



# POLICY BRIEF

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## Higher Education Institutions Framework for Local Implementation towards SDGs

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## Highlights

- Within SDGs localization process, four central roles of HEIs are teaching and learning, research, service and knowledge exchange, and student initiatives support.
- Sustainability leadership in HEIs encompassing a shared vision, missions and policies is essential for engagement with local community practices.
- Three main common challenges in enhancing the roles of HEIs towards SDGs implementation in local community include unsustain funding, ranking competition, and centralized governance.

## Introduction

In the achievement of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), implementation efforts of all stakeholders are obligatory. While public awareness, education and training are essential for the path towards sustainability (UNESCO, 2006), Higher Education Institutes are expected to have a fundamental role as knowledge distributors through their curriculum apparatus to achieve Goal 4 by provision of inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities for all people. Nevertheless, their role as knowledge generators through their research mechanisms can also contribute to other SDGs (Elena, Fleacă, & Maiduc, 2018). In addition, sustainability provides opportunities for liberal arts educators to deepen practices and engage them implicitly with the real world (Weissman, 2012). These indicate that HEIs are key agents in promoting sustainability principles within society (Chalkley, 2006; Lukman & Glavič, 2007).

As localizing SDGs becomes the core component of all implementation efforts in subnational contexts to achieve the 2030 agenda, it provides research opportunities for HEIs to investigate and overcome struggles of SDGs implementation at the community level. The results from our previous study demonstrate that the significant role of Higher Education Institutions is bridging between local and international SDGs by emphasizing local community as crucial partnerships for governmental agencies to attain the SDGs (Charoenratana, Terada, Castro, Das, & Kanie, 2020). With capability to address the gap between SDGs in local practices and national policies and to conduct community engaged research, owners of sustainability shared visions become more diverse.

In this policy brief, we introduce the HEIs framework for localizing SDGs as the result of our joint project in six countries including Indonesia, India, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand. Existing community engagement practices were collected through surveys. Models and methodologies were inspected to analyze the way HEIs can collaborate with local communities. We propose four central roles of HEIs, which are crucial for community engagement within the SDGs localization process, consisting of teaching and learning, research, service and knowledge exchange, and student initiatives support, which are all crucial for community engagement. Furthermore, we highlight sustainability leadership, which is a fundamental support for local engagement practices within HEIs activities. Afterwards, we discuss common challenges limiting HEIs potential to engage with community. The policy recommendations at the end of this policy brief put emphasis on encompassing new roles of HEIs and the sustainability leadership, with awareness of mutual challenges.

# HEIs Framework for Local Implementation towards SDGs

## *New Roles of HEIs: Within and Beyond Traditional Roles*

The emergence of a new pandemic like Covid has exposed the uncertainty of the era we are living within. These types of global societal and environmental issues typify the unsustainability of our current world, which is our core common challenge. To achieve SDGs localization, community engagement is necessary. Hence, strong collaboration between HEIs and community is based on a mutually reciprocal relationship. In this relationship, communities become social labs for HEIs, while emerging knowledge from HEIs contributes to both community well-being and HEIs knowledge corpus.

Though traditional HEIs roles as knowledge distributors and knowledge generators, academics make more inquiries about HEIs new role as transformative agents for sustainable development (Dalla Gasperina, Mazutti, Brandli, & Rabello, 2021; Netto, 2020; Wu & Shen, 2016). Our surveys in six countries found various community engagement practices through four HEI roles as following:

### *Teaching and Learning Towards Community Sustainability*

Unsustainability challenges call for action rather than reaction. HEIs have to rethink about what and why knowledge is inducing unsustainability in environmental, social, and economic systems and reorient their education to address this. As education for sustainability (EfS) could be either generated as a new program or integrated within existing curriculum, communities can become learning and living laboratories of students. Community struggles towards sustainability provide learning opportunities in ways that both excavates students' insight and engages them with the real world.

While EfS programs are offered in the curricula of Indonesia and Thailand's HEIs, community field trips are common in India, Japan and Thailand, and thesis topics associated with community issues are embraced in HEIs in both Malaysia and Thailand. Furthermore, according to the National Service Scheme in India, community working hours are counted as learning hours.

Apart from their students, HEIs can also provide open courses accessible for everyone, just as a public university in Thailand offers many free short courses open for all. Nevertheless, the endorsement of EfS in short courses curriculum requires systematic design and responses to the need of the targeted community members as well.

### *Community Engagement Research*

In achievement of SDGs localization, HEIs as knowledge generators could create new knowledge through their research capability. Since SDGs requires the breaking down of silo thinking, an integrated transdisciplinary approach is mandatory. Community engagement research calls for participation and empowerment approaches to identify community needs and look for solutions with local stakeholders. Newly generated knowledge is the result of collaboration between researchers and community members, who aim to tackle community issues towards their well-being.

Nevertheless, our survey results indicate that the HEIs surveyed in all six countries give priority to community based researches, whose participation levels are various. Best practices are found in India and Indonesia. While the community engagement research is common practice among India's HEIs, a university in Indonesia establishes a mechanism responsible for community SDGs, which provide sustainability for community engagement research.

## *Community Services and Knowledge Exchange*

HEIs traditional roles could be perceived as market and industrial services as well, since their students becomes qualified workers for the labor market and their applied knowledge interconnects with industrial development. Therefore, the extended role of HEI as community services are expected as the new HEIs role as well, especially from SDGs localizing perspectives. Globally, University Social Responsibility (USR) approach is adapted by many HEIs (Ruiz Lozano & Alvarez, 2012). Some country proposes national policy for community transformation with strong HEIs engagement (Hudson, 2013).

