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1           **Systems Approaches for Localising the SDGs: Co-Production of Place-based Case Studies**

2   **In: Globalization and Health**

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10

11    Abstract

12    *Introduction/Background*

13    Localisation is a pervasive challenge in achieving sustainable development. Contextual particularities  
14    may render generalized strategies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) unfeasible,  
15    impractical, or ineffective. Furthermore, many localities are resource- and data-poor, limiting  
16    applicability of the global SDG indicator framework. Tools to enable local actors to make sense of  
17    complex problems, communicate this understanding, and act accordingly would improve results.

18    *Aim*

19    Systems approaches can help characterise local causal systems, identify useful leverage points, and foster  
20    participation needed to localise and catalyse development action. Critically, such efforts must be deeply  
21    rooted in place, involving local actors in mapping decision-processes and causation within local physical,  
22    social and policy environments. Given that each place has a unique geographical or spatial extent and  
23    therein lies its unique characters and problems, we term these activities “placially-explicit.” We describe  
24    here a process used to develop placially-explicit, systems-based (PESB) case studies on issues that impact  
25    urban health and wellbeing, producing place-based models and insights that are useful for SDG  
26    localisation.

27    *Methods*

28 Seven case studies were co-produced by one or more Partners with place-based knowledge of the case  
29 study issue and a Systems Thinker. In each case, joint delineation of an appropriate framing was followed  
30 by iterative dialogue cycles to uncover key contextual factors, with attention to institutional and societal  
31 structures and paradigms and the motivations and constraints of other actors. Casual loop diagrams were  
32 iteratively developed to capture complex narratives in a simple visual way.

### 33 *Results*

34 Case study development facilitated transfer of local knowledge and development of systems thinking  
35 capacity. Partners reported new insights, including a shifting of problem frames and corresponding  
36 solution spaces to higher systems levels. Such changes led partners to re-evaluate their roles and goals,  
37 and thence to new actions and strategies. CLD-based narratives also proved useful in ongoing  
38 communications.

### 39 *Conclusion*

40 Co-production of placially-explicit, systems-based case studies are a useful component of  
41 transdisciplinary toolsets for local SDG implementation, building the capacity of local actors to explore  
42 complex problems, identify new solutions and indicators, and understand the systemic linkages inherent  
43 in SDG actions across sectors and scales.

### 44 Keywords

45 Systems approaches, systems thinking, place-based approaches, placially-explicit, localisation, decision-  
46 making, co-production

### 47 Background

#### 48 *Translating SDGs into local contexts*

49 The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015 as a globally-agreed  
50 vision for advancing the conditions of people and planet while ensuring that no one is left behind.

51 Because health is central to and deeply interlinked with sustainable development (1), progress toward

52 these goals is essential for creating physical, social and policy environments that will sustain and enhance  
53 health and wellbeing. Realising such progress will require action at local scales, yet localisation involves  
54 more than just local application of high-level agendas. Rather, SDG localisation encompasses local  
55 agenda setting, decision-making, and process monitoring with locally-adapted indicators, which together  
56 generate the ownership necessary for successful SDG implementation at local scale. It is thus critical that  
57 the apparatus of sustainable development become more responsive and relevant to local needs and  
58 aspirations.

59 Substantial difficulties exist in translating high-level SDG goals for local contexts, as evidenced by the  
60 literature on gaps between global indicators and local needs and understandings. Global indicators enable  
61 comparison between contexts but may sacrifice local validity (2,3) and the ability to motivate action by  
62 reflecting local values (4,5). Furthermore, global indicators may be unusable at local scales where data, or  
63 the resources and capacity to obtain such data, are unavailable (2,3). Necessary development of SDG  
64 indicators that match locally available needs, values, and capacity is hampered by the same resource and  
65 capacity deficits that limit local application of global indicators. Furthermore, responsibilities and  
66 expertise are vertically and horizontally fragmented. This fragmentation frequently isolates local actors,  
67 depriving them of support and empowerment and thereby limiting meaningful participation and  
68 ownership. This is problematic given that participation, rooted in place as an organising principle, is  
69 critical for connecting domains such as planning and health (6) that are critical for SDG action.

70

#### 71 *Systems approaches for localisation*

72 Despite shared emphases on contextual understanding and holistic approaches, systems thinking and  
73 place-based approaches have rarely, and only recently, been mentioned together in scientific literature (7–  
74 9). They intersect in systems approaches (10–13), which are strategies for problem exploration, framing  
75 and solving that make use of systems thinking tools and methodologies in tandem with participatory  
76 engagement beyond the academy.

