



UNIVERSITI  
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Cawangan Perak

VINSPIREd  
Virtual Ispoh International Summit on  
Professionalism, Research and Education 2022

leGRESAFE  
2022

E-PROCEEDING OF

1<sup>st</sup> INTERNATIONAL  
E-CONFERENCE ON  
GREEN & SAFE CITIES  
2022

“Sustaining the  
Resilient, Beautiful and Safe Cities  
for a Better Quality of Life”

20 & 21 SEPTEMBER 2022

Organisers:



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1<sup>st</sup> INTERNATIONAL E-CONFERENCE ON  
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“ Sustaining the Resilient, Beautiful and Safe  
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**ORGANISED BY**

Gresafe\_Cities RIG  
The University of Queensland, Australia  
Kampus Hijau UiTM Perak

**CO-ORGANISED BY**

Research, Industrial Linkages, Community  
& Alumni Network (PJIM&A)

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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

Cataloguing in Publication Data

No e ISBN: 978-967-2776-13-0

Cover Design: Muhammad Falihin Jasmi

Typesetting : Ts Dr Azizah Md Ajis

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## **TRUST AS AN ELEMENT FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS) LOCALISATION PROCESS IN MALAYSIA**

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### ***Abstract***

In Malaysia, the process of localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is still in its early stage, as just a handful of localities are committed to implementing the global agenda. In order to materialise the SDGs localisations concentrating on the community, the local government's top management must take aggressive measures and adopt a top-down and bottom-up strategy to encourage more community participation in the SDG-related activities. This article examines the implementation of the SDGs in three local governments, emphasising "community participation" and "trust" as the enabling factors. This qualitative study utilises in-depth interviews with five local government officials tasked with implementing the SDGs at their respective localities. The data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. The study outcomes indicate that "trust" is the primary factor supporting community participation in SDG-related programmes. To ensure active community participation in SDG-related programmes, the "community trust" factor could be developed by focusing on: a) internal and external stakeholder partnerships, b) community engagement, c) reward and recognition, and d) designing interactive programmes. The tactics mentioned above were advised to be bolstered by multi-stakeholder engagement and community inclusion principles. Active community participation in local government activities has been shown to sustain SDG-related programmes and empower the community effectively. Owing to the limited number of selected local governments, the findings of this study cannot be generalised. This research solely selects local governments from Malaysia's north and south region. Therefore, future research should expand the number of local governments evaluated based on Malaysia's region and incorporate a quantitative approach with a public survey. To enhance community participation in the SDG's localisation process, other components such as local leadership, multi-stakeholders roles, and the use of technology might be further explored.

**Keywords:** *Community Participation, Malaysia, SDGs Localisation, Sustainable Development Policy, Trust.*

## INTRODUCTION

The term “localisation” within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation was highlighted in a few of the United Nations (UN) and international organisations’ official documents and reports on the global agenda. The most straightforward and comprehensible definition of SDGs localisation was in the World Cities Report 2020 by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) as the followings:

Localisation can be defined as “the process of defining, implementing and monitoring strategies at the local level for achieving global, national, and subnational sustainable development goals and targets.”

The above reference highlighted that SDGs localisation is a process of executing the 17 SDGs as a global agenda at the local level (i.e. local government/ local authorities/ cities/ municipalities), which could support the progression of the SDGs in the respective countries. The United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) reports also define the SDGs’ localisation by focusing on the SDGs governance framework that will positively affect the community (UCLG, 2019). From the previous literature, there is a limited definition of SDGs localisation being presented. A work by a few authors, such as Masuda et al. (2021) and Mwebesa et al. (2021), has at least given the context of SDGs localisation by referring to it as an interaction between government and community in realising the sustainability agenda.

As found in the available SDGs reports and academic literature, few requirements and strategies were proposed to materialise the SDG’s localisation. Above all, raising SDGs awareness at all governmental levels (national, sub-national, and local) is crucial, mainly to generate participation from all parties. Other strategies are the followings: multilevel and multi-stakeholder coordination and partnership (Jönsson & Bexell, 2020; Sunam et al., 2018; UCLG, 2019), financial support (Joshi et al., 2021; UCLG, 2019), capacity building (UCLG, 2019), integrated SDGs approaches (i.e. SDG-related plans, policies and programmes) (Dai & Menhas, 2020; Jönsson & Bexell, 2020; Joshi et al., 2021; Sunam et al., 2018) and local SDGs data management (Yani Wang et al., 2019). A few obstacles were also identified that could hamper SDGs localisation: lack of accountability, lack of integration, lack of SDGs awareness, lack of local democracy and lack of resources (Jönsson & Bexell, 2020).

Initially, the idea for SDGs’ localisation of the SDGs was given a boost at the Seville Commitment 2019 (Mwebesa et al., 2021). The urge to localise the 17 SDGs has become a central discussion at global SDG-related conferences and summits, and there has been a call to empower the SDGs at the city level. Malaysia is not excluded as the Ministry of Housing, and Local Government (MoHLG) has encouraged their local government to start mapping the local initiatives with the SDGs. In 2021, the ministry announced the list of Malaysian SDGs Cities and established the Malaysian SDGs Centre. In 2022, a few of these SDGs Cities presented their maiden SDGs Voluntary Local Review (VLR) at the UN’s High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), indicating there are success stories that can be shared to portray the Malaysian cities progress in the SDGs localisation.

However, discussion on SDGs localisation is relatively new in Malaysia, and the literature on examining the role and effectiveness of domestic actors, particularly in the localisation of SDGs, remains limited (Khoo & Tan, 2019). Only a few studies on specific areas of “SDGs localisation” have been conducted. Studies on SDGs localisation in Malaysia have been presented earlier by Khoo and Tan (2019), focusing on civil society’s roles.

