

Rescaling the Rungs of Arnstein's Ladder of Community Participation Framework on the Localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals

Radduan Yusof^{1*}, Mohd Idham Mohd Yusof², Farah Adilla Ab Rahman³, Mohamad Fazli Sabri⁴,
Mariani Ariffin⁵, Emir Hadžikadunić⁶

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Seremban, Malaysia

⁴Department of Resource Management & Consumer Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia

⁵Department of Environmental Management Faculty of Environmental Studies Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia

⁶Department of Political Science and International Relations, Sarajevo School of Science and Technology, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9010116>

Received: 01 January 2025; Accepted: 05 January 2025; Published: 05 February 2025

ABSTRACT

Localising Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a process through which local governments adapt global objectives to address local needs and priorities, enhancing relevance and accountability. This study examines SDG localisation within the Malaysian local government system using Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation as a theoretical framework. This research assesses citizen input sharing, decision-making, program implementation, and monitoring functions in the local government SDGs initiative towards varying levels of Arnstein's citizen engagement. Data from 162 respondents were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), revealing significant relationships between community participation and perceived empowerment. Findings highlight the need for continuous community engagement across SDG implementation stages to foster inclusive, sustainable development. Recommendations for policy enhancements and inclusive participation frameworks are discussed.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; SDG Localisation, Community Participation, Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, Local Government.

INTRODUCTION

Localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) refers to defining, implementing, and monitoring strategies at the local level for achievable global, national, and subnational sustainable goals and targets [28]. It involves adapting and implementing the global SDG framework within local contexts to make these goals relevant, actionable, and measurable at the community level. The process of SDG localisation recognises that Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) are vital in transforming global aspirations into tangible, context-specific outcomes at the local level [37][38]. The LRGs can devise strategies that address specific needs and circumstances by adapting goals to communities' unique challenges and opportunities [35][36][2][9]. By tailoring SDGs to address community-specific challenges and leveraging local opportunities, LRGs empower stakeholders to shape, monitor, and sustain development initiatives directly relevant to their environments.

Adapting worldwide goals to specific local circumstances guarantees that development initiatives are pertinent and feasible at the community level [10]. A commitment to community participation and sustainable policies

highlights the local government's role in SDG implementation in Malaysia. The nation was an early adopter of SDG frameworks, presenting its Voluntary National Report (VNR) on SDG progress at the United Nations Higher-Level Political Forum (HLPF) as early as 2017 [41]. This demonstrated Malaysia's commitment to integrating SDG principles into local governance and the public's active role in sustainable development. However, significant challenges remain, particularly regarding fostering meaningful citizen participation and bridging the gap between policy frameworks and effective local action.

The primary aim of this study is to evaluate the extent of citizen involvement in SDG localisation at the local governance level in Malaysia. Leveraging Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation as a theoretical guide, this research investigates the dynamics of citizen participation in providing input, decision-making, program implementation, and monitoring within local SDG efforts towards a meaningful contribution to the whole spectrum of involvement based on Arnstein's Theory. Interestingly, most research employing Arnstein's Theory is qualitative by nature [19][20][14][29]. By examining community participation through an adapted Likert-style questionnaire, this study provides new insight into the challenges and potential of citizen empowerment in achieving localised sustainable development goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Localisation of SDGs refers to adapting global goals to fit local needs, contexts, and priorities, allowing local governments to play an essential role in sustainable development [28][39][25]. Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) act as intermediaries in translating broad SDG targets into practical, localised actions, strengthening public ownership, accountability, and context-specific responses to community challenges [35].

Community participation is crucial for meaningful SDG localisation, particularly as it fosters ownership, transparency, and accountability in governance [15]. The active involvement of citizens in decision-making, program implementation, and monitoring enhances policy responsiveness and builds trust between government bodies and local communities. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation [3] offers a structured framework for assessing citizen engagement in decision-making, ranging from minimal, tokenistic involvement to complete citizen control. Arnstein identifies eight rungs of participation: from non-participation (manipulation, therapy) to degrees of tokenism (informing, consultation, placation), and ultimately to varying levels of citizen control or empowerment (partnership, delegated power, citizen control) [3][13][19][20].

Minimal participation (non-participation, manipulation, and therapy) represents the lowest level of community involvement, where community members have no or negligible influence over decisions. This level often involves informing or educating the public without providing any real opportunity for feedback or input [3]. Minimal participation can lead to disengagement and distrust among community members [31][32][16].

Tokenism (information, consultation, and placation) refers to a level of participation where community members can express their opinions but have limited power to influence decisions. This level includes consultation and placation, where feedback is sought but not necessarily acted upon [3]. Studies have shown that tokenism can create a false sense of involvement and may ultimately undermine trust in local government [34]. On the other hand, tokenism has led to the adoption of participatory evaluation processes, fostering critical reflection on effective involvement [5].

Citizen control or empowerment (partnership, delegated power, and citizen control) represents the highest level of participation, where community members have significant power and influence over decision-making processes. This level of involvement ensures that community needs and preferences are fully integrated into local governance [3]. Research suggests citizen control can lead to more responsive and accountable governance and higher community satisfaction and trust [27][21][40].

The Arnstein Ladder of Community Participation framework, initially conceptualised in 1969, is a widely referenced model for understanding the varying degrees of citizen involvement in management and decision-making. This framework has been widely adopted in studies to evaluate citizen involvement in governance, providing insight into power dynamics and the depth of community engagement. For example, localising

SDGs in Malaysia's local governance context requires active engagement of communities and can be easily explained across Arnstein's ladder, aiming to achieve higher rungs of citizen control and partnership to ensure sustainable and inclusive outcomes. However, while it has been extensively used in qualitative research to describe and analyse participation processes, its application in quantitative studies remains relatively rare, particularly in survey-based research. This is primarily due to its inherently conceptual nature, which challenges operationalising its constructs into measurable survey items.

