

From Vision and Mission to implementation: Strengthening District-Level Administration through a Multi-Stakeholder SDG Initiative – The APPGM-SDG Experience

*Paniirselvam Jayaraman**

Abstracts

Leaving no one behind is the key slogan of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the formation of APPGM-SDG, the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia for Sustainable Development Goals, has laid the foundation for implementing sustainable solutions towards ground needs. APPGM-SDG adopted a grounded research methodology, and through its issue-mapping process in 115 parliamentary constituencies from 2020 to 2024, it identified a strong need to strengthen local administration and adopt sustainable solutions involving multiple stakeholders. This paper focuses on the journey toward finding effective approaches for local administration and the implementation of the initiative in 2024. The district-level administrative offices, namely district offices and local governments, are the focal points in delivering sustainable solutions on the ground. These offices have been prominent since the 1950s, when Tun Abdul Razak, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Rural Development, actively sought to strengthen district-level administration. He introduced the concept of the “operation room” to coordinate and deliver government development plans and launched the Red Book Program. The government’s continued commitment to this purpose is reflected in the 2021 Voluntary National Review (VNR) and its implementation in 2024. Malaysia recommended a multi-stakeholder engagement at the district administration level to resolve issues, and this 2021 VNR recommendation was implemented in 2024 by the government through a joint policy solutions initiative between APPGM-SDG and Yayasan Hasanah. This paper includes case studies from APPGM-SDG

* Paniirselvam Jayaraman is the Director of the Policy Solutions Unit of the Secretariat of All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia for Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG). Email: paniirj@gmail.com

grounded research methodology, which impactfully contributed to the formation of the policy solutions initiative, and covers details related to implementation and lessons learnt. The analysis combines APPGM-SDG grounded research, case studies, and secondary data to assess the impact of this multi-stakeholder initiative at the district-level.

Keywords: district office, local government, VNR, multi-stakeholder, policy solutions

Introduction

Malaysia was historically under colonial rule, with its administration system heavily influenced by the British administration. This ruling mechanism continues to shape many commonwealth countries, with some modifications based on local contexts. Colonial rule in Malaya began with the Pangkor Treaty in 1874. The British intervened in the sultanates' governance by installing British Residents to advise rulers on administrative affairs. Following this evolution, district offices were formed to oversee revenue collection, justice, land, and administration, with a district officer appointed as the key focal person. After independence, this practice continued, with district offices expanding their roles to include planning and development. When Tun Abdul Razak, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Rural Development, strengthened the district offices by introducing the "Operation Room" concept, which enabled district offices to coordinate and deliver government development plans. Tun further introduced the "Red Book" program in the 1960s, streamlining national development through a 3-tier process (federal, state, and district) to better align with local needs and requests.¹ These initiatives empowered the district office as a premier government arm coordinating and addressing local governance and development issues.

These post-independence interventions and initiatives have significantly shaped our current government administration. The situations and issues faced today are far more complex and, in most cases, require cross-ministry and cross-agency mandates to resolve challenges and facilitate implementation. One notable example of such a mandate is the TVET education landscape in Malaysia. TVET education started in 1906 and was strengthened after independence with the formation

of Institut Latihan Perindustrian (ILP) and Institut Kemahiran Belia Negara (IKBN) in 1964. Today, TVET education is administered across 12 ministries, with over 1,300 institutions offering TVET courses. Only in 2020 was Majlis TVET Negara (MTVET) formed to streamline the ecosystem and coordinate activities across these 12 ministries. One of the key achievements of MTVET is the formulation of Dasar TVET Negara 2030, which strengthens the effort further.² Similarly, district-level cross-agency efforts are evident in areas such as poverty eradication, district infrastructure development, and disaster management, which are managed through multi-agency committees.

The need for multi-stakeholder initiatives at the districts level

The initiatives above demonstrate the need for cross-agency initiatives at the district level. The committees function effectively but remain limited to specific issues, such as poverty, development, and disaster management. The engagement primarily involves government agencies, members of parliament, and state assembly representatives. It does not involve other stakeholders, such as universities, experts in the locality, or policy organisations like APPGM-SDG.

