and after leaving the field. Analysis begins when formulating and explaining the problem, before entering the field, and continues until the writing of the research results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Economic Development Concept

This traditional concept of economic development focuses on the allocation of scarce productive resources and optimal growth as a means to produce a continuous increase in goods and services (Todaro & Smith, 2011). This assumes the world is in an advanced capitalist economy supported by perfect market conditions. Economic growth is determined by perfect market mechanisms; without government intervention, economic development will proceed naturally, driven by an invisible hand, which Adam Smith called the "invisible hand" (Adam Smith, 1776). Indicators developed to measure development include growth and GNI (Gross National Income) per capita. Development has traditionally been understood as a purely economic phenomenon, where aggregate profits increase rapidly, and GNI per capita growth trickles down to society in the form of employment and other economic opportunities. Poverty, discrimination, unemployment, and income distribution tend to be neglected in favor of achieving growth. Research by Todaro & Smith (2011) shows that the emphasis on productivity tends to be on output, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP).

The Mentawai Islands are a unique region with world-renowned biodiversity and cultural riches. However, data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) consistently places Mentawai among the regions with significant poverty rates in West Sumatra. Poverty in this region is multidimensional, driven by geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, and limited access to global markets.
The fundamental problem lies not in the absence of a work ethic, but rather in a productivity model that is out of sync with local needs. The concept of "Meaningful Productivity" offers a solution: a work model that not only generates economic value but also provides meaning for the sustainability of life and the preservation of the noble values of indigenous communities.
Development economists define productivity as the ratio between output and effort (input). If someone produces more output than the effort expended, then productivity is good or efficient. This definition is as understood by the following experts:

a. Harrington, H. James – 2005
   "Productivity is the continual improvement of processes to produce more goods or services with less effort and resources."
b. Drucker, Peter F. (although most of his early work predates 2000, it is widely referenced in the 2000s)
   Definition (recited in 2001):
   "Productivity means a balance between all factors of production that will provide the maximum output with the least effort."
c. Mas'ud & Mokhamad Subehi (2023) – Ministry of Agriculture
   In their report "Labor Development and Productivity in the Indonesian Agricultural Sector," they state that: "Labor productivity is an indicator of efficiency in producing agricultural output per unit of labor."
d. Muhammad Maulana (2023) – Parahyangan Catholic University. "Labor productivity is the ratio between output produced and labor input used."
e. According to Sutrisno (2009),
   Productivity is the relationship between output (goods or services) and the resources used (labor, materials, money).

From the definition outlined above, it is clear that indicators of successful economic development still rely on increased output, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP). This phenomenon aligns with the statement by Todaro & Smith (2011) in the introduction above.

Paradigm Shift in Development

Economic development using a growth approach has been around for a long time. The experiences of the 1950s and 1960s provide valuable lessons for development economists. In these decades, developing countries experienced targeted levels of economic growth, but the lives of their people did not experience significant changes. The positive economic growth at that time was accompanied by poverty and development disparities within the community. This phenomenon indicates a narrow understanding of economic development. Now, development economists and planners are increasingly vocal in their calls for serious efforts to address absolute poverty,

increasingly unequal income distribution, and rising unemployment. Based on this experience, during the 1970s, the concept of economic development using a growth approach began to be redefined and based on the context of increasingly dynamic economic development.

According to Kartasasmita, as quoted by Nurman (2015), development is essentially a process of change for the better through planned efforts. As a process, the primary dynamic element in development is the multidimensional nature of human beings (Weruin, 2014). Therefore, the development process must be viewed from various perspectives, not just the economic dimension, but also political, social systems, education, culture, and institutional dimensions. This shift in the development paradigm is reinforced by the views of Amartya Sen, a 1998 Nobel Prize winner in economics. Sen stated that "capability to function" plays a crucial role in determining poverty status in a society. Sen even emphasized that income and utility approaches to measuring poverty will not yield optimal results; what matters is "what a person can be and what he can do" with commodities with certain characteristics that he possesses or is familiar with—this is what Sen calls functioning. The role of functioning in the development paradigm is an instrument for developing the ability to relate to other people or groups. Long-standing relationships, characterized by mutual knowledge, understanding, and trust, accumulate in the form of crystallized values that develop through productive relationships, becoming a distinct capability. This is what James Foster and Christopher Handy, as cited by Todaro & Smith (2011), call external capability. Thus, when linking functionality and external capability, it can be said that functionality is the achievement of capabilities (external capabilities) regarding a commodity with certain characteristics that are possessed or known to the fish.