The local government's role in SDG implementation in Malaysia is central to advancing sustainable policies and facilitating community participation. Various studies underscore the importance of this localised approach, as it helps LRGs address specific community needs and mobilise resources effectively [41]. However, challenges persist, including limited awareness of SDG relevance among local actors, weak coordination between stakeholders, and a lack of robust data systems to track progress [33][10].

Despite Malaysia's progress in SDG localisation, fostering meaningful citizen participation is not easy. Studies highlight factors such as limited capacity and resources, resistance to community-driven approaches, and the top-down nature of decision-making in many local governments as significant barriers [42][12]. These issues are compounded by power dynamics within local government structures, which often result in superficial forms of engagement rather than genuine collaboration. Moreover, research indicates that effective SDG implementation depends on mechanisms that allow for reciprocal actions between governments and citizens, with communities actively participating in setting priorities, monitoring progress, and adapting strategies. However, a lack of inclusive local frameworks and limited financial support often hampers this process, resulting in participation fatigue among citizens and inconsistent progress toward SDG targets [7].

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method sequential design [30] to explore and measure community participation in local government SDG initiatives. In the qualitative phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with policymakers, NGOs, and local government officers, while focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with community members. These qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis with NVivo software to identify recurring themes and patterns.

The analysis revealed four key dimensions of community participation: (1) providing input, (2) decision-making, (3) program implementation, and (4) monitoring. These dimensions, which serve as the dependent variables in the study, represent how citizens interact with governance processes to influence policy and program outcomes effectively. Insights from the qualitative findings were then operationalised to design survey items for the quantitative phase, ensuring alignment with the thematic framework and enhancing the robustness of the study's methodology.

Questionnaire Structure and Measures

In the quantitative phase, the framework is grounded in Shelly Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), adapted and modified for this research to three levels, which are (1) therapy, (2) tokenism, and (3) empowerment. Therapy includes forms of symbolic engagement, such as manipulation and informing, where citizens lack real influence. Tokenism involves limited engagement, such as consultation and placation, where citizens' opinions are heard but hold little weight in decision-making. Empowerment encompasses active participation, including partnership, delegation, citizen control and complete authority in governance, reflecting true empowerment and collaboration.

The questionnaire items were designed to measure how this simplifies Arnstein ladder correlates with the four dimensions of community participation: input sharing, decision-making, program implementation, and monitoring gathered in the qualitative phase in the localisation process of SDGs in the LRG. Twelve hypotheses were created, as shown in Fig. 1

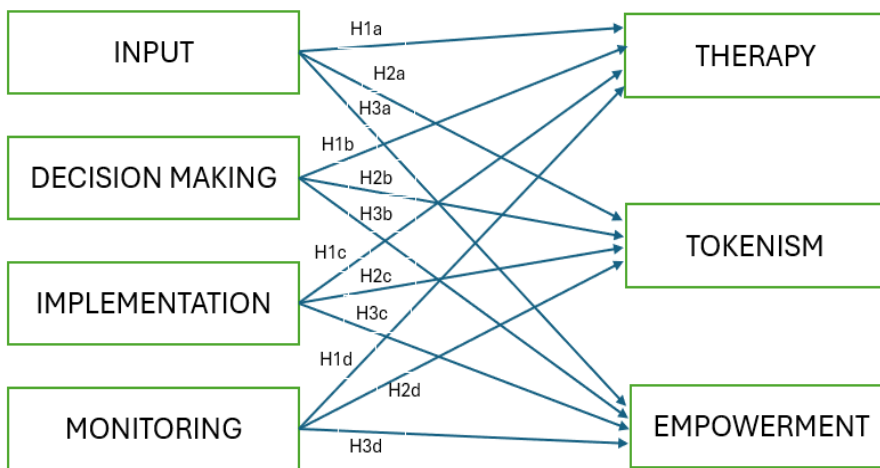


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

The Conceptual Framework (Fig. 1) adapts and simplifies Arnstein's original eight-rung ladder, making it practical for governance studies while capturing the spectrum of participation. Shelly Arnstein's ladder of participation offers a conceptual framework for examining varying levels of citizen engagement within decision-making processes, ranging from minimal non-participation to genuine empowerment. This study integrates the concepts of Therapy, Tokenism, and Empowerment with empirical insights from mechanisms such as Input Sharing, Decision-Making, Program Implementation, and Monitoring, highlighting the depth and nature of citizen participation in local government SDG localisation. This study provides a robust framework for evaluating and enhancing citizen participation by integrating qualitative insights with quantitative validation. It highlights pathways for governments to move from symbolic engagement toward genuine empowerment, aligning governance practices with democratic principles and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Data Collection

The data was collected through a structured Likert-style survey questionnaire distributed across various local government areas in Malaysia. Participants were selected through a convenience sampling method, and enumerators assisted in administering the survey to ensure a consistent understanding of the questions. A total of 293 responses were obtained, representing a diverse cross-section of communities involved in SDG-related activities at the local level.

Data Preprocessing

Before analysis, data preprocessing was performed to check for missing values, outliers, and adherence to PLS-SEM assumptions. Variables were standardised as required to facilitate comparison. Content validity was established through expert review by six faculty members from Malaysian universities, ensuring the questionnaire accurately captured the constructs under study. Out of 293 questionnaires distributed, only 162 were retained for analysis after careful data cleaning and quality checks.