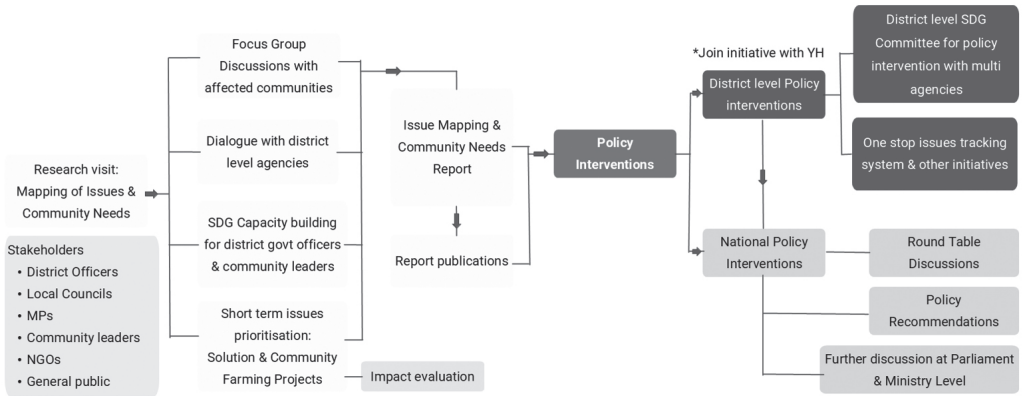
The objective of this paper is to document the process leading to the formation of the above-mentioned policy solutions initiative as a national program which streamlines input from district and state into the national policy-making process. In addition, the paper presents a case study on pilot-testing the concept of multi-stakeholder initiatives as a national policy intervention and highlights key best practices derived from the policy solutions initiative.

APPGM-SDG identified the need for a multi-stakeholder initiative at the district level through its issue-mapping process. This issue mapping process forms part of its grounded research methodology. This grounded research methodology begins with multi-stakeholder engagement. The researchers conduct focus group discussions with community members, JKKK/ JPKK/ KRT chairpersons, local solution partners, NGOs, MP & ADUNs, districts officers and other stakeholders. After this process concludes, government agencies validate the identified issues through inter-agency dialogues. Both sets of data are subsequently published as research reports and used for further analysis at the policy advocacy

2 Portal Rasmi TVET Madani, Portal Rasmi TVET Madani (31 December 2024) <https://www.tvet.gov.my/main/latar-belakang> accessed 31 December 2024.

and policy solutions level. Analysis of these reports shows that many issues on the ground require multi-agency engagement to resolve. Some issues require state and federal-level engagement for solutions. Flow chart 1 below shows the grounded research methodology adopted by APPGM-SDG, which serves as a primary source for this paper.

Flow Chart 1: APPGM-SDG Grounded Research Methodology for Policy Interventions



Case Study 1: The Petaling Jaya multi-stakeholders initiative

Petaling Jaya issue mapping in 2020 illustrated the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement to resolve issues on the ground. The issue mapping based on APPGM-SDG grounded research methodology, focused on selected locations involving vulnerable groups. Many issues were identified within Petaling Jaya's urban population, and one significant issue was the Lembah Subang 1 (LS1) PPR flats. Through the focus group discussion, it was established that LS1 is a rental scheme under the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT), which took over administration from the state government in 2017. LS1 faced numerous challenges, including infrastructure deficiencies, illegal renting, foreigners' occupation, waste management, parking shortages, and illegal electricity connections. The Flat Lembah Subang 1 Joint Management Body (JMB) struggled to address these issues due to the separation of power between state agencies, municipal council, and federal agencies. These issues clearly required cross-agency intervention for resolution.

In 2020, APPGM-SDG suggested the formation of a multi-stakeholder committee involving various parties to discuss and resolve the issues identified through the focus group discussion. The committee consisted

of the MP of Petaling Jaya, the Petaling Jaya Municipal Council, the district office, the LS1 JMB and the Selangor State Exco office for housing. APPGM-SDG served as the secretariat to the committee. A few engagements were held with local residents and JMB before the first formal meeting, chaired by a representative from the Selangor State Exco for Housing. The findings were presented during the meeting, followed by feedback and discussions with all attendees. After the Covid-19 PKP, the committee resumed physical meetings, where discussions became more substantive with the participation of state assembly members. Minutes of meeting with follow-up actions were prepared, and agencies agreed to address issues based on letters from the State Exco office. Some of the challenges faced at that time included limited cooperation from agencies in recognising this multi-stakeholder initiative, jurisdictional barriers, and inconsistent support from local stakeholders. These challenges were gradually overcome through continuous engagement. This experience helped establish a systemic solution for the cross-agency issues faced by residents in LS1 through a multi-stakeholder committee, which subsequently served as a model for similar solutions in other locations.

