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## **Localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals in an Emerging Nation**

### **Abstract**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed to by all member countries of the United Nations, require urgent action on the world's most pressing problems. Success requires bottom-up participation of local stakeholders. This case study of Timor-Leste – a fledgling, fossil fuel supported economy – maps the awareness and commitment of grassroots stakeholders to the SDGs and the roadblocks to localisation. Guiding this paper is Habermas' view of societal evolution and communicative action, which aids analysing the socio-political and structural dynamics affecting SDGs localisation in a developing nation. This study reveals stakeholder inability to articulate a clear vision for the SDGs, lack of human capital and funds, a weak public-administrative system, strong socio-political nuances, and poor governance infrastructure to support multi-stakeholder relationships. This paper provides insights for developing a more nuanced and robust public intervention to support local stakeholders that will enable knowledge, cultural and communication transformations required for successful SDGs localisation.

*Keywords:* Timor-Leste, localisation, multi-stakeholder engagement, public governance of SDGs, socio-political economy, societal evolution, cultural identity

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## **Introduction**

The 17 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) present a visionary agenda for a more equitable, prosperous, and sustainable world by 2030 (Oosterhof, 2018). Although led by national governments, the achievement of SDG targets also requires bottom-up engagement and support from local grassroots stakeholders, making localisation efforts a critical process (Lucci, 2015). The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (GTLRG) defines localisation as “the process of taking into account subnational contexts in the achievement of the subnational agenda” (2016, p. 6). GTLRG asserts that in general, localisation comprises four key steps: i) awareness raising; ii) advocacy; iii) local implementation; and iv) monitoring & evaluation. These four steps need to be addressed at the subnational level by local stakeholders to successfully diffuse a national SDGs strategy. Current literature on localisation of global policies suggests that the institutional, cultural and knowledge eco-systems at multiple governance levels affect new policy diffusion (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016; Valencia et al., 2019), including diffusion of the SDGs.

The empirical evidence on the integration and diffusion of the 17 interdependent SDGs is only emerging (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017), with research efforts largely focusing on middle income countries (Horn & Grugel, 2018), and transition economies (Galli et al., 2018).

However, there is a lack of investigation of the problems faced by poor developing countries in localising the SDGs with their own socio-political nuances and cultural history. It is within this context of poor developing countries with strong cultural histories that this paper aims to address a research gap.

Institutional and governance mechanisms which are critical for public policy diffusion are often nascent in poor countries, calling into question more nuanced and innovative ways to building awareness, commitment, and ability to undertake actions that are aligned with the global sustainable development agenda. Multi-stakeholder arrangements examined by Fowler

and Biekart (2017), using a comparative analysis of four developing countries, found that these complex arrangements for implementing SDGs need better quality interlocutors, i.e., hosts who are instrumental for facilitating communications and brokering among different stakeholders. Likewise, Beisheim et al. (2018) examine two SDGs-focused multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) in Kenya in the water sector and found that efforts to translate knowledge from partnership to national-level meta-governance for MSPs remain marginal. The two MSPs reveal existing national-level meta-governance structures in Kenya to be either defunct, largely driven externally (e.g., by donors) and/or rather fragmented. Overall, this nascent body of literature remains limited on how SDGs localisation can occur successfully within poorer countries. We contend that further inquiry is needed on the role of a nation's socio-political historical context juxtaposed against its extant economic realities to fully capture the risks, barriers, and enablers for SDGs localisation.

This study assesses the localisation of the SDGs with specific focus on key stakeholders' awareness, and their willingness and ability to engage with their nationally endorsed SDGs plan within Timor-Leste (TL) – a newly emerging, economically impoverished nation. As such, the focus of this study is the SDGs localisation process by stakeholder organisations in TL in the context of a strong rhetorical commitment to the SDGs by the national government. TL emerged as an independent country in 2002 after more than 400 years of colonisation by Portugal and 24 years of tragic invasion and occupation by Indonesia (Leach, 2017). A third of the population is still illiterate and the majority survive on subsistence agriculture (RDTL, 2019). This lack of literacy and economic currency severely limits the populations' knowledge of the SDGs and successful adoption of the SDGs agenda which can be potentially overcome by social learning (Courvisanos & Boavida, 2018). The years of servitude to their colonial masters did not dampen the Timorese national identity, language, and culture, which remains distinct from that of Indonesia and Portugal. This cultural

resilience has created a strong “common civic identity” (Kingsbury, 2012), and forms the basis for engaging the Timorese community with any agenda that connects with their own vision of the nation.

Further, like most other young nations, TL lacks a strong framework of business, professional and financial institutions, legal and justice systems. Historical revenue sources from sandalwood and coffee are now virtually non-existent, with rural activity largely dominated by subsistence agriculture. The discovery of oil in the Timor Sea provides the country with much needed funds for development, but this has borne several sustainable development threats in environmental, social and community development (Courvisanos & Boavida, 2018).