However, only studies by Rahman and Yusof (2020) and Yusof et al. (2022) have presented the SDGs localisation at the community and local government levels with discussion on the element of “trust”. Hence more studies are required to examine and explore the various context of the SDG’s localisation process in the country.

Considering the importance of SDGs localisation from an academic discourse point of view, this study attempt to answer one major question, “*how is trust and community participation associated with the SDGs localisation in Malaysia?*”. Therefore, this study explored the connection between “trust” and “community participation” in the SDGs localisation process in three local governments in Malaysia and provided insightful findings as its novel value.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### SDGs Localisation

The global agenda for sustainability have now co-exist with the “localisation” term (Meuleman & Niestroy, 2015) to reflect its importance in localising sustainable development initiatives. Not only could localising the SDGs further advance the UN’s global agenda at the lowest level of the governmental system, but few authors have highlighted the significance of the localisation process. It will nurture more partnerships, accelerate sustainability progression, and potentially impact the community (Ginsberg, 2002; Sianes & Vela-Jiménez, 2020; Sunam et al., 2018).

Worldwide, there has been a positive progression in the local and regional governments’ involvement in producing reports that mention the SDGs localisation activities (i.e. the Voluntary National Review and Voluntary Local Review) – A report on the country’s SDGs progression, which needs to be presented to the HLPF (UCLG, 2019). However, localising the SDGs is challenging. According to Dai and Menhas (2020), a central facilitator is necessary to establish the conditions needed for SDGs to be localised. These include developing, implementing, and monitoring integrated approaches to SDGs. To start with, the local government could fully utilise their existing resources, according to Masuda et al. (2021) While for Mwebesa et al. (2021), learning from other cities’ best practices could improve the SDG’s localisation understanding. Above all, SDGs localisation needs political commitment. As mentioned in Jönsson and Bexell (2020), political institutions at all levels need to adopt the SDGs and align it with their mandates.

### The Concept of Community Participation at the Local Level

The term public and community participation have been interchangeably used, and many scholars have academically discussed the concept. A leading concept of community participation was introduced by Arnstein (1969), and the idea has evolved until today. Within the context of local government’s administration, community participation is essential to guarantee the success of programmes and initiatives designed for community well-being. Active public participation at the local government level is vital in solving any issues that affect the local community within their vicinity (Mohammadi et al., 2018). Community participation is also vital in developing local economic initiatives (Lasso & Dahles, 2021) and environmental conservation (Hartiwiningsihh & Handayani, 2017; Sang, 2021).

However, there are two views when discussing the extent of public participation at the local level. One is from the people/community’s view that public participation should be extensive, and another one is from the members of the local government’s view that public participation should be limited (Mohammadi et al., 2018). In contrast, Lasso and Dahles (2021) elucidated community participation as a multi-faceted phenomenon – the local community participating in various activities, either in a noticeable or unnoticeable manner.

## **The Concept of Community Participation in Sustainable Development (or SDGs) Localisation and its Relations with the Concept of “Trust”**

Based on the “Structural preconditions for sustainable development – a multilevel view,” managing sustainability is a recursive process, from global, government, and organisation, to individual level (Schwaninger, 2015). For instance, through local government, sustainability concepts and practices could emerge (Ginsberg, 2002). Hence, public participation is essential to advance the sustainability agenda at this local level (Ginsberg, 2002; Midin et al., 2016). Sustainable attainment at the local level is a prerequisite because the sustainability progression influences sub-national and national achievement. Further, the community’s well-being will improve with the local conditions. This is because, by localising the SDGs, the local government can tailor-made their strategies to the local context (Mwebesa et al., 2021). Moreover, only through participation will the community’s demands and concerns are heard and considered by the authoritative bodies. Nevertheless, involving the community in sustainability initiatives has also been considered a complex and dynamic process (Li & Hunter, 2015). Assessing, monitoring and evaluating the community participation level is also not easy.

Within the discussion of public participation in SDGs implementation at the local level, past literature has highlighted the importance of “trust” in implementing the global agenda. Globally, studies related to public participation in local government and “trust” have been conducted by a few authors (Herian, 2014; Mohammadi et al., 2018). The issue of distrust between the local government and communities is also still prevalent (Cheema, 2020; Meyer et al., 2012; Yuanni Wang et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that a lack of trust among the local community and the other stakeholders will affect strategic partnership and collaboration, affecting the level of community participation (Lasso & Dahles, 2021; Sang, 2021). Hence, it remains an area that is promising to be researched because the “community trust” will determine the level of local democracy (Michels & de Graaf, 2010) and influence community support for the local government services/programmes (Herian, 2014; Meyer et al., 2012). Various types of trust in local government have also been empirically studied and identified, such as political trust (Herian, 2014).

There are a few reasons the public expresses their trust (or distrust) in the local governments and their services. One is because of the local government structure, systems and procedures. In Fitzgerald and Wolak (2014), a decentralised local government system allows people to have more voice, thus creating more trust in the local government. As the lowest authoritative body in any governmental system, the local governments play significant roles in representing the national and subnational policies related to sustainability that must be localised. Hence, establishing local governance structures and systems that support social inclusion by promoting “community-local government partnership” in the dialogue, consultation, and policy-making process is imperative for sustainable development progression and could create more trust (Cheema, 2020; Ginsberg, 2002; Hull & Evensen, 2020; Michels & de Graaf, 2010; Sobol, 2008; Yuanni Wang et al., 2020). Doing so can translate the local community aspirations related to sustainable development through participatory decision-making. It serves as a win-win situation for the government as it will provide more information, perspectives, and potential solutions for better policy decisions (Lasso & Dahles, 2021; Michels & de Graaf, 2010).