77 Systems thinking has been defined in various ways, with key elements including a consideration of  
78 interconnections, holistic rather than reductionist approaches, and exploration of dynamic and emergent  
79 behaviour arising from the action of feedback relationships (14). Systems thinking provides tools for  
80 managing complexity by shifting problem frameworks from linear cause-effect interpretations toward an  
81 understanding of the larger context in which interventions might occur, how other actors might respond,  
82 and unintended consequences that might affect not only outcomes but also interventions themselves (15).  
83 Place-based approaches are motivated by the idea that sustainability problems are often best understood  
84 by analysing human–environment interactions in specific locations and at relatively small scales. This is  
85 generally justified in terms of analytical tractability, or on the grounds that macro-scale approaches  
86 involve the sacrifice of process detail, or in the belief that human–environment interactions are strongly  
87 context-sensitive (16,17). An important critique of the local approach to sustainability issues is that action  
88 which is locally optimal may shift externalities to other scales, sectors, or locations. Systems thinking,  
89 with its emphasis on interconnectedness, can be a useful corrective to this.

90 Systems approaches make use of causal loop diagrams (CLDs) and other systems thinking tools to enable  
91 participatory exploration of problems. In addressing local problems, a place-specific approach is critical,  
92 because problems manifest in unique ways in particular contexts. Although common contextual features  
93 are often shared across different settings, the interconnections and interdependencies between parts of  
94 systems (especially between people and environments) are often diverse, dynamic, and, most importantly,  
95 place-specific. Pre-existing social, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions in different places  
96 also play a significant role in determining the structure of causal chains (Cartwright, 2013). Thus, lessons  
97 are not easily translated across contexts. Rather, efforts to address local problems—such as in SDG  
98 localisation—require a placially-explicit understanding of the relationships and interconnections in that  
99 place.

100 In systems approaches, placially-explicit understanding is achieved by engaging actors and stakeholders  
101 with systems tools for model- and narrative-building. These methodologies provide a common language  
102 that is a necessary part of any solution for overcoming disciplinary and organisational fragmentation and

103 enabling diverse stakeholders to create shared narratives about important development issues (18). A  
104 common language is critical to transdisciplinary work that integrates both academic researchers from  
105 different unrelated disciplines and non-academic participants to research a common goal and create new  
106 knowledge and theory. Narratives developed in transdisciplinary projects can advance localisation of the  
107 SDGs in various ways:

- 108 • By facilitating the creation and communication of holistic understandings of complex socio-  
109 ecological issues (19).
- 110 • By creating systems frameworks that are useful for evaluating likely leverage points and  
111 consequences of actions (20,21), thus suggesting local SDG solutions and ways to parlay the  
112 SDGs into broader local development.
- 113 • By fostering the development of relationships among actors, thus providing a pathway for  
114 developing the local, intersubjective, value-based indicators advocated by Burford et al. (2013,  
115 2016) and enabling the integrated multi-level partnerships that have been identified as one of the  
116 key drivers for SDGs localisation (22,23).

117 Transdisciplinary systems thinking workshops have been a typical vehicle for building systems thinking  
118 capacity and applying systems methodologies to local problem exploration (24,25). Such workshops  
119 facilitate transdisciplinary action, often by training participants to overcome disciplinary barriers, and can  
120 thereby serve as a vehicle for systems approaches. However, while valuable, such workshops are often  
121 resource-intensive, and may require the convening of large groups of stakeholders. Here, we describe a  
122 complementary capacity-building process: co-development of placially-explicit, systems-based (PESB)  
123 case studies. Such studies are well-suited to meet the challenges of SDG localisation in ways that improve  
124 health and wellbeing, especially in low-resource and low-capacity settings.

125

## 126 Methods

127 While the urban environment, including the built environment, is a key determinant of health (26), the  
128 fields of urban planning and public health are limited in their interactions, the result of a long-standing

129 divergence (6). Under the Systems Thinking and Place Based Methods for Healthier Malaysian Cities  
 130 (SCHEMA) project, an effort to improve decision-making for urban health, PESB case studies were  
 131 developed to demonstrate the value of systems approaches for improving understanding and developing  
 132 narratives to address this and other such gaps, with the end goal of improved decision making. Simple  
 133 CLDs were used to visually communicate the complex relationships among urban planning, public health,  
 134 and other fields (18,20). These were combined with other written and visual elements to produce seven  
 135 case studies (Table 1) aimed at policy-makers, and were launched at the 9<sup>th</sup> World Urban Forum (WUF9)  
 136 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

137 Case studies were co-produced by one or more partners with place-specific knowledge of the case study  
 138 issue (“Partners”) and an expert in systems thinking (“Systems Thinker”). Partners were recruited via an  
 139 open call and through professional networks. Partners included representatives from civil society  
 140 organisations, policy researchers, academics, and the private sector. With one exception, Partners had no  
 141 or minimal prior exposure to systems thinking.

**Table 1:** List of Case Studies

Case Study Description	Partners	Key Insights
Analysis of how policies and practices around school canteens interact based on observations of schools in a small township.	Anthropology researcher	Policies and practices surrounding school canteens with different goals (i.e. student nutrition, promotion of small businesses, and school finances) have been set independently of each other. While they make sense independently, they are incoherent together, undermining nutritional value of school canteen food.
Challenges in changing diets in Malaysia to combat rise in diabetes.	Health policy researchers	Health promotion through informational campaigns needs to be accompanied by strategies that address societal and environmental drivers of food consumption and physical activity.
Sustaining urban rejuvenation efforts in a financially-limited locality.	Officers from an organisation funding and facilitating urban rejuvenation efforts	When urban rejuvenation efforts are coupled with a locally-appropriate strategy for engaging communities and developing cross-sector partnerships, resources can be unlocked for maintaining improvements and initiating new efforts.