Among the collection of community engagement practices in our surveyed study, some community services provided by HEIs are found as well. HEIs in both Indonesia and Thailand designated community service as a part of academic staffs' job assignments. Indonesian HEIs offers capacity building program to empowerment targeted community members. By chance, some universities in Thailand already adopted USR approach by provision of community health services, community public park, community sport center, etc. In the Covid-19 pandemic times, some have established field hospitals and vaccination centers.

By our previous study, HEIs bridged the gap between community SDGs and national SDGs by providing dialogue platform between local community members and government agencies and interpreting local community knowledge into modern academic language. As a result, the community entity is emphasized as significant partnership of SDGs localization.

## *Student Initiatives with Community Engagement*

HEIs belongs to students as well. Student initiatives are important transformative power for HEIs in sustainable development (Drupp et al., 2012), especially in a 'bottom up' manner. As students learn about the unsustainability of their neighborhood community labs, their initiatives as voluntarily community engagement outside classroom could assist these neighborhood communities in tackling the problems of unsustainability.

From our surveyed results, there exists student initiatives in HEIs surveyed in India, Malaysia and Thailand at the time of Covid. A group of Indian students established the Covid Taskforce to provide assistance for academic staffs and students affecting with Covid. Malaysian student volunteers work closely with community. Thai student councils investigate working conditions of low wage workers in their own university and introduce policy recommendations to university's executives.

## *HEIs Sustainability Leadership*

Since HEIs play an important role in promoting SDGs, their sustainability leadership involves processes, which academic executives and staffs undertake to implement policies and initiatives within their organizations towards sustainable development. The accomplishment of HEIs sustainable development implementation is strongly associated with their commitment to sustainable development (Lozano et al., 2015).

Our survey results indicate that HEIs sustainable development policies provide supportive pathways for community engagement practices of academic community members. An Indian university, whose foundation is accompanied by a community development vision, has sustainable development goal embedded within its missions, action plan and budgeting plan. Apart from the Indian HEIs' sustainable development missions, some universities in Indonesia and Malaysia have established university mechanisms supporting sustainable development practices including special track funding schemes.

Therefore, although the majority of HEIs have endorsed sustainable development in their policies, without a correspondent mechanism, action plan, and budgeting, their sustainability leadership performance can not be enhanced.

## *HEIs Common Challenges*

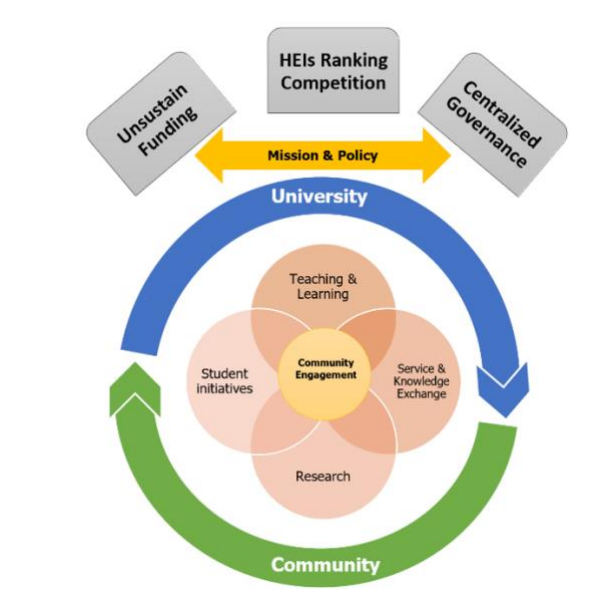
In the achievement of SDGs, HEIs encounter many challenges (Filho et al., 2020; Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Our research findings point o to three common challenges among HEIs in six countries, which are unsustainable funding, ranking competition, and centralized governance.

Unsustainable funding for sustainability researches exhibits the lack of commitment and the understanding of community engagement practices. Community engaged research requires the investment of time to establish trust relationship between HEIs and communities, to identify community unsustainability issues, and to assist them in finding the solutions towards their well-being. The methodology is diverse from general community based research. Unsustainable funding schemes, which provide budgets in the short time frame, limits HEIs capability within the process of SDGs localizing.

HEIs ranking competition, which put emphasis on the role of 'research university', devotes much attention to the highest impact publications rather than community engagement practices. This new form of HEIs competition give precedence to science and technology disciplines, since their publication achievement is in accordance with publication ranking. Conversely, social science disciplines with strong commitment to community SDGs are perceived as not as productive, because the achievement of sustainable development through community engagement takes time and may lack evidence from a short-term positivism viewpoint. In addition, the trap of HEIs ranking competition causes the unsustainable funding scheme for community engagement research as well.

Centralized HEIs governance leads to bureaucratic administration and silo working culture, which causes the lack of collaboration towards the same goal, especially SDGs. As localizing SDGs calls for the change from 'bottom up' manner, sustainability HEIs requires decentralized governance as well, since the change needs to be adequately addressed by the internal governance. Hence, 'Partnerships for the Goal' could be implemented within HEIs complex structure to enhance collaboration among academic communities towards SDGs.

## Recommendations



- Encourage HEIs:
  - to establish SDGs localizing long term plan and ensure its implementation;
  - to establish engagement initiative with their neighbourhood community;
- Strengthen HEIs sustainability network through collaborative knowledge action; and
- Develop measurement framework for HEIs sustainability leadership and governance towards SDGs localizing.

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