



THOUGHTS

Why Waqf Must Enter Everyday Economic Life



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The successful launch of a petrol station on waqf land in Sungai Merab, Bangi, Selangor, offers a concrete example of how waqf can move beyond public assumptions. Situated along a corridor with steady traffic flow and surrounding residential growth, the project places a waqf asset squarely within everyday economic activity rather than at its peripheries. That placement matters, as public understanding of waqf remains largely traditional.

Research on waqf in Malaysia affirms that Muslims generally associate waqf with mosques, religious schools or burial grounds, reinforcing a familiar and narrow understanding of the institution. These associations are not wrong, but they are incomplete. They

economic participation. The opportunity cost of this mindset is not theoretical. Official data from JAWHAR shows that as of 2023, some 2,415 hectares of waqf land in Malaysia remain unutilised, representing 12 per cent of the total registered waqf land area.

For context, the recently completed Hospital Pasir Gudang occupies about 20.6 hectares, meaning the idle waqf land mass nationwide is equivalent to more than 100 hospitals of similar scale. This illustrates the scale of opportunity embedded in underutilised waqf assets at a time of rising social and care needs. It is within this wider context of latent capacity, rather than as an isolated commercial venture, that the petrol station project in Sungai Merab warrants closer attention.

Making waqf visible in everyday economic life

The petrol station is built on waqf land that remains under the religious trusteeship of Majlis Agama Islam Selangor, with development and asset stewardship undertaken by Perbadanan Wakaf Selangor. Operationally, the station is run in collaboration with Petron Malaysia under a dealer-owned, dealer-operated model but with a unique institutional twist. While the land remains as a waqf asset, the waqf institution does not actually sell fuel or manage retail staff itself. This distinction is very critical for public understanding.

Instead, daily operations such as sales, safety, and regulatory compliance are handled by professional managers. This allows the waqf to derive income from the productive use of its land without assuming the direct retail risk. Once the station is operational, revenue is first used to cover operating costs and facility maintenance.

The remaining surplus is cycled back into the waqf ecosystem for asset upkeep and future reinvestments. Crucially, 50 per cent of the surplus is allocated to Masjid Sungai Ramal Luar to honour the original intent of the land donor, the late Haji Mat Saman.

From passive charity to growing assets

In simple terms, the land is not sold. And the waqf character is strictly preserved. Value is generated through use, then returned to public benefit. What makes this model different from traditional charity is not merely that it generates income, but what that income enables. Regular cash flow allows waqf assets to be maintained properly, upgraded over time and used more efficiently. In this way, the waqf asset itself grows in strength and capacity. This idea, that waqf can grow rather than simply be consumed, is largely absent from public discourse.

Yet it aligns closely with the original purpose of waqf as a perpetual source of benefit, delivered through a structure that sustains itself. Perpetuity can still be achieved not by freezing assets in their original form, but by allowing them to remain productive while preserving the original intent.

Extending public imagination to the care economy

The same public assumptions that limit acceptance of commercial waqf also shape expectations around care. Elderly care and long-term support are often viewed as family responsibilities or state obligations, and waqf rarely features in this conversation. Yet Malaysia is ageing rapidly, and the care economy is becoming an unavoidable national issue. Here too, waqf has begun to challenge public expectations.

An elderly care facility recently launched by Wakaf Penang demonstrates how waqf can be mobilised to provide structured, dignified care for older persons. An old folks' home does not resemble a mosque, but it fulfils the same underlying objective: sustained public benefit. Supported by income from other productive waqf assets, such facilities can operate on a sustainable basis, offering continuity and affordability rather than episodic charity. This places waqf squarely within the emerging care and silver economy, where services must be reliable, scalable and sensitive to dignity.

Waqf and nation-building, seen through public eyes

From a public perspective, nation-building is often associated with visible state projects or major private investment. Waqf is rarely included in that mental picture. Yet productive waqf offers a quiet but important complement. Revenue-generating waqf assets can help fund social services without constant appeals.

Care facilities can ease pressure on families and healthcare systems. Training centres for caregivers can support employment in a growing silver economy sector. The elderly care home contributes directly by meeting a social need. The petrol station contributes

not usually associate with religious endowments.

Governance and public trust

For this shift in public perception to endure, governance is of paramount importance. Members of the public may accept innovation, but only if trust is maintained. Commercial activity must be clearly separated from religious stewardship. From the public’s point of view, profit is not the goal – impact and integrity are. Strong governance ensures that productive waqf does not undermine its moral standing as it expands into unfamiliar territory.

Public understanding of waqf today is limited, but it is not fixed. What reshapes perception most effectively is not explanation, but experience. Seeing waqf land host a functioning petrol station. Seeing waqf support an elderly care home. Seeing benefits delivered consistently over time.

These experiences slowly expand what the public believes waqf can be. The petrol station in Sungai Merab and the care facility in Penang do not overturn long-held assumptions overnight. But it has already begun, and long may it continue.

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