

## **The Contribution of Three Pillars: Government, Community, and Students in Establishing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Timor-Leste**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this research is to find out how Government, Community, and Students of Timor-Leste understand and aware towards SDGs. By knowing this, we can know what they do not understand and create better learning programs so that they can participate in achieving sustainable development goals. The research method used in this research is qualitative method. The study collected both primary and secondary data. In this study, the researcher sought to comprehensively explore the contributions made by the government, civil society, and students in Timor-Leste in an effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that have been set for 2030. This investigation aims to deeply analyze the roles and synergies between these three key actors in the context of national sustainable development. Based on the findings and analysis of this research, it can be concluded that the commitment to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Timor-Leste is not only shown by the government, but also reflected in the active involvement of the community and students. The Government of Timor-Leste has shown a strong commitment through the ratification of various regulations and the establishment of institutions that support the implementation of the SDGs*

**Keywords:** SDGs; Government; Communities; Students.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a comprehensive global initiative that aims to optimize the potential and assets of every country. The concept was formulated by the United Nations with the aim of achieving universal prosperity and environmental sustainability. The United Nations (UN), together with the Secretary-General and the World Commission on Environment and Development, defines this concept as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, 1987). Sustainable development aims to balance the interests of the environment, society, and the economy so that the lives of future generations remain good (Yuan et al., 2021). Based on the *Lao Hamutuk* civil society report, it is stated that in September 2015, a total of 193 countries in the world signed and agreed to contribute to the achievement of SDGs in 2030. One of the developing countries committed to the SDGs is *Timor-Leste* (Jain et al., 2021). *Timor-Leste* is a newly independent island nation as of 2002; as a new country, it certainly faces various challenges and problems, including environmental, social, and economic issues (Government of *Timor-Leste*, 2017). According to the second Voluntary National Review report, *Timor-Leste's* commitment to people-centered sustainable development is

central to achieving the SDGs (Government of *Timor-Leste*, 2019). This decision demonstrates *Timor-Leste's* commitment to building a better, fairer, and more sustainable country. In an effort to integrate national development policies with the global agenda, the government of *Timor-Leste* developed an Action Plan that serves as a guide to align the Strategic Development Plan (SDP) with the SDGs, to achieve the 2030 Agenda targets. *Timor-Leste* has adopted the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals through Government Resolution No. 34 of 2015 on September 23, 2015, two days before they were formally adopted by the United Nations in the General Assembly (Government of *Timor-Leste*, 2017).

*Timor-Leste's* success in realizing its vision of sustainable development relies heavily on the involvement of all levels of society, including students. As an active and innovative group, students have great potential to play a role in designing and implementing creative solutions to achieve predetermined development goals (Omisore et al., 2017). By exploring students' understanding of the SDGs, we can identify existing knowledge gaps and design more effective programs to achieve sustainable development goals. According to Leal Filho et al. (2019), as institutions that have the ability to shape public opinion and drive social change, universities have a great responsibility to be catalysts in achieving the SDGs. Farias et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of sustainability education in building a sustainable society that is aware of the impact of today's actions on the future. Therefore, Manolis & Manoli (2021) highlighted the importance of raising awareness of the SDGs among university students as a crucial step toward achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Lack of environmental awareness is a significant obstacle in achieving sustainable development goals. Research by Capelo et al. (2014) highlights the importance of improving public understanding of environmental issues in the context of education for sustainability. In a statement cited by Tatoli (2021b), the Prime Minister of *Timor-Leste*, Taur Matan Ruak, called on local authorities and communities to promote and raise awareness of environmental conservation at the national level. While there is a deep cultural connection between Timorese people and nature, their understanding of environmental issues, particularly climate change, still faces a number of challenges. Some of the main contributing factors are limited access to information, lack of formal environmental education, and the dominant focus on economic development. In an effort to overcome these obstacles, *Timor-Leste* has initiated a national dialog to involve all levels of society in achieving sustainable development goals (Government of *Timor-Leste*, 2017).