Several cases were excluded to ensure the validity and reliability of the dataset. First, responses with more than 30% missing values (16) were removed to avoid compromising the analysis with incomplete data. Second, outliers were identified and excluded (24) using Mahalanobis's distance method, which detects extreme values that could disproportionately influence the results. Third, non-engaged responses, such as those exhibiting straight-lining behaviours (identical responses across all items in all variables), were discarded (33) as they indicated a lack of genuine participation.

Finally, responses from participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria, expressly those unaware (58) of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), were excluded to maintain the sample's representativeness. A mean imputation technique was employed to manage the remaining dataset and address residual missing values. Missing values were replaced with the mean of the corresponding variable, preserving the dataset's size

while minimising potential biases associated with data loss. This approach ensured the final dataset was robust and representative, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Assessment of Measurement Quality

The initial step in evaluating the model involves validating the measurement model's robustness. The goodness of measurement is scrutinised through construct validity and discriminant reliability considerations. Construct validity ensures that the measures accurately test the intended constructs, assessed through convergent and discriminant validity [17]. The recommended threshold for a valid loading value is above 0.50, with values of 0.70 and higher considered excellent for individual indicators [16].

Common method bias (CMV) was a major concern since the items in the latent constructs in the dependent variables are expected to produce high collinearity. Thus, to avoid common method bias, any occurrence of VIF greater than 3.3 is proposed as an indication of pathological collinearity. Items are deleted to ensure that all the VIFs in the inner model result are lower than 3.3 and that the model is free from common method bias [16]. The subsequent section presents additional statistics and analysis findings from the PLS method.

Table 1: Results of measurement model (summary of constructs validity and reliability of the latent constructs)

CONSTRUCT	ITEMS	OL	CA	CR	AVE
Input	INPUT1	0.816	0.921	0.925	0.76
	INPUT2	0.854			
	INPUT3	0.857			
	INPUT4	0.902			
	INPUT5	0.926			
Decision Making	DECMAKE1	0.872	0.897	0.906	0.707
	DECMAKE2	0.811			
	DECMAKE3	0.839			
	DECMAKE4	0.879			
	DECMAKE5	0.801			
Program Implementation	PROIMP1	0.783	0.933	0.943	0.792
	<i>PROIMP2</i>	0.920			
	<i>PROIMP3</i>	0.936			
	PROIMP4	0.928			
	PROIMP5	0.871			
Monitoring	MONITOR1	0.878	0.917	0.931	0.751
	MONITOR2	0.848			
	MONITOR3	0.911			
	MONITOR4	0.898			
	MONITOR5	0.793			

Therapy	THERAPY1	0.872	0.917	0.929	0.75
	<i>THERAPY2</i>	0.901			
	THERAPY3	0.859			
	THERAPY4	0.813			
	THERAPY5	0.884			
Tokenism	TOKEN1	0.783	0.930	0.942	0.783
	<i>TOKEN2</i>	0.927			
	<i>TOKEN3</i>	0.926			
	TOKEN4	0.930			
	TOKEN5	0.847			
Empowerment	EMPOWER1	0.801	0.878	0.88	0.733
	EMPOWER2	0.899			
	<i>EMPOWER3</i>	0.862			
	EMPOWER4	0.861			

Italic items are deleted from the final PLS-SEM analysis.

Reliability and Validity

The study's PLS-SEM model was evaluated for reliability and validity to ensure robust measurement of constructs. Composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated, with all constructs surpassing the 0.7 threshold for reliability and the 0.5 AVE threshold [16]. These results confirm that the constructs used in the study, which are input sharing, decision-making, program implementation, and monitoring, demonstrated good internal consistency and convergent validity.

Convergent validity evaluates the correlation among measurements within a construct by calculating the factor loading of indicators, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) [16][17]. AVE, representing the mean variance extracted for items loading on a construct, is deemed acceptable if it exceeds 0.5 [16]. This study confirms that the AVE values for all constructs surpass the recommended cutoff, as shown in Table 1. Additionally, the calculated composite reliability values exceed the 0.7 cutoff value [17], meeting the criteria for convergent validity. Table 1 presents the outcomes of the measurement model, confirming the validity of items for their respective constructs.

Reliability was tested through Cronbach's alpha coefficients, with internal consistency values ranging from 0.878 to 0.933, meeting the recommended threshold [23][24]. Factor analysis using principal component analysis (PCA) confirmed construct validity, with all measures demonstrating adequate internal consistency and convergent validity.

Table 2 Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) Results

	DECMAKE	EMPOWER	INPUT	MONITOR	PROIMP	THERAPY	TOKEN
DECMAKE	0.841						
EMPOWER	0.55	0.856					

INPUT	0.557	0.477	0.865				
MONITOR	0.725	0.643	0.405	0.862			
PROIMP	0.758	0.541	0.421	0.779	0.89		
THERAPY	0.63	0.677	0.613	0.583	0.552	0.867	
TOKEN	0.429	0.801	0.492	0.496	0.437	0.716	0.889

Cross-loadings, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio demonstrate discriminant validity. Both the cross-loading and Fornell-Larcker criterion are met, in which the latter shows that the square root of AVE (diagonal value) for each variable surpasses the correlation of latent variables [21]. At the same time, the former's cross-loading indicator's loading is greater than the indicators for its corresponding variables. At the same time, the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) suggested that thresholds of the value of HTMT should be less than 0.85 or 0.90 [17]. Table 2 shows that the HTMT requirement is met, indicating that discriminant validity has been proven.

Structural Model Assessment

The evaluation of the structural model, considering PLS's primary focus on prediction, involves examining the variance explained (R2) for Indigenous constructs and the significance of path estimates [16]. Bootstrap analysis with 500 resampling techniques was applied to determine the statistical significance of path coefficients [6][17][18].

