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SDG17 in Environmental Conservation Activities at Malaysian Local Government

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Abstract

The local governments in Malaysia have been tasked with conserving the environment and addressing ecological deficiencies. This paper explores three distinct Malaysian local governments' commitment to the environment and their partnership strategies. This qualitative study has discovered that the selected local governments have similar environmental-related programmes, and the stakeholders' engagement is evident in their localities. This study is essential to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) to foster the community-based efforts to increase environmental stewardship. Future research may include exploratory studies on the environmental commitments of local governments in Sabah and Sarawak.

Keywords: Environmental Conservation ; Local Government ; Malaysia ; SDG17

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1.0 Introduction

Environmental sustainability has been a discussion among academicians and scholars as one way to reach sustainable development. The role of protecting the environment is in collective measures and should be governed at each level of governmental institutions (national, subnational and local levels). In Malaysia, local governments have been entrusted with the environmental conservation roles to achieve two main global sustainability agendas: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Local Agenda (LA21). In addition, the local government's commitments toward environmental protection are vital to support the SDG's localisation process in the country, particularly in progressing the SDG related to the environment. Hence, this study is considered pertinent to enrich the literature on environmental sustainability within the context of SDGs implementation in Malaysia. This study aims to explore the local government's commitments toward environmental conservation and how it could support SDGs, particularly in Malaysian settings. The specific objectives of this study are: a) to identify the different forms of environmental conservation activities conducted at the local government level; and b) to assess the different types of partnerships and stakeholder groups involved in environmental conservation activities conducted at the local government level.

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2.0 Literature Review

Effective environmental management and conservation actions require good environmental governance incorporating institutional, structural and procedural elements (Bennett & Satterfield, 2018). However, it will be challenging. For example, the top-down approach in managing policy related to environmental sustainability has been mentioned as one reason that hinders community participation in the environmental governance structure (Barrutia et al., 2015; Woldie & Tadesse, 2019). Therefore, integrating the community and other stakeholders through partnership in local governance was suggested as one way to preserve the environment and materialise the agenda on sustainability (Meschede, 2019; Woldie & Tadesse, 2019). Besides that, a legal framework and institutional support that recognise community ownership towards environmental sustainability are also essential (Hue & Sun, 2021; Raza, 2018; Woldie & Tadesse, 2019; Yu & Huang, 2020). Previous literature also has illustrated the importance of participation and partnership in the local environmental governance, such as in the case of China (Wang et al., 2020).

Globally, only a few studies were conducted within the context of SDGs and local government commitment to the environment. Few works are available such as those by Martínez-Córdoba et al. (2021) and Meschede (2019). In Malaysia, studies within the context of environmental sustainability have been conducted, and it is associated with the LA21 progression (Ahmad Azam & Mohamed Osman, 2012). However, the discussion on SDGs, local government and environmental commitment remain scarce. The existing study is as conducted by Rahman & Yusof (2020). A discussion on the integration of the local government and their stakeholders in achieving environmental sustainability is also being highlighted in Ahmad Azam and Mohamed Osman (2012). As a result, it was proven that stakeholders' engagement in environmental programmes has successfully increased the local government's sustainability levels (Ahmad Azam & Mohamed Osman, 2012). Therefore, this exploratory research, focusing on local governments' commitments to environmental sustainability, 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 in-depth interviews until it reached the point of saturation. Using a purposive sampling and snowballing technique, the authors identified and invited eight officers from three local governments representing the City Council, Municipal Council and District Council. The criteria of the informant's selection are the key person responsible for environmental-related programmes in the local government. The selection of the local governments is based on a few considerations: a) these local governments are active in environmental initiatives, and b) these local governments have adopted sustainability principles in their local planning. These local governments represent the northern and southern areas of Peninsular Malaysia to discover if there are any differences in the localities' efforts toward the environmental commitments. The objective of the in-depth interview was to elicit informants' experiences and interactions with various stakeholders when executing environmental programmes at their localities. The authors opted for this method to provide rich data and responses. Subsequently, interviews were conducted and recorded. Interview transcription was analysed using NVivo, and themes were derived as the major findings. The following section mentions the key findings of this study.

4.0 Findings

The findings of this study will be presented based on the research objectives. Firstly, "to identify the different types of environmental conservation activities conducted at the local government level". Local governments selected for this study have initiated numerous community-centric environmental conservation activities. It is either led by the local government, the community, or collaboration to achieve the environmental goals outlined in the SDGs and the LA21. The following Table 1 summarises and categorises the environmental actions of the three local councils.