The democratically elected government of TL embraced the SDGs (United Nations, 2015) from the start (September 2015) and saw this as the path to socially inclusive development by incorporating them into their already existing Strategic Development Plan (SDP) which was their blueprint for development adopted in 2011 (RDTL, 2011). To align the national development agenda (SDP) with the SDGs, the TL Government led by the then Prime Minister, Dr Rui de Araújo, went on a large round of presentations and talks to inform the community at large and encourage local stakeholder organisations to take ownership of the SDGs Roadmap that the government had developed. Given the extremely difficult task of connecting with a largely poor illiterate population, the localisation of the SDGs ends up with key stakeholder organisations in the TL community. The nature of this community dictates that the key stakeholders comprise organisations that are significant actors in the development process; financial institutions (FI) – including microfinance institutions and credit unions, social and private enterprises (SP), non-government organisations (NGOs), and civil society organisations (CSOs). Examination of the commitment to SDGs by these stakeholders is imperative for understanding the trajectory of TL economic development as it

faces an uncertain political and economic future. Critical to this investigation is the extent of localisation of the government's SDGs agenda wedged as it is between government-driven SDP-based 'big development' sustained by oil/gas extraction, reflecting a "predominantly top-down, neoliberal paradigm", and "local communities...[with]...highly participatory program[s]" that are 'bottom-up' niche innovative solutions (Cryan, 2015, p. 141).

The overall aim of this study is to assess the factors affecting the localisation of the SDGs by key stakeholder organisations in TL. We employ a stakeholder conceptual lens, focusing on their awareness and approach to advocacy and local implementation. Thus, two research questions are posed:

1. What is the level of awareness and commitment by business and community stakeholder organisations in TL towards the SDGs?
2. What are the factors that enable or inhibit business and community stakeholder organisations in TL to contribute to their national SDGs and to sustainable development in general?

Our research approach is guided by the framework of societal evolution and communicative action, developed by Jürgen Habermas (1979; 1987) to explain how in modern societies humans communicate to create, sustain, and develop social relationships. A central assumption of the theory of communicative action is that social relationships and actions take place through language with agreement or consensus reached through a common understanding of norms, meaning and values while valuing and maintaining social relationships (Habermas, 1979). As such, for this study the Habermas (1987) framework is seen as appropriate for it facilitates contextualising the impacts of the socio-cultural and political system in TL on stakeholder organisations and their identification with the 2030 SDGs agenda. In other words, the aim is to recognise the localisation mechanisms – from

broad socio-culture norms to specific operational imperatives that underly how stakeholders contribute to the sustainable development process through the SDGs.

The Habermas approach provides a unique contribution to the development agenda in terms of a theory of societal action that links development stakeholders to the SDGs via localisation. The Habermas framework has not been previously used in this SDG localisation context. It extends upon past conceptual approaches that have largely examined actions on SDGs either from macro level factors, e.g., government, socio-political systems; or micro level factors, e.g., organisational systems. Instead, this approach brings into focus the Lifeworld, or socio-cultural and historical factors that provide a better understanding of the meanings given to the SDGs by a social group. In doing so, this study fills the literature gap where the historical socio-cultural interpretative lens is omitted.

Based on 28 interviews (26 stakeholders and 2 government organisations), this study maps the contextual factors shaping the TL journey towards achieving the SDGs. The findings reveal stakeholder inability to articulate a clear vision for the SDGs, lack of human capital in sustainability management training, lack of funds for sustainability initiatives aligned with national SDGs, and little tangible effective public administration in support.

The results of this research provide much needed empirical evidence on stakeholders' awareness, commitment, and capabilities to undertake sustainability initiatives that are aligned with the SDGs at the local level (advocacy and local implementation). This study also contributes to the literature on SDGs localisation in developing countries. This study would be of interest to sustainability researchers, policy makers and global organisations advocating localisation as a pathway for the success of the SDGs as a guided development agenda.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The next section provides a literature review of localisation of the SDGs, followed by a description of the conceptual framework

underpinning our study. The following two sections delineate the research method and discuss findings from the study, respectively. The final section provides limitations and conclusions of the study.

### **Background – The SDGs and localisation**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were critical for the global awakening on poverty reduction, but somewhat failed to get a buy-in from developing nations due to its reliance on a top-down diffusion approach (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2013; Sumner & Tiwari, 2010, p. 14). By contrast, a more consultative process was implemented in forming the SDGs agenda, which advocates for SDGs localisation based on strong government leadership that is diffused through business and community consultation and participation, premised on a bottom-up approach (Oosterhof, 2018).

Past studies examining SDGs localisation process indicate various facilitating and inhibiting factors such as political bias, incoherence by government policies, lack of community awareness and knowledge, and ability to connect to civic identity. For instance, Horn and Grugel (2018) in their study based on Ecuador suggest that one facet of localisation is the varied interpretations of the SDGs by policy makers who have an inherent bias towards targets considered to be relevant to their country and consider the SDGs ambiguous in the context of the changing global political architecture. Galli et al. (2018) recognise that for the ambitious SDGs in the transition economy of Montenegro to be successful requires strengthening administrative capacities and investment to address governance gaps in the localisation process. Valencia et al. (2019), in a seven-country study, find that the delineation of urban boundaries and an integrated coherent governance approach between levels of government and other sectors is important when implementing the SDGs at the local level. Tan et al. (2019) provide a preliminary exploratory study of cases studies on localisation of SDGs and find that a systems approach is helpful in the localisation of SDGs, and that the



implicit (or tacit) knowledge of local actors is the key to informing local communications and decision-making. Benn et al. (2006, p. 234) describe how a “sustaining organization” appears as a champion in its local community, using “its influence so that society will progress toward a more equitable...[and]...ecological renewal.” For success, all the above localisation processes that support SDGs require to be wrapped around a strong sense of equality and unity under a civic identity for policy enactment (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016).