However, meaningful public participation in the decision-making process is hardly ever being practised by most local governments (Ginsberg, 2002; Sobol, 2008). A total social inclusion is rare. In certain conditions, the local governments believe they should limit public participation and hinder active community engagement with local government decision-making processes (Mohammadi et al., 2018). The exclusion of certain groups in the community

will hinder the community's voice from being heard. It will lower their public trust in government and eliminate the quality of local democracy (Michels & de Graaf, 2010).

Secondly is through accountable and transparent local government. According to Cheema (2020) and Midin et al. (2016), accountable local government practising transparent public service will determine public trust, improve local government service quality, and advance the sustainability agenda. It has been said that around the world, the local government institution has used various mechanisms, tools, and instruments to establish community "trust" based on accountability and transparency principles in supporting good governance practices. Its ultimate aim was to eradicate corruption. In many instances, the accountability and transparency principles could be upheld by having a transparent public procurement procedure, participatory budgeting, proper auditing, and the availability of rules to control the local government's leaders and public officers from any unethical conduct (Cheema, 2020). In materialising the SDGs, this kind of transparency in its programmes and project expenditure is also required.

The previously explained element of decision-making and transparency was proven to have an association. A qualitative study by Mohammadi et al. (2018) shows that the local community (particularly the community representatives) has an issue of trust with the local government members and the local councillors, especially within the decision-making process. There has been a lack of transparency and less power-sharing in decision-making. The local community was being excluded, and decisions were not shared. However, the study confirmed that the local community is willing to be involved in the local government policymaking process. This indicates that despite the social exclusion, the community is willing to participate in the local governance if opportunities exist. The context of social inclusion also has been highlighted by Sianes and Vela-Jiménez (2020) as the process need to be at the local and grassroots level.

Third, the community's trust will be based on the local government's service quality. According to Herian (2014), public trust is different when dealing with local government policies. The community action on trust would depend on the types and quality of activities and services the local government offers. A study by Meyer et al. (2012) has encountered that when the community has problems accessing the local government services, there is a low level of trust. This indicates that service quality offered by the local government determines the level of community trust, and it must be improved to re-create the community's trust.

Hence, within the sustainable development policymaking framework, institutional changes by improving the local governance to promote local participation are an area that needs to be observed and debated (Ginsberg, 2002; Li & Hunter, 2015; Sang, 2021; Sobol, 2008; Sunam et al., 2018). Few other measures of improvement also have been proposed within the context of sustainable development (and SDGs) initiatives, which, to a certain extent, could establish community trust: multi-stakeholders engagement and partnership (Midin et al., 2016; Mohammadi et al., 2018; Sianes & Vela-Jiménez, 2020; Yuanni Wang et al., 2020), attractive and sustained programmes (Lasso & Dahles, 2021; Sang, 2021), rewarding programmes (Sang, 2021), promotional strategies (Sunam et al., 2018; Yuanni Wang et al., 2020), participatory strategies (Gutberlet, 2021; Lasso & Dahles, 2021; Nurbaiti & Bambang, 2018; Sang, 2021; Sobol, 2008). The strategies mentioned are not only to nurture more active community participation but also to empower the community (Lasso & Dahles, 2021; Li & Hunter, 2015). This indicates that community inclusivity is vital in ensuring meaningful community engagement, especially in sustainability initiatives.

International organisations also have highlighted the importance of creating "trust" in local governments through various mechanisms. The United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) (2019), in its report, stated that local governments need to adopt an open government, meet citizens' demands, establish transparent institutions, and develop innovative participatory

mechanisms to create trust and support the SDG16 (inclusiveness) progression. In addition, the local government's improvement could strengthen the local democracy to materialise the SDGs implementation.

The UCLG (2019) also reported that local governments worldwide had explored new ways to activate public participation by adopting "Open Government" and "participatory budgeting" to create public trust. The local community and local government work together to co-create and co-produce sustainable solutions to issues affecting the community (UCLG, 2019). For example, in Purwanti et al. (2018), women were given opportunities and positions at the local level to participate in the policymaking process and contribute to Indonesia's SDGs' localisation process. A shift toward more community-based initiatives and grassroots innovations is also desirable, particularly within the context of SDGs progression (Gutberlet, 2021). The following Table illustrates various participatory mechanisms in promoting community participation for SDGs localisation:

**Table 1**  
*Community Participation Mechanism in SDGs Localisation Process*

<b>Participatory Mechanisms to Localise the SDGs</b>	<b>Countries/Cities/Local Government</b>	<b>Source</b>
The local government developed Voluntary Subnational Reviews on the current state of SDG localisation	Costa Rica, Ecuador, Kenya, Benin, Mozambique, Nepal	(UCLG, 2020)
Participatory budgeting (i.e., gender-responsive participatory budgeting	The city of Tshwane, Local governments in the State of Penang	UCLG (2019)
Open Government (i.e., innovative solutions, technology adoption, sustainable public procurement process, and open access to data )	The city of Tshwane, The city of Aragon, The city of Berlin, The city of Buenos Aires, The city of Montevideo, The city of Ghent, The city of Sabadell, The city of Granollers, The Petaling Jaya City Council	UCLG (2019)
Uphold the issues related to human rights relevant to the communities (i.e., promoting non-discrimination, gender equality and protecting the marginalised community such as the homeless and people with disabilities)	Metropolitan government of Gwangju, City of Bogotá	UCLG (2019)
Establishing SDGs Promotion Headquarters to localise the SDGs	Japan	Sunam et al. (2018)
Incorporate SDGs in the sub-national planning	Nepal, Indonesia	Sunam et al. (2018)

