

# Community Participation for Sustainable Development Goals: The Localisation Process

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## ABSTRACT

*According to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), localisation is pertinent in supporting global agenda implementation. Realising this importance, Malaysia's Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MOHLG) has encouraged local authorities to realign their programmes and activities with SDG-oriented policies. Consequently, a few of the leading local authorities produced their maiden Voluntary Local Review (VLR) in 2021. An essential component of SDGs localisation involves the inclusion of the youth community. This study, therefore, aimed to explore youth community involvement in five different Malaysian regions, focusing on the issues they encountered and the importance of being involved in the localisation process. Interviews with youth representatives indicated that they faced a few institutional and commitment impediments involved with the SDGs. Youth representation and local government action could*



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*potentially improve the SDGs implementation. Finally, SDGs leadership is required at all levels. The study's empirical findings have offered a potential new research avenue, particularly to achieve the SDG goal for sustainable cities and communities.*

**Keywords:** *Local authorities; SDGs localisation; Malaysia; Youth Community*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Seville Commitment in 2019 supports SDGs localisation and emphasises the importance of local governing in committing to the sustainability (Mwebesa et al., 2021). Relative to Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the role of the sub-national and local units towards sustainability is more significant and recognisable in the United Nations (UN) SDGs framework (Klopp & Petretta, 2017; Simon et al., 2016). Inclusion of the lowest governmental systems (e.g., local government, local authorities, cities, or municipalities) could contribute to regional and national development (Simon et al., 2016). Hence, it could materialise the triple bottom line concept of sustainability at the community-based level within the broader sphere of economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

Localising SDGs is challenging, and because it is voluntary, not all countries are committed to achieving the global agenda at the subnational and local levels. In addition, SDGs localisation operates at both intergovernmental and multilevel governance levels (Revi, 2017), which is regarded as a complex structure. As several nations have discovered, limited resources and skills make mainstreaming the SDGs at the municipal and provincial levels difficult.

The progress and achievement of SDG localisation among UN members could be traced in their reports and data presented at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). From the Voluntary National Reviews (VNR), Asia and Pacific countries, for example, have made extensive efforts to raise SDGs awareness, translate SDGs into a local context and engage stakeholders. However, only a few have reported their substantive SDGs localisation process at the subnational level, and various cities

report different phases of their localisation programme (Sunam et al., 2018; Mwebesa et al., 2021).

Studies on mainstreaming SDGs within local contexts remain limited (Masuda et al., 2021). For instance, in Malaysia, SDGs localisation has been discussed in Khoo and Tan (2019), and Rahman and Yusof (2020) which offers avenues for more empirical studies. The former discusses the SDGs localisation in the context of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and the latter focuses on community participation. Nevertheless, there is little research on youth participation in the SDGs localisation process. Thus, this study offers exploratory studies on SDGs localisation by focusing on the youth as a part of the community agenda. Furthermore, youth participation involving SDGs has been regarded as important by the UN, and they were one of the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGOS) in the SDGs implementation process. Thus, this study aimed at the following objectives:

- a) To identify the issues faced by the youth community in the SDGs localisation process.
- b) To discover the importance of youth participation in the SDGs localisation process.
- c) To identify strategies that could strengthen the SDGs localisation framework.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature has emphasised the essential role of SDGs governance in ensuring SDGs localisation and implementation. Ideally, SDGs should be embedded in local institutions through various measures (e.g., via policies that promote multi-stakeholder partnership at various levels of government). A configuration involving the inclusivity principle could produce a real impact on the ground (Klopp & Petretta, 2017; Sunam et al., 2018). The SDGs framework and governance need to be restructured with increased flexibility. It should foster openness and social inclusion that inspire broader multi-stakeholders participation, particularly at the grassroots level (Klopp & Petretta, 2017; Sianes & Vela-Jiménez, 2020). The openness of the local government will provide an inclusive ecosystem that will allow for the interaction of various SDGs stakeholders. Sunam et

al. (2018) point out the importance of multi-stakeholder inclusiveness, partnership and collaboration in SDGs governance.

Social inclusion requires that various community members are taken into consideration regarding SDGs implementation. These local actors will enable the realisation of the 2030 Agenda (Masuda et al., 2021). To be sure, this social inclusion process will strengthen the participatory and partnership mechanism (Klopp & Petretta, 2017; Sianes & Vela-Jiménez, 2020). Numerous studies have recommended that the execution of SDGs localisation should involve the university (Sianes & Vela-Jiménez, 2020), women (Purwanti et al., 2018; Sunam et al., 2018), youth (Polese et al., 2018; Sunam et al., 2018), indigenous individuals and ethnic minorities (Do et al., 2020; Sunam et al., 2018), and marginalised groups in general (Sunam et al., 2018).

