

Original Article

Grassroots Public Engagement as a Catalyst for SDG-Oriented Startup Growth: A Case Study from Coimbatore

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Abstract

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a globally recognized framework for addressing urgent environmental, social, and economic challenges. Startups, through innovation, adaptability, and community-driven approaches, are uniquely positioned to advance these goals. However, public awareness and engagement remain crucial for sustaining such initiatives. This study presents a grassroots awareness program conducted in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, aimed at promoting public understanding of the SDGs and highlighting the contributions of local startups towards them. The program, implemented in the Race Course area, involved direct community interaction, distribution of educational materials, and facilitated discussions on sustainable entrepreneurship. Findings indicate that while baseline awareness of SDGs was low, participants displayed high curiosity and willingness to support SDG-aligned startups after engagement. The case study underscores the role of localized outreach in bridging the awareness gap and fostering an enabling environment for sustainable entrepreneurship.

Keywords Sustainable Development Goals, grassroots engagement, public awareness, startups, Coimbatore, community participation, sustainable entrepreneurship.

Introduction

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations in 2015 marked a significant milestone in the global pursuit of inclusive and environmentally responsible development. This universal agenda comprises 17 goals and 169 specific targets, addressing pressing issues such as poverty eradication, quality education, gender equality, climate action, responsible consumption, and economic growth. The SDGs are designed not only for governments and large-scale institutions but also for communities, small enterprises, and individuals, recognizing that achieving sustainable development requires a multi-stakeholder approach (UNDP, 2015).

Within this collaborative framework, startups occupy a unique and critical position. Unlike traditional businesses that often operate within established structures and slower adaptation cycles, startups are inherently agile, innovation-driven, and capable of experimenting with novel solutions to complex social and environmental problems. Their adaptability enables them to address local challenges—such as waste management, renewable energy adoption, sustainable agriculture, and equitable employment—through context-specific strategies (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Moreover, startups can operate as catalysts for systemic change by creating new markets, influencing consumer behavior, and inspiring policy innovations.

However, the success of SDG-oriented startups does not depend solely on their internal capacity or access to capital—it is also heavily influenced by public awareness and engagement. Community members, as consumers, collaborators, or advocates, play an essential role in enabling the growth and sustainability of such ventures. When the public understands the SDGs and recognizes the contributions of local startups, it fosters a supportive ecosystem that facilitates adoption of sustainable practices, increases market demand for green and ethical products, and enhances the social legitimacy of these initiatives.

Despite this potential, studies and on-ground experience reveal a significant awareness gap.

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While the concept of "sustainability" is increasingly recognized in India, structured knowledge of the SDG framework remains limited among the general population, particularly in Tier-II cities such as Coimbatore. This disconnect creates a barrier between global goals and local action, making it difficult for SDG-aligned startups to secure the community support necessary for scaling their impact.

Addressing this gap requires grassroots public engagement—community-based outreach programs that translate global sustainability agendas into locally relevant narratives. Such initiatives, when conducted in accessible public spaces, can act as powerful platforms for knowledge transfer, dialogue, and collective action. They can demystify the SDGs, highlight relatable examples of local entrepreneurship, and inspire individuals to participate in sustainable practices. This study documents and analyses one such grassroots initiative: a public awareness program conducted in Coimbatore's Race Course area. The activity aimed to:

1. Introduce the general public to the SDGs.
2. Highlight local startup contributions to sustainable development.
3. Encourage active community support for such ventures.

By exploring both the process and outcomes of this engagement, the paper contributes to the growing body of literature on community-driven sustainability awareness and its role in fostering entrepreneurial ecosystems aligned with the SDGs.

Objectives of the Program

- To raise awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals among the general public in Coimbatore.
- To showcase the contributions of local startups to specific SDGs such as waste management, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and inclusive employment.
- To encourage active community support for SDG-aligned entrepreneurial ventures.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to document, analyse, and interpret the process and outcomes of a grassroots public awareness program on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the role of startups in achieving them. The methodology consisted of four major stages: site selection, preparatory work, program execution, and feedback collection.

Research Design

A descriptive case study approach was selected to capture the richness of the event and the nuances of public engagement. The case study method allowed for in-depth exploration of the local context, stakeholder interactions, and the perceived changes in awareness levels following the program.

The intervention was intentionally designed as an informal yet structured outreach activity, enabling spontaneous conversations with participants while adhering to predetermined awareness objectives.