## **METHODOLOGY**

This case study employed a qualitative approach. Three local governments representing three categories of localities were purposively selected to explore their SDGs localisation process. These local governments represent the City Council, Municipal Council and District Council types of local government. Two local governments are situated in the northern part of

Malaysia, and one represents the southern part of the country. Five local government officials tasked with implementing SDGs in their respective communities are willing to participate in this study. This research employed in-depth interviews to explicate the informants' meaningful responses. It was conducted face-to-face under the guidance of an interview procedure. The aim of the in-depth interviews is for the researchers to acquire rich information and to learn about informants' experiences implementing SDGs in their vicinity (Please refer to the list of interview questions in Appendix A). Ethical issues were observed throughout the research process. During the interview session, the informant's responses were recorded and afterwards transcribed and verbatim analysed. Based on the researcher's interpretation, data were coded, categorised, and thematised using NVivo software. Figure 1 illustrates the research process involved in this study. The sections that follow detail the study's findings and results.

**Figure 1**  
*Research Process*



## RESULTS

This section will explain the strategies adopted by the local governments in executing SDGs at their localities by focusing on SDG16 on inclusivity and SDG17 on partnership. This study has discovered that *“developing community trust throughout the SDG’s localisation process requires multi-stakeholder engagement and community inclusivity through public participation activities”*.

The stakeholders engaged in the SDG’s localisation process include the external and internal actors. The external stakeholders considered by the local governments in this study are the international partners, government departments and agencies, other local governments, academic institutions, private sector and businesses, NGOs, community leaders and politicians. At the same time, their internal stakeholders consist of the local councillor, local government staff, and all the departments in the local government institutions. The local government officers have highlighted the importance of engaging with all these relevant stakeholders in their SDGs execution. As mentioned by Informant A1: *We cannot afford to do it (SDGs localisation) alone. Our local government collaborates with other stakeholders through partnership and Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) initiatives [...]*.

Informant A1 further adds that SDGs localisation must focus on community engagement at the grassroots. This indicates that the local governments’ SDG-related programmes and service delivery must be community-centric. The rest of the informants share the same notion on the local community as one of the essential SDGs actors who act as the programme partner in SDGs implementation. Their inputs and suggestions are deemed critical to improvising the SDG-related programmes. This study has identified that most of the local government programmes associated with the SDGs focused on the area related to the environment, education, and skills development. These local governments also initiate a programme partnership at various levels in the SDG’s localisation process and do not work in a silo. It further proves that these local governments practise vertical and horizontal stakeholder engagement and policy integration in executing the SDGs localisation process at their respective localities.

In strengthening multi-stakeholder engagement and community inclusivity in the process of SDGs localisation, the following strategies and concerns are required, particularly in developing the community trust to actively participate in the SDG-related programmes organised by the local governments:

### **Strategy 1: Active Roles of Local Government Officers (Internal Stakeholders) and Visible SDG Governance Mechanism**

The local government officers' active presence in the SDGs' localisation process fosters the community's trust and desire to participate in SDG-related programmes through their engagement with the SDGs' multiple stakeholders. This study has revealed that local government officials must be dedicated entirely to implementing the SDGs as a global agenda. Local government officers' prominent roles as policymakers, implementors, and advocates could facilitate the development of community trust. As pointed out by Informant A3, the local government officers responsible for SDGs must be proactive and continually develop community participation within their programmes:

*[...] the officers cannot be laid-back [...] if you are too relaxed, there will be no continuous collaboration with the community [...] (hence) we are pushed to create an engagement and collaboration with the community [...] (because) the community is our grassroots [...] they are everything to us [...] we need to educate them. - Informant A3*

The local government officers are obligated to educate the community, create awareness and nurture their interest in SDGs. This is due to the importance of focusing on community needs in localising the SDGs and guaranteeing that the programmes are community orientated. Even though SDGs are still new for certain local governments in Malaysia, it is recognised that all the Local Agenda 21 (LA21) activities and programmes focusing on the community is implicit and explicitly associated with the SDGs' localisation progression. This is something that the majority of local governments in Malaysia overlook. LA21 and SDG activities should be re-aligned as they are aimed at local government sustainability.

However, the local government's institution must first be strengthened, and the staff at the local government must be equipped with SDGs knowledge and exposed to sustainability principles. It should be understood that the SDG's localisation process did not belong to a specific department. The SDG-related programmes were executed across the departments and units in the local government using collaborative strategies. The SDG agenda still requires a designated department to serve as its commander-in-chief in the local government. This study uncovered the local governments' imposition of unstandardised SDG governance processes and their reliance on internal partnerships to execute the SDGs. In particular local government, the SDGs were spearheaded either by the Town Planning Department, Community Department or Corporate Department. This variation of the SDGs governance mechanism at local government depicted the autonomy given to the local government to decide on how SDGs should be ascendent at the local level. For instance, Informant B2 has shared their SDGs governance system:

*[...] the corporate unit is a mediator for the community programme [...] we work with the planning department, tourism unit and other departments [...] we have to do it (SDGs localisation) together [...] (so) we became stronger in programme implementation [...] - Informant B2*

In dealing with their local community, the local government officers have to own specific SDGs knowledge and various interpersonal skills such as communication, negotiation and empathy skills to deal with myriad issues raised by the local community. This is based on the informant's responses on how they need to deal with different conflicts and crises within the community. Informants A3 and B2, for instance, stress the importance of establishing a good rapport and camaraderie with the local community to ease their communication and develop future cooperation. This is the first step to nurturing community trust – establishing a good interpersonal relationship. Only then will the community trust the local government (and their officers). Thus, the officer responsible for the SDGs must know how to be diplomatic when dealing with the complex character of the community. It ensures that future collaboration with the community would be better. The following responses indicate the importance of communication and negotiation skills needed by the local government officers:

