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# Community SDG Readiness Scale: A Strategic Tool for Bringing Stakeholders Together

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives** Our aim is to create a tool for identifying *early adopters* of SDG projects among key community stakeholder groups, thereby enhancing community readiness and improving the success rate of SDG project implementation.

**Methods** To develop the Community SDG Readiness Scale (CSRS), we employed a three-step instrument development method that involves item generation, questionnaire design, and the creation of an actionable visual interface.

**Discussion** While still in its early stages, the CSRS tool shows promise by taking a systematic approach to SDG advancement, guiding innovators through stakeholder evaluation and providing a clear path for project implementation, while emphasizing both organizational and socio-emotional factors to foster collective mindsets and optimize time and emotional energy for sustainable community transformation.

**Keywords** *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Community SDG Readiness Scale (CSRS), stakeholder engagement, socio-emotional readiness, collective mindset, sustainable transformation*

## INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a framework introduced by the United Nations in the early 2000s. Since then, the framework has inspired significant research advancements, improving the systematic development of SDG methodologies and deepening our understanding of the complex interplay among social, economic, and environmental dimensions of the goals. However, recent examinations indicate a persistent gap between SDG research findings and actionable insights in practice (Berrone et al., 2023; Xin et al., 2024). In other words, SDG research

### Highlights

► This is a youth-centered theoretical study. Youth researchers were a vital part of active learning and collaboration.

► This study addresses the persistent gap between SDG research and practical implementation by offering a universal tool with a unique perspective: stakeholder socio-emotional readiness.

► With a strong focus on togetherness and collective mindsets, this study serves as a call for realignment of future SDG efforts.

often falls short of driving meaningful change.

Paunović et al. (2022) and Pärli et al. (2023) pointed out that bridging the gap between SDG research and practice requires greater attention to project implementation. While the primary focus of SDG research has been resource management, the main challenge in project implementation lies in stakeholder engagement (Falconer, 2024; Salleh et al., 2023). To effectively close this gap, researchers must shift their focus from things to people. Additionally, much of the SDG literature on stakeholder engagement focuses on the accountability of individual stakeholder groups, often assigning blame rather than exploring approaches that promote a collective mindset (Abhayawansa et al., 2021; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). To enhance community readiness and improve the success rate of SDG projects, researchers need to develop implementable tools that foster a collective mindset.

A community's readiness for an SDG

project encompasses both resource and stakeholder readiness. Because resources are governed by various stakeholder groups, it's essential to assess each group's readiness, reflecting their collective mindset and acceptance of the project. Achieving a collective mindset or acceptance of an idea, as the law of diffusion of innovation explains, is a gradual process that relies on reaching "early adopters," who make up about 13.5% of a given population (Sinek, 2011). The vast majority of the population will not embrace an idea until it has been accepted by the early adopters (Kaoun, 2019). Thus, although every community and SDG project is unique, successful project implementation hinges on identifying early adopters among stakeholders. Meanwhile, the law of diffusion of innovation suggests that an "early adopter" is not a fixed identity but a dynamic perspective. An individual may be an early adopter in one context while fitting into other categories—such as innovators, early majority, late majority, or laggards—in different situations, depending on the characteristics of the project and the community population (Sinek, 2011).
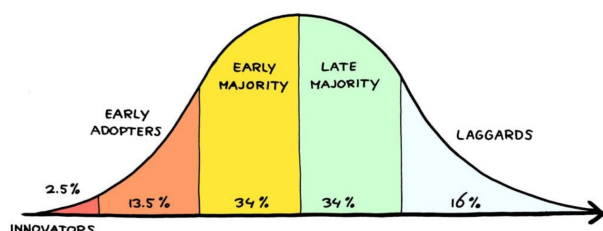


Figure 1: Law of Diffusion of Innovation

Since Everett M. Rogers first introduced the law of diffusion of innovation in 1962, it has gained widespread acceptance. However, to date, a systematic tool for effectively identifying early adopters has yet to be developed. The complexity of the variables makes developing such a universal tool highly challenging. In this study, we will tackle this challenge by creating a tool that encompasses organizational and socio-emotional dimensions, offers step-by-step guidance for identifying early adopters, improves community readiness, and ultimately enhances the success rate of SDG project implementation.

## METHODS

To develop the Community SDG Readiness Scale (CSRS), we employed a three-step methodology. We began by generating items, including a comprehensive stakeholder list, and measures for both organizational

and socio-emotional readiness. Organizational readiness involves capability-related factors, while socio-emotional readiness involves motivation-related factors. Next, we designed the questionnaire, organizing the generated items into a clear, structured format for data collection. Finally, we developed a visual presentation, enabling CSRS users to display their findings in an informative way.

### Item Generation

*Stakeholder List*

The stakeholder list generation began through joint reflection of the many participatory action research projects with which the authors have been involved. We then consulted other studies related to action research and SDGs to stretch our thinking and include more potential stakeholders. Finally, the list and entire CSRS approach was shared with youth partners. Through that process, we were able to add, edit, and revise the stakeholder list based on their feedback.

*Measures of Organizational Readiness*

We began by compiling literature on organizational readiness measures, using the Google Scholar and PubMed databases. After identifying relevant studies, we analyzed them to extract measures aligned with the CSRS concept and suitable for community SDG project implementation. We also consulted two specific existing scales related to SDGs and organizational readiness (UNPAN, n.d.; CCHD, 2006). Lastly, we categorized these measures into distinct groups.

*Measures of Socio-Emotional Readiness*

Few studies examined socio-emotional readiness, but the CCHD (2006) did provide some guidance. To further generate measures of socio-emotional readiness, we reviewed the 40 frameworks of social and emotional learning compiled by the EASEL Lab at the Harvard University (HGSE, 2024). We also examined RULER (Brackett et al., 2019), an emotional intelligence tool. By synthesizing insights from these resources, we were able to generate a list of items relevant to socio-emotional readiness in community SDG projects.

### Questionnaire Design

In the process of questionnaire design, we focused on structuring the items that had been generated in the earlier stages into a clear and user-friendly format. First,

the generated items were grouped into relevant sections and themes, ensuring that each section addressed a specific aspect. Then, we reviewed each item to ensure it was concise and free from ambiguity. This step helped reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation. Questions were carefully worded to maintain consistency and avoid misleading or biased phrasing. Finally, we examined the logical flow of the questionnaire, ensuring it was easy for users to follow.

### Visual Presentation

To create an ideal visualization for stakeholder readiness, we explored various existing styles and formats, including charts, graphs, and other types of visual presentations. After a thorough examination of these styles, we concluded that a two-dimensional matrix is the most appropriate.

## COMMUNITY SDG READINESS SCALE (CSRS)

The CSRS tool consists of four components:
(1) Stakeholder List,
(2) Organizational Readiness Questionnaire,
(3) Socio-Emotional Readiness Questionnaire,
(4) The CSRS Matrix.

In the following sections, we'll outline how SDG project teams—referred to as *innovators* in the law of diffusion of innovation—can apply each component to their specific projects.

### Stakeholder List

The CSRS Stakeholder List includes 10 categories, each with various subgroups. See Figure 2. This list assists SDG project teams in identifying key stakeholder groups (KSGs) crucial to their project's success. To create an accurate and effective list of

1. **Schools**
   - ☐ School board member
   - ☐ State board of education r
   - ☐ Regent
   - ☐ Superintendent
   - ☐ District official/employee
   - ☐ Principal
   - ☐ Administrator
   - ☐ Dean
   - ☐ Counselor
   - ☐ Social Worker
   - ☐ Teacher
   - ☐ Athletic coach
   - ☐ Staff member
   - ☐ Students
   - ☐ Family member
   - ☐ Alumnus

2. **Hospitals**
   - ☐ Board member
   - ☐ Donor
   - ☐ Administrator
   - ☐ Doctor
   - ☐ Nurse
   - ☐ Specialist
   - ☐ Outreach professional
   - ☐ Staff member
   - ☐ Patient

3. **Businesses**
   - ☐ Salesperson
   - ☐ Service provider
   - ☐ Entrepreneur
   - ☐ Investor
   - ☐ Worker
   - ☐ Customer/service recipien

4. **Places of worship**
   - ☐ Board member
   - ☐ Donor
   - ☐ Administrator
   - ☐ Religious leader
   - ☐ Volunteer
   - ☐ Member

5. **Local, state, and federal government entities**
   - ☐ Elected official
   - ☐ City councilperson
   - ☐ Mayor
   - ☐ Sheriff
   - ☐ County commissioner member
   - ☐ State/US representative
   - ☐ State/US senator
   - ☐ Service provider (ie: firefig
   - ☐ Voter/constituent

6. **Non-profit organizations/NG**
   - ☐ Board member
   - ☐ Donor
   - ☐ Administrator/Leader
   - ☐ Volunteer
   - ☐ Member
   - ☐ Service provider
   - ☐ Service receiver

7. **Local industries**
   - ☐ Salesperson
   - ☐ Service provider
   - ☐ Entrepreneur
   - ☐ Investor
   - ☐ Worker

8. **Media**
   - ☐ Newspaper/TV/radio reporter
   - ☐ Newspaper/TV/radio editor
   - ☐ Readers/viewers
   - ☐ Advertisers
   - ☐ Social media poster
   - ☐ Social media audience or responder

9. **Residents**
   - ☐ Neighbor
   - ☐ Co-worker
   - ☐ Friend
   - ☐ Family member
   - ☐ Elderly person
   - ☐ Young person
   - ☐ Volunteer

10. **Potentially Overlooked**
    - ☐ Unhoused neighbor
    - ☐ Incarcerated citizen
    - ☐ Undocumented resident
    - ☐ Person living in poverty
    - ☐ Person dealing with addiction
    - ☐ Person with disabilities
    - ☐ Person with intersectional identities

Figure 2: CSRS Stakeholder List

KSGs, SDG project teams should carefully review all categories and conduct thorough discussions.

### Organizational Readiness Questionnaire

This questionnaire assesses five aspects of a KSG's organizational readiness: knowledge, skills, availability, financial strength, and people power.

#### Establishing Standards

Once the KSGs are identified, the project team uses the following guiding questions to establish standards for each group. This is because the required knowledge, skills, and other factors can vary significantly between KSGs. For example, the financial support and manpower (e.g., volunteers, specialists) required of one KSG may be significantly higher or lower than that of another KSG. Below is a list of guiding questions for establishing standards for the KSGs:

[Knowledge] What key knowledge is required of *this* stakeholder group?

[Skills] What skills are required of *this* stakeholder group?

[Availability] What level of availability is required of *this* stakeholder group?

[Financial Strength] What level of financial strength is required of *this* stakeholder group?

[People Power] What level of people power is required of *this* stakeholder group?

#### Evaluation

With the established standards, the project team gathers supporting data, including each KSG's track record, current community involvement, and relevant documentation—such as organizational charts and financial reports. Using this data, along with their past interactions with the KSG, the project team conducts discussions to assess the five aspects of the KSG's organizational readiness by answering the following questions.

[Knowledge] Does this KSG have the *knowledge* needed for supporting the implementation of the project?

[Skills] Does this KSG have the *skills* needed for supporting the implementation of the project?

[Availability] Is this KSG *available* to support the implementation of the project?

[Financial strength] Does this KSG have the *financial strength* needed for supporting the implementation of the project?

[People Power] Does this KSG have the *people power* needed for supporting the implementation of the project?

#### Scoring

After examining the questions and collecting supporting data, the next step is scoring or assessing the answers to better understand the KSG's readiness. We suggest doing this in pairs or teams; discussing tensions and alignment can lead to important, rich conversations. To support the process, we propose using a 5-point scoring system for each KSG and for each aspect with 5 representing KSGs who are highly prepared to support the project, 0 representing KSGs who are unprepared, and 2.5 representing median-level of readiness.

Due to the diversity of SDG projects, we do not provide a specific scoring rubric. Instead, the project team should rely on the standards established at the outset of the Organizational Readiness Questionnaire to guide their scoring. In the event of disagreements, the team is encouraged to resolve them through discussion, carefully reviewing all evidence. This approach strengthens connectedness among team members and fosters a collective understanding that is essential for ongoing KSG readiness assessments throughout the project.

Here, we present a hypothetical project to demonstrate the scoring process and, later, the matrix presentation for CSRS users. This example project is a citywide youth mental health initiative, and we identified school board members as one of the KSGs. To score the five aspects of