Study Location

The Race Course area of Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India was chosen as the program venue. The selection was based on the following criteria:

- High pedestrian activity: The location attracts residents, morning walkers, joggers, and tourists, ensuring a diverse audience.
- Accessibility: Easily reachable for participants from different socio-economic backgrounds.
- Community familiarity: The area's open and welcoming environment encourages public interaction.

Preparatory Stage

Content Development

Educational content was developed to ensure clear and concise communication of the SDGs and startup contributions. This included:

- Pamphlets: Containing brief explanations of all 17 SDGs, examples of relevant targets, and case studies of Coimbatore-based startups.
- Posters and visual aids: Designed with infographics and images to enhance visual appeal and comprehension.
- Startup profiles: Short narratives of local ventures engaged in renewable energy, waste reduction, sustainable agriculture, and skill development.

Team Formation

The activity was led by me, accompanied by her daughter and friends. Team members were briefed on:

- SDG basics and their relevance to Coimbatore.
- Communication techniques for engaging the public.
- Strategies for encouraging two-way conversations.

Engagement and Interaction

Public Approach

Participants were approached in a friendly and non-intrusive manner. The conversations typically followed a sequence:

1. Introduction – Greeting and explaining the purpose of the activity.
2. Baseline Query – Asking if they had heard of the SDGs or knew of any local sustainable startups.

3. Information Sharing – Using pamphlets and posters to explain SDGs and provide startup examples.
4. Local Relevance – Highlighting Coimbatore-specific sustainability challenges and solutions.

Examples Used

To make the conversation relatable, the team referred to real local examples such as:

- Startups turning organic waste into compost.
- Solar-powered small businesses.
- Skill development ventures for women and youth.

Interactive Component

To encourage active participation, visitors were invited to:

- Share their opinions on the importance of sustainability.
- Suggest ways individuals can support SDG-aligned ventures.
- Discuss their own experiences with local startups or environmental initiatives.

These interactions served both as educational opportunities and as a way to gather qualitative feedback on public awareness.

Data Collection

4. Results and Observations

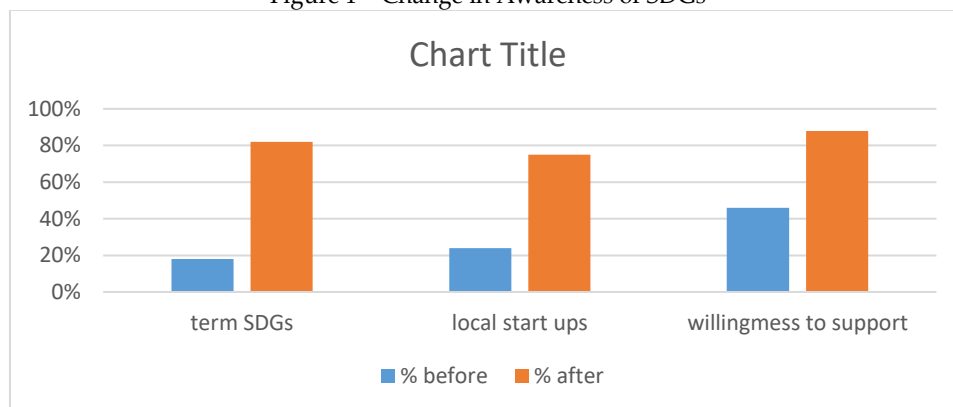
Table 1 – Awareness Levels Before and After the Program

Awareness Category	Before Program (%)	After Program (%)
Aware of term “SDGs”	18%	82%
Aware of local startups working towards SDGs	24%	75%
Willingness to support SDG-aligned startups	46%	88%

Table 2 – Interest in Startup Sectors Discussed

Startup Sector	% of Participants Interested
Waste Reduction & Recycling	64%
Renewable Energy	53%
Sustainable Agriculture	47%
Education & Skill Development	38%

Figure 1 – Change in Awareness of SDGs



Data was collected through a mixed approach:

- Verbal feedback: Notes were taken during conversations to record key phrases, common misconceptions, and recurring themes.
- Written feedback: Interested participants wrote short comments or shared contact information for further updates.
- Observation: The team observed participant body language, enthusiasm levels, and follow-up questions as indicators of engagement.