The success factors for the SDGs localisation model vary according to the country (Sunam et al., 2018). In a study by Mutiarani and Siswanto (2020), the local government size and revenue source determined Indonesia's SDGs accomplishment. Internal and external factors also encourage and hamper community participation (Nurbaiti & Bambang, 2018). In specific SDGs localisation projects, the success depends on community members with specific skills, expertise, and capabilities to execute the projects together (Mwebesa et al., 2021; Sianes & Vela-Jiménez, 2020). Nevertheless, multi-level government commitment and intervention are vital for a successful outcome (KC et al., 2021; Mwebesa et al., 2021). For example, Mayoral leadership supporting urban SDGs has been a vital part of the One NYC initiative (Klopp & Petretta, 2017). Derived from the literature selected for this study, Table 1 shows some examples of SDGs localisation strategies used in various countries.

The following strategies have been recommended by many authors in order to intensify and mainstream SDGs localisation and we believe they should be applied to every country:

**Table 1**  
*Examples of the SDGs localisation strategies*

Country	SDGs localisation strategies
Afghanistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To create SDGs awareness and adjust the national-provincial SDG targets and indicators (Sunam et al., 2018)</li> </ul>
Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The SDGs national and subnational action plans were introduced for 2017–2019 to facilitate the localisation of SDGs at the provincial and local levels (Sunam et al., 2018).</li> <li>The Village Act amendment has strengthened female roles and participation in decision making, which support the SDGs localisation process (Purwanti et al., 2018)</li> </ul>
Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The SDGs Promotion Headquarters are responsible for raising public awareness of SDGs (Sunam et al., 2018)</li> <li>SDGs Future Cities model of urban planning (Masuda et al., 2021).</li> </ul>
Nepal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The constitutional amendment in 2015 led to the creation of provincial and local government, and SDGs were incorporated into the sub-national planning and budgeting process (Sunam et al., 2018)</li> <li>The National aspiration of “Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali” in the 15<sup>th</sup> Periodic Plan has mainstreamed SDGs. The global agenda has been integrated into the Sub-National Government’s periodic plans with effective monitoring and evaluation guidelines. Nepal also has localised SDGs by having 479 targets against 169 targets set by the UN (Joshi et al., 2021)</li> </ul>
Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The sectoral, regional and local development plans are aligned with the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) to reflect the SDGs localisation commitment (Gamboa et al., 2019; Reyes et al., 2019).</li> </ul>

Every country should elevate efforts to raise SDGs awareness at all governmental levels. This can be materialised using traditional and social media (Sunam et al., 2018), various SDGs campaigns, and communication measures (Klopp & Petretta, 2017; Masuda et al., 2021). SDGs reach-out and public engagement programmes should encompass all population groups to ensure that the community understands and initiates the global agenda and owns the local agenda (Masuda et al., 2021; Mwebesa et al., 2021; Sunam et al., 2018). Hence, community leaders’ empowerment is vital. They are responsible for mainstreaming SDGs at the local level by setting local goals, and they determine the breadth of community participation (Ilham et al., 2020; Nurbaiti & Bambang, 2018).

Reaching out to the community will help policymakers to identify sustainable solutions for the challenges that the localities face (Mwebesa et al., 2021).

SDGs should be prioritised in the subnational and local government's legal frameworks, policies, and plans by aligning them with the national SDGs framework (Ginsberg, 2002; Masuda et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2019; Sunam et al., 2018). In localising SDGs, the local government could retain (or modify) the existing global SDGs indicators/targets to account for local features (Klopp & Petretta, 2017; Simon et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019). At the same time, the local government should demonstrate holistic SDGs data collection and monitoring using the current technology advancement (Klopp & Petretta, 2017). It is vital in the monitoring and evaluation of local SDGs indicators and targets.

The local government needs to establish a multi-stakeholder partnership to localise SDGs by involving as many internal and external stakeholders as possible (Ginsberg, 2002; Masuda et al., 2021; Sianes & Vela-Jiménez, 2020; Sunam et al., 2018). All these multi-stakeholders should be involved in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of the SDG-related development plan and budgeting process (Gamboa et al., 2019; Masuda et al., 2021; Sunam et al., 2018).