Core Values of Development

Based on the description above, we can state that development is a social dynamic that must be addressed with a multidimensional approach to human life. Economic development is only one dimension that is indeed a driver; others are not the goal of development. However, Todaro & Smith (2011) crystallized at least three basic components of conceptual and practical values that help understand the meaning of development.

- Sustenance: concerns the provision of basic human needs such as food, shelter, health, and protection. If these basic needs are not met, absolute underdevelopment will occur, resulting in an unmet standard of living.
- Self-esteem: being fully human is an important psychological component of human life. This component can be felt as if it is not valued, as expressed by a blind woman from Tiraspol, Moldova (Todaro & Smith, 2011; 7).
- Freedom from Servantism (freedom); the ability (freedom) to choose something as a life choice without interference from the interests of others is a completely independent and liberated attitude from the perspective of true freedom. By making choices based on one's own choices, without sacrificing one's self-respect, one is said to have avoided being tied to others, which often results in unfair treatment.

In essence, this article reminds the author that development is essentially a multidimensional change in a society's social system: economic, cultural, social, educational, political, and environmental. Therefore, indicators for measuring development success should be more varied and comprehensive. The experience of development economists in the 1970s, which focused solely on economic growth and GNI (gross national income), aligns with what we have experienced in Mentawai. Economic growth, as measured by GRDP or GNI per capita, has improved, but it is irrelevant to the improvement in poverty and social levels in Mentawai society. This phenomenon is not unique to Mentawai; it also occurs in other places, such as Gorontalo Province (see Table 1). The problem lies in the development paradigm (mindset), which needs to be revised without abandoning the core values of development itself, as proposed by Todaro & Smith (2011) (listed in D).

The development paradigm must be revitalized with a combination of poverty reduction, income distribution, increased environmental health awareness, and sustainable and measurable community empowerment. Revitalizing the development paradigm is related to ensuring that the planned development values impact the lives of the target communities. Development strategies, starting with a vision, mission, objectives, and programs, along with their measurement, are directed toward a single point of certainty.

Thus, the meaning of productivity becomes more developed and broader, not merely limited to the comparison between the quantity of output produced and the effort (input) used. High economic growth which is considered as an output with good efforts, does not necessarily have an impact on improving the standard of living of the target community, therefore it is necessary to distribute this growth to the community through poverty alleviation, empowerment with a participatory pattern (Widjajanti, 2011) in order to be proactive. Productivity means essentially the ability to function (capability to function) of a person or group to manage a commodity with the characteristics that they have or are familiar with.

CURRENT CONDITIONS OF MENTAWAI SOCIETY

Although this development concept has been believed and implemented for a long time, in various parts of the world, it remains a common perception among people still struggling with poverty. Todaro & Smith (2011) in their book, Economic Development, translated by Agus Dharma on pages 3-8, describe that many countries still live in poverty. Here's what they say:

- Observation of a small family in North America: The average family consists of four people with an annual income of over $50,000. Their home has many pleasant amenities, and each child has their own bedroom. They eat three meals a day, supplemented by a variety of other nutritious foods. Both children are in good health and attend school. Both are completing secondary education and will likely continue on to college. They can choose from a variety of careers of their choice, and they live to an average age of 78. This family is typical of families in most wealthy countries. Parents, educated enough to secure stable employment, provide shelter, clothing, food, and education for their children, can save for old age. However, despite all the economic benefits, there are "non-economic" costs, such as intense competitive pressures, mental and physical strain in providing for a family's needs deemed adequate by

society, which can negatively impact the health of older adults. Opportunities for leisure, walks in the fresh air of the countryside, and sunsets are often unattainable in times of economic disruption and environmental degradation. However, a comfortable economic status and a luxurious lifestyle are merely dreams for billions of less fortunate people in this part of the world.

- Let's consider an extended family in South Asia. They typically live in poor rural areas, with a 2-3-bedroom home with a family size of around eight or more: parents, several children, grandparents, and several aunts and uncles. Their combined real annual per capita income is around $300, consisting of cash and the produce they consume together. Their daily lives involve farming and cultivating vast tracts of land owned by people living in nearby towns. Adults are illiterate, and young children rarely attend school, skipping school and continuing their education beyond primary school. Meals are often limited to just one or two meals a day, often with the same type of food, and the quantity often insufficient to satisfy their hunger. They lack access to electricity, sanitation, or clean water. Diseases frequently plague their communities, and qualified doctors and medical practitioners live in the city. The workload is heavy, their skin is parched from the scorching heat, and the hope of a better life seems distant.
- Observing urban life in South America: witnessing the stark contrasts in living conditions from one part of a rapidly expanding metropolis to another. Modern buildings, large tree-lined boulevards, along stunning white-sand beaches; yet, just a few hundred meters from this, the landscape changes, with shacks huddled together in a precarious condition along the slopes of a steep hill.