Table 1. The list of environmental conservation activities implemented by the local governments in Malaysia

Categories of environmental conservation activities	Association with the SDGs	City Council A (CC-A)	Municipal Council B (MC-B)	District Council C (DC-C)
Sustainable waste management (i.e., e-waste Campaign, 3R Campaign, clean-up programme, Cash for Trash, No Plastic Day Campaign)	SDG11, SDG12	/	/	/
Low carbon city (i.e., Car-Free Zone Day, Sustainable Community Garden Project, Tree Planting and river conservation projects, Smart City, Solar Panel project, Green Technology adoption)	SDG7, SDG11	/	/	/
Programmes on climate action	SDG13	/		
Education for Sustainable Development (i.e., Green School Programme, exhibition, talks)	SDG4, SDG11	/	/	/
Sustainable community programmes (i.e. awards for active community)	SDG11	/	/	
Strategic planning and development planning focusing on environmental sustainability	SDG11, SDG16	/	/	/

Three main programmes were identified as being implemented in these local governments to protect the environment; the low-carbon

city, sustainable waste management, and clean-up programmes. By referring to table 1, a low-carbon city concept has been the priority for all the three local governments. They have demonstrated a visible commitment to reducing their carbon footprint and establishing a low-carbon city by focusing on green initiatives. The low-carbon city concept was first deployed in their local government's building structures by adopting green technology and energy-saving features. The commitment was then expanded to include their immediate vicinity, public facilities and the territory of the local government in order to educate the local community about the low-carbon idea.

Next are waste management-related programmes. These cities implemented sustainable waste management programmes intending to minimise waste's impact on the environment. Each of the three local governments highlighted waste management as the main issue raised by their local community. The community's biggest concern has been the household garbage collection process, unregulated refuse, landfill disposal mechanisms, and illegal garbage dumping. The local population highlighted waste management as their primary concern since it is the local government's obligatory function as stipulated under the Malaysian Local Government Act. Nevertheless, to deal with the community request, the local governments frequently engage with their community to solve issues on waste management and initiate various campaigns dealing with waste issues, such as "cash for trash", "no plastic day", and "recycle programmes".

Finally, the clean-up programmes at the three local governments are frequently held. The projects were known as "*gotong-royong*". The community-based clean-up activities are usually held to nurture the neighbourhood and togetherness spirit. However, all three localities have highlighted that the "*gotong-royong*" activities have lost their popularity, and there is less community participation in the programmes. Even though it was designed for the community and aimed to clean up and beautify the community residential area, the local government's staffs predominantly perform the work with their strategic partners from the other government agencies. This has been one of the local government's frustrations.

The following subsection will discuss the second research objective for this paper: "to assess the different types of partnerships and stakeholder groups involved in environmental conservation activities conducted at the local government level". Figure 1 and 2 portrays the various parties (external and internal stakeholders) involved in the environmental conservation initiatives at the local level. The first discussion is on the external stakeholders:

4.1 External stakeholders



Fig. 1: The external stakeholders in the environmental conservation programmes

i) International organisations

This study has identified limited cooperation and collaboration between the District Council types of local government with any of the international organisations in their environmental conservation efforts. This is based on the responses made by Informant DC1 and DC2. Their exposure and cooperation with the international partners are almost none/invisible. Their collaboration is only within the circle of local stakeholders. Compared to the City Council and Municipal Councils like CC-A and MC-B, they had better global exposure and collaboration in their environmental activities. This indicates that the District Council might face a lack of capacity or opportunity to create a higher level of partnership and cooperation. Several global bodies such as the UN agencies and other regional establishments have been mentioned and worked alongside the City Council and Municipal Council level of local government to protect the environment. Both CC-A and MC-B, for example, had begun their international benchmarking and partnership through this international collaboration.

ii) The federal government, state government, other local government and government agencies

The Ministry of Housing and Local Government provides many project grants to the local governments to initiate community-based activities related to the environment. This indicates that the ministry at the federal level supports the country's local governments. However, none of the informants mentioned the role of the other ministries and central agencies who act as their programme partners in the environmental conservation initiatives. Additionally, this study discovered that environmental commitment at the local governments would

depend on the state government's pledge to environmental policy. For CC-A and MC-A, both localities follow the instruction and the state government's policy on the environment. This is because the state governments where these local governments resided have a clear agenda on green policy.

iii) Private sector

This stakeholder is the sponsor, funder, and partner in environmental projects through their corporate social responsibility initiative. They also provide lucrative gifts and rewards to attract more community participation in environmental-related projects. As a result, it has successfully reduced the local government's financial burden. In addition, the physical projects are also carried out within the public-private partnership framework, for example, to support the low-carbon city implementation. Even though the private sector provides sponsorship and financing of the programmes, the local government still rewards and attracts the community to participate in environment-related programmes by providing food, allowances, and appropriate eco-green training to nurture a sustainable community.