*We have to be close with the community [...] establish good rapport [...] then it will be easier to communicate and work with them [...] we must know how to tackle their hearts [...] I am using discussion and diplomacy to gain community support and participation [...] (so) we have to be very patient [...] - Informant A3*

Exposing the local communities to sustainability principles is not an easy task. All informants agreed that it is challenging to explain the topics of sustainability (or SDGs) to the community, as they would not pay much attention to the area as a topic of discussion. Even though the concept of sustainability might be promoted through programmes like talks and forums, it did not receive the community's attention. They are more concerned about the output and outcome of the SDG-related programme in the form of public service delivery executed by the local government (i.e., localities cleanliness and better waste management) rather than for the local officers verbally explaining the sustainability concept.

Hence, various mechanisms have been used by the local government officers to inculcate the sustainability principles and nurture community interest with the hope that they will accept the idea of sustainability and trigger their interest in participating in the local government's SDG-related programmes. For example, the element of SDGs and sustainability was introduced and explained through the various environmental campaigns, promotional materials (i.e. posters, banners, pamphlets), social media platforms, and the local government leaders' speeches. Hence, the local government can create awareness among the local community about SDG-related issues, i.e., environmental-related SDGs, which has been the primary focus for all the local governments in this study.

These informants highlighted sustainable waste management, low carbon city, and sustainable community garden programmes as their major initiative to educate and create community awareness of SDGs. Nevertheless, certain local governments face difficulties integrating the SDGs principles into their programmes. This is due to a lack of expertise, lack of exposure to SDGs and lack of programme funding. This limitation hampered the success of the local government's SDGs programmes. Community less support the activities and the programmes will not be sustained. The following responses illustrate this:

*[...] it is a challenge for us to educate the community and blend our programmes with sustainability principles, i.e., on low carbon city concept [...] what we did was to nurture their awareness through consistent promotion of SDGs and environmental sustainability (through social media and promotional materials) - Informant E1*

## **Strategy 2: Active Roles of a Local Leader, Councillor and Local Champion (External Stakeholders)**

The informants in this study highlighted the significant roles of a local leader, councillor and local champion as crucial in helping the local government to execute the SDGs. This study discovered that the community leader and community representative could be the mediator to nurture community trust and confidence in the local government's services and SDGs programmes.

The councillors' roles were first highlighted as they were formally appointed as localities representatives and were remunerated to organise community programmes in their area. As mentioned by Informant A2, the role of the councillor in their local government is the mediator between local government and the local community. Hence, they are required to influence their community in their area and initiate community-based programmes relevant to the SDGs. As for Informant B2, the local councillor position is the "area officer". Thus, they are the custodian of the community within their jurisdiction and are required to execute community-based programmes. The responses show that these councillors act as formal community representatives and have the capacity to attract more public participation.

However, the councillor's responses toward sustainability commitment vary according to local government. Most of the informants in this study mentioned that their councillors are less proactive in designing and executing the community programmes. The community programme execution was considered as the local government's obligation rather than a collaborative event. Councillors still rely on "top-down" programme implementation. Therefore, to include more councillors (and local government officers) in SDG-related programmes, some local governments had to educate them on sustainability principles and appoint them as the programme partner. The local councillors' exposure to sustainability also will ease the SDG-related information dissemination to the community. It aims to encourage more public participation in localising the SDGs and develop community trust. Even though, at first, the local governments had to design their own community programmes using a top-down approach, appointing the councillor as a programme partner and engaging with the community had shown a positive impact.

However, one local government prefers to engage the local champion or the most influential community member to serve as the mediator rather than their community leader. It is ideal considering the local leader's likelihood of being incompetent and losing community support. This suggests that local leaders battle for the community's support in a power struggle. Therefore, these local champions, who are more neutral (and influential), will likely stimulate greater community participation in the local government's SDG-related programmes.

In addition, political representatives (i.e., members of parliament and state legislative assemblymen) were also considered community leaders and representatives by local governments. They were engaged in local governments' SDG-related programmes to increase community participation. According to Informant A3 and B2, the political representatives for targeted constituencies will be briefed on the programme and will participate in its implementation as programme partners.

## **Strategy 3: Community Engagement**

The successful strategy to create community trust in SDG-related programmes is by promoting community engagement through inclusivity principles by having community-based programmes and allowing the community to lead their SDG-related programmes. Furthermore, the community should be included in the SDG governance mechanism and be engaged in decision-making processes.

The informants in this study have shared that the community should be empowered in the SDG's localisation process. The community were given opportunities to lead SDG-related programmes and proposed programmes relevant to the sustainability principles. It was discovered that the examples of SDG-related programmes that primarily focus on the community as the main anchor or initiator are the "sustainable waste management projects" and "community garden initiatives". These programmes have been sustained until now. The ownership is being transferred to the community and has generated a local economy. It is all because both local governments and the community trust each other.

Before the policy endorsement and programme execution, the various groups of communities (including the community leaders) will be engaged in the planning through various strategies, i.e., Focus Group Discussion (FGD), public survey, town hall session, public consultation, community dialogue session, roundtable discussion, sustainability committee meeting and draft publicity. This allows the community to share their opinions and guarantees that the proposed programme will fulfil the community's desires. This measure has increased the community's commitment to participating in SDG-related programmes and nurtured their trust. It portrays the significant contributions from the community to policy improvement and programme implementation.