In summary, SDGs localisation involves multi-stakeholder groups and processes that necessitate awareness with a willingness and ability to link local actions and global goals (Oosterhof, 2018). In the next section, this link is developed through a Habermas framework that Unerman and Bennett (2004) identify as a moral consensus building process for achieving effective dialogue between diverse stakeholders and authorities.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Habermas model of societal evolution (1987) provides a broad framework that enables identification of formal and informal mechanisms that affect decision-making in multi-stakeholder relationships in society. The Habermas model is a valuable tool of analysis for any socio-political issue that has significant economic inferences, as Zacharias (2007) shows in adopting the same analytical tool to understand country mechanisms operating in relation to work-life balance. The conceptual framework set out in Figure 1 explicates Habermas’ approach to integrating three analytical stages from societal evolution perspective, called Lifeworld (LW), Steering Media (SM) and Systems (SYS) (shown on the left-hand side of the figure). On the right-hand side of Figure 1, each of the three stages of the Habermasian model is applied to issues related to SDGs localisation for a given nation. The three right-hand boxes identify relevant SDG factors at the broad societal and cultural level (LW) as well as policies related to environmental and public administrative issues (SM), and finally at the organisational level (SYS).

**Insert Figure 1 about here**

**Figure 1. Conceptual framework to implement SDGs**

At the top of Figure 1, LW represents various intangible interpretative elements made up of culture, society, and personality dimensions that are critical for providing meanings to what a society believes in and its acceptable attitudes, norms, and values. Applied to the context of SDGs, the first analytical stage centres around the attitudes towards SDGs, and the assumptions on the importance and relevance of the global goals to society and to the nation. When relating these dimensions to TL, a strong cultural identity exists that is associated with resilience, survival and freedom as defining societal values formed in a cauldron of exploitative colonisation and violent invasion (Leach, 2017). This is the LW that influences attitudes towards the concept of sustainability underpinned by the SDSGs Roadmap. The ‘Personality’ dimension within the TL context captures the beliefs and experiences of the Timorese people with their deep traditional sustainability values. Subsequently, the rich LW defined by TL’s distinct national and cultural identity can be expected to affect the next two stages.

The second analytical stage of the framework, as depicted in Figure 1, refers to the abstract actors related to the political and legal framework that sets laws, regulations, and standards (Power) and the financial institutions and investors driven by profit/surplus (Money). As such, governments and other ‘steering’ social institutions influence or steer discussions and policymaking in specific ways. Broadbent et al. (1991) identify government, professional and financial institutions as SM features or organs of power.

The organs of Power and Money play a critical role in shaping and setting the rules and administrating them. This forms an integrative force between the first and third stages in order to “...guarantee social cohesion” (Zacharias, 2007, p. 88). Thus, the implementation of

the SDGs in an orderly and effective manner becomes a function of the relevant organs of power and money within a nation that can also further define the national sentiments and values of sustainability and the SDGs. In relation to the TL contextual setting, the organs of power and money represented by legislation and ethical standards associated with the SDGs, and funds from the Petroleum Revenue earmarked for SDGs are critical actors expected to play an important steering role in SDGs localisation.

The third analytical stage of the Habermasian framework (shown in Figure 1) is SYS, which refers to the institutional framework comprising the extant stakeholder organisations, institutions, and socio-political economy of a country. Broadbent et al. (1991) see SYS as consisting of economic or administrative organisations. In all such contexts, these organisations have operating systems that function in the community/local space in response to the SM. Essentially, SYS operate through actions of the SM, but follow LW imperatives. From the TL contextual setting, it is expected that achieving the SDGs in TL requires local stakeholder organisations to develop SDGs diffusion eco-systems that are aligned with the broader societal attitudes and values on sustainability so as to have coherent awareness and commitment to the SDGs. This includes having business organisational level policies, systems and practices that respond to the sustainable development challenge set up by the TL government going forward to 2030.

Overall, the three stages of the Habermasian framework facilitates understanding how SDGs localisation can occur through public administration and policymaking that are themselves shaped by the wider cultural and community values and the organisational level systems and processes. Furthermore, the Habermasian framework encourages transparent dialogue where it is contended that “[I]f all participants in dialogue have the same opportunity to employ communicatives, that is, to initiate communication and continue it through speaking and responding of asking questions and giving answers, then equally distributing

opportunities...” are put forth to realise effective long-term outcomes (Habermas, 2001, p. 98). However, the efficacy and dynamics among the different stages and elements within this framework in relation to SDGs localisation remains an empirical issue to be studied within a given country setting.

## **Method**

In this study, a multi-stakeholder qualitative approach is adopted following prior studies (Beisheim et al., 2018; Fowler & Biekart, 2017) based on in-depth interviews of senior management staff from seven financial institutions (FIs: two banks, two microfinance institutions and three credit unions), 11 business enterprises (eight private and three social), six NGOs (one international and five Timorese), and two CSOs (both Timorese). Appropriate human research ethics approval was obtained. The 26 organisations in our sample provide a comprehensive coverage of the business, social (not-for-profit), and voluntary organisations within the TL community that are independent of the government. To gauge political support within the government, two interviews were conducted with senior representatives of two government departments guided by a separate set of questions.

The first 19 interviews were conducted in Tetum (local language) by a Timorese research assistant in the period December 2017 to June 2018; and who then translated them to English. A senior academic colleague at Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa’e verified the translation. The remaining nine interviews were conducted in English by one of the authors during September-October 2018.

The transcribed data was imported into NVivo and coded into nodes, based on the research questions and the Habermasian framework themes such as social and cultural values. The nodes were sub-classified into appropriate thematic categories, based on the responses: for example, the node collecting information about “expected challenges to SDG

implementation” was classified into sub-categories of corruption, gender inequality, lack of communication, and so on (see description of thematic analysis in Braun & Clarke, 2006). To provide context to the interviews, a desktop review of each organisation’s website (17) and Facebook pages (5) was undertaken, where available. With the help of the research assistant, websites/Facebook pages in Tetum were also reviewed. The use of multiple participants and sources of evidence helped to increase internal validity of data (Yin, 2009). Further, any emerging issues were clarified through additional follow-up questions asked via email or Facebook messenger.

## **Findings**

Four themes identified from the interview data ensue in this section. With participants representing a variety of organisations, codes are used to connect direct quotations to the type of organisation, i.e., government (G), financial institution (FI) or other multi-sector stakeholder (MS).

### *A. Context of SDGs*

TL’s VI Constitutional Government (16/2/15 to 15/9/17) publicised its commitment to the SDGs using mass media (including television) and information sessions, often led by the Prime Minister Dr Araújo (often referred to as “Dr Rui”). One government official stated: “We must adopt the SDGs to develop in more sustainable way. We also have the policy and regulation to support the idea of SDGs” (G01), and “...as a government we want to focus to develop education, health, water, sanitation and women participation”. Another government official stated: “The Prime Minister in his speech encouraged the private sector to be able to help fund the programs that we aim to reach. Private sector is important to help implementing SDGs.” (G02). Yet, the private sector is very small in TL (Inder & Cornwell, 2016).

Importantly, the government's rhetoric on the importance of SDGs in relation to key national development issues such as health and well-being flags a positive posture.

In the first year of committing to the SDGs, success of the government in building awareness is evident as the SDGs Roadmap "...was promoted by our former Prime Minister Dr Rui..." (MS06). Of the 26 organisations interviewed, only four had not heard of the SDGs, nor of their government's commitment. These were four very small organisations; two social enterprises, one private enterprise, and one credit union. The one private enterprise organisation in this group of four was an innovative outlier. The owner (and interviewee) of this small business was not aware of the existence of the SDGs, and so the formal interview ended there. However, a subsequent informal discussion, Facebook page and follow-up questions revealed he had a strong Timorese cultural commitment to the natural ecosystem and the social Timorese community. At the other end of the commitment spectrum, two significant local NGOs working in the sustainable agriculture space strongly promoted awareness of the SDGs.

Two interviewees noted the contradiction with the TL Government promoting the SDGs while having its long-term funding commitment to the SDP. An interviewee was critical of the government's standard 'big development' SDP process while rhetorically committing to the SDGs: "Development tends to focus in the city only and [the rest are] left behind...[yet] we don't pay attention to the agriculture sector, but only focusing on big/mega projects and big industry..." (FI02) From this evidence, the rhetorical stance of the government explicated in the SM framework stage, exhibited considerable success in localising the SDGs across a wide spectrum of organisations. However, scepticism emerged on whether government could embed the SDGs in practice, given Power and Money prevailing through big development committed projects, in contrast to the pledge in the SDGs agenda that "no one will be left behind" (UNDP, 2020, p. 6).

## *B. Commitment to SDGs*

The 22 stakeholders aware of the SDGs were very clear that the global goals were important for their organisation and acknowledged their importance for inclusive development of TL.

Figure 2 sets out in a network diagram the organisational divergence across the four types of organisations (blue hubs) with their specific nominated SDGs. The diagram reflects the different LWs of the organisations with the focus of NGOs and CSOs on ecology, energy and inclusive SDGs, whereas FIs focus is on economic and social SDGs.

**Insert Figure 2 about here**

### **Figure 2. Nominated SDGs by types of organisations**

Each FI nominated many SDGs; many more than those nominated by the other three organisational types. However, they tended to allocate responsibility for these SDGs to other organisations who they “supported” through finance. This reflects their status in the SM (Money) stage. Also, the SM status of FIs was manifest by having designated two SDGs (SDG16 Peace and Justice Strong Institutions & SDG17 Partnerships for the Goals) in a lowly fourth rank; both SDGs being seen from the government’s Roadmap as longer-term broad social goals. For SDG5 Gender Equality, a FI showed strong support for this issue, with their representative noting: “We provide loans to women in rural areas for them to plant vegetables, start small kiosk, [raise] livestock and sell it to the market” (FI02). Another stated that 95% of their microfinance clients were women (FI03). This is incredibly important as MS09 clearly identified the wide gender gap: “Male domination is very strong, men will do all the talking, take the decisions. Female will just follow. We also have groups that mostly the members are men”.

There were five organisations nominating SDG7 Affordable and Clean Energy, but one bank was highly critical of the government’s historical position on investing heavily in diesel

power stations prior to the 2015 SDGs commitment. This bank representative stated: “So far, we have some proposals to work on this idea [renewable energy] but when we approach the government, some people in the government think that we do not need it.” (FI02) In fact, another participant clarified this position: “The government’s non-commitment to alternative energy doesn’t help in changing public perceptions” (MS13). At the same time electricity remains expensive, and many Timorese continue to use firewood from forests as cooking fuel given the high price of alternate fuels (FI02). This reflects the lock-in existing at the SYS stage in the energy space for TL.

Participants recognised lack of government action across this diverse SDGs agenda, with MS12 concluding: “Government ignorance of local initiative...and lack of government support to local entrepreneurs.” As an example, in reference to SDG11 Sustainable Cities and Communities (with seven nominations), one interviewee indicated the lack of commitment by government to this SDG: “Even though the land law has been approved by Parliament and promulgated by the President, it is still not working...” (FI02). Overall, this reflects the slow progress in the Power stage by TL that is frustrating movement to successfully engage with the SDGs agenda.

There were varied responses to the perceived reasons that SDGs are important to the organisation, local community, and the country. The strong majority considered the SDGs important as they focussed on holistic development in terms of the SYS stage, with environmental protection critical in addressing the scourge of climate change because “it is easy for us to destroy the ecosystem and habitat in nature, but it is very difficult to recover it again.” (MS06)

Dilemmas emerged in the interviews in respect to the importance of the SDGs agenda. One interviewee was very perceptive in recognising the need for the country to be a fossil fuel exporter, but this conflicted with sustainable development: “Today [when] people talk about



economic growth in Timor, it is focused on oil...So now how can we build an economy on the basis of nature, harmony between the human, the economic and environment?" (MS04)

Other interviewees recognised the importance of farming: "...climate change impacts on agriculture production is very serious, as most of our farmers depend on agriculture for their main source of income and food." (FI01). For example, stakeholders are critical of the flooding of the local markets with cheap imported food. They see the lack of subsidies and support for local agriculture results in much higher price for local products and thus finds fewer buyers willing to pay (FI02). On the other hand, MS14 was able to encourage organic farming in their sphere of influence and sell this produce at a premium profitably, but this is a highly limited niche endeavour due to the small scale of this operation. Further, an NGO interviewee suggested an alternative model of development based on sustainability: "Yes, we think this is very important as SDGs aim to find a model for development that will protect our environment and people, and to reduce the social gap." (MS05) One microfinance interviewee recognised the task of achieving eventual social justice and peace through a model of sustainable development by noting the need to be "...sustainable in the area of education, infrastructure, economic, health, and others in general" (FI04).

From those organisations that recognise the SDGs, most viewed their relevance and practicality as unclear; thus, no active decisions emerged (i.e., passive SDGs awareness). These organisations noted that the SDGs are relevant to TL. When interviewed they were unsure how to practically commit and implement SDGs; one NGO noted: "I look around for some examples where I could demonstrate the importance of SDGs, yet I could not find recent practical examples of how we use the SDGs." (MS08) Another NGO expressed a cynical view that the SDGs are only important because the TL Government said they were, stating: "SDGs [are] important because we are a member of the United Nations and UN has

set out these goals and [thus] adopted by our government.” (MS01) This view reinforces passivity and not action at the SYS stage.

Overall, despite differing LWs across types of organisations and limited SM succour, the localisation commitment appeared to be strong. A few organisations showed a clear perspective on how to engage with small, limited niche communities to spread the sustainable development message, while most lacked guidance on how to engage and thus the SYS is unable to adjust.

### *C. Actions to Show Commitment to SDGs*

Each interviewed organisation had a different view on how to demonstrate commitment to SDGs, which they recognised as relevant. None of the organisations had the wherewithal to allocate specific funds for SDGs promotion or compliance, except in actions that fit in with their specific ethical commitments. For example, one private enterprise demonstrated commitment by employing only local people to engender a sense of ownership by the community. In addition, two of the private businesses saw their social responsibility as donating substantial funds to community centres, blood donation camps, schools, free internet at university, and to an orphanage. Such donations implicitly promote inclusive sustainable communities under SDG11. An FI recognised SDG5 Gender Equality by ensuring a “...gender balance in accessing financial services...and to encouraging financial inclusion.” (FI02), which also built up this FI’s clientele. Another business stated on their website that they “...provide invaluable assistance to coffee farmers such as distributing necessary materials for coffee processing and providing instruction on better processing methods to produce specialty coffees...increasing their income by almost 60%.” (MS14), yet it also benefitted their own downstream activities.

Most of the interviewed organisations stated that they had been working on goals similar to the SDGs long before the SDGs were formalised or before cognisance of their existence. In this context, any successful activity in an impoverished society is viewed by these organisations as supporting TL's economy generally, and *de-facto* localising the SDGs. However, as SDG8 Decent Work and Economic Growth states, employment needs to be socially inclusive and economic growth be aptly ecologically sustainable. An example of a successful newly developed activity is the Timor-Leste Coffee Association (ACTL) which has been able to “[connect] farmers to the international market. Before, they have no idea and they just sell the coffee cherry to CCT (Cooperative Café Timor) and get whatever the price decided by CCT” (MS09). ACTL has, through inclusive events with coffee farmers like *Festivál Kafé Timor*, directly improved their financial viability and profitability without deterioration of the physical environment.

Economic activity in TL has not in general been along SDGs lines. The current SYS is underpinned by SM of Power and Money that drives economic development which often has not been inclusive or sustainable (Feijó, 2019). This severely limits ability of all stakeholders to display SDG commitment. One interviewee also recognised the enormity of this SDGs development agenda as it relates to education and health: “...the children in rural areas [have] very limited facilities to support their education... [also the SDGs can help reduce the] high mortality of mothers and children.” (FI01)

Advocacy to the government on specific SDGs was viewed as important by organisations. One CSO interviewee stated that it lobbies the government to “...sell our plastic to Indonesia for recycling or to buy a recycling machine” (MS06) to reduce plastic pollution. One each of FI and NGO act as conduits for SDGs information flow between their clients, political parties, government, academics, and cooperatives. A social enterprise lobbied the government

and foreign support agencies for funds to support their efforts in providing employment and reducing poverty.

The most common explicit way for organisations to show commitment to SDGs was by supporting education in some form. Most of these educational activities specifically relate to the major purpose of the organisation. One each of CSO, FI, and private enterprise, as well as two NGOs, educate their own members about how to protect the environment. Three FIs and one large business focused on training through actions like funding schools, capacity building and scholarships for local students to study abroad. Other activities included leadership course on environmental protection (NGO), local encyclopaedia and free internet for community centres and universities (large business), and local farmer training on quality management (social business). Where relevant Facebook pages and websites of interviewed organisations displayed SDGs commitments to gender equality (SDG5), education (SDG4), health and well-being (SDG3). For example, an FI website states: “we focus on microfinance, with a primary focus on poor, rural women”. In the context of a small country with limited resources (i.e., existing SYS), this list of actions is an impressive commitment to the localisation of SDGs.

The concept of a “sustaining organization” is dominant in four organisations; one business enterprise (eco-tourism), two NGOs (training and information on sustainability), and one CSO (socio-political youth movement). All exhibited equitable and ecological renewal by incorporating the SDGs as champions in their local communities. This required much effort in communicating and advocating unassumingly without ‘brand-brandishing’. Finally, one private enterprise innovative outlier with no knowledge of the SDGs can be classified as a “sustaining organization”. Such was the commitment of its owner to sustainable development broadly that he wanted to create a circular-style (closing-the-loop) business: “We focus on

recycle materials, zero waste management...buy local and organic, employ locals, and with returns to locals for building the Timor-Leste economy.” (MS12)

Overall, there was no uniformity (or SYS-stage perspective) in the stakeholders’ understanding or approach to the SDGs. They were highly localised efforts. Missing was a coordinated SM-based effort to combine holistic efforts (including strong focus on ecological goals) across sectors and with direct government support through effective public administration.

#### *D. Challenges to SDGs Adoption*

Challenges facing organisations to realise their SDGs commitment emerges from the interviewed organisations. These challenges underpin SDGs localisation mechanisms. Figure 3 illustrates 67 nominations of specific challenges to SDGs adoption. Each organisation was allowed to nominate as many challenges as considered relevant. Despite commitment by all TL governments since 2015 to the SDGs, two large nominated categories of challenges are state-based. One is the lack of legal framework and security: “One of the challenges that the bank is facing in order to give out more loans is the absence of laws and regulations from the government” (FI02). For FI04, this transformed into a security issue: “There is no strong security system in place that reaches our [organisation’s] coverage to ensure the safety of our staff, especially female staff.” This instils uncertainty and insecurity in the Timorese community environment, making any shift to sustainable development more difficult.

**Insert Figure 3 about here**

#### **Figure 3. Specific challenges to adoption of SDGs by types of organisations**

The second state-based challenge is inappropriate or lack of government support for the implementation of SDGs. The reasons for this implementation problem appear to be the lack of translation of ideas into reality across the whole population, which is probably very

difficult at the best of times. For example, “There is still a lot to be done from all the stakeholders such as government and policy makers...more than just talking at yet another seminar, workshops, meetings here and there, but with no actions” (FI02). “All the development is in the city, [rural] populations get no access to education, bad roads, no electricity, no proper housing or access to primary health care” (MS04). Any type of government action in support of the SDGs, as per the Roadmap, would demonstrate a strong positive localisation sign. However, the above comments show a lack of execution by the state, as well as inadequate allocation of state funding for SDGs adoption and the localisation process, a failure of SM; also identified in the Roadmap review by Courvisanos and Boavida (2018).

Further, there was concern for lack of consistency on sustainable development; as noted, the “Government of Timor-Leste should have long-term planning in place, and it must be followed up by each new government. The new government cannot just come and change things as they wish.” (FI05) Political instability has been an ongoing issue as proponents of bottom-up sustainable development inside and outside Parliament regularly oppose government top-down big development (Feijó, 2019; Sainsbury, 2020). Thus in TL, state-based ‘lack of translation’ of challenges leads to stakeholders questioning the desire and ability of ‘localising’ global state-promoted SDGs.

More of a direct challenge noted by participants is lack of state funding support for localisation. As MS05 states: “People in rural areas are left out and just watch the so-called development that does not benefit our people.” One private enterprise owner expressed frustration with the public governance system through cutting funds for basic services: “The budget is being reduced, and now where they would put in their priority is still unsure.” (MS13)

The lack of non-financial resources was the most nominated challenge. This reveals the poor state of basic infrastructure and institutional support, which leads to “high dependency on external funds” (FI05) and “...we think all the goals are important, but we have limited resources to focus on all, so we just nominated three goals” (MS01). Specifically, lack of skilled workforce was a significant contributor to this challenge, with one private enterprise owner optimistically stating “...hopefully they [local population] will get those skills and understand that and in the future will be relied on local labour.” (MS13) From these statements, these interviewees recognise the critical need to build local resources at the time when international NGOs are reducing their role in the country and focusing on other more recent foreign crises elsewhere. Linked to lack of skilled workforce needed to localise stakeholder commitment is the general low level of education, particularly in rural areas; a typical explanation being: “They [the available workforce] are the people that have no access to education, very few go to high school, very few go to university... Women get married in their early age [thus not educated]” (MS04).

Lack of community support is the next biggest nominated challenge. Many village communities still live according to ancestral traditions, which limits their ability to adapt to changes needed in order to implement the SDGs. An example is when one private firm gives workers gloves for food processing “...but they throw them [away]” (MS14). Another private enterprise owner explained this lack of awareness:

...you got to have a solid education base of people that understand what the environment is here for. A lot of them, because they are in the context of poverty, they are trying to get by day-by-day living for the kids and getting food. (MS15)

Other challenges nominated included difficulty in access to finance/loans, gender inequality – “women in Timor are educated but it’s difficult to speak out because of the culture” (MS16), and little or no consumer protection or control of product quality. One government official

interviewed said: “We have challenges to reach the SDGs and achieve the SDP due to lack of resources.” (G01). The second one also re-iterated the same challenge: “the problem is lack of money, lack of human resources [to undertake various projects]” (G02); yet, TL governments have regularly “raided” the country’s sovereign wealth Petroleum Fund to buy equity and build infrastructure for extracting and exporting oil/gas (Doraisami, 2018).

## **Discussion**

Thematic analysis of multi-stakeholder interviews and review of their websites/Facebook pages allow us to answer the research questions. In respect to the first question, we find the TL government has been successful only initially in raising awareness of the SDGs-based development agenda, the first step towards localisation. The vast majority of participating stakeholder organisations were aware, although seven had only passive awareness (3 FI, 1 CSO, 2 NGO and 1 SP: these were some of the smallest organisations in our sample), since to them their relevance and practicality of the SDGs was unclear. This reflects a partial success of the SM process with strong initial public relations effort led by the former Prime Minister, but also a failure of the SM process due to no follow-up public administration efforts to build on the initial drive. The success of the SDGs agenda requires the conversion of this passive awareness to active awareness and engagement by improved communications, ongoing education of stakeholders, provision of adequate financial and non-financial resources and infrastructure for this process. This state-based investment at the SM stage is critical for localisation of SDGs.

Unlike other developing countries like Bhutan where local government builds on the inaugural awareness (Oosterhof, 2018), the highly centralised public governance of TL does not allow such localisation awareness processes to operate. Thus, the promulgation of the SDGs agenda came directly from SM middle-stage of the Conceptual Framework, with little explicit connection by public and money power to the higher LW stage and problematic



linkage to the SYS stage where the grassroots organisations operate. Public power is centralised, while the limited money power from the Petroleum Fund focuses on oil/gas extraction and processing.

Further to the first question, stakeholder organisations were committed to the SDGs in their own unique functioning way. Within the constraints provided by a lack of funds, lack of clear direction and minimal support from various TL governments; the stakeholders that were aware of the SDGs indicated commitment to this agenda, as the second step in localisation. Mobilising resources to implement the SDGs agenda is another matter. With severe lack of state funding support for localisation, organisations indicated that their own funds were highly limited (if non-existent) for long-term SDGs commitments. This state funding austerity led to strong advocacy for more state-based support at the SM stage. However, in terms of advocacy at the local SYS stage, most organisations provided education activities that supported the SDGs – as argued strongly in the localisation roadmap (GTLRG, 2016).

The Habermasian conceptual framework provides context for understanding factors that enable or inhibit business and community stakeholder organisations in TL to contribute to their national SDGs agenda; thus, addressing the second question. From the viewpoint of TL Lifeworld (LW), this country's common culture "civic identity" enabled it to emerge with strong resilience out of colonisation/invasion trauma (Kingsbury, 2012). The localisation perspective allows this society's small collective communities to employ this civic identity (Trindade, 2008) through its collective strength (Broadbent et al., 1991; Zacharias, 2007) to build a sustainable development ecosystem. One small enterprise owner-stakeholder (MS12), despite not being aware of the SDGs, linked his business to ancestral traditions and adapting these to modern sustainable (socially and ecologically) actions. Such linkage from the LW stage to the SYS stage is a critical clue to mechanisms TL can adopt to implement effectively the SDGs, and it comes from an owner-stakeholder who was formally unaware of the SDGs.

At the SM stage, the promise of the SDGs Roadmap in TL has been undermined by three factors that emerge from the findings. First is the inability of state institutions to resolve political instability that instils uncertainty and insecurity in the Timorese community environment, which is completely antithetical to building a strong sense of unity and equality (Freistein & Mahlert, 2016). Second is the perceived contradiction in TL governments between the SDGs promise and their strong commitment to the SDP with its drive for oil-rich revenue. Essentially, the big oil development approach creates a potential ‘Resource Curse’ problem that the Petroleum Fund aims to protect (Doraisami, 2018). At the same time, the third factor has all TL governments asking the many under-funded NGOs in the country to carry the weight of executing the SDGs via social and ecological development despite NGOs having lack of power to determine the overall sustainable development direction of the country (Barrowman & Kumar, 2018).

At the level of SYS, tangible organisations function as stakeholders that respond to the SM on SDGs with a strong LW overlay. From the TL community standpoint, the SDGs challenges are many and varied as evident in the findings. Clear in the findings is a gap between passive and active awareness stakeholders. This reflects the intrinsic difficulties in localisation of the SDGs. The TL government seems to have acknowledged these difficulties and shortcomings in its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) on the SDGs submitted to the UN in 2019, when it acknowledged the need for “the VNR process [to serve] as a platform to deepen awareness” (RDTL, 2019, p. 26). This study finds that the TL government needs to improve communication and awareness in order to strengthen multi-stakeholder relationships and build partnerships with development organisations (Beisheim et al., 2018). This requires increased public funding and resource allocation for SDGs by building on from the TL government initial media blitz in terms of promotion of human rights, reforming public administration, as well as improved statistical capacity and data availability. These type of

state actions are emphasised by GIZ (2019), and argued by UNSDCF (2021) specifically for TL. All these actions lie within the SM stage of the Habermas framework which require translation into the SYS stage. This suggests that the TL government and the UN are both aware of some of the current shortcomings in the SM processes used in TL for the localisation of SDGs. An SM process highlighted for improvement is that the TL government can potentially listen to the voices of the wider stakeholder communities identified in this study, as opposed to the appointing of an advisory group when it set up the VNR 2019 process. Such an advisory group may not be able to hear the nuances of voices from the community at large.

This exploratory study identifies some of the roadblocks in the localisation and implementation of the SDGs agenda in a poor country. The Habermas framework points out that for successful implementation of SDGs, governments need to consider the nation's LW to be able to effectively adapt the SM. For this the most important first step is building awareness and education. This process needs to be ongoing until there is a buy-in into the process by almost all stakeholders, not to have some major initial media blitz which lacks operational follow-up. In addition to building active awareness of the SDGs agenda, there must be efficient processes in government and its public administration that build on such awareness. Learning from the TL experience as viewed from the stakeholder perspective, the government needs to modify its SM stage by ensuring adequate resource allocation, institutional development, appropriate operating responses, enhanced data collection and analysis, as well encouraging the establishment of partnerships for financing the SDGs. In each step of the SDG localisation process, it remains mandatory to continue to hear the voices of all stakeholders so they can modify their own SYS responses appropriately. The UN can help by providing educational and other resources, including stronger guidance on producing VNRs and providing feedback on how to improve SDG localisation based on the VNRs.

A starting point for other countries in a similar position can be a review of comparable VNRs from other nations (see for example GIZ, 2019). In addition to the analysis of national planning and coordination mechanisms, VNR reviews list mechanisms adopted by countries under comparison, including descriptions of relevant departments, self-assessment and feedback mechanisms, cost analysis, monitoring, and evaluation parameters (UNDP, 2020). For poor economies the critical issue is allocating funds for these processes from within their own country and collecting funds from other sources including international aid and foreign investment. In this process governments need to address the issue of ‘big development’ which is antithetical to sustainable development, while ensuring the needs of the various diverse communities in the country are adequately addressed. Observations from these reviews and the TL stakeholder study find not only that there are limited initiatives for localising the SDGs, but the impact of several initiatives (for example, the microfinance project for women in support of SDG5) appear limited when considered nationally.

## **Conclusion**

This study, guided by a Habermasian conceptual lens, found that it is critical that societal awareness and cultural attitudes towards sustainability are aligned for the localisation of SDGs. Despite SDGs rhetoric of the TL VI Constitutional Government, the steering of the SDGs and related governance mechanisms at the government level appeared to be severely lacking; with much promise but little practical sustenance. The distinct national and cultural identity of TL that was at the forefront of its creation as a nation provides the potential nourishing of the SDGs with organisations linking sustainable development to indigenous knowledge that underpins the Timorese strong ‘civic identity’. From this analysis, the alternative needs rejection. This is the view that the SDGs challenge is too abstract and hard, thus the way to manage development is to simply defend the existing unsustainable position

that focuses purely on massive expenditure for big development projects of oil/gas extraction and mass tourism.

Despite a severe lack of resources, TL has demonstrated that initial effective awareness raising by the government results in the recruitment of grassroots stakeholders across this tiny poor country. Local stakeholder commitment is being translated into localised implementation of the SDGs agenda, albeit within the available institutional frameworks, and without significant advocacy by the political leadership of the country after DR Araújo's Prime Ministership ended in July 2017. There has been little data available on the final step of localisation monitoring, assessment, and learning; thus, this was not the focus of this study. As a beginning to this final step, the TL 2019 VNR report provides some guidance by noting the need for deeper awareness in the TL community of the SDGs agenda. There is still much work to be done by the government in refining its processes to continue building awareness and providing adequate resources and building the infrastructure to be able to further localise the SDGs and to align the TL national development with its own roadmap and the SDGs agenda. Note that the TL Joint Sustainable Development Goal Fund was launched in 2020, after the conclusion of data collection for this study. Since the goal of the Fund is to assist the TL government in developing an integrated national financing framework (INFF) and match resources coming from its petroleum business with external funding to aid SDG localisation and implementation, future studies may conduct further inquiry into the Fund's design and assess its potential to influence SDG localisation.

There are caveats to the findings of this study. First, this an exploratory study limited to data from 26 representative stakeholders with a unique socio-political qualitative perspective on the SDGs. A broader study is required to appreciate the extent of the localisation mechanisms presented, including a more detailed examination of policy-generation and decision-making within the governance systems. In particular, future studies may consider if stakeholder input

is obtained for the formulation of public policy in general and for the SDGs in particular, thereby assessing their active awareness of the SDGs. This was not considered in our study as it required a broader remit. Future studies may utilise a larger survey-based approach. Finally, the framework and analysis of vision and challenges in this one emerging nation provides an approach to the task ahead for implementing the SDGs in other developing countries.

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