The successful achievement of the SDGs in *Timor-Leste* also depends on the understanding and active participation of all levels of society in *Timor-Leste*. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the level of public understanding of the SDGs. The purpose of this research is to find out how much the people of *Timor-Leste* understand about the SDGs. By knowing this, we can identify what they do not understand and create better learning programs so that they can participate in achieving sustainable development goals.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach, combining institutional (government), communal (indigenous communities), and generational (students) perspectives within a collaborative analytical framework. Few previous studies have explicitly explored the synergy among these three pillars in the context of a post-conflict nation like *Timor-Leste*. This approach offers a new perspective on how multi-stakeholder engagement can be a strategic key to overcoming development challenges. The urgency of this study is rooted in the recognition that top-down policies alone are insufficient to achieve the SDGs. Grassroots participation and the active involvement of students as agents of change are essential for building collective awareness and creating locally relevant, sustainable solutions. Therefore, an in-depth study is needed to assess their level of understanding and actual contribution in the SDG implementation process.

The objective of this study is to examine the extent of understanding and engagement of both communities and students in *Timor-Leste* in supporting the implementation of the SDGs. It also aims to identify obstacles and potential synergies between these actors to reinforce national strategies toward achieving the 2030 agenda. The significance of this research lies in its potential to provide a strong empirical foundation for government and educational institutions in designing educational and empowerment programs based on the SDGs. Furthermore, the study is expected to enrich academic discourse on sustainable development in developing countries and serve as a reference for evidence-based policymaking among development stakeholders in *Timor-Leste*.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research method used in this study is a qualitative method. The study collected both primary and secondary data (Hartanti & Kusumajati, 2025). According to Bougie & Sekaran (2020), qualitative data includes interviews, open-ended responses, and notes, collected from various sources such as individuals, organizations, and publications. In this study, the researcher sought to comprehensively explore the contributions made by the government, civil society, and students in *Timor-Leste* in an effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that have been set for 2030. This investigation aims to deeply analyze the roles and synergies between these three key actors in the context of national sustainable development.

This research uses the interpretive paradigm. According to Thanh & Thanh (2015), interpretivism usually seeks to understand a particular context, and the core belief of the interpretive paradigm is that reality is socially constructed. Using this approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper and richer understanding of how Timorese people and students understand and respond to the SDGs. This approach enables researchers to explore the meanings hidden behind the information obtained from official government documents, civil society, and the results of interviews with Youth Environmental & Climate Advocates.

*Interview* is a research technique that involves direct interaction between the interviewer and the informant to obtain in-depth information. According to Bougie &

Sekaran (2020), interviews can be conducted in various formats, both individual and group, and the communication channels that can be used include face-to-face, telephone, and internet networks. In this study, researchers used semi-structured interviews, which are interviews that have a predetermined framework of questions but still allow for follow-up questions to explore further information. There were three Research Questions (RQ): 1) What is the commitment and role of the *Timor-Leste* government regarding sustainable development (SDGs)? 2) What is the understanding of the community and students about SDGs? 3) What is the role and involvement of the community and students in efforts to achieve the SDGs? With the various information obtained, the researcher seeks to present a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the issues studied.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **(RQ1) How is the commitment and role of the Timor Leste government related to sustainable development (SDGs)?**

Based on the research results obtained, it shows that the government of Timor-Leste has shown a strong commitment to contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through various regulations that have been issued. The Government of Timor-Leste adopted the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals through Government Resolution No. 34 of 2015 on September 23, 2015, two days before they were officially adopted by the United Nations at the General Assembly. The resolution also mandates the establishment of an SDG implementation working group to be chaired by the Office of the Prime Minister. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs was then ratified by resolution of the National Parliament on November 18, 2015. Resolution No 19/2015 also recommended that the Government of Timor-Leste align its planning and budget system with the SDGs. The government subsequently issued a directive (Directive No 038/2015/XII/PM dated December 22, 2015) establishing the SDG Working Group, and a Decree (Government Decree No. 1, February 1, 2016) mandating that the SDGs should be reflected in the annual plan and budget, (Government of Timor-Leste, 2017), which aligns with the Strategic Development Plan (SDP), (Courvisanos & Boavida, 2017; Downes et al, 2017; Lopes, 2021). <Since adopting the SDGs in 2015, the Government of Timor-Leste has systematically focused on high priority SDGs, such as SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and infrastructure), (ESCAP, 2019).