A few studies were conducted involving the youth community in the context of SDGs, such as the Vietnamese youth perception of SDGs (Polese et al., 2018), youth in smart community initiatives (McNaughton et al., 2020), and the youth community understanding of SDGs (Ariffin & Ng, 2020; Polese et al., 2018). Polese et al. (2018) suggested that young people need to be included in government structures, institutions, and policy measures at the national, sub-national, and local levels. This indicates that youth demographic together and multi-stakeholders are needed for SDGs localisation.

There has been limited research on youth participation in SDGs despite their meaningful and substantial contribution to SDG localisation. Hence, a study exploring the role of the youth community in SDG localisation is relevant and timely, particularly in Malaysia. Such knowledge can fill in the absence of research on this particular demographic.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This exploratory study chose six youth representatives as participants whose ages ranged from 20 to 40. Even though the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act (Amendment) 2019 has stipulated that the new youth age range in Malaysia is from 15 to 30 (Yunus & Landau, 2019), its implementation has been put on hold, and the previous youth classification is still effective in the interim. The participants were selected through a purposive sampling technique. They represented youth movements from the following four Malaysian peninsula regions: southern, central, northern, and eastern. In addition, the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak were included. As part of the groups and SDGs stakeholders, the youth representatives' knowledge and experience were assessed, particularly regarding their roles and participation in SDGs localisation. This study utilised a case study approach in collecting data using in-depth and semi-structured interviews. The interview questions focused on elucidating youth roles, their contributions, and learning about their perspective on the challenges of SDGs localisation in Malaysia. The list of questions used in this study can be viewed in Appendix A and can be extended in exploring the roles of other SDG stakeholders in the context of SDGs localisation. The data gathered from the interview were then recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Issues Faced by the Youth Community in the SDGs Localisation Process**

Based on the research participants' responses, it was concluded that two issues could hamper SDGs localisation. The first involves "institutional issues," and the second issue involves "lack of youth commitment." The institutional issues are challenges encountered by the youth community when dealing with their respective local government. Participants highlight the following problems: territorial and jurisdiction issues, lack of cooperation from the local government, lack of SDGs planning, and a lack of "youth space."

While performing an SDG-related environmental programme, one youth participant faced territorial and jurisdiction issues regarding the programme's area. Specifically, Participant A's intention to collaborate on an environmental protection activity was rejected by a local government because the proposed area was within the borders of two adjacent states and none of the local administrations in the vicinity claimed to have jurisdiction over the beaches. As a result, clean-up actions in the areas have become difficult to execute due to a lack of support from the local authorities. However, the activities were done anyway because inaction would result in waste concentration encircling the isolated beach regions. As expressed by the participants, they ignored the local government's rejection of their clean-up proposal due to their perceived moral obligation to clean up the region and safeguard the environment. The youths were concerned that inaction from the authorities would lead to an ecocidal build-up of rubbish. They sought to keep the beaches clean and maintain the area's status as a popular tourist destination despite the bureaucracy.

The degree to which local governments cooperate with the youth-led SDGs agenda varies. Some municipal governments are encouraging the youth community to start programmes in their localities. However, local governments also prefer to work in a silo, hindering collaboration with various community groups. The lack of cooperation leads to an environmental deficit and creates a poor public perception. The varied acceptance from local governments towards youth initiatives in SDG-related programmes is well illustrated by Participants A and F:

[...] We used to approach (the local government) [...] We had a rather unwelcoming reply [...]. They (the local government and concession) were assigned (to collect garbage in the beach area), but when we wanted to help (we got rejection) [...]. We encounter trash in the area, affecting the beaches' cleanliness and ocean. The visitors keep coming to the beach area. People will perceive negatively that the place is not being maintained [...]. - Participant A.

[...] they (local government) always support and are more flexible with us. So, I think when it comes to the environment should be no problem. - Participant F.



In addition, according to the participants, there is limited (almost no) youth representation at the local government level. There was no specific position for the younger community to design SDG-related policies at the local level. This is due to varied ideas and views that other generations and politicians in local institutions have towards the youth. Consequently, the limited space and platform available for youth at the local level have led to a lack of formal youth participation in the SDGs localisation process.

Participant C mentioned that the only way SDGs-related programmes and environmental activities can function well is when there is good cooperation and full support from the local government. SDGs localisation needs to be led by the local government, and they should not work in a silo. Participant C further highlighted the commitment of a few local governments in Malaysia toward SDGs implementation. It featured their openness towards changes and their readiness to include various communities, especially the younger ones, in local planning and programmes:

[...] these local government was performing (in SDGs) because they worked on it and were honest. Thank you for the open-mindedness of the local government. Because not all local governments are open-minded (in accepting new changes) [...]. - Participant C.