The VNR 2021 recommendation

The Petaling Jaya experience in 2020 demonstrated that multi-stakeholder engagement involving multiple agencies provides a critical mechanism for addressing many ground-level issues. By recognising the value of this approach, APPGM-SDG, in its engagement with the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) for Voluntary National Review (VNR) of SDGs in 2021, suggested a multi-stakeholder inter-agency task force as one of the key recommendations for resolving local issues and localising SDGs at the district level.

In localising SDGs, in addition to working with local authorities, efforts are being made to engage with the district offices. This is to ensure an inter-agency SDG delivery taskforce is organised at the district level to enhance the role of all agencies, including a multi-stakeholder group (civil society, private sector, and academic networks) in addressing economic, social, and environmental concerns at the grassroots level.
– Malaysia VNR 2021, page 120.³

3 Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2021 (12 July 2021) https://ekonomi.gov.my/sites/default/files/2021-07/Malaysia_Voluntary_National_Review_%28VNR%29_2021.pdf accessed 31 December 2024.

This evidence-based recommendation paved the way for the formation of such initiatives at the federal and local levels. *MTVET*, *Jawatankuasa Basmi Kemiskinan Peringkat Daerah*, and the *Program Pembasmian Miskin Tegar* are examples of multi-stakeholder engagements implemented by the government to develop and implement solutions.

The *Program Pembasmian Kemiskinan Tegar Keluarga Malaysia* (BMTKM) is a clear example of a multi-stakeholder initiative, which includes lead organisations such as the Economic Planning Unit (EPU), the Implementation Coordination Unit (ICU), and the Prime Minister's Department. The initiative also involved the country's leading foundations, universities, and poverty experts. APPGM-SDG was actively involved, contributing model solutions from the ground and mobilising local resources. The government's commitment to implementing the VNR recommendation was reflected in this national initiative.⁴

Case Study 2: The Ipoh Barat multi-stakeholder experience

The 'multi-stakeholders' evidence-based recommendation in VNR 2021 by Malaysia was monumental. In the same year, APPGM-SDG conducted an issue-mapping exercise in Ipoh Barat, where a long-term issue affecting local livelihoods was identified in Kampung Tai Lee and Jalan Spooner, Ipoh. We recorded settlements classified as 'illegal' because the residents did not own the land. About 70 families were affected across these two locations, and relocation space was needed.

Following the multi-stakeholder footsteps and with efforts led by the Member of Parliament, YB. M. Kula Segaran, a proposal to form a multi-stakeholder committee was put forward. Prior to its formation, APPGM-SDG conducted a demographic study in the two settlements to identify the actual number of families, the issues affecting them, their history, and productivity capacity. Most of the residents were elderly and unable to work, which hindered their ability to relocate to housing areas, pay rent, or even purchase homes. The data was presented to the MP, and a suggestion was made to form a multi-stakeholder committee with the Ipoh City Council.

APPGM-SDG appointed a local solution partner to act as the secretariat for this initiative and convened the first meeting, which was chaired by the Mayor of Ipoh City Council. The Member of Parliament (MP) of Ipoh

4 Debbie Ann Loh and Hirzawati Atikah Mohd Tahir (eds), *Poverty Conversations in Sabah and Peninsular Malaysia: The APPGM-SDG Findings From Ground Realities* (Persatuan Promosi Matlamat Pembangunan Lestari 2024).

Barat also participated in this engagement, along with representatives from 13 agencies, namely the State Economic Planning Unit (UPEN), the District Office, relevant departments of the Ipoh City Council, Railway Asset Management (RAC), the Land Office, the Police Department, and from the office of the State Assemblymen. The meeting agreed to establish a multi-stakeholder task force, and minutes were documented for further action. Several subsequent meetings and discussions were held, during which the task force deliberated on the issues and potential solutions. This process paved the way for the offer of a 1-acre plot by the Ipoh City Council to build houses for the settlers in these two villages. The task force continues to meet to discuss funding for housing development. While the discussions are ongoing, APPGM-SDG, together with the MP's office and the Ipoh City Council, initiated a temporary community garden project with community members on the allocated plot to utilise the land sustainably for the benefit of the settlers.

The fruit of the multi-stakeholder task force has benefited the community in many ways, and such a sustainable and continuous initiative demonstrates a viable way forward in addressing many cross-agency issues that require systemic intervention from multiple agencies. It represents a local solution driven by local stakeholders.

Formation of the policy solutions initiative

The multi-stakeholder engagements proposed and undertaken by APPGM-SDG in Lembah Subang 1, Petaling Jaya, and Kampung Tai Lee and Jalan Spooner, Ipoh Barat were clear testaments to the pursuit of sustainable solutions for local issues. These initiatives were subsequently highlighted as recommendations in the VNR 2021, submitted by the Malaysian Government to the United Nations.