On the other hand, according to Azzahra & Aushafina (2018) Timor Leste is one of the prime examples for this sustainable development after ratifying the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Timor Leste has shown significant progress in terms of gender equality, namely contributing to the 5th sustainable development goal. In response to the sixth sustainable development goal, Clean water and sanitation, the government of Timor-Leste is exploring ways to increase the availability of clean water and ensure sustainable water supply for individuals and society at large (Takeleb et al., 2020) In 2017,

the Government of Timor Leste presented a draft National Oceans Policy (NOP) to the UN Ocean conference in New York, as a commitment to contribute to the 14th SDG goal (Voyer et al., 2020)

As stated by one informant regarding this issue, he said that:

*"SDGs is a global program that all UN member countries are required to adopt or carry out the mission, because Timor-Leste is also a UN member country, inevitably Timor-Leste must also carry out this mission."*

Based on the findings presented, significant conclusions can be drawn to answer the first research question (RQ1), which focuses on the role of the Government of Timor-Leste in contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where various policies and programs have been initiated and implemented gradually in various development sectors. These sources of information indicate that there are serious efforts from the Government of Timor-Leste to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030, reflected in the allocation of resources and the establishment of coordination mechanisms between relevant ministries and agencies. Furthermore, it was revealed that the SDGs agenda has a strong alignment with Timor-Leste's State Long Term Plan, officially known as the Strategic Development Plan, which contains the vision and mission of sustainable development in its various dimensions. This implies a positive synergy in the implementation of the two frameworks, both of which have the same focus on sustainable development, with the hope of bringing measurable positive impacts to the welfare of Timor-Leste's people and environmental sustainability.

#### **(RQ2) What is the understanding of the community & students about the SDGs?**

Argue that communities and students are the main actors of development and the government is obliged to direct guide and create a supportive atmosphere (Katili et al., 2022; Zunaidi et al., 2023). The participation of Timorese people and students in environmental conservation efforts has been going on for generations, although conceptual understanding of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) has not been evenly distributed among all circles. Henfrey et al. (2023) argue that the SDGs cannot be understood as a top-down delivery of centrally designed interventions or policies by governments or UN agencies, but rather as a bottom-up, community-led convergence of global aspirations and existing strategies. According to Nogueira et al. (2024) the collective behavior of communities reflects the development of various initiatives inherently embedded in daily practices, which significantly contribute to the renewal of natural resources, the sustainability of the water cycle, and the transition towards renewable energy sources.

Indigenous peoples have long practiced traditional practices that are in line with the principles of environmental sustainability. They intuitively understand that their survival depends on maintaining the balance of the ecosystem. Local communities have developed deep traditional knowledge systems on sustainable environmental

management. Although not yet explicitly articulated in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), these practices have been ongoing for generations. The younger generation, with a more comprehensive understanding of the SDGs, has a crucial role in connecting local wisdom with global goals. Massive educational efforts are needed to raise public awareness of the contribution of local practices to the achievement of the SDGs.

In Timor Leste's report Alumni Youth Parliamentary mentioned that Timor Leste has an opportunity to implement the SDGs, that "Timor Leste has a traditional culture, "Tara Bandu", which can be utilized to protect the environment and promote indigenous knowledge for climate action. Timor Leste has a unique culture that can be transformed into community-based tourism, sustainable agriculture, and economic development," (APFTL, 2024). Although faced with limited information dissemination, community entities and students in Timor-Leste show significant participation in environmental conservation initiatives. The growing awareness among the population of the interdependence between natural disasters and human negligence motivates their involvement in applicable activities, such as reforestation and monitoring of practices that have the potential to cause environmental degradation. Traditional socio-cultural practices, such as the Tara Bandu Ritual, which is a mechanism of Local Wisdom that is unique and has historical value in Timor-Leste, is actualized as a tangible manifestation of their collective commitment to sustainable environmental protection. Based on his research Cardinoza, (2005) Tara bandu has proven to be an effective institutional tool in the protection of forests, wildlife, water sources, sacred places and community property. This indicates an intuitive understanding and implementation of environmental conservation values that are internalized in the practice of community life, even in the midst of limited access to formal information on global environmental issues.