The contrasting life phenomena described by Todaro & Smith are quite representative of all life in the universe, as if a race is taking place between prosperity and poverty. This is particularly true in Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia. Takeredas et al. (2024) in the Journal of Economic and Development Studies, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2024, stated that Gorontalo Province ranks 32nd in Indonesia with a worrying poverty depth and severity index. This situation is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Percentage of Poor Population by Regency/City in Gorontalo Province, 2012-2021

Wilayah	Persentase penduduk miskin (%)									
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Boalemo	20,4	21,8	20,8	21,7	21,1	21,9	20,3	18,9	18,6	19
Gorontalo	20,4	21,8	20,8	21,8	21	20,6	19,8	18,1	17,6	17,9
Pohuwato	20,4	21,8	20,8	22,4	21,2	21,3	19,4	18,2	17,6	18,1
Bone Bolango	20,4	21,8	20,8	18,5	18	17,8	17,4	16,1	15,8	16,3
Gorontalo Utara	20,4	21,8	20,8	18,9	18,5	19,2	18,5	17	16,9	17,2
Kota Gorontalo	20,4	21,8	20,8	6,05	6,05	5,7	5,57	5,45	5,59	5,93
Provinsi Gorontalo	20,4	21.9	20,9	18,3	17,7	17,7	16,8	15,5	15,2	15,6

Sumber : BPS Provinsi Gorontalo 2021(dalam Jurnal

Meanwhile, West Sumatra Province ranked ninth nationally in 2024. Mentawai Regency recorded a high percentage reaching double digits, while other regencies/cities fell below double digits. This situation can be seen in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Percentage of Poor Population by Regency/City in West Sumatra Province, 2018-2022

Wilayah	Persentase kemiskinan (%)				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Sumbar	6,65	6,42	6,28	6,63	5,92
Kep.Mentawai	14,44	14,43	14,35	14,84	13,97
Pesisir Selatan	7,59	7,88	7,61	7,92	7,11
Kab.Solok	8,88	7,98	7,81	8,01	7,12
Sijunjung	7,11	7,04	6,78	6,8	6
Tanah Datar	5,32	4,66	4,4	4,54	4,26
Padang Pariaman	8,04	7,1	6,95	7,22	6,25
Agam	6,76	6,75	6,75	6,85	6,22
Lima Puluh Kota	6,99	6,97	6,86	7,29	6,59
Pasaman	7,31	7,21	7,16	7,48	6,85
Solok Selatan	7,07	7,33	7,15	7,52	6,51
Dharmasraya	6,42	6,29	6,23	6,67	5,56
Pasaman Barat	7,34	7,14	7,04	7,51	6,93
Padang	4,7	4,48	4,4	4,94	4,26
Kota Solok	3,3	3,24	2,77	3,12	3,02
Sawahlunto	2,39	2,17	2,16	2,38	2,28
Padang Panjang	5,88	5,6	5,24	5,92	5,14
Bukittinggi	4,92	4,6	4,54	5,14	4,46
Payakumbuh	5,77	5,68	5,65	6,16	5,66
Pariaman	5,03	4,76	4,1	4,38	4,13

Sumber : Sumatera Barat Dalam Angka, 2024

Poverty is a phenomenon in developing countries that are still struggling to find solutions. Those who are less fortunate face not only economic pressures but also social, political, and humanitarian pressures. This description of poverty was expressed by several individuals, according to Todaro & Smith (2011) in several countries, including:

- When someone experiences poverty, they are ignored by society and feel inferior. They have no food, their household is hungry, they have no clothes, and their family experiences no progress. (A poor woman from Uganda)
- For the poor, everything is terrifying—disease, humiliation, shame. We are helpless, we fear everything; we depend on everyone. No one needs us. We are like trash that everyone wants to throw away. (A blind woman from Tiraspol, Moldova, Eastern Europe)
- When food is abundant, families can share. But in the current famine, even families won't help you with food. (A young man in Nichmishi, Zambia)
- We had to queue for hours before it was our turn to get water. (Participant in a group discussion from Mbwadzulu Village (Mangochi), Malawi.
- Don't ask me what poverty means, because you've already found it outside my house. Look at this house and count the holes. Look at the household utensils and my clothes. Look at everything and note what you see. That's poverty.) (a poor man in Kenya).