To make this recommendation a reality, the Malaysian Government, through the Ministry of Finance, allocated RM 15million in the 2024 National Budget to Yayasan Hasanah to work hand in hand with APPGM-SDG in resolving local issues through the multi-stakeholder initiative. This initiative is designed to work with the District Offices as key players, together with other agencies and stakeholders, to provide sustainable solutions to local challenges.

This arrangement to work with District Offices creates a more streamlined coordination mechanism among APPGM-SDG, ministries, the state administration, district offices and relevant agencies and ultimately revives the original "Red Book" agenda introduced by Tun Abdul Razak.

The policy solutions initiative: resolving local issues through multi-stakeholder engagement - An impact-driven initiative between APPGM-SDG and Yayasan Hasanah

This project is a large-scale multi-stakeholder intervention involving 55 districts across Malaysia. The main aim is to establish an SDG Multi-Agency Committee at each District Office and to hold periodical meetings to deliberate on issues identified and validated by APPGM-SDG. This initiative builds upon APPGM-SDG's experience in facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement and resolving local challenges on the ground. It also seeks to strengthen the role of District Offices in coordinating systemic solutions to these challenges. In essence, the project represents a policy solutions initiative at the grassroots level, while also providing resources and knowledge support to stakeholders engaged in the solution process. The project has a few deliverables, which will be elaborated below.

The district-level SDG multi-agency committee

This committee will be facilitated by APPGM-SDG and chaired by the District Officer. The mandate to establish this committee will be based on approval from the State Secretary, and its members will comprise government agencies, local authorities, and relevant stakeholders. APPGM-SDG will serve as the resource partner, providing supporting documents, data, and facilitation through the appointment of a local coordinator. The primary objective of the committee is to resolve identified local issues within the jurisdiction of the district level. For issues that require state and federal intervention, the local coordinators will engage with the relevant authorities and present inputs during meetings, which will be formally recorded in the minutes.

Development of issues-tracking cloud system

This cloud-based system will be developed to monitor the progression of issues on the ground towards sustainable solutions. APPGM-SDG has identified more than 1,000 issues on the ground, and this project will address them through the District SDG Committee in 55 locations nationwide. The system will provide comprehensive information for researchers and analysts on the process of issue resolution, including the technical details involved and the best practices derived from implementation.

Capacity building of local leaders and district government officers

This deliverable aims to strengthen the capacity of local leaders and district-level government officers in contributing to policy formulation and implementation. For local community leaders, the focus will be on enhancing their ability to engage effectively with government agencies during consultation sessions, provide informed input for local government planning, interpret and analyse local development plans, and utilise e-government platforms. Government officers, on the other hand, will be trained on SDG awareness and the application of a multi-stakeholder approach to resolving local issues.

Poverty study

A poverty profiling study will be conducted using a multidimensional poverty approach to deepen the measurement of poverty dimensions and strengthen ongoing efforts on poverty eradication. The study will validate the dimensions included in the Multidimensional Poverty Index and develop recommendations for the government on additional dimensions proposed by APPGM-SDG.

Policy roundtable discussion and publications

The project will also convene policy roundtable discussions at the state level and produce policy briefs at the regional level for the benefit of all project stakeholders. In addition, publications highlighting best practices will showcase the effective work undertaken by District Office in resolving local issues through a multi-stakeholder approach.

The initiative will be implemented in 55 locations, with 65 APPGM-SDG full-time and contract-based personnel engaged over a two-year period. Several positive outcomes have already been observed, most notably the establishment of multi-stakeholders SDG Committees in all 55 districts; measurable progress in identifying and implementing sustainable solutions to numerous data-backed local issues recorded by APPGM-SDG; the capacity building of local leaders to strengthen their engagement in *libat urus* sessions with agencies; and the enhanced role of District Offices in coordinating solutions to multi-faced issues on the ground.

Lessons in implementation

This initiative represents a large-scale implementation that requires “punca kuasa” to commence groundwork. wherein this regard, the

role of Pusat SDG Negara (PSN) is pivotal. PSN issues a support letter for the initiative, enabling APPGM-SDG to engage State Secretaries with the letter to seek approval to establish the SDG Committee within distinct offices. The challenges encountered in forming this initiative have provided valuable lessons in developing a unique multi-stakeholder framework across 55 locations.