One of the informants provided an important explanation regarding the overall level of understanding of the community towards the concept of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in which he stated that:

*"Practices such as protecting and conserving the environment have actually been around for a long time and our elders have been doing it, it's just that they don't know that what they are doing is also contributing to the SDGs, but we as young people or those of us who already know about these programs or terms, we need to direct or disseminate information that what you are doing is included in contributing to the global goals that everyone is now trying to contribute".*

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practices to the achievement of the SDGs. To achieve the set goals, synergistic collaboration between various levels of society, institutions, communities, and academics is necessary. This joint effort urges us to intensify socialization and environmental education, in order to build collective awareness of the importance of preserving nature. Through the active participation of all elements of society, it is hoped that behavioral changes that have a positive impact on the environment can be created, such as reducing logging and forest burning activities, which are one of the causes of climate change.

In an effort to understand the dynamics of understanding and participation of the Timorese community and students towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), based on the analysis of the results of interviews and information from various reliable sources that researchers obtained about the understanding of the community and students on this issue revealed: i) a unique pattern of understanding, where people tend to associate SDGs with concrete issues that directly impact their lives, such as access to basic needs and environmental conservation. On the other hand, ii) traditional practices rooted in local wisdom, such as the Tara Bandu Ritual, show alignment with sustainability principles, although explicit understanding of the SDGs as a global framework may still be limited. In addition, iii) the role of the younger generation as a link between local wisdom and the global goals of the SDGs is crucial in efforts to increase community awareness and participation.

### **(RQ3) What is the role and involvement of communities and students in efforts to achieve the SDGs?**

Communities and students can work together to create strong synergies in achieving the SDGs. Students can provide knowledge, skills and innovation, while communities can provide local context, experience and resources. Partnerships between communities and students can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to development challenges. According to Alifa et al. (2023) students are known as a figure full of new ideas and full of enthusiasm so that they have great potential to influence and become a driving force in society. According to (Katili et al., 2022) society is the main actor of development. This means that both have a very important role to play in contributing to the achievement of the 2030 SDGs. (Fatuberliu, 2021; Lafaek News, 2021; Sapnews, 2023; Tatoli, 2021a) Communities and students in Timor-Leste voluntarily participate in tree planting activities, which not only aim to reduce the risk of natural disasters such as soil erosion and flooding in the future, but also to support the preservation of water resources, ensuring their availability for future generations, while strengthening their commitment to environmental sustainability.

The participation of Timorese communities and students in tree planting activities reflects a deep concern for the environment and the future of Timor-Leste. This activity aims to reduce the risk of frequent natural disasters, such as soil erosion and flooding, which are serious problems in many areas of Timor-Leste. Tree planting plays an important role in stabilizing soil, preventing landslides, and improving environmental quality in disaster-prone areas. By strengthening the resilience of ecosystems,

communities proactively protect their areas from threats that could harm their lives and livelihoods. Timorese students, as a group of young intellectuals, play a crucial role in environmental conservation efforts through reforestation activities. Their participation is not only driven by concern for current environmental conditions, but also by a clear vision of Timor-Leste's sustainable future (Government of Timor-Leste, 2017). With a more comprehensive understanding of global environmental issues and their relevance to the local context, students act as agents of change who are able to bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and traditional practices. They actively contribute to strengthening ecosystem resilience through tree planting, while disseminating information and education on the importance of environmental conservation to the wider community. Through this initiative, students not only contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals (SDGs) but also instill the values of environmental conservation to future generations.

As conveyed by one of the informants regarding the role of the community and students to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs, he said that:

*"The role of students and the community to contribute to SDGs, in my opinion, especially students, students must actively participate because students get the most information than other people who are not in school, and students who have joined volunteer groups to carry out activities related to SDGs should when they return to their respective areas they already know what they will do because they have gained a lot of experience and information to contribute to SDGs, so the point is that students are agents of transformation who can influence others to be able to do good things. Aside from being students, we don't need to go far, we can practice in the environment around our school, for example planting trees, throwing garbage in its place, it doesn't seem like much but the impact is huge if we consistently do it. And the role of the community is also the same, when we hear or get information such as climate change, the environment, reducing malnutrition, we already know that what we have to do, we don't need people to push us this, that's when we move, and one of our bad habits is that we move when there is money, which has made the community forget its role to contribute voluntarily."*

In the Civil Society report, Luta-Hamutuk said that communities must be part of the solution. Currently, governments and international organizations are implementing many projects related to climate change. It is important for communities themselves to know the causes and impacts of climate change and have the opportunity to participate in the development of programs (Jain et al., 2021)

The following table presents a synthesis of the roles played by Timorese students and communities in the context of contributing to the SDGs, illustrated through reforestation practices and other environmental conservation initiatives.