A university botanic garden’s challenge in maintaining conservation and education missions as university institutional priorities and funding shift.	University researcher and living laboratory programme officer	To maintain its mission, the botanic garden needs to re-evaluate who it considers as its key stakeholders, and reorient its activities and focus to cultivate those relationships.
Competing paradigms within a university of the value of its undeveloped land, and the challenge of maintaining green spaces in urban centres.	University administration leader and living laboratory programme officer	To secure university green spaces, institutional paradigms and sustainable land use must be strengthened. To achieve this, linkages must be made between conservation and other core values and priorities the university holds.
Technological and community approaches to river clean-up and maintenance.	Civil society advocates and university researcher	Technology appears to offer predictable and easily-implementable solutions to state and local authorities dealing with pollution issues. However, when this is the sole solution, communities are disempowered and become disengaged, feeding paradigms that lead to increased pollution.
Bike-sharing as part of an integrated public-transit solution.	Private sector bike-sharing company	Barriers to cycling are lowered when there is a critical mass of cyclists such that driver-awareness and road infrastructure change to accommodate cycling. Bike-sharing companies can play a role in overcoming initial barriers such that this critical mass can be reached.

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Co-production of PESB case studies was designed to fully engage Partners in holistic problem definition and representation so that Partners retained control over the transfer of knowledge, often implicit or tacit, into the case study format (27). The process began with selection of an appropriate framework for understanding the issue in question. Partners were provided with a short primer on CLDs, a sample case study, and a short set of guidelines, and developed a 200-word abstract describing the problem and highlighting attempted or proposed solutions. The Systems Thinker followed up, via e-mail or a face-to-face meeting, with an iterative series of questions, based on principles in systems approaches, to map out the larger context in which the case study was embedded. Attention was given to institutional and societal structures and paradigms, as well as the motivations and constraints of other actors involved in the problem and/or solution.

154 Based on responses to initial questions, the Systems Thinker developed three to four candidate CLDs that  
155 attempted to create a conceptual model of causal linkages surrounding the problem and solution in a  
156 manner consistent with the Partner’s narrative. Partners were asked to identify what was correctly  
157 captured and what was left out, concluding with the selection of a preliminary CLD and corresponding  
158 problem frame that accurately represented the Partner’s understandings. The selected CLD went through  
159 several further iterations, informed by ongoing engagement. The CLDs were broken down into 3-4 stages  
160 of complexity. The simplest stage involved one or two key feedback loops, with further contextual detail  
161 added in subsequent stages. Potential systems-based interventions were usually added in the last stage.  
162 When the CLDs were finalised, Partners wrote the case study text, using the CLD stages as an outline.  
163 The Systems Thinker played an editorial role to ensure the text was consistent with and adequately  
164 explained the narrative portrayed in the CLDs. Contact time between the Systems Thinker and the  
165 Partners varied widely; the Systems Thinker spent an average of ten hours per case study on face-to-face  
166 time and written correspondence, with an additional ten hours in developing CLDs and the editorial role.

167

## 168 Results

169 Development of the PESB case studies facilitated a transfer of local knowledge from Partners to the  
170 Systems Thinker, and development of systems thinking capacity in the former. In five of the seven case  
171 studies, Partners engaged deeply with CLD development, giving substantive comments about CLD  
172 structure and variable naming; in the remaining two, Partners were more invested with developing a case  
173 study product than with the reflective process and were largely uncritical about the CLD representation.  
174 Engaged Partners reported new insights that changed the way they understood the highlighted issue.  
175 The PESB case study methodology adopted here provided Partners with tools for describing a place in  
176 terms of feedback relationships and for understanding the origins of various consequences—desirable and  
177 undesirable. Initial case study abstracts by Partners were usually framed narrowly, with solutions  
178 presented as direct, linear responses to the problem. Through the process here described, Partners  
179 reframed their conceptualization of local challenges away from immediate problems, goals, and roles,

180 instead mapping out the incentives, constraints, and goals of other actors within the system. In each case,  
181 the final problem frame was at a higher systems level—engaging with broader institutional and societal  
182 rules, values, and paradigms—than the original problem described in the abstract. The resulting  
183 conceptual models in the CLDs were useful for hypothesizing about leverage points, causal pathways and  
184 theories of change, and for prioritising among evidence to be collected or generated. This resulted in  
185 proposed solutions at higher problem levels, understood in connection with larger causal pathways for  
186 change.

187 Improved understanding among Partners of the complex nature of their case studies has had real-world  
188 relevance as they continue to work and advocate on these issues. For example, one Partner who had  
189 conducted an observational, anthropological study of the nutritional value of meals in school canteens  
190 developed an analytical framework for integrating the motivations and actions of various actors (28). The  
191 analysis revealed how important but diverse priorities—school funding, enterprise as welfare-promotion,  
192 and student health—underlying the different policies affecting school canteen operators undermined  
193 nutritional standards in student meals. The interactions of these policies were clear through the combined  
194 experiences of the different actors at the local level, but not through the viewpoints of any single actor or  
195 policy. The integrated approach in the case study enabled identification of key feedback loops that could  
196 be strengthened to increase the capacity and motivation of school canteen operators to provide healthy  
197 food options.