The second issue involves a lack of knowledge and commitment towards SDG-related programmes. From the participant's responses, a poor understanding of SDGs and their underlying concepts leads to an inability to relate the SDGs to the current situation. This in turn affects youth participation and commitment to SDG-related programmes. The participant also finds that SDGs are not widely promoted at the local government level. Local government planning for SDGs implementation has remained unclear and has made little effort to raise community awareness about SDGs. Nevertheless, active participation in SDG-related programmes also depends on youth-led initiatives. As mentioned by the following participants:

[...] it is not that SDGs are not being responded to. The issue is that it is superficially known. There is a lack of planning at the local level [...] for example, what is the five years of planning and who should be empowered to achieve the (SDGs) target [...] not all youth understand SDGs [...] more initiative needed to make everyone familiar with the agenda [...]. - Participant B.

[...] the (youth) programme involving local authorities [...] not comprehensive. (It depends on how) close or not close youth community with local government. - Participant D.

### **The Importance of Youth Participation in the SDGs Localisation Process**

Involving youth in the SDGs localisation process offers a win-win situation for both the local government and youth community. This is because the youth community could assist the local government with SDG-related programmes and environmental conservation. The youth community is potentially creative, passionate, and capable of performing heavy tasks. Therefore, the collaboration between two parties could elevate their reputations in helping to materialise SDGs localisation via community-based projects.

At the same time, engaging with the SDGs localisation process via youth-initiated programmes may change the public perception of the role of local government. In regard to sanitation issues, the local government will be blamed if they fail to perform their duties since they are responsible for maintaining environmental hygiene and cleanliness. Therefore, by working together with the local government via numerous voluntary groups, the reputation of the local government in maintaining the environmental condition could be preserved, which will improve public approval ratings. This was mentioned by Participant A:

For me (youth participation in environmental protection activities) is important because this area (beach) is a tourist area, and it is beautiful and needs to be looked after [...] maybe the society will perceive that the local government is not performing their duty when we do the voluntary works. But we are here to help and assist them for the environmental cause. - Participant A.

Involving the youth community in SDG-related programmes could promote sustainable behaviour among the community. SDGs localisation is not a one-off activity. It envisions bringing permanent community changes that will be consistently practised. As noted by Participant F, their public area clean-ups have created community awareness and reduced trash. In addition, the strict local government by-laws that penalise those who litter public areas are one of the best ways to control public behaviour. It has been proven that the youth-initiated SDG-related activities assist the local government sustainability framework, improve the community perception and actions towards preserving the environment. It has also been used for social marketing and promotion by youth movements. It has elevated the youth movement's visibility towards community development. These youth have created a platform from which to influence and attract the local community to join their SDG-related programmes.

[...] instead of the local government collecting their trash [...] there will be a group of kids or youths who will also help do the cleaning up [...] we will go in a group wearing the same t-shirt. It is kind of [...] our own identity [...]. Surprisingly, the number of trash that we collected from the first year until the third has decreased [...] they (the community) started not to throw the trash [...] started to have the awareness [...] and reduced the amount of trash and [...] they do not want to be fined or being compound. - Participant F.

## **Strategies and Recommendations to Strengthen the SDGs Localisation Structure**

### ***SDGs Stakeholder's Partnership and Collaboration***

The participants have outlined strategies and recommendations to enhance the SDGs' localisation structure. Firstly, through an SDGs stakeholder's partnership and collaboration in executing the SDG-related programmes. The local government should open their door and accept the youth movements' contributions towards improving environmental conditions at their localities. With the limitations that local governments might be having, youth capability for initiating various community activities can complement community development principles and function as a strategic partnership. Youth community commitment is

priceless and should be valued by local institutions. The role of government is pivotal in endorsing youth movement programmes.

[...] if the municipalities are willing to accept our assistance [...], we can help (preserve the environment) and (attract) more visitors [...]. - Participant A.

Participants have noted the importance of SDGs stakeholder collaboration, which is the essence of success in SDG-related programmes. The youth community has worked with other government agencies and the business sector, apart from the local government. The partnership with various government agencies indicates that the collaboration involves both the vertical and horizontal governance structure by involving state and local institutions.

[...] we are working together with [...] different stakeholders. For example, in this state, we have worked together with local governments [...] Green Council [...] (and) government agency. - Participant C.

(we) collaborate with the local government, and the concession company appointed to collect trashes [...] and recycling centre. - Participant F.