The Contribution of Three Pillars: Government, Community, and Students in Establishing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Timor-Leste

Contribution Aspect	Community Role	Student Role
Environmental Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have an intuitive and empirical understanding of the impact of environmental degradation on local life.</li> <li>• Demonstrate deep concern for the environment around where they live.</li> <li>• Understand firsthand the impact of natural disasters such as soil erosion and flooding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a heightened awareness of the importance of environmental conservation for the future of Timor-Leste.</li> <li>• Have a more comprehensive understanding of global environmental issues and how they relate to the local context.</li> <li>• Have a good understanding of the SDGs.</li> </ul>
Conservation Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively engage in reforestation activities as an adaptation strategy to climate change and natural disasters.</li> <li>• Implement conservation practices that are integrated with local wisdom and customary traditions.</li> <li>• Protect areas from disasters by planting trees.</li> <li>• Maintaining the ecosystem with local traditions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribute to strengthening ecosystem resilience through reforestation and other conservation initiatives.</li> <li>• Serve as a link between scientific knowledge and traditional practices in environmental conservation efforts.</li> <li>• Help direct community activities to be in line with the SDGs program.</li> </ul>
Education and Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pass on traditional conservation knowledge and practices to younger generations.</li> <li>• Participate in local traditions that protect the environment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disseminate information and education on the importance of environmental conservation to the wider community.</li> <li>• Serve as an agent of change in raising public awareness on environmental issues.</li> <li>• Linking local wisdom with the global goals of the SDGs.</li> </ul>
Decision Making	Participate in local traditions that regulate the utilization of natural resources, such as the tara bandu tradition.	Potential to participate in sustainable policymaking with their knowledge.

Source: Data processed

Based on the above results for the third research question (RQ3), it can be concluded that the synergy between the community and students has great potential in encouraging the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, where students act as agents of change equipped with knowledge, skills, and innovation, while the community as the main pillar of development provides a deep understanding of the local context, rich

experience, and essential resources. This partnership between the two parties is believed to be able to produce more effective and sustainable solutions in overcoming various complex development challenges. The active participation of communities and students, as seen in the voluntary tree planting initiative in Timor-Leste, reflects a deep awareness of the importance of environmental conservation and a commitment to a sustainable future. These activities not only aim to reduce the risk of natural disasters such as soil erosion and flooding, but also to protect vital water resources. Students, with a comprehensive understanding of global environmental issues and their relevance to local conditions, play an important role in bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and traditional practices, as well as disseminating information and education on the importance of environmental conservation to the wider community. Therefore, active engagement and close collaboration between communities and students are crucial in ensuring the success of efforts to achieve the SDGs.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and analysis of this research, it can be concluded that the commitment to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in *Timor-Leste* is not only shown by the government but is also reflected in the active involvement of the community and students. The Government of *Timor-Leste* has demonstrated a strong commitment through the ratification of various regulations and the establishment of institutions that support the implementation of the SDGs, such as Government Resolution No. 34/2015, the establishment of the SDGs Working Group, and the alignment of national development planning with the SDGs within the framework of the Strategic Development Plan (SDP) (Government of *Timor-Leste*, 2017, 2019). This commitment is further strengthened through a focus on national priority goals, such as the elimination of hunger, access to clean water, quality education, gender equality, and industrial innovation, as well as contributions in international forums, such as the drafting of the National Ocean Policy (Government of *Timor-Leste*, 2017; UN, 2015). The involvement of communities and students plays a very important role in supporting the achievement of the SDGs in a contextual and grassroots-based manner. Local communities, especially indigenous communities, have long implemented local wisdom-based environmental conservation practices such as *Tara Bandu* (The Asia Foundation & Belun, 2013), which are essentially aligned with the principles of the SDGs, although not always formally recognized. Meanwhile, students act as a bridge between academic knowledge and traditional practices through education, advocacy (Sibic, 2025), and direct involvement in environmental conservation activities such as reforestation and sustainable natural resource management (Fatuberliu, 2021; *Lafaek News*, 2021). Collaboration between students and communities, coupled with government support, creates a strong and comprehensive synergy in supporting the successful implementation of SDGs in *Timor-Leste*. This cross-sectoral effort is expected to encourage sustainable social transformation and improve the overall quality of life of the community.

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