198 The PESB case studies had benefits beyond improved problem understanding. Several Partners requested  
199 further capacity building and engagement, having found the exercise valuable to their work. For example,  
200 one Partner initiated and funded a transdisciplinary workshop on campus sustainability, to extend insights  
201 from their case studies to other university actors. Additionally, the case studies provided compelling  
202 narratives which proved useful for Partners' organisations, both internally to improve understanding, and  
203 externally to communicate effectively.

204

205 *Example: Illustration of Localisation, Capacity-Building, and Values-as-Indicators*

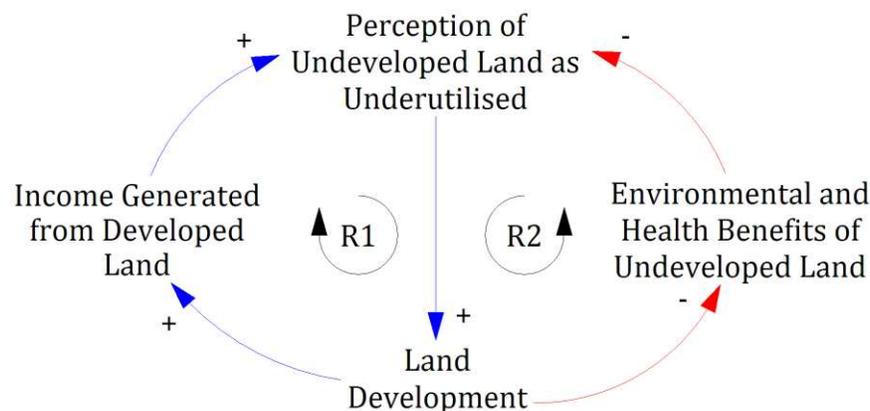
206 A pair of case studies examined campus sustainability in the setting of a major Malaysian public  
207 university, unpacking how place-specific institutional structures and paradigms support or threaten  
208 educational and outreach efforts and sustainable land-use choices (29,30). Partners originated from a  
209 botanic garden facility with a broad mission of conservation and education and from a closely-associated  
210 grassroots initiative (alumni and student) for ecological engagement and volunteerism adopted by the  
211 university. The first case study examined drift in university support for the broad botanic garden mission,  
212 while the latter examined a project conducted by the grassroots initiative that contributed to the  
213 preservation of a rewilded parcel of land in the face of development pressures.

214 A wide body of literature establishes the positive contributions that green space and biodiversity make to  
215 health, especially mental health (31,32). However, drivers that promote appreciation, preservation, and  
216 cultivation of green space are strongly place-based and heavily subject to local context, including  
217 socioeconomic conditions, developmental legacy and climate (33,34). Malaysia is a developing economy,  
218 in which income generation is a high priority. Land is a priceless resource in the city and the neoliberal  
219 developmental paradigm adopted worldwide over recent decades has resulted in the side-lining of green  
220 space conservation (35). The intrinsic assumption in this paradigm is that undeveloped land constitutes an  
221 underutilised resource. Yet the modern-day reframing of development in terms of sustainability  
222 recognizes the value of green space. This is contained not only in SDG 15.9, calling for the integration of  
223 ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, but also in SDG 11.7 which affirms  
224 the need to provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces. University  
225 campuses and botanic gardens can contribute substantial institutional green space to a city (36), but most  
226 relevant examples come from well-resourced institutions in highly-developed contexts.

227 These case studies explored the value to the university of maintaining or converting green spaces and the  
228 institutional values required to sustain urban green space efforts more broadly. The Partners' initial  
229 framing of the problem was in terms of individual decision-makers and their values, and of institutional  
230 resource constraints. While the Partners have a degree of agency in addressing the issues at hand, the  
231 primary locus of decision-making authority lies elsewhere, contributing to a sense of disempowerment

232 and uncertainty over the long-term viability of their efforts. Their engagement with the case studies was,  
 233 in part, an attempt to advocate for their positions on these issues.

234 A systems-level analysis shifted focus from personalities as guardians of values toward the influence of  
 235 institutional structures and incentives in shaping institutional values. Partners attributed this to rigorous  
 236 and repeated probing via the systems thinking process, which interrogated many underlying assumptions.  
 237 For example, funding cuts to the botanic garden were originally ascribed to budgetary constraints  
 238 stemming from reduction of public funding for the university. Further reflection revealed shifts in the  
 239 university institutional priorities as the fundamental driver, as university budgetary constraints had merely  
 240 accelerated funding cuts to the botanic garden, a trend that had begun long before. This revised  
 241 conceptual model of events created a better appreciation of the various constraints faced by decision-  
 242 makers face and pointed toward institutional paradigms of undeveloped land as a core issue undermining  
 243 support for biodiversity and greenspace initiatives (Figure 1).