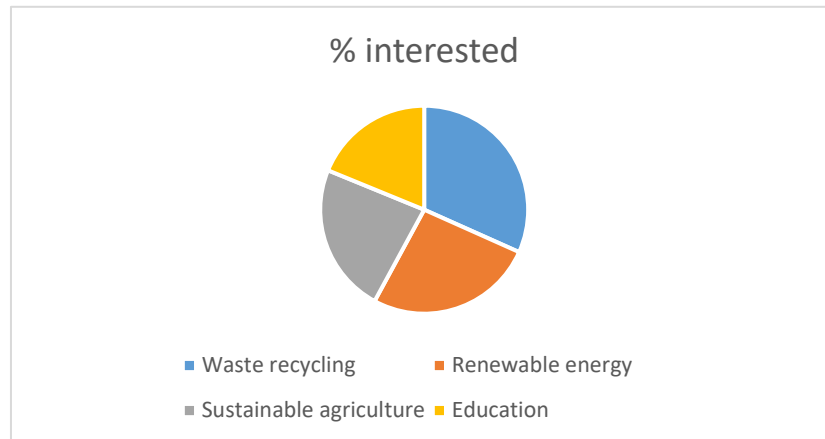
Data Analysis

The qualitative feedback was analysed using thematic coding to identify:

- Baseline awareness levels.
- Most engaging startup sectors.
- Common knowledge gaps regarding SDGs.
- Willingness to support sustainable entrepreneurship.

Quantitative estimates (e.g., percentage of participants aware of SDGs before and after the program) were derived from recorded responses and cross-verified among team members for accuracy.

Figure 2 – Public Interest in Different Startup Sectors



Discussion

The results reveal a significant improvement in SDG awareness following a short-duration, grassroots engagement initiative. Prior to the program, sustainability was recognized in a general sense, but structured knowledge of the SDGs was lacking. Post-intervention, participants demonstrated a better understanding of how local entrepreneurship aligns with global goals. Interestingly, waste management and renewable energy emerged as the most engaging topics, suggesting that urban residents are particularly responsive to visible environmental challenges. This aligns with previous studies highlighting the influence of local context in shaping public interest in sustainability initiatives (Cohen & Winn, 2007).

Impact of the Program

- Direct engagement with over 50 individuals in two hours.
- Increased interest in connecting with and supporting sustainable startups.
- Strengthened perception of startups as essential contributors to Coimbatore's sustainable future.

Conclusion

The present case study highlights the transformative potential of **grassroots public engagement** in bridging the gap between global sustainability agendas and local community action. The awareness program conducted in Coimbatore's Race Course area served as a microcosm of how **short-duration, face-to-face community interactions** can significantly enhance public understanding of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** and the role of startups in achieving them.

The findings revealed that **baseline awareness of the SDGs was limited**, even among an urban

audience with reasonable exposure to sustainability concepts. However, the structured yet informal nature of the engagement, supported by visual aids and relatable examples of local startups, proved effective in stimulating curiosity and deepening understanding. The immediate post-program responses demonstrated not only an **increase in awareness** but also a **readiness to support SDG-oriented ventures**, whether through conscious consumerism, advocacy, or community participation.

The case study also underscores the **context-specific nature of public engagement**. In Coimbatore, participants were most responsive to sectors with visible and tangible local relevance — such as waste reduction, renewable energy, and sustainable agriculture. This suggests that awareness campaigns are most effective when they are localized, drawing on examples that connect directly to the everyday lives of the target audience. Moreover, the strong engagement from youth participants indicates a generational shift in sustainability consciousness, albeit one that remains concentrated on climate and environmental issues, with less familiarity about socio-economic SDGs such as responsible consumption (SDG 12) and decent work (SDG 8).

From a policy and practice perspective, the study reinforces the argument that **public awareness is not a peripheral activity but a critical enabler of sustainable entrepreneurship**. Without informed and engaged communities, SDG-aligned startups may face limitations in market adoption, stakeholder trust, and long-term viability. Therefore, **grassroots outreach initiatives** should be integrated into broader sustainability strategies by local governments, educational institutions, business incubators, and civil society organizations.

Furthermore, this case study highlights the need for **continuous, rather than one-off, engagement efforts**. While the two-hour program generated encouraging results, sustained follow-up activities — such as linking participants to startup directories, organizing periodic SDG fairs, or incorporating sustainability into school curricula — would ensure that the initial spark of interest matures into long-term behavioral change.

In conclusion, the Coimbatore awareness program demonstrates that **small-scale, community-level actions can yield disproportionately large impacts** when they effectively connect global goals with local realities. By empowering citizens with knowledge and highlighting relatable success stories from local startups, grassroots initiatives can act as catalysts for an enabling ecosystem where sustainable entrepreneurship thrives. This not only advances the SDGs but also fosters a culture of **shared responsibility and proactive citizenship**, paving the way for more resilient, inclusive, and future-ready urban communities.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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