Strategic partnerships

This initiative has fostered strategic partnerships with agencies and organisations at the state level, advancing the localisation of the SDGs to a new stage. In Kedah, APPGM-SDG will collaborate with the Greater Kedah Initiative in its implementation, with anticipated exchanges of knowledge and expertise. In Sabah, APPGM-SDG is working with the Institute of Development Studies Sabah (IDS) and the Secretariat Sabah Maju Jaya (SMJ), a collaboration that enables the sharing of resources and expertise to generate meaningful solutions on the ground. In Sarawak, the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) serves as APPGM-SDG's strategic partner, with the Divisional Residents' Office as the focal point. Here, the SDG Committee will be integrated with the existing Divisional Development Committee (DDC). In Terengganu, the State Secretary has proposed implementing the initiative through the Jawatankuasa Basmi Kemiskinan, an existing multi-agency committee.

State-Level Engagements

The initiative is also emerging as a focal point for the establishment of state-level SDG initiatives under the purview of the State Secretary. This was first demonstrated in Perlis, where a state-level SDG Committee has been formed. The progress of this initiative will be reported through the committee at the state level and subsequently streamlined with updates to the National SDG Steering Committee. Sabah and Penang have also expressed interest in establishing state-level SDG committees, with APPGM-SDG as a strategic partner in their state-level SDG efforts. This development marks a significant breakthrough for the Malaysian Government, as it enables engagement with a body under the Malaysian Parliament while integrating the contributions of CSOs at the state level in advancing the SDG agenda.

Major milestones of the initiative by Malaysian government and APPGM-SDG

Implementation of the VNR 2021 Recommendation.

This initiative stems from a key recommendation in VNR 2021. Malaysia is committed to localising the SDGs at the district level and implementing this recommendation to strengthen district administrations in resolving local issues through a coordinated national effort. This initiative is expected to generate numerous success stories and best practices on the ground, which can serve as lessons for replication in other locations and administrations.

Distinct Multi-Stakeholder Engagement at the District Level- A First in the Country

Malaysia has reached a significant milestone in delivering local solutions to the identified issues through the formation of multi-stakeholders engagements at the district administration level, coordinated with parallel effort at the state and federal levels. This initiative involves not only government agencies but also the Parliamentary body (APPGM-SDG), local leaders, CSOs, resource persons, and Yayasan Hasanah. This partnership is unique and represents the first of its kind in the country.

Best practices from district leadership

APPGM-SDG has implemented numerous programmes with district agencies and documented valuable experiences and recommendations for addressing issues on the ground. One notable example comes from an environmental officer, who suggested that all district-level decisions concerning communities and development plans should first be reviewed in a multi-stakeholder meeting involving all relevant departments, similar to the OSC in councils. As departments are directly or indirectly interconnected in most development efforts, obtaining input from all departments would ensure more sustainable and accountable decision-making. Such recommendations, derived from practical experience and professional expertise on the ground, will be systematically recorded and shared as best practices. This initiative has created a valuable ecosystem for district leaders to share their recommendations based on expertise, enabling others to replicate and implement effective solutions.

Development of local leadership to support district administration in drafting and delivering better policy

Local leadership development and community organising are the key lesson of this multi-stakeholder initiative. The development of this group will ensure that targeted solutions are carried out based on input from the communities.⁵ A specific component proposed in this Policy Solutions Initiative is the policy advocacy capacity building, which will definitely enable local leaders to engage more effectively with agencies during *libat urus* sessions and to provide adequate feedback for these engagements. This element is critical and aligns with the SDG principle of “leaving no one behind” in policy solutions.

Conclusion

Leaving no one behind, the central slogan of the SDGs, can be truly achieved if district-level administration and delivery are strengthened. The experiences in Lembah Subang, Petaling Jaya, and in Ipoh Barat, together the implementation of similar initiatives in 55 districts across Malaysia, is a “walk the talk” action by the Malaysian Government and demonstrate its commitment to resolving local issues that affect people and their livelihoods.

What began before the formalisation of the SDGs under the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak is now being given a new dimension of focus through this multi-stakeholder initiative undertaken by APPGM-SDG in collaboration with Yayasan Hasanah, the Malaysian Parliament, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Economy. This represents a coordinated national effort to strengthen district administrations and to enable intelligence sharing across institutions for the greater good.

This initiative, which is currently being implemented, will ensure sustainable local development through multi-stakeholder involvement and deliver positive change for communities. As articulated by Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom*, true development encompasses not only economic growth but also social inclusion, security, transparency, and political empowerment. In line with Sen’s perspective, this initiative seeks to promote sustainable local development through collaborative multi-stakeholder engagement, thereby bringing meaningful improvements to community well-being.

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