The endogenous construct (Therapy) exhibits an R2 of 0.530, indicating that 53% of the variance in therapy can be explained by input providing, decision-making, program implementation, and monitoring. Meanwhile, the endogenous construct (Tokenism) exhibits an R2 of 0.351, indicating that 35.1% of the variance is in tokenism. Additionally, the endogenous construct (Empowerment) exhibits an R2 of 0.470, indicating 47% of the variance in empowerment. Based on Cohen's [6] and Hair's [16] guidelines, these R2 values signify a substantial effect. The results confirm a significant impact of input providing to therapy and tokenism but a very low-value input to empowerment. At the same time, monitoring impacted tokenism and empowerment, as shown in Fig 2.

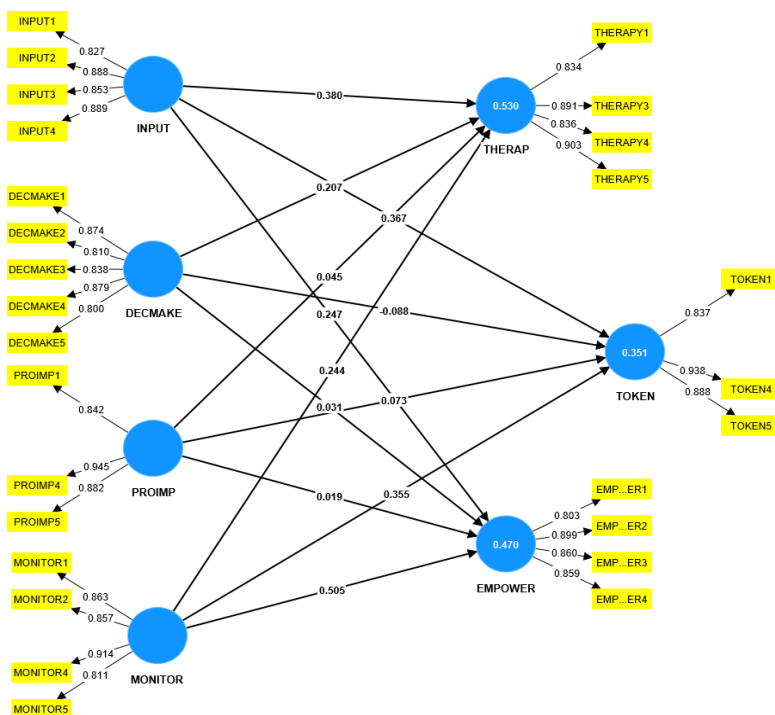


Fig. 2 Structural Model Assessment

The Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) method was employed for data analysis. The following section presents the results and hypothesis testing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study employs a quantitative research design using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to assess the relationships between community participation levels and perceived empowerment in localising SDGs within Malaysia's local government framework. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation provides the theoretical basis, offering a lens to evaluate citizen engagement through three levels: therapy, tokenism, and empowerment. PLS-SEM using Smart-PLS was used because of its ability to manage small samples (Hair et al., 2013) calculation due to the severe expulsion of samples from the survey response.

The model's fit was evaluated using variance explained (R^2) values for endogenous constructs and bootstrap analysis with 5000 resampling runs [17]. The study tested multiple hypotheses concerning the relationships between community participation dimensions and perceived empowerment outcomes. Hypotheses testing provided insights into which aspects of community participation (input sharing, decision-making, program implementation, and monitoring) were significantly related to perceptions of minimal participation (therapy), tokenism, and empowerment.

The sample's demographic profile indicates a heterogeneous group, with most females (59.68%) and males (34.95%), as shown in Table 3. The age distribution suggests that the predominant group is aged 18-24 (35.48%), succeeded by those aged 25-34 (25.27%), with fewer numbers in the later age categories. Sixty-six per cent of respondents possess a bachelor's degree. Regarding employment status, 50% are engaged in full-time work, whereas significant percentages are unemployed (20.43%) or students (16.67%). The monthly income distribution shows that the predominant category earns between RM1501 and RM3999 (37.63%), while a notable proportion chooses not to declare their income (38.17%). The marital status reveals that the majority are single (74.73%), with a predominant residence in urban areas (50%), followed by suburban (24.73%) and rural (16.67%) locales.

Table 3: Demographic of Respondent

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES	FREQUENCY	%
Gender		
Male	102	34.95
Female	174	59.68
Prefer Not To Say	15	5.38
Age		
18 to 24-Year-Old	104	35.48
25 to 34-Year-Old	74	25.27
35 to 44-Year-Old	60	20.43
45 to 54-Year-Old	49	16.67
55 to 64-Year-Old	3	1.08
65 And Older	2	0.54
Prefer Not to Say	2	0.54
Highest Education		

SPM And below (equivalent to O-level)	49	16.67
Diploma	24	8.06
Bachelor's degree	195	66.67
Post Graduate Degree	16	5.38
Prefer Not to Say	9	3.23
Occupation		
Employed Full-Time	146	50.00
Employed Part-Time	0	0.00
Self Employed	36	12.37
Unemployed	60	20.43
Student	49	16.67
Retired	2	0.54
Monthly Income		
Below RM1500	0	0.00
RM1501 to RM3999	110	37.63
RM4000 to RM7999	22	7.53
RM8000 to RM11999	19	6.45
RM12000 to RM14999	17	5.91
RM15000 and above	13	4.30
Prefer Not to Say	111	38.17
Marital Status		
Married	72	24.73
Single	218	74.73
Divorced	0	0
Widowed	0	0
Prefer Not to Say	2	0.54
Area of Residence		
Rural	49	16.67
Suburban	72	24.73
Urban	146	50.00
Prefer Not to Say	24	8.30

The survey data indicates that a substantial majority (68.82%) of respondents are aware of the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs), while a considerable segment (19.89%) is not, and 11.29% remain uncertain, as shown in Table 4. Most respondents assess their knowledge of SDGs as neutral (39.78%), while smaller segments rate it as low (29.03%) or very low (21.51%). Only a few respondents rate their understanding as high (5.91%) or very high (3.76%). Most (59.14%) have experienced information or campaigns about the SDGs in their community, while 26.34% have not, and 14.52% remain uncertain. Awareness of governmental or local governmental initiatives on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is divided, with 47.31% being aware and 52.69% unaware. Involvement in SDG-related activities is modest, with 28.49% participating, 47.85% never engaged, and 23.66% uncertain.