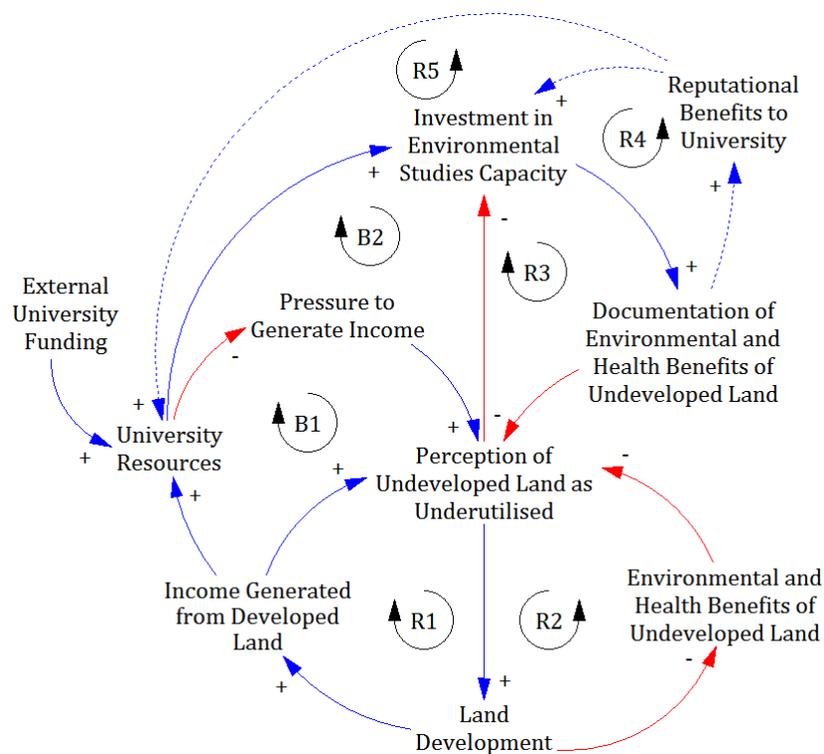


245

246 **Figure 1:** Partners discovered competing institutional narratives surrounding undeveloped university  
 247 land, each driven by reinforcing feedback loops. The perception that undeveloped land is underutilised  
 248 drives new development, which in turn generates income, reinforcing the perception that undeveloped  
 249 land should be developed (R1). Conversely, when undeveloped land is perceived as valuable, low rates of  
 250 development will preserve environmental and health benefits, and the experience of these benefits  
 251 undermines the belief that undeveloped land is underutilised (R2). Figure is reproduced from Ong and  
 252 Adikan (2018). (29)

253 Whereas a general analysis of the issue of green space on campuses might focus on profit-vs-loss  
 254 calculations, situating the issue within a unique place allowed for deeper consideration of the local socio-

255 geographic context. The university's land bank is a significant green space in a locality where nature is  
 256 otherwise scarce. The engagement of student volunteers in this project provided low-cost capacity  
 257 building through fieldwork training at a time when classroom-based practical sessions were threatened by  
 258 severe funding cuts across the university. Choosing to maintain green space fostered good will with  
 259 neighbourhood residents who would have been affected by the proposed development. These insights  
 260 suggested that Partners need not only advocate ecological and sustainability causes, but also seek out the  
 261 systemic feedbacks that shape institutional perspectives and values related to land-use (Figure 2).