In designing the local government's strategic planning and development plan that conforms with the sustainable development (and SDG) principles, the community representatives have been invited to give their ideas and suggestions. Initially, the programme and policy idea originated from the local government. However, to ensure it suits the community preferences, the local governments adopted the above-mentioned strategies for acquiring the community feedback and constructive comments on the local government's proposals. As a result, these local governments successfully identified the most practical, feasible and sustainable community projects that can attract more public participation. The community is more interested and eager to lead and implement the SDG-related programmes with minimum intervention from the local government. Informant A1 and E1 have explained their community engagement process:

*Under the green technology policy, we created a "Sustainable Community Programme" [...] every year, we will select one or two communities, villages or residential areas [...] we will organise activities with them, i.e., talks and clean-up activities [...] - Informant E1*

#### **Strategy 4: Reward and Recognition**

Offering rewards and recognition to attract more community participation in SDG-related programmes is considered essential. All the informants in this study highlighted the need to offer monetary and non-monetary benefits to attract the community to participate in the local government's SDG-related programmes. It acts as a promotional and motivational factor to encourage more crowds and sustain the programmes in the future. Furthermore, offering rewards and recognition has successfully established community trust and guarantees more public participation.

The monetary rewards and recognition are in the form of programme allowance for attending any workshops and training related to sustainability, i.e. recycling workshops. Specific programmes such as "trash for cash" were also introduced to promote sustainable waste management in the community. Cash prizes were also offered to the community who participated in community garden competitions to activate and encourage a more sustainable lifestyle. At the same time, the rewards through community programmes have created a spirit of community teamwork and being competitive for environmental benefit. During a pandemic, there are also SDG-related programmes organised by the local government, such as the TikTok

challenge on a topic related to sustainability. It has received positive responses from the community. Few informants mentioned that social media are a powerful tool to create community interest in sustainability initiatives:

*[...] we run TikTok challenge [...] residents need to display their gardening activities in the and use recycled materials as their garden decoration [...] unexpectedly, most senior citizens among women are good at using TikTok [...] making this community programme more fun. - Informant A1*

The non-monetary rewards and recognition, as mentioned by the informants is, in the form of sustainable community awards, opportunities to be highlighted in the mass media (i.e. newspaper and television) due to the community's activeness in sustainability initiatives, lucky draw, free meals for each programme, free seeds and plants to promote green community and individual appointment as local champions. These informants (i.e., Informants A3, B2 and E1) have mentioned that the community's usual queries for attending SDG-related programmes are the availability of foods and drinks. Hence, it has been a culture that complimentary meals should be provided to encourage public participation: *[...] we provide meals and manpower during the clean-up activities [...]. We also provide a token of appreciation and a lucky draw [...].*

### **Strategy 5: Creation of Interactive Programmes**

Informants in this study also highlighted that the community prefers interactive communication and social media usage to be updated with current information on local government services and activities. The use of social media then has been used by these local governments to promote, publicise and attract public participation in their SDG-related programmes. It is considered one of the essential communication tools, especially during a pandemic. However, the community feedback and responses on the programme's participation vary according to the categories of the local governments. The community is observant and keeps its eyes on local governments' performance through official social media. Informant A1 and E1, for instance, have mentioned the use of WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube to portray the local government activities. It is also one way to spread the positive message of sustainable development to the community.

On the contrary, the community also can use the social media channel to raise any issues that affect them. Nevertheless, the traditional way of promotion, such as through pamphlets, banners, and posters, is still being practised by a few local governments, even though less effective. This is to reach non-social media users. The following responses illustrate this:

*We do have a special media unit [...] we used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and have our own Youtube channel [...] we portray our programmes and spread to the public [...] - Informant A1.*

Furthermore, the community opt for fun and entertainment programmes that incorporate educational elements, exhibition, and cultural activities and involve all community groups. For example, the carnival programme has attracted more audiences and participation from all ages. Activities such as cultural shows, exhibitions from government agencies, booths to collect e-waste, talks on sustainability, sports activities, craft activities, colouring contests, and entertainment programmes are among the itinerary. Thus, few informants mentioned that this programme format would be continued, and sustainability (or SDGs) would be among the

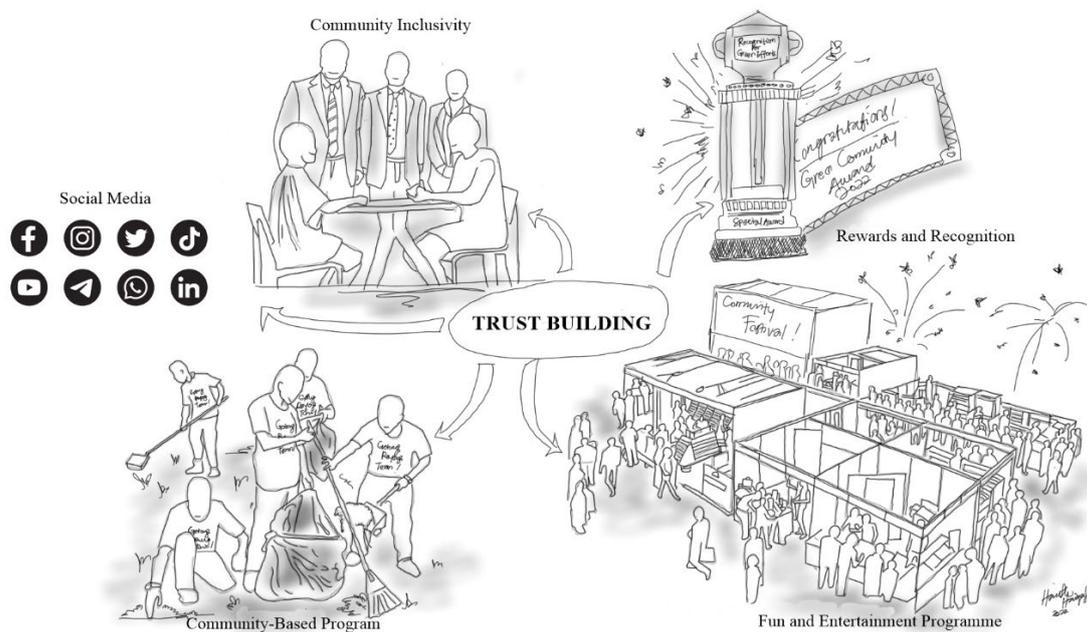
carnival themes since it has successfully attracted more crowds from the local community. Informants A1, A3, B2 and E1 confirmed this.