None of the participants, however, mentioned collaborative efforts involving residents' associations, universities, and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in their SDG-related programmes. This indicates that the youth movements have limited networking. Nevertheless, some participants agreed that the residents' association should be involved in the SDGs localisation process, as mentioned by Participant E:

[...] very important (to include community) [...]. I think they can localise the SDGs, but they need maybe a more supportive group of people (from youth). - Participant E.

### **Youth Representation at the SDGs Localisation Framework**

The youth demographic needs to be represented in the SDGs localisation framework. It can be in a formal or informal structure. As mentioned in the first part of the findings, Participants D and E highlighted the lack of youth representation at the local government level. The participants further explained the need for a specific position in the local government, namely, a local councillor appointed from the youth community so that the younger generation's voice would be heard. Conversely, participant E suggests creating a local-level SDGs committee by involving the youth and other stakeholders in the decision-making process. The inclusion of the youth in various SDGs localisation formal structures will ensure the effectiveness of its implementation as the youth could advocate for SDGs at various levels. The community will be empowered, and the youth will partake in the SDGs planning. This action will formalise and institutionalise the youth contribution to the SDGs localisation process.

Apart from that, it is viable that the youth role can be informally recognised by the local government. In SDG-related programme implementation, the youth act as initiators, implementors, and mediators between the community and the local government. Hence, the acknowledgement of youth representation in the SDGs localisation process can also be informally recognised and supported by the local government. Participant F experienced this, as the participant has developed a positive relationship with the local government in performing the duty as the mediator.

[...] I become the middle person for the community and the local government. For example, in the market area, they (the local government) did not provide a garbage bin [...] when the seller community informed me about it, I went to the local government and negotiated with them [...]. When they sent the garbage bin, I informed the seller at the market to take good care of it [...]. (Our relationship) I can say positive because it has never been done before by anyone in my area. So, they (the local government) are always like, paying attention to us especially when we do (voluntary works). - Participant F.

## **Leadership**

The participants underscored the importance of enhancing three levels of SDG-minded leadership with SDGs cultivated sensibility and practice: These levels involve leadership at the community, state and local government levels. A state government leadership commitment regarding SDGs is needed as a development policy at the state government that aligns with national SDGs planning will serve to expedite SDGs localisation. Local governments at the state government will follow the state development agenda to ensure that the SDGs localisation process runs smoother at the local level; however, a sub-national government commitment toward SDGs is a necessary prerequisite. The Mayor holds a significant position in mobilising officers and councillors at the local level toward the SDGs agenda. A Mayor should have the vision and mission of localising the SDGs within their territories. A horizontal collaboration with other local governments is required to learn from the best SDGs practices of other local governments. The local community should also be empowered. Community leaders should initiate their SDG-related programmes in a manner relevant to their local issues. Community understanding of SDGs could be improved by all these means, and they will act on it. The participant's responses were as follows:

[...] to spearhead the (SDGs) agendas at the local government level and more significant institution level, the state government could take up the roles [...] - Participant B.

[...] Municipality A is good at SDGs is because of the Mayor. The Mayor started the green initiative [...] no vehicle day [...] localise the SDGs [...]. It requires mindset changes at the local government - Participant C.

[...] the government can create a more (SDG-conscious) community by empowering the community leader (at the village) or the village committee [...] to take up the challenge and be part of the SDGs movement [...] – Participant E

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, this study postulated three essential components in localising the SDGs. The importance of partnership, inclusivity, and leadership in the SDGs localisation process is consistent with the earlier studies. It suggests that the aforementioned components are necessary preconditions for local-level SDGs' success, and they, therefore should appear in the SDGs governance mechanism. Nonetheless, the present findings offer an avenue for further empirical evidence. This study has certain methodological limitations. The selection of the participants for this study is not exhaustive to reflect community participation in the SDGs localisation process as the community's younger generation only represents it. Thus, the findings are not generalisable. However, it may provide some insight into the importance of including the youth community in the local level SDGs framework. Future research in the scope of SDGs localisation should be expanded by including other community groups such as the resident association, business community, civil society and academic community to depict their holistic contribution to the localisation process.

## **CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS**

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. All authors contributed equally to the write-up of the article.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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## **APPENDIX A**

List of the interview protocol.

- a) How were you engaged in SDGs localisation programmes/activities at the local government level?
- b) How does the local government respond to your participation in the SDGs localisation programmes/activities?
- c) What are the challenges in participating in the SDGs localisation?
- d) How can we improve the SDG localisation process in Malaysia?

