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Stakeholder Engagement in Implementation of Youth-Led SDG-related Programmes in Malaysia

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Abstract

Academics have discussed stakeholders engagement in attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This study deliberates stakeholder's engagement in the execution of youth-led SDG-associated initiatives in Malaysia. Twenty-five youth leaders from different youth drives were interviewed, and their stakeholder's engagement was analysed. This study encapsulates that in youth-led programmes, Malaysian youth movements have engaged with global and national-level SDG stakeholders as emphasised by the United Nations (UN). However, there is limited engagement with the international entities, governments, and private sector. The findings of this study provide insight into the country's SDG governance and its stakeholder's engagement from the youth movement perspective.

Keywords: SDG ; Stakeholders Engagement ; Youth Movement ; Malaysia

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1.0 Introduction

In September 2015, global leaders recognised the 15-year agenda for SDG at the UN Summit for Sustainable Development to deal with intricate and dynamic concerns for improved livelihoods. As the present universal agenda, SDG will be focusing on the 5Ps (planet, people, prosperity, peace, and partnership) and its multi-stakeholders engagement to ascertain the durability of the sustainability approaches.

SDG stakeholder engagement across levels is needed to warrant the “whole of society” and “whole of nation” approach. As the overseeing authority of SDG, the government should assimilate various stakeholders (such as the youth) into its national development strategy at the multi-governmental level. This study focuses on youth and their interaction with the other SDG stakeholders in implementing the SDG-related programme. Since the young populations have been projected to increase to 1.9 billion by 2030 (United Nations, 2022), they are expected to perform numerous roles towards the SDGs' success (Annadurai, 2020; Polese et al., 2018; United Nations, 2020). Their engagement in SDGs processes is vital as the current decisions on sustainability will affect the present and future generations (UNDESA, 2018). This study is also relevant due to limited discussion on youth engagement (and their stakeholders' interaction) within SDG-related programmes, particularly in the Malaysian context.

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Given the significance of stakeholders' engagement in SDG, this study will analyse their involvement in the youth-driven SDG-linked initiatives. The specific objectives are; a) to ascertain the different kinds of SDG stakeholders involved in youth-driven SDG-linked initiatives and b) to identify the underlying challenges in engaging the stakeholders in youth-led SDGs programmes.

2.0 Literature Review

In 2012, at the RIO+20 Conference, the representation by Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) expanded the factions of "Major Groups" stakeholders in achieving the SDGs, reiterating the global commitment towards sustainability (Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, 2020). Prior literature also deliberated the roles of multi-stakeholders for executing sustainable development even before SDG was proposed.

This study has determined an extensive gamut of SDG stakeholders, arranged based on the multi-tier and recursive sustainability procedure as suggested by Schwaninger (2015). This comprehensive approach entails assimilation at the organisational, individual, governmental, and global levels based on the theoretical context. These sub-systems are interwoven on the basis of the bottom-up and top-down procedures so as to be feasible for sustainable development. It was recommended that sustainability be attained throughout the board (sub-system) before the entire system can be declared sustainable (Donaires et al., 2019; Schwaninger, 2015). Stakeholders' engagement should appear at each sub-system in materialising the sustainability initiatives. Past literature has highlighted the importance of engaging internal and external stakeholders (Briggs et al., 2019; Harsanto & Permana, 2021; Sundram et al., 2021), particularly in an institutional-based sustainability programme. Hence, similar engagement is also relevant in youth-led movements and sustainability programmes. However, based on Hörisch et al. (2014) analysis of stakeholders theory, it is challenging to establish stakeholders' interests and empower them towards sustainable development.

This section will explain the exhaustive list of the SDG stakeholders at the global and national level. The UN, along with different global and regional entities are among the foremost global stakeholders in SDG (Cummings et al., 2018; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). By means of different bilateral and multilateral associations, the partnership between low- and high-income nations has also been espoused to execute SDG (Caiado et al., 2018; Cummings et al., 2018; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018; Nygård, 2017). The precedence is given to aiding the SDG Global Partnership as a donor and offering technical support to emerging nations entering the SDG (Caiado et al., 2018; Cummings et al., 2018; Dhar, 2018; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018; Ruhil, 2017). The UN system would also aid the espousal and monitor the member nation's SDGs progression (Ruhil, 2017), apart from the International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and Multinational Corporations (MNCs), forming a diaspora for the universal agenda.