*[...] we created programmes that engaged all types of ages, from young to old community [...] clean-up activities are less engaging [...] but if we organise a festival, it gathered more public participation – Informant A3*

The main findings of this study are depicted in Illustration 1. With the following strategies, the trust could be built. When trust has been established, only then will the community participate in the SDGs localisation process, which was implemented through community initiatives and activities:

### Illustration 1

*The Strategies to Develop Trust Among the Community in SDGs Localisation Process*

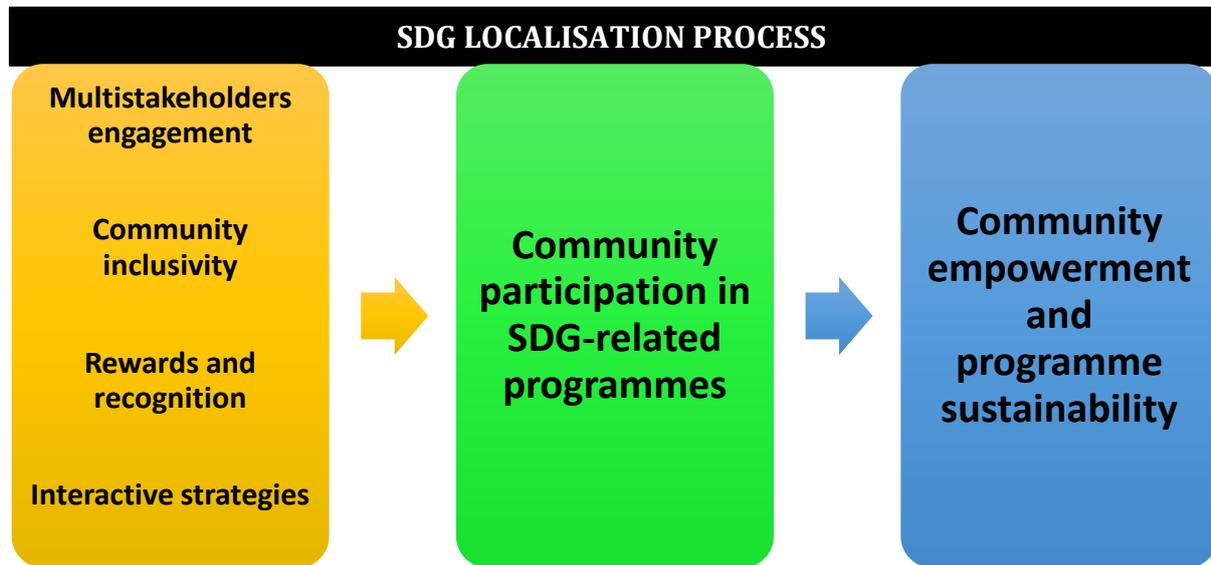


## DISCUSSION

This study has proposed the following frameworks to develop trust among the community in the SDG's localisation process (Refer to Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*The Framework of Trust and Community Participation in the SDGs Localisation Process*



SDG's localisation process requires the community at the grassroots to act on it. This study has confirmed the existence of community participation in SDG-related programmes in the selected local governments. Indirectly, it has supported the SDG's localisation process in Malaysia. The nature of the programmes at the initial SDGs localisation is more to top-down, and for certain activities, it has now been characterised as a bottom-up programme. It was found that the local governments are aware of the need to create SDG programmes and impose them on the community. Hence, based on Schwaninger's (2015) "Structural preconditions for sustainable development – a multilevel view," this study has proven that there is an SDGs initiative at the municipalities level and individual level through community participation practices.

This study has learned that the community should be given ownership and empowered to lead and initiate their SDG-related programmes. By doing so, these SDG-related programmes will sustain and create community commitment. However, trust is needed from both parties (local government and community) before the community is delegated to execute their SDG-related programmes.

Trust is important because it deals with the community's capability to act on the programmes and the willingness of the local government to transfer the roles of programme implementors to the community. However, it is not an easy task. This study encounter four dimensions in establishing the trust before the community are willing to participate in SDG-related programmes; *a) multi-stakeholder partnership, b) community engagement, c) rewards and recognition, and d) interactive strategies*. All these dimensions were suggested needed before the community trusted the local government. It will lead to their willingness to have meaningful and valuable participation in SDG-related programmes as part of the SDG's localisation process. In addition, these dimensions have been stated in the earlier literature, and this study's findings demonstrate their relevancy.