Table 4 Awareness and Participation in SDGs

Items	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Are you aware of SDG?		
Yes	201	68.82
No	58	19.89
Not Sure	33	11.29
How would you rate your knowledge of SDGS?		
Very Low	63	21.51
Low	85	29.03
Neutral	116	39.78
High	17	5.91
Very High	11	3.76
Have you encountered any SDG-related information or campaigns in your community?		
Yes	173	59.14
Never	77	26.34
Not Sure	42	14.52
Are you aware of the government or LG's efforts towards SDGs?		
Yes	138	47.31
No	154	52.69
Have you ever participated in any SDG-related activities in your community?		
Yes	83	28.49
Never	140	47.85
Not Sure	69	23.66

Hypotheses Testing and Path Analysis

The analysis investigates the impact of four citizen participation mechanisms on SDGs localisation in the Local government, which are providing input (INPUT), decision making (DECMAKE), program implementation (PROIMP), and monitoring (MONITOR) on three community participation outcomes in local government SDG localisation: THERAPY, TOKENISM, and EMPOWERMENT, which are modified based on

Arnstein's ladder of participation. Bootstrapping with 5000 samples was used to test the statistical significance of path coefficients, providing insights into the influence of each community participation dimension.

As shown in Table 5 shows that providing input significantly impacts all three levels of participation. Its most substantial effect is on Therapy (B=0.38, p<0.001), suggesting that soliciting citizen input leads to low-level participation outcomes. It indicates that governments may collect feedback to create an illusion of engagement without meaningful involvement. Providing input also significantly influences Tokenism (B=0.367,p<0.001), where citizens feel their voices are heard but lack substantial decision-making power, reflecting superficial inclusion in SDG processes. Lastly, INPUT has a positive but more negligible effect on Empowerment (B=0.247,p=0.001), suggesting that while citizen input can foster genuine influence, its impact is limited compared to other mechanisms.

Table 5 Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	relationship	(B)	T stat	P value	Decision	F ²
H1a	Input → therapy	0.38	3.842	0	yes	0.211
H1b	Decmake → therapy	0.207	1.307	0.191	no	0.029
H1c	Proimp → therap	0.045	0.276	0.783	no	0.001
H1d	Monitor → therapy	0.244	1.712	0.087	no	0.044
H2a	Input → token	0.367	4.318	0.000	yes	0.143
H2b	Decmake → token	-0.088	0.486	0.627	no	0.004
H2c	Proimp → token	0.073	0.41	0.682	no	0.001
H2d	Monitor → token	0.355	2.87	0.004	yes	0.068
H3a	Input → empower	0.247	3.268	0.001	yes	0.08
H3b	Proimp → empower	0.019	0.114	0.909	no	0
H3c	Decmake → empower	0.031	0.17	0.865	no	0.001
H3d	Monitor → empower	0.505	3.839	0.000	yes	0.169

Decision-making does not significantly affect Therapy, Tokenism, or Empowerment (p>0.05 for all relationships). This indicates that citizens' involvement in decision-making processes is either symbolic or constrained, failing to produce meaningful changes in SDG localisation outcomes. This finding suggests a need for citizens to have more authentic and impactful decision-making roles.

Program Implementation also shows no significant effects on participation outcomes (p>0.05 across all relationships). This result may imply that citizen involvement in program implementation in the local government SDG initiatives is perceived as operational rather than strategic, limiting its contribution to deeper engagement or empowerment. This highlights the need for citizens to be more active in shaping and steering program outcomes rather than simply executing predefined tasks.

Monitoring has mixed but significant effects. While its influence on therapy is marginal (B=0.244, p=0.087), it significantly impacts Tokenism (B=0.355, p=0.004) and Empowerment (B=0.505, p<0.001). The relationship between MONITOR and Empowerment points out the critical role of citizen oversight in shifting power dynamics, fostering accountability, and enabling meaningful participation in SDG localisation. This suggests that citizen monitoring is key for moving from symbolic to substantive involvement.

The effect size (f²), as shown in Table 5 analysis, revealed notable contributions for specific paths. The

relationship between INPUT and THERAPY exhibited a firm effect size ($f^2=0.21$), highlighting the substantial impact of citizens providing input on their perception of participation. Likewise, MONITORING and EMPOWERMENT showed a significant effect size ($f^2=0.169$), underscoring the critical role of monitoring in fostering citizen control and meaningful engagement in governance processes. These findings provide valuable insights into the mechanisms driving citizen participation in governance.

According to Arnstein's Theory, therapy represents the lowest rung of citizen participation, characterised by non-participation and superficial engagement, with governments seeking to "educate" or "cure" citizens through consultation mechanisms that do not foster real decision-making influence. In this study, therapy reflects instances of limited citizen engagement where input-sharing activities are conducted but fail to lead to meaningful participation. Input sharing positively correlated with perceptions of minimal participation, suggesting that citizens' involvement often remains symbolic, focusing on information gathering rather than power redistribution [26]. Input-sharing exercises may give the impression of participation, but they primarily sustain non-participatory modes of governance [1][11].