iv) Academic Institutions

The local government also focuses on the academic institutions (i.e. schools, colleges and universities) as their programme partner and nurtures environmental awareness in the younger generation. From the observation, Informant CC-1 mentioned that the younger generation is more active and dedicated to executing environmental activities. The programmes were carried out within the school compound to support the "green school approach" and outside the class activities to expose them to actual biodiversity. This triggered the young participants' interests and supported the implementation of the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) by combining hands-on projects and an experiential learning approach.

v) Non Governmental Organisations

NGOs such as the Environmental NGOs (ENGOS) play a significant role in empowering the community in the environmental conservation efforts for certain local governments. This study has proven that NGOs can lead and initiate meaningful environmental programmes by focusing on the community, with minimum intervention from the local government. In this situation, the NGOs will become the programme facilitator. The local government could transfer the programme ownership to the NGOs and empower the community to be independent in the programme's implementation. In addition, NGOs also act as community representatives in voicing out environmental issues affecting the community. Informant CC1 has mentioned this: *[...] The (programme) idea is from the NGO [...] they decided on the programme's [...] we give support and assistance [...] for example, a programme called "a cash for trash" [...]*. Other categories of NGOs engaged with these local governments include professional associations representing the landscapers and property developers.

vi) Community and their leaders

Most environmental conservation programmes at the local government level were implemented with the community and their leaders. However, there is a situation where the community was reluctant to actively participate in specific environmental programmes as they considered it as the local government's responsibility. The community are less responsive and less supportive of protecting the environment. Nevertheless, the local governments successfully influence the community to participate in, empower the community, and sustain the environmental-related programmes. The local government provided training, support, promotional platforms and rewards (i.e. monetary and awards) and nurtured the community's confidence/trust towards the local government's aspiration in environmental protection agenda. As a result, the community was empowered in their environmental programmes, and they were able to generate revenue in addition to their environmental enthusiasm. In designing the environmental-related initiatives at the localities, these local government has begun various strategies to engage with the community. The mechanisms included surveys, public opinion, focus group discussion (FGD), town hall sessions, and budget consultation.



Illustration 1: The FGD process implemented at the CC-A

4.2 Internal stakeholders

The internal stakeholders being referred to are the local government's councillors, staff and departments within the local government. The local governments have specific funds for the local councillors to organise programmes with the community and function as the facilitator and intermediary. Hence, their supporting role is essential for the local government to identify suitable programmes for the community. They are also obligated to attract community participation. However, informants in this study expressed concern that the local councillor is less proactive in bringing forward the environmental issues and programmes.



Fig. 2: The internal stakeholders in the environmental conservation programmes

The environmental conservation activities are across-department and require cooperation from everyone. It did not belong to any specific department. It is a collective effort, and everyone must go to the ground, meet the community and identify the suitable programmes for the community - a bottom-up approach. Informant CC3 has mentioned the active roles of local government officers: [...] *(the) officers cannot be laid back or sleep [...] there will be no continuous collaboration with the community [...] we need to push ourselves for the community engagement and collaboration [...] grassroots is everything to us [...]*.

The commitment of the local governments toward environmental initiatives also depends on the local government's leadership and officers' ability to communicate and negotiate with various stakeholders. Additionally, the local environmental frameworks are vital in motivating the staff to carry out programmes on the environment.

5.0 Discussion

Overall, this study has concluded that the environmental programmes in the Malaysian local government can be guided by three types of motivation – local government initiatives, community initiatives and third-party initiatives such as the NGOs and international agencies. However, this study has shown that the environmental programmes in Malaysian localities are still top-down rather than bottom-up. Primarily, it will be fully designed and led by the local government. Comparatively, this study has also found that the city council types of local government will have a better bottom-up approach in their environmental programme implementation than municipal and district council types of local governments. This is due to the financial strength, experts' availability, and more exposure to sustainable development. This indicates that the practice toward environmental commitments varies according to the categories of local governments.

This study has discovered that a broader partnership with other stakeholders will strengthen the environmental conservation activities and provides more meaningful engagement. Meschede (2019) has highlighted the partnership importance in achieving environmental sustainability with the SDGs framework. Sobol (2008) also emphasised the importance of partnership in the context of sustainable development. The local governments in this study have established an inclusive partnership in their programmes to support the SDG's idea of "leaving no one behind". However, there is room for improvement, especially in ensuring that all stakeholders' voices can be heard and considered in the city planning. For example, the importance of NGO's and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) engagement as community representatives in the local environmental initiative (Mumtaz, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). More opportunities to collaborate with international agencies are also needed to act on the global agenda.