This study reaffirmed the significance of multi-stakeholder engagement in the SDG's localisation process. The internal and external actors implementing the SDGs should be inclusive and embrace the phrase "leaving no one behind". These actors can be the mediator and influencers to acquire community trust in participating in SDG-related programmes organised by the local governments. As echoed by Midin et al. (2016), participation and inclusivity of stakeholders are features of multi-stakeholder engagement procedures, increasing sustainability initiatives and enhancing governance. The level of SDGs knowledge is also a prerequisite in ensuring the success of SDGs localisation success. Earlier, this study highlighted the local government officers' need to own SDGs knowledge. However, Jönsson and Bexell (2020) highlight the need for everyone to acquire SDGs understanding. Thus, political commitment is also essential in localising the SDGs. SDGs also need to be actively promoted using traditional and new media (Sunam et al., 2018). This study indicates that local governments and the community are aware of social media. Thus, it could be a powerful tool for disseminating the SDG's principles and notions.

Based on Figure 2, the community participation in the SDGs localisation process will have resulted in two outcomes; community empowerment and programme sustainability. The objective of community participation practices is to ensure the community can reach the highest level of participation and retain their participation. This study has successfully discovered that community participation in SDG-related programmes initiated by the local government has increased the ability of the community to organise their activities associated with sustainable development principles. Their enjoyment in executing the programmes was due to the developed trust. In addition, the community participated because the projects could generate income for the community, strengthen their camaraderie and conserve the environment. From this excitement, the SDG-related programmes initiated by the community can sustain, and the SDG project has become a flagship project in the respective local governments. Based on Arnstein's ladder of Participation (1969), this study has discovered that community participation in these SDG-related programmes we at the "citizen power" level, where these community has become the partner to the local government, and at certain activities being empowered to initiate their own SDG activities.

However, this study encountered that communities from various races will have different commitments toward sustainability. It depends on the activeness of the organised community and their leadership values to influence the community. Various categories of communities (i.e. B40, M40 and T20) will raise different issues related to sustainability. Their response to local governments' initiatives on SDGs is also distinct.

Nevertheless, all local governments reported that the spirit of community and neighbourhood in maintaining the localities' cleanliness through clean-up activities is fading. This is something that needs to ponder. Local communities are less interested in clean-up activities and prefer more enjoyable programmes which combine interactive, hands-on activities, exhibitions, sports and entertainment. Thus, SDG-related programme design should consider interactive and entertainment elements to attract a wider audience. For example, few countries have created SDGs roadshows, socialisation events, and SDG festivals to attract broader community participation (Sunam et al., 2018). Similar event management could be replicated in Malaysia's local government to establish community trust and interest in SDG-related programmes. Overall, the findings from this study have discovered the association of SDGs localisation with community participation and element of trust.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the localisation process of the SDGs in Malaysia requires active and meaningful community participation. However, in order to increase their participation, trust must be established first. Internal and external actors responsible for the SDG's localisation

process must be engaged, and participation should be rewarded with recognition and prizes. In addition, the design and implementation of SDG-related programmes should be inclusive by incorporating all segments of society, maximising the use of social media, and being more interactive. Few constraints were encountered: this study included only three local governments from Malaysia's northern and southern regions. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, it provides several implications.

This study has several policy implications. First, there is a need to acknowledge that SDGs localisation in Malaysia is still at an early stage, and not all local governments are aware of it. In fact, some of them are having lack SDGs experts and capacity. However, due to limited SDGs exposure and passion, they have begun aligning their sustainability practices with the SDGs. Furthermore, this study has discovered that the federal and state governments' commitments to SDGs directly affect the local government's obligations toward the SDGs' localisation. Hence, specific SDG policies at the higher level of the governmental system are needed, and proper training is given to the policy implementor.

Secondly, this study has shown that community empowerment results from the SDG's localisation. To empower the community, they need first to participate in SDG-related activities and be rewarded. Hence, the specific allocation or grants for community-SDG projects could be made available either by the government or through Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) initiatives for the community to initiate and lead their own SDGs projects. This will sustain the SDGs initiatives and support the bottom-up participation approach.

This study has a significant contribution to the sustainable development field of study. It is among the early research in Malaysia, analysing the integration of "trust" and "community participation" within the context of "SDGs localisation". Therefore, this is a significant contribution to the pool of literature, not only within Malaysia's context but also in the Southeast Asia region and among developing countries. The findings also add a new perspective to the existing studies associated with the participation theories.

Furthermore, this study paves the way for further research on the localisation of the SDGs by considering the multi-stakeholders engagement and from the community standpoint. Therefore, future research may also include local governments from all regions of Malaysia, including SDGs cities, and data should be triangulated with a quantitative survey of the local community. At the very least, it will provide detailed findings and convey Malaysia's SDGs localisation perspective.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is made possible by the support of the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) Ministry of Higher Education, Grant Number: FRGS/1/2021/SS0/UITM/03/1. Researchers would like to express their gratitude to the participants of this study and Muhammad Harith Haiqal for sketching the illustrations in this article.

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Surat kami : 700-KPK (PRP.UP.1/20/1)

Tarikh : 20 Januari 2023

Prof. Madya Dr. Nur Hisham Ibrahim  
Rektor  
Universiti Teknologi MARA  
Cawangan Perak



Tuan,

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3. Tujuan permohonan ini adalah bagi membolehkan akses yang lebih meluas oleh pengguna perpustakaan terhadap semua maklumat yang terkandung di dalam penerbitan melalui laman Web PTAR UiTM Cawangan Perak.

Kelulusan daripada pihak tuan dalam perkara ini amat dihargai.

Sekian, terima kasih.

“BERKHIDMAT UNTUK NEGARA”

Saya yang menjalankan amanah,

**SITI BASRIYAH SHAIK BAHARUDIN**  
Timbalan Ketua Pustakawan

*nar*

*Setuju.*

*27.1.2023*

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