Tokenism represents a mid-level citizen engagement where citizens have avenues to express their voices but lack absolute decision-making authority or influence. This is typically reflected through consultations, feedback sessions, or public surveys, which symbolise inclusion but often do not lead to substantive changes [22]. This study's findings highlight that input sharing demonstrates a positive relationship with tokenism, with the strongest association observed in citizens' perception of limited engagement. Citizens often find their involvement confined to symbolic gestures rather than genuine decision-making power [8][1]. Similarly, citizen decision-making shows associations with tokenism but rarely leads to higher levels of empowerment or citizen control. Monitoring activities also yield mixed effects, as they are linked to tokenistic participation in some cases but can enhance citizens' engagement depending on the level of oversight and accountability they exercise.

Empowerment, the highest rung on Arnstein's ladder, reflects genuine citizen participation, perhaps marked by shared decision-making, control of resources, and accountability. It indicates the active and substantive engagement of citizens granted absolute authority to shape decision-making outcomes and influence local government actions. This study identified monitoring as a significant mechanism contributing to citizen empowerment. When communities actively monitor SDG initiatives and hold governments accountable, they experience heightened engagement and empowerment. The findings highlight that monitoring provides communities with opportunities to demand accountability and to ensure that SDG localisation initiatives are effectively implemented [15][4]. While Program Implementation and other forms of participation demonstrate positive engagement with tokenistic elements, they do not exhibit as strong a link with empowerment outcomes compared to monitoring [15][16][4]. Citizen involvement in governance strengthens public policy's legitimacy, accountability, and effectiveness. By incorporating diverse perspectives and local knowledge into decision-making processes, governments can develop more responsive and inclusive policies, addressing all citizens' needs more effectively. However, fostering citizen participation in governance is often challenging due to structural complexities within institutional frameworks [40].

The study reveals that while mechanisms such as input sharing, decision-making, and program implementation may facilitate forms of participation, they primarily operate within the lower rungs of Arnstein's ladder, mainly reflecting tokenistic involvement rather than genuine citizen empowerment. Only through active oversight and monitoring do citizens experience a more substantial shift toward empowerment, demonstrating the importance of accountability and shared power in fostering genuine engagement. This suggests that while local governments encourage various forms of citizen participation, they must work to move beyond symbolic involvement toward more profound, more substantive forms of citizen empowerment. The findings reveal a similar framework that suggests an essential link of citizen-generated data in design requirements to ensure the data is suitable for local monitoring [4], to enhance the visibility and impact of SDG Initiative [25], and to amplify citizen engagement [8][9][12].

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis identified several significant hypotheses in the relationships between citizen involvement

dimensions and levels of participation. Providing input was found to have a significant positive effect on Therapy (H1a), Tokenism (H2a), and Empowerment (H3a). Additionally, monitoring demonstrated a significant favourable influence on both Tokenism (H2d) and Empowerment (H3d), indicating its importance in fostering higher levels of community participation. Conversely, some hypotheses were found to be insignificant. Decision-making did not significantly influence Therapy, Tokenism, or Empowerment, suggesting that mere involvement in decision-making processes does not necessarily translate to perceived participation or empowerment. Similarly, Program Implementation did not significantly affect any outcome variables, indicating a limited impact of citizen participation in program execution on levels of involvement.

To enhance community participation in the localisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to progress toward genuine citizen empowerment, this study provides the following recommendations based on the analysis and findings. Local governments should establish structured and systematic avenues for community input at various stages of SDG-related initiatives. Beyond simple feedback collection, these mechanisms should empower citizens to influence decision-making processes actively. Structured forums, such as town halls, advisory councils, and digital platforms like online surveys, can provide consistent opportunities for citizens to express concerns, share ideas, and contribute meaningfully to local governance. Ensuring citizens' voices are systematically considered can shift engagement from tokenistic levels toward more meaningful participation.

Transparency is a critical factor in fostering trust and encouraging deeper community engagement. Local governments are encouraged to share clear and detailed information on how community feedback shapes policy decisions and regional development plans. This includes making updates on SDG progress and decision rationales publicly accessible. Transparent decision-making reassures communities of their role in contributing to local development goals, thereby building confidence and encouraging sustained participation.

Citizen participation should extend beyond input and decision-making into the monitoring and evaluation phases of SDG implementation. Local governments can integrate participatory monitoring mechanisms, such as citizen-led community audits and evaluation workshops, to enable residents to assess the progress of SDG initiatives, provide feedback, and suggest corrective actions. These monitoring initiatives foster a sense of ownership, accountability, and sustained empowerment by allowing citizens to ensure that SDG implementation aligns with their needs and priorities.

Collaboration with Civil society organisations (CSOs) can address resource gaps and bring specialised expertise to SDG initiatives. CSOs can facilitate public awareness campaigns, conduct training programs, assist in data collection, and support participatory monitoring efforts. These partnerships can expand community engagement, build strategic capacity, and strengthen citizens' ability to contribute meaningfully to SDG localisation.

Local governments should prioritise capacity-building initiatives to counter barriers such as limited awareness of SDGs and insufficient participation capacity. The survey responses in this research have shown that many do not know what SDG is. Tailored workshops, community education programs, and awareness campaigns can equip citizens with the knowledge and skills to engage meaningfully with SDGs and local governance processes. Special attention should be given to empowering marginalised groups, ensuring diverse perspectives are represented and included in the localisation process.