Statements like these are the cry of the soul for the suffering experienced throughout his life as someone less fortunate. Poverty will attack other aspects of life, such as social, cultural, and humanitarian. The statements of some of the people mentioned above reflect attitudes of dependency, pessimism, a culture of not sharing, and shame.

Poverty in Mentawai is not only material deprivation, but also "poverty of access." The community has abundant food resources (sago and fish), but struggles to convert them into economic value due to the long and expensive distribution chain.

Meaningful productivity in Mentawai consists of three pillars:

1. Ecology: Not destroying the forest as a source of life.
2. Culture: Respecting social time and traditional rituals.
3. Economy: Producing derivative products with added value (downstream processing).

Sago has long been considered a subsistence food. A productivity strategy means encouraging the processing of sago into packaged flour or industrial materials for export, increasing its economic value by up to 300%.

Mentawai is a global surfing destination. However, profits often flow to outside parties. Productivity means directing local communities to become the primary subjects through the provision of standardized homestays and cultural tour guides. The Mentawai Islands Regency was established independently under Law No. 49 of 1999 and de facto separated from its parent island in 2000. Geographically, Mentawai is an archipelagic regency (99) scattered across a cluster of large islands. The Mentawai population of 91,120 (1.57% of the population of West Sumatra) is spread across an area of 5,980.76 km2 (14.20% of West Sumatra's total area). Administratively, the Mentawai region is divided into 10 sub-districts, 43 villages, and 341 hamlets.

If we look at the economic growth and education aspects of Mentawai (see Table 3), in aggregate, they are not significantly behind the average economic and education growth in West Sumatra. Mentawai's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew 64% compared to West Sumatra, and economic growth also reached 4%. The decline in unemployment and the increase in the labor force participation rate are quite encouraging, with Mentawai far outperforming the West Sumatra average. Mentawai's economic growth achievements appear to be accompanied by achievements in education; literacy rates, elementary and secondary school enrollment rates, remain closely matched by those of West Sumatra (see Table 3).

Table 3: Geographic, Economic, Educational, and Social Overview of Mentawai Compared to West Sumatra.

GEOGRAFI	
Luas Wilayah Mtw/Sbr	**: 5.980,76 Km2/42.120 km2 - (14,20%)**
Penduduk Mtw/Sbr	**: 91.427/5.836.200 (MDA,2024) - (1,57%)**
P.Siberut	**: 3.869,90 Km2 (64,71%)**
P.Sipora	**: 620,73 Km2 (10,38%)**
P.PUS	**: 1.482,13 Km2 (24,91%)**
Kecamatan	**: 10**
Desa	**: 43**

Dusun	**: 341**
EKONOMI	
• **PDRB/Kapita harga berlaku Mtw/Sbr**	**:36,31/57,05**
• **Pertubuhan ekonomi Mtw/Sbr**	**:4,04/4,36**
• **Pengangguran terbuka Mtw/Sbr**	**: 1,33%/5,79%**
• **Partisipasi Angkatan kerja,Mtw/Sbr**	**: 83,47%/70,44%**
PENDIDIKAN	
• **Melek Huruf Mtw/Sbr**	**:99,05/99,37**
• **APK SD (Angka Partisipasi Kasar) Mtw/Sbr, SD**	**:111,55/104,74**
• **SMP**	**:99/96,24**
• **SMA,**	**:82,17/93,65**
SOSIAL	
• **Harapan hidup Mtw/Sbr**	**: 65,1/70,19THN**
• **Kemiskinan Mtw/Sbr**	**:13,76/5,79%**
• **IPM Mtw/Sbr**	**: 65,79/76,43**

Sumber : MDA & SDA (2024)

However, the economic and educational growth figures outlined above unfortunately do not align with improvements in social welfare. For example, let's take just three indicators: life expectancy (UHH), poverty rate, and the Human Development Index (HDI). Of these three indicators, the most significant is the Mentawai poverty ratio, which increased by 233% compared to the West Sumatra average (see tables 2 and 3). The achievements made above in the economic and educational sectors seem to have been instantly destroyed by the rise in poverty figures.

CONCLUSION

Poverty alleviation in Mentawai cannot be achieved through mass industrialization that undermines the social fabric. A meaningful productivity strategy—one that combines appropriate technology with local wisdom—is key to improving welfare without uprooting communities from their cultural roots.

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