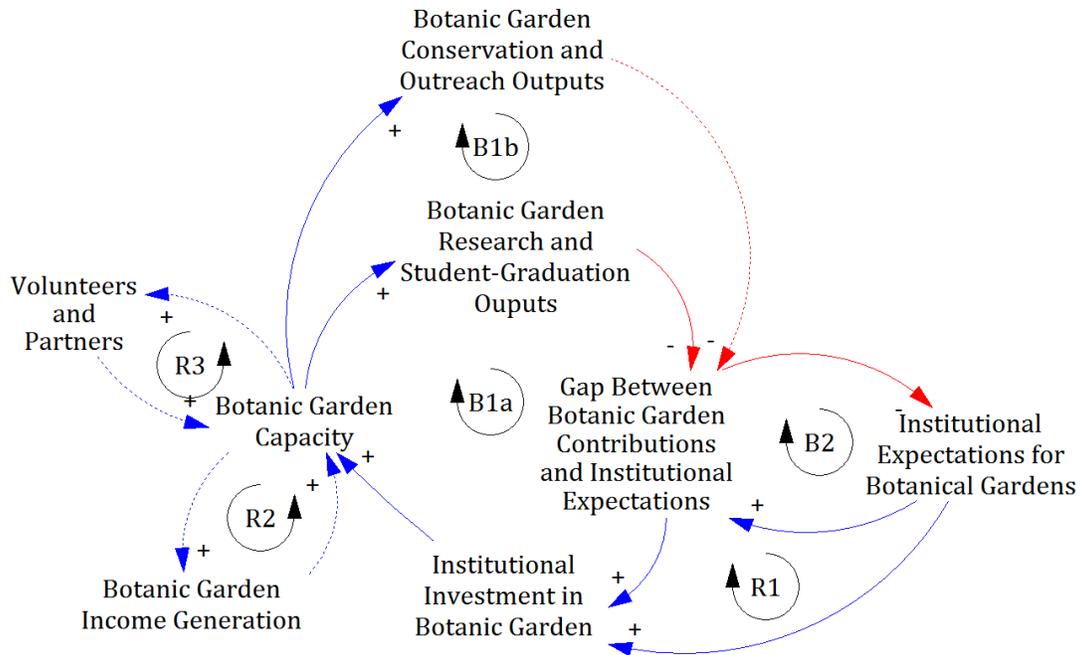
262

263 **Figure 2:** Partners identified several systemic relationships that strengthen or weaken the competing  
 264 narratives. Availability of university resources, driven largely by external public funding, determines the  
 265 level of pressure for income generation, which in turn can lead to development to alleviate financial  
 266 pressure (B1 loop). University efforts to document environmental and health benefits of undeveloped land  
 267 have shaped perceptions of the land and encourage further investment in such studies (R3 loop); however,  
 268 such efforts are also threatened by university funding limitations, which are further constrained by  
 269 decisions to forego income generation to preserve undeveloped land (B2 loop). Partners identified  
 270 reputational benefits to the university as useful leverage point if certain pathways (dotted arrows) could  
 271 be developed and strengthened. Translation of documented environmental and health benefits of  
 272 undeveloped university land into reputational benefits could reinforce university decisions to invest in

273 environmental studies (R4). Reputational benefits could also be leveraged for income generation through  
274 edu-tourism and other means (R5). Figure is adapted from Ong and Adikan (29).

275 The case study process provided Partners a space to reflect on the importance of underlying variables,  
276 causes, consequences, and feedbacks. In developing their conceptual models and narratives with the  
277 Systems Thinker, the Partners revisited everyday experiences. This reflection catalysed discovery of the  
278 interconnectedness of the issues and more importantly, their linkages to wider narratives of sustainability.  
279 Partners re-evaluated the value of various key performance indicators in directing focus to the actions  
280 necessary to advance the overarching mission. One such example was the identification of land-use  
281 paradigms as a central issue. This led the grassroots initiative to invest effort in engaging the university in  
282 dialogue on how land is valued. A prior focus on green space and biodiversity indicators, which remain  
283 important outcomes, did not draw attention to the importance of engaging institutional values driving  
284 university decision-making processes. This illustrates the role that values-as-indicators in SDG  
285 localisation can play in drawing actors attention to critical processes that must be engaged to achieve  
286 desired outcomes (4,5).

287 The Partners also recognised that the previous strategy of treating the university as the botanic garden's  
288 sole primary stakeholder limited their capacity to influence the feedback loops shaping institutional  
289 perspectives (Figure 3). This became the basis of a theory-of-change exercise that underpinned a major  
290 restructuring of the relationship between the grassroots initiative and the botanic garden for better  
291 medium-term sustainability. The respective roles played by the botanic garden facility and the grassroots  
292 initiative were re-evaluated, with a pivot toward recognizing the external support community (volunteers,  
293 alumni, etc.) as a primary stakeholder, and the creation of an entity outside the university institutional  
294 system to support this.



295

296 **Figure 3:** Although the botanic garden had, since its foundation in the 1970s, developed a mission for  
 297 conservation and public education/outreach, university institutional priorities and performance indicators  
 298 since the mid-2000s shifted toward research and student-graduation outputs, severely weakening the B1b  
 299 loop (indicated by dotted arrow). As the university was viewed as the sole primary stakeholder, the  
 300 botanic garden felt pressure to shift its mission toward research (B1a loop). The alternative was to face  
 301 diminished capacity as repeated failure to meet expectations would lead the institute to expect less from  
 302 botanic garden in the long term (B2 loop) and thus invest less (R1 loop). The case study Partners  
 303 identified that a pivot toward the external support community as another primary stakeholder could enable  
 304 the botanical garden to maintain both its mission and its capacity. This requires investment to establish  
 305 and strengthen new feedback loops (R2 and R3 loops).

306 Meanwhile, the botanic garden is bolstering its endorsement of and infrastructural support for the  
 307 grassroots initiative through greater access to its space and legacy resources. This represents a shift in the  
 308 way the botanic garden operates: its relationship to volunteer and grassroots movements in the past was  
 309 more casual, as such partnerships were deemed peripheral to day-to-day operations at best, and  
 310 burdensome and a liability at worst. This expanded capacity for risk-taking was made possible through a  
 311 better understanding of systems, in which such actions are not just public service, but are critical to  
 312 building the botanic garden's own support and capacity in the long-term. By anchoring some educational  
 313 and outreach efforts outside the university, the Partners aim to increase resilience, improve

314 responsiveness to community values and priorities, and extend the utility of the botanic garden  
315 infrastructure and facilities.