Local governments should align SDG objectives with local development planning to ensure that communities' priorities are at the centre of sustainable development strategies. The authority must devise a robust framework to implement these recommendations across various governance contexts, including rural and underdeveloped areas. By incorporating citizens' active and meaningful participation, governments can demonstrate their commitment to sustainability while providing a clear pathway for citizen participation. This integration creates opportunities for communities to engage in measurable, actionable objectives, fostering a shared vision for local and national SDG progress.

These recommendations aim to transition community participation from symbolic gestures and tokenistic

levels toward genuine empowerment within Arnstein's Ladder of Participation framework. Implementing these strategies would strengthen trust, create more inclusive governance practices, and ensure sustainable, community-driven solutions in SDG localisation efforts. By addressing barriers, fostering partnerships, and promoting transparency, local governments can strengthen community bonds, enhance citizen agency, and contribute meaningfully to sustainable development goals.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of community participation in localising sustainable development goals (SDGs) within local Malaysian governments, focusing on how different levels of involvement influence perceptions of empowerment, tokenism, and control. Using Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation as a guiding framework, the research revealed that while local governments often encourage citizen engagement through input sharing and involvement in program implementation, many efforts remain within tokenistic engagement. Citizens perceive empowerment and genuine influence over SDG activities just when they are actively engaged in monitoring and evaluation.

This study highlights critical implications for local governance and citizen participation in SDG localisation. The findings underline the need to shift from tokenistic practices toward meaningful community engagement across all stages of SDG implementation. Local governments can achieve this by adopting structured mechanisms for citizen input, ensuring transparency in decision-making, and promoting active community participation in monitoring efforts. These strategies can align SDG initiatives more closely with community priorities while enhancing accountability and improving project outcomes. Furthermore, fostering partnerships with civil society organisations (CSOs) and investing in capacity-building programs are vital. Such initiatives can empower communities by equipping them with the necessary knowledge, resources, and opportunities to participate effectively in sustainable development processes. This approach can help address barriers such as low awareness and resource constraints, creating a more inclusive and impactful path toward achieving SDG goals.

Despite the contributions of this study to understanding community participation in the localisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the lens of Arnstein's ladder of participation, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations may influence the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. First, only 162 out of 293 distributed questionnaires were used due to missing data, outliers, and non-engaged responses. Apart from that, the respondents were selected through a convenient sampling, which may limit the representativeness of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional design captures relationships simultaneously but cannot establish causal links or trends over time. Third, while the study focused on four participation mechanisms: providing input, decision-making, program implementation, and monitoring SDGs in the local government, other contextual factors or mechanisms influencing participation were not explored. Apart from that, the framework of the Arnstein ladder of participation rung is simplified and may undermine the Theory's full explanation. Fourth, the reliance on survey data may introduce biases such as recall and common method bias. Lastly, the findings are context-specific to local SDG localisation efforts in Malaysia and may not generalise to other countries or regions.

These limitations highlight the need for caution when interpreting the findings and suggest opportunities for future research. Future studies could expand the sample size, explore additional contextual variables, adopt longitudinal designs, and conduct cross-country comparisons to build on the findings and address the limitations identified in this study. Future research should investigate other factors affecting community participation, such as socio-economic constraints, access to digital platforms, and cultural dynamics, to provide a more nuanced understanding of effective SDG localisation. This study emphasises that meaningful community empowerment is central to advancing SDG goals and building resilient, sustainable communities, positioning local governments as facilitators and allies in sustainable development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is made possible by the support of the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) No:

FRGS/1/2021/SS0/UITM/03/1 by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia.

REFERENCE

1. Anmol, S., & Singh, R. (2019). Community participation in sustainable development: A case study of rural India. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.03.001>.
2. Annan-Aggrey, E., Bandaiko, E., & Arku, G. (2021). Localising the sustainable development goals in Africa: Implementation challenges and opportunities. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, (24), 4–23. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.958293729970017>.
3. Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>.
4. Ballerini, L., & Bergh, S. I. (2020). Using citizen science data to monitor the Sustainable Development Goals: A bottom-up analysis. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 112, 28-38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2020.06.011>.
5. Caraveo, Y. C., & Linares Pontón, M. E. (2007). Promoting child and youth participation in the creation of citizenship. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 17(2), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.17.2.0001>.
6. Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203771587>.
7. Dauda, S., & Hasan, S. (2018). Media strategies for promoting Sustainable Development Goals. *Arab Media Society*. <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/media-strategies-for-promoting-sustainable-development-goals/>.
8. Dreyer, M., et al. (2018). Public engagement with research: Citizens' views on motivations, barriers and support. PROSO Project, European Union. https://www.proso-project.eu/downloads/proso_d6.1_final_report.pdf.
9. Dziva, C., & Kabonga, I. (2021). Opportunities and challenges for local government institutions in localising sustainable development goals in Zimbabwe. In *Sustainable Development Goals for Society Vol. 1: Selected topics of global relevance* (pp. 123-140). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57927-3_7.
10. Etheraj, P., Wahab, S. A., Osman, S. I. W., Zawawi, N. M., & Fazal, S. A. (2018). Sustainable development and innovation: Reviewing the concept and Malaysian participation. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(9), 1211–1226. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v8-i9/4692>.
11. Fraisl, D., et al. (2020a). Closing the gap: Citizen science for monitoring sustainable development. *Nature Sustainability*, 3(10), 851-858. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-020-0582-1>.
12. Fraisl, D., et al. (2020b). Mapping citizen science contributions to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. *Sustainability Science*, 15(6), 1735-1751. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00833-7>.
13. Gaber, J. (2019). Building "A ladder of citizen participation". *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 85(3), 13-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2019.1612267>.
14. Gaventa, J., & Barrett, G. (2012). Mapping the outcomes of citizen engagement. *World Development*, 40(12), 2399-2410. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2012.05.014>.
15. Ghorbani, M., Niazi, M., & Madani, K. (2017). Community engagement in sustainable development: Lessons from Iran. *Sustainable Development*, 25(5), 456-467. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1678>.
16. Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C., & Sarstedt, M. (2013). *A primer on partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM)*. Sage Publications, Inc.
17. Henseler, J., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2015). A new criterion for assessing discriminant validity in variance-based structural equation modeling. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 43(1), 115-135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-014-0403-8>.
18. Henseler, J., Hubona, G., & Ray, P. A. (2016). Using PLS path modeling in new technology research: Updated guidelines. *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, 116(1), 2-20. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMDS-09-2015-0382>.
19. Horn, V., & Draude, C. (2024). The ladder of data citizen participation: A sociotechnical lens for designing democratic digital services in the data economy. *Interacting with Computers*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/iwc/iwae038>.
20. Jin, S.-H. (2022). Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation in the life extension and decommissioning