Apart from the partnership, as illustrated in Figure 3, the remaining strategies for executing the environmental programmes in the local government are through training and skill development (to the local government officers and the community) and appropriate fundings and rewards. This will attract more community interest to participate in environmental activities and create trust. This study also concluded that these local governments' sustainable environmental conservation programmes have successfully empowered the community and improved their economy by conforming to these strategies. This is due to the community's belief that the programmes could bring changes and improve their localities. Implicitly, it has developed the community's trust in the local government as the service provider. As Mohammadi et al. (2018) mentioned, community participation will allow empowerment within the norms and practices spheres. While in Rahman and Yusof (2020), trust was the pillar in the community participation in environmental sustainability at the local level. This proves the claim that participation increases when there is trust and satisfaction towards the local government (Seimuskane & Vorskava, 2013).

The Malaysian local government's common types of environmental programmes can be categorised into three: sustainable waste management, low carbon reduction, and clean-up activities (Refer to Illustration 2). It has been identified that these local governments are not emphasising programmes related to climate action. Improvements are needed by focusing on post-implementation for the environmental programmes as it is viable to monitor and supervise the programme.

This study has also discovered the importance of higher-level environmental policy (national and subnational level commitment toward the environment), local government leadership, and programme communication as enablers to attract more community participation in environmental activities. Good policies and legislation on the environment could transform the community's attitude and awareness into a

more sustainable lifestyle. Thus, the political system plays a significant role in determining the sustainability commitment (Martínez-Córdoba et al., 2021; Tiwari & Mohan, 2021). At the same time, leaders of local governments need to have wisdom and vision to transform their cities to be more environmentally friendly. The Malaysian community may consider issues on the environment as not that important. However, by having social media, it could attract their attention and interest in the issues. For instance, social media and technology have been highlighted as very important in encouraging e-participation among the local community (Bonsón et al., 2012; Meschede, 2019).

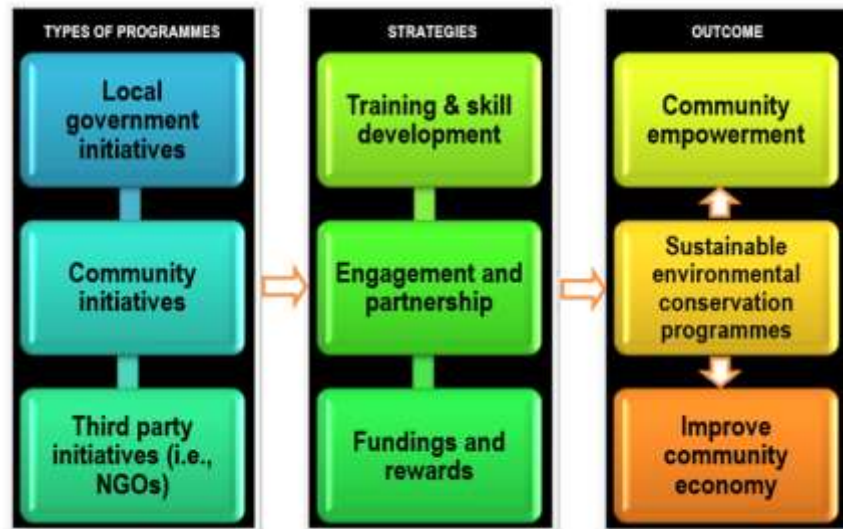


Fig. 3: The framework of environmental conservation implementation in Malaysia's local government



Illustration 2: The sketches on the environmental programmes implemented in the Malaysian local government

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, the local government must continue engaging with its multi-stakeholder group to strengthen its environmental governance mechanisms. In this discussion, the main stakeholder groups in Malaysian environmental conservation programmes at the local government could be characterised by their internal and external actors. Their inclusivity has proven significant in creating a meaningful environmental programme. Even though the local government may face monetary and expert limitations, the responsibility to protect the environment could be fulfilled through strategic partnership.

This study is limited to only three local governments in peninsular Malaysia, and the findings cannot be generalised. Hence, more studies on local governments' initiatives toward environmental stewardship are needed. In-depth comparative analyses may also be carried out to ascertain leadership and community factors to engage in environmental activities.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper has identified types of environmental programmes and their implementation strategies in the Malaysian localities. The findings help support future research on sustainable cities and communities in the urbanisation field of studies.

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