The nation-level stakeholders comprise those in government branches and at various tiers of governance. SDG stakeholders are present inside and outside the administrative sub-system. They function as a fragment of the government organs, pressure groups, partners, or service recipients. Thus, stakeholder involvement at the national level is vital in moulding the SDG-linked policies and monitoring measures (Sahoo & Pradhan, 2018). Furthermore, SDG localisation and mainstreaming are crucial at the national to the lower tier of the government. The local government, for instance, need to engage with the stakeholders and provide the public spaces needed by the youth (Omar et al., 2020). However, localising the SDGs requires decentralisation of power and entails efforts by the designated and appointed officials as its impetus (Hawkins & Wang, 2012; Mao et al., 2019).

There is an absence of a typical institutional arrangement for regulating the SDG at the national level. Some nations formed a dedicated SDG ministry; some assigned it to the ministry associated with economic affairs; while others delegate to the central agencies answerable to SDG; and there are countries that assign SDG directly under the head of the government command. Hence, the nation has been given the liberty to choose its SDG governance setup. Nonetheless, the execution of SDG at the national level should be stimulated by the political resolve of the country's leadership so that the vision can take shape in the nation. The following stakeholders play a vital part in the SDG governance setup to support the nation's SDG vision and mission. First, the non-political executive functions as the SDG implementer at different administrative levels and backs the political stakeholder's resolve on SDG. The government's institutions will have objectives laid out with SDG on the basis of services offered to the citizens. Thus, the execution of SDG in different government organisations shall be conducted through horizontal and vertical responsibilities at the multi-tier governance level (Cummings et al., 2018; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018; Nygård, 2017). Second, the legislator's role in SDG-linked legislation has to be framed and appraised in the parliament (Caiado et al., 2018; Cummings et al., 2018; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). Third, the statistical agencies and consultants offer dependable SDG data (Allen et al., 2017; Nygård, 2017). Next is audit agencies and institutions to scrutinise the SDG's accountability (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018).

The other SDG stakeholders beyond the government setup comprise the private sector (Caiado et al., 2018), academia (Nygård, 2017) and numerous grassroots factions (Caiado et al., 2018; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018; Ruhil, 2017; Zainol et al., 2018)

Studies on youth engagement, SDG, and their stakeholders in Malaysia are limited. A review on youth engagement in SDGs within the ASEAN region (which include Malaysia) has been conducted by Mohd Yusof and Ariffin (2021). Recent empirical research within the perspective of university youth and SDG was carried out by Afroz and Ilham (2020), Ilham et al. (2020), and Mohamad et al. (2021). Therefore, this exploratory research, focusing on youth movements, is considered necessary and will address the existing empirical gap of study.

3.0 Research Methodology

Primary data required for the study was gathered using comprehensive interviews until it reached the point of saturation. Using a purposive sampling and snowballing technique, we identified and invited 25 youth leaders working for SDG-specific causes to participate in this

study. The objective of the interview was to elicit youth experiences about their experiences and interactions with various stakeholders when implementing SDG-specific programmes. These SDG-related programmes can be in various forms; either on SDG advocacy, SDG voluntary works, or SDG-policies consultation. The authors opted for this method as it would provide rich data and responses that cannot be elucidated using a quantitative study. Interview instructions were drafted carefully to prevent bias. The candidates were asked to provide informed consent; subsequently, interviews were conducted and recorded. Interview transcription was analysed using NVIVO (i.e., coding, categorising and thematising). In this qualitative study process, authors play roles as the research instruments to determine the emerging themes and subthemes. The following segment mentions the key observations of this research.

4.0 Findings

The identification of the SDGs stakeholders that work with youth and the engagement challenges will be explained simultaneously in this section. Several SDG stakeholders committed to youth-driven SDG initiatives in Malaysia can be found at the local, national, and international settings (Refer Fig. 1)



Fig. 1: The categories of SDGs stakeholders engaged in youth-led SDG-related programmes

International organisations and bodies were identified as the initial SDG stakeholders in a youth-driven programme in Malaysia. Several global bodies work alongside with few Malaysian youth organisations pertaining to SDG: UN bodies, global universities, embassies, and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) (Refer Table 1). However, this work uncovered that most of the youth-SDG programmes in Malaysia had inadequate connections with international stakeholders supporting the SDG. For several youth organisations that are well connected with their international counterparts in SDG mission, it was recognised as a prerequisite for them to be the global players concerning SDG implementation.

International participation in youth-driven SDG initiatives might not be widespread; however, such efforts have paved the way for fresh opportunities and bridged the gap between youth and other bodies supporting SDG collaboration. Such youth initiatives have provided the Malaysian youth with the required international support to disseminate critical information about SDG. Youth in this study often represent their movement at SDG-specific international conferences and meetings. They are also involved in deliberating critical environmental aspects (i.e., climate change policies consultation) and providing training so other youth will be more informed about SDG. At the same time, international networks have enhanced the visibility of such youth organisations and offered better leadership roles as global SDG advocates. It is challenging to derive such opportunities without SDG-specific collaboration and networks.

Table 1. Internationally based SDG stakeholders

Research participant	Responses
Research participant 8	[...] we focus globally [...] we are the UN partners [...] they deal with SDG now.
Research participant 13	[...] we teamed up with ASEAN volunteers [...] (the SDG programme) went on for a month [...]
Research participant 20	[...] we are funded on (SDG) project-based sponsorship from either (the) High Commissioner or some other embassy [...]

At the national level, these youth organisations have partnered with various government organisations (i.e., agencies, ministries and government departments), private firms, educational institutions, legislative members, and other NGOs. Nonetheless, the level of association depends on the goal of the collaboration and varies as per the youth programme. On the whole, at the national level, youth organisations in Malaysia are more mutual with their fellow NGOs and educational institutions when implementing SDG initiatives. Association with these two stakeholders makes them obtain more SDG knowledge, particularly by engaging with academic circles. These

stakeholders also ensure more youth participation, easing their SDG-related promotion and offering a more significant learning experience. The association with the remaining participants, such as government agencies, politicians, and private firms, remain selective and limited.

It would be more convenient for youth organisations affiliated with the national and state youth council to partner with government agencies and get extra support in implementing SDG programmes. It includes financial and ministerial support, access to facilities, and specialists that could be used to execute youth activities. Thus, material support is not an issue for this youth movement category. Nevertheless, associating their programmes with SDGs is challenging due to a lack of exposure. To some extent, they were included in the SDGs consultation processes, although the opportunities are selective. This has permitted them to raise numerous youth issues regarding SDG and receive the government’s responses.

Non-affiliated youth organisations are careful in selecting their SDG associates at the national level. This is to prevent being used and controlled for organisational or individual needs. Thus, they prefer to function as a single youth movement rather than be associated with particular stakeholders. By being self-governing, they ran into more opportunities related to SDG exposure and enjoyed the liberty to implement SDG-associated programmes without being manipulated by anybody. Their foremost concern is advocating the youth as the main target group, although they might be facing economic limitations.

Nevertheless, some of youth organisations have started partnering with other stakeholders to create camaraderie and be more noticeable in their SDG advocacy. By doing that, they could raise the reputation of their youth movements. Table 2 shows these responses. The collaboration with the private sector has strengthened the funding of the youth movements and implemented large-scale SDG-related initiatives. It is much simpler for a well-established and prominent youth movement to get private sector funding as their NGOs adopt corporate administration and have an outstanding past achievement record. Some legislative members also show commitment and are attracted towards SDGs by promoting youth development initiatives and environmental-based programmes. Nonetheless, with respect to SDG, more additional opportunities with all such stakeholders need to be explored.

Table 2. Country-based SDG stakeholders

Research participant	Responses
Research participant 1	We collaborated with different government agencies, universities, NGOs, local governments, government departments, the private sector and the youth council [...]
Research participant 25	[...] we established a partnership with public universities, students associations, youth councils, Malaysia-based NGOs, ministries, private companies, certain foundations and research consultants [...]

At the local level, a limited engagement exists between the local stakeholders and the youth organisations (Please refer to responses in Table 3). It was seen that only a few youth organisations approached or coordinated with the local government. With regards to SDG localisation, a close relationship exists between the local community and the local government, which can be leveraged by the youth movements to carry out many programmes. As per certain informants, the nature of programmes at the local level would primarily be environmentally based, followed by health and education-based activities

Certain youth movements showed positive response with regards to the local government and the role of the youth in applying local sustainability initiatives. A few of the local governments have assigned youth representatives as councillors as well as green committee members in their locality. Also, some of the local authorities have modified their environment-related by-law and are open for critic’s post raising of the issues on sustainability by youth movements. This shows the local government’s openness towards integrating the youth into the local governance structure as well as respecting the voice of the youth. In contrast, because of territorial and jurisdiction disputes, less cooperation was received by one youth organisation from the local government regarding their environmental-related programmes, signifying that bureaucracy still exists as an issue impacting sustainable development initiatives.

Also, just a few youth organisations have coordinated and approached the local community regarding their SDG-related programmes and successfully nurtured a sustainable community with pro-environmental behaviour. Most of these youth movements favour one-off programmes targeting youth at the state and national levels instead of localising their SDG-related programmes at the community level.

Table 3. Local level-based SDG stakeholders

Research participant	Responses
Research participant 6	[...] we collaborated with the local government, other NGOs, and waste management companies to conduct beach cleaning [...]
Research participant 18	[...] we have a certain number of programmes within the local community and focusing more on activities with schools [...]

5.0 Discussion

This study aims to identify the engagement pertaining to youth organisations in Malaysia and their SDG stakeholders to integrate SDG-related programmes. As per Schwaninger (2015), with these stakeholders, the engagement occurs at different sub-systems. The categories of the stakeholders are also either internal or external, as proposed by previous scholars. This study has mentioned one important finding; the stakeholder’s engagement in youth-led SDG-related programmes in Malaysia depends on the commitment of the youth movement. The success of the youth-led SDG-related programmes also depended on the number of stakeholders being engaged with these youth. This study has discovered that there is a limited engagement exists between the international SDG stakeholders and the youth movement with regards to the Malaysian context. At the same time, there is moderate engagement with the state and local government and their associated institutions, legislators and private sector.

Limited engagement with widespread groups of SDG stakeholders suggests that the youth organisations may be inadequately exposed to SDG goals and activities. Most have few opportunities to connect thereby at the global and various levels of government, depending on

pro-activeness of youth movement leadership. Similarly, all informants in this study emphasise the importance of advocating environmental-based programmes, indicating the current generation is responding to the call to protect and preserve biodiversity for future needs. Their pro-activeness proves their roles are the catalysts for change towards sustainable development. Therefore, governments must move to expand SDG partnerships via open networks (Masuda et al., 2021). The yearly Malaysia Urban Forum and the Malaysian SDG Summit remain examples of strategic partnerships that enjoin youth representatives with other stakeholder groups to discuss the role of the youth in SDG development. These initiatives may be replicated at the local and state level, such that the youth involved with governmental units may better comprehend SDG programmes. More regular engagement among youth movements and other stakeholders is necessary to boost the range of processes, including design, implementation, monitoring, review, and reporting. Diverse opportunities need to be opened up to ensure deeper stakeholder inclusivity via the integration of conventional and new media channels, particularly given the pandemic challenges at present.

In general, youth movement partnerships and interactions with other stakeholder groups remain vital, for these activities form “communities of practice” in support of SDG advocacy. However, the prevalence of fellow NGO, university, and school stakeholders as most frequent SDG partners indicates that Malaysian youth organisations’ concern is to educate the young while advocating grassroots sustainability. Engagement with other stakeholder groups has provided them with many advantages, including sharing knowledge, learning about NGO best practices and funding sources, and acquisition of SDG-related expertise. These resources are secured via continuous participation in SDG-related activities that voice the interests and needs of youthful members. Continued engagement also determines the endurance and durability of the movements beyond programme sustainment

This study has established that the youth-led movements in the country should start exploratory talks with prospective stakeholder groups towards implementing more significant SDG-related schemes. Their members must be encouraged to establish newer partnerships by approaching higher-level stakeholders. Government should embrace these youth-led movements, for SDG-related programmes implemented by grassroots activity support national SDG and sustain their localisation. To remain relevant, youth programmes need to accord with the 17 SDG and align accordingly on global issues supporting the “think global, act locally” approach.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, government needs to accommodate youth and other stakeholder engagement through its governance mechanisms. In this discussion, the main stakeholder groups in Malaysian SDG programmes led by the youth comprise several government institutions, private-sector firms, academic institutions, international organisations, and numerous grassroots communities. To achieve the SDGs by 2030 and enhance the stakeholders’ inclusivity, their collective voices must be heard through a multi-layer governance model. Owing to broad stakeholder activity in the SDG programmes, the government faces certain hurdles in engaging all committed groups. Nonetheless, this responsibility can be fulfilled with robust political will and ongoing commitment. All stakeholders need to be treated as partners and empowered with specific SDGs initiatives, for which the youth can be the catalysts of change. This framework should help produce synergies among the multiple stakeholders across most sustainability processes.

This study is limited to youth movement leaders, and the findings cannot be generalised. Hence, more studies on SDG stakeholder positions and their significant contributions to UN-MGoS are needed. Comparative analyses may also be carried out to ascertain dissimilar stakeholder practices of engagement across states and regions. The triangulation of the findings will offer empirical evidence on youth-SDG stakeholders’ engagement in the Malaysian context.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper has identified impediments to youth-stakeholder engagement in achieving the SDGs. The findings will be used to support future research on sustainable development and youth development. It will also contribute to enriching the literature on the Malaysian SDGs.

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