- process of the Kori-1 Nuclear Power Plant. *NGO yeon'gu*, 17(1), 179-221. <https://doi.org/10.35225/kdps.2022.17.1.179>.
21. Munoz, A. (2022). Community engagement and sustainable development: A case study from Latin America. *Journal of Community Development*, 53(2), 123-140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2022.1234567>.
 22. Neshkova, M. I., & Guo, H. (2012). Public participation and organisational performance: Evidence from state agencies. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(2), 267-288. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mur038>.
 23. Nunnally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. H. (1994). *Psychometric Theory* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill. https://books.google.com/books/about/Psychometric_theory.html?id=r0fuAAAAMAAJ.
 24. Peterson, R. A. (1994). A meta-analysis of Cronbach's coefficient alpha. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(2), 381-391. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209405>.
 25. Priambodo, Y., & Yulianto, E. (2024). Localising Sustainable Development Goals in rural areas: A case study on rising awareness in Pohjejer Village, East Jawa, Indonesia. *JPSI (Journal of Public Sector Innovations)*, 8(2), 78-87. <https://doi.org/10.26740/jpsi.v8n2.p78-87>.
 26. Quick, K. S., & Feldman, M. S. (2011). Distinguishing participation and inclusion. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 31(3), 272-290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X11410979>.
 27. Rasheed, M. I., Malik, M. J., Pitafi, A. H., Iqbal, J., Anser, M. K., & Abbas, M. (2020). Usage of social media, student engagement, and creativity: The role of knowledge sharing behavior and cyberbullying. *Computers & Education*, 159, 104002. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104002>.
 28. Reddy, P. S. (2016). Localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). *African Journal of Public Affairs*, 9(2), 1-15. <https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/EJC-7b8b8f8a0>.
 29. Rosen, J., & Painter, G. (2019). From citizen control to co-production. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 85(3), 335-347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2019.1618727>.
 30. Sekaran, U., & Bougie, R. (2010). *Research Methods for Business: A Skill-Building Approach* (5th ed.). John Wiley & Sons. https://books.google.com/books/about/Research_Methods_For_Business.html?id=Ko6bCgAAQBAJ.
 31. Shibuya, K. (2020). Community participation in urban planning: A case study of Tokyo. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 42(3), 345-360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2020.1716698>.
 32. Suarez-Reyes, M., & Beoucke, M. (2023). The impact of tokenistic participation on community trust: Evidence from Latin America. *Community Development Journal*, 58(2), 234-250. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsab045>.
 33. Tan, S. (2019). Achieving Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals and environmental lessons for Malaysia. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 7(2), 233-269. <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2019.9>.
 34. Turner, R. (2024). Tokenism in public participation: Impacts on trust and governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 34(1), 45-60. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muaa045>.
 35. United Cities and Local Government (UCLGa). (n.d.). Roadmap for localising the SDGs: Implementation and monitoring at subnational level. Retrieved from https://uclg.org/sites/default/files/roadmap_for_localizing_the_sdgs_0.pdf.
 36. United Cities and Local Government (UCLGb). (n.d.). Policy recommendations: Our roadmap to accelerate the achievement of SDGs. Retrieved from <https://uclg.org/en/news/policy-recommendations-our-roadmap-accelerate-achievement-sdgs>.
 37. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2020). Guidelines for community engagement in support of sustainable development goals. <https://www.undp.org/publications/guidelines-community-engagement-support-sustainable-development-goals>.
 38. UN-Habitat. (2019). Localising the SDGs: What, why, how? State of African Cities. Retrieved from <https://unhabitat.org/urban-issues/sustainable-urban-development/african-cities-report>.
 39. Urquijo-Reguera, J., Illán Sailer, J. C., Trobat Llompart, M., & Canal Oliveras, R. (2024). A methodology for prioritising sustainable development goals targets at the local level: The case of Barcelona City Council. *Sustainable Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.3228>.
 40. Yadav, B. (2024). Citizen Participation in Government Decision-Making. *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, 9(4), 267-271. <https://doi.org/10.31305/riijm.2024.v09.n04.033>.

41. Yusof, M. I. B. M., & Ariffin, M. (2020). A journey towards sustainability: A review on sustainable development implementation in Malaysia. 14th International UMT Annual Symposium, UMTAS 2019, 494(1). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/494/1/012001>.
42. Yusof, R., Yusof, M. I. M., Rahman, F. A. A., Sabri, M. F., Ariffin, M., & Hadžikadunić, E. (2024). Catalysing change: Unveiling tailored strategies for localising sustainable development goals in Southeast Asia. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*, 8(2), 1887-1911.