*Box 1: Example of SDG Localisation Problem that Can be Addressed with Case Study Methodology*

Efforts in Malaysia for family planning (FP) and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) have been guided by various international movements and documents, national plans and policies, and accompanied by significant advocacy efforts over the several decades. The Malaysia Sustainable Development Goals Voluntary National Review Report 2017 (Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, 2017) showed that Malaysia has made substantial overall progress toward SDG 3: Good Health and Well Being. Nonetheless, SRH remains a concern, with issues such as contraceptives use and adolescents sexual and reproductive health remaining controversial, contested, and difficult to operationalise 'downstream' in policies, programmes and services due to diverse local gendered realities, culture and religion, and ways of allying and working creatively with influential actors.

In Malaysia, the National Family Planning and SRH Programme and services are mainly targeted at married couples. These are provided free of charge at Ministry of Health clinics or at a subsidised rate from the National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB) facilities and the non-government organisation - Federation of Reproductive Health Associations, Malaysia (FRHAM) clinics. Unsubsidised FP and SRH services are also available from private pharmacies and clinics. Nevertheless, these services have been insufficient to address low use of contraceptives and deficiencies in adolescent sexual and reproductive health. Much of the shortcomings stem from problems in local implementation:

There are no clear mechanisms to coordinate and track progress of SRH programmes and services across the NFPDB, MOH and FRHAM clinics at the ground level. Common indicators and frameworks are necessary to coordinate action and leverage resources. An Advisory and Coordinating Committee on Reproductive Health (ACCRH) was established in 2001 at both national and state levels for SRH programmes and services, consisting of these three and other relevant organisations. However, the ACCRH has often been inactive and the decisions that are made do not translate into local, coordinated, action.

Meaningful engagement with local communities has not been established particularly with the marginalised and underserved populations, including young people. Community members are perceived as recipients of FP and SRH programmes and services instead of being empowered and engaged in generating ideas, making informed decisions, and sharing responsibility.

There is a lack of understanding and buy-in from other crucial partners at the local level including the Youth and Sports Ministry, Ministry of Education, Department for Islamic Development, and local community leaders. Addressing SRH needs of unmarried, young people and adolescents remains controversial for most of the key partners.

Here, we see the need for (1) systemic understanding to overcome fragmentation of efforts; (2) for sense-making tools to enable bottom-up approaches to generate contextually-appropriate solutions; and (3) for powerful narratives that can challenge and shift deeply-held paradigms. These needs in localisation are not unique to the challenges of FP and SRH, and the case study approach described herein attempts to address all three.

316

317 Discussion

318 *Utility for SDG Localisation*

319 Systems thinking has often been used as a tool for scaling-up local interventions for improved health  
320 outcomes (44,45). Here, a different approach has been taken, using systems approaches for down-scaling  
321 and localisation, recognising that complexity and interconnections exist at all problem scales. Indeed, the  
322 PESB case study methodology was conceptualised to enhance decision-making, especially in the face of  
323 cross-sectoral issues that impact health and wellbeing, by improving capacity for systemic understanding  
324 and transdisciplinary communication. As a bottom-up process, it features minimal resource requirements.  
325 These design parameters make this approach uniquely suited for SDG localisation, in which complex and  
326 interconnected challenges particular to a specific place need to be addressed with locally-available  
327 resources.

328 In local SDG implementation, local indicators are important not only for measuring impacts, but for  
329 highlighting important processes that generate the desired outcomes. Indeed, systems thinking recognises  
330 that indicators are not just a measurement, but that the choice of indicators also changes system behaviour  
331 as indicators become targets and actors take actions accordingly (37). This can be beneficial if indicators  
332 are well-aligned with actual goals, but can be detrimental if there are pathways to achieve indicators that  
333 are not relevant—or even detrimental—to desired outcomes. The case study methodology enables actors  
334 to develop conceptual models of systems processes, enabling them to choose supportive indicators in a  
335 holistic manner that acknowledges critical relationships and system leverage points (21). Key processes  
336 often include the inculcation and nurturing of values that support the SDG goals—enabling factors that  
337 are often neglected in indicator selection because of the difficulties in quantifying and standardising such  
338 subjective and place-specific variables (4,5). Systems approaches can enable and inform the process of re-  
339 examining accepted narratives, mitigating against path dependency so that indicators are not adopted  
340 merely because of prior usage (38).

341 The same improved conceptual models that enables better selection of local indicators also increases  
342 capacity to act. Systemic understanding is useful not only for identifying pathways and leverage points for

343 achieving specific SDG targets, but also for identifying the potential unintended consequences of  
344 simultaneous SDG actions across different sectors and scales, as where efforts to achieve one SDG target  
345 reinforce or constrain efforts to achieve another (39). Benefits are most apparent where multiple actors in  
346 sustainable development can be brought together in the development of a case study, with a simple  
347 systems model such as a CLD serving as an organizing principle for communication and relationship-  
348 building needed to achieve sustainable development.

349 Case studies are effective tools for advocating positions to policy-makers (Sallis et al., 2016). However,  
350 the complex messages and relationships frequently inherent in local operationalisation of the SDGs are  
351 often difficult to communicate in an accessible narrative. The CLDs used in the PESB case studies  
352 address this challenge, acting as metaphors that communicate complex ideas and relationships that are not  
353 easily communicated through words alone (18,40). The input of the System Thinker was important to  
354 effectively use CLDs in this manner. In general, Partners tended to push for greater detail and complexity  
355 in CLDs, to represent all the particularities of their case study. While additional complexity was useful in  
356 exploration and achieving a comprehensive understanding of the issue, the Systems Thinker generally  
357 advocated for simplification to make key relationships visually observable and comprehensible.

### 358 *Strengths and Limitations*

359 The PESB case study methodology is one of several ways in which systems thinking and place-based  
360 research can be brought together in systems approaches, and comes with particular strengths and  
361 weaknesses. The development of the case studies involved extended engagement, which allowed the  
362 Partners to use, practice, and develop the skills of creating and interpreting causal loop diagrams to a  
363 higher level than can be done in a short course or workshop. It is a flexible methodology with low costs,  
364 enabling its utilisation in a wide variety of challenges. As it relies heavily on Partners implicit knowledge,  
365 it does not require the extensive data that certain systems methodologies rely on—which is typically  
366 unavailable at local scales.

367 There are a number of limitations in the PESB case study methodology. It is an involved and potentially  
368 time-intensive process, and several prospective Partners declined to participate for this reason.

369 Interpersonal connections are important in cross-disciplinary work (41), especially in small co-located  
370 projects (42), and were important in sustaining a multi-month collaborative process. The opportunity to  
371 showcase work or highlight issues at WUF9 was a key incentive for Partners. Finding or creating such  
372 opportunities may be important for obtaining Partner interest when there is not prior interpersonal  
373 connection or interest in systems methodologies. A second major limitation was the lack of representation  
374 from different stakeholder groups in most of the case studies, limiting the scope of perspectives that could  
375 have been otherwise achieved. It can be difficult to obtain the buy-in needed from different groups, a  
376 factor that implies significant interpersonal management challenges for the Systems Thinker. The  
377 problem of limited perspective was partially addressed by asking the Partners to reflect deeply on the  
378 motivations and paradigms of the other actors involved in their challenges.

379 The PESB case study methodology can complement other systems tools. It can serve as a catalyst for  
380 transdisciplinary systems thinking workshops by creating outputs that draw interest, and can also be a  
381 way of sustaining learning and engagement with systems methodologies following an introductory  
382 workshop. The CLDs developed through the case studies are also a good starting point for low-order  
383 systems dynamics modelling that can further aid local decision-making (43). The PESB case study  
384 methodology is not dependent upon other systems methodologies to achieve impact, however: improved  
385 understanding of causal linkages can in itself improve local decision-making for the SDGs, generating  
386 benefits for population health and wellbeing. The extent of impact in this methodology depends on the  
387 same conditions that other transdisciplinary engagement tools depend upon: long-term follow-up and  
388 commitment of resources to act upon insights generated via transdisciplinary understanding.

389

## 390 Conclusion

391 A Systems Thinker engaged several local Partners to co-produce placially-explicit, systems-based case  
392 studies, using systems approaches to develop conceptual models and narratives that describe and analyse  
393 local urban challenges that impact health. In addition to producing documents that visually communicated  
394 complex challenges, this provided a method, suitable for resource-poor contexts, for drawing out

395 Partners' implicit and tacit knowledge and placing it in a systems framework. This process improved  
396 Partners' understanding of the challenges they faced, improving analysis and action.

397 Local decision-making is critical to operationalising the SDGs. This affects urban planning, delivery of  
398 health services, education, environmental management, and many other factors that shape population  
399 level health. While the complexities of interlinkages coupled with lack of resources makes localisation of  
400 the SDGs a daunting task, local actors have vast implicit and tacit knowledge that they can draw upon.  
401 The PESB case study methodology is a powerful way of enabling these actors to articulate this knowledge  
402 through conceptual models for synthesis, evaluation, and action. Such placially-explicit models can be  
403 powerful tools to inform local decision-making and communication, increasing the likelihood of  
404 achieving desired outcomes in local actions toward the SDGs.

405

#### 406 Declaration

407 *Ethics approval and consent to participate*

408 Not applicable.

409 *Consent for publication*

410 Not applicable.

411 *Availability of data and material*

412 Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current  
413 study. The co-produced case studies can be accessed at [http://www.thriveurban.info/wp-](http://www.thriveurban.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/SCHEMA-Case-Studies.pdf)  
414 [content/uploads/2018/02/SCHEMA-Case-Studies.pdf](http://www.thriveurban.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/SCHEMA-Case-Studies.pdf)

415 *Competing interests*

416 The authors declare that they have no competing interests

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420 *Authors' contributions*

421 DTT led the study design, carried it out, and led the preparation of this manuscript. JGS contributed to the  
422 study design and supported the development of the PESB case studies. BO was a Partner in two of the  
423 case studies and led the section, “Example: Illustration of Localisation, Capacity-Building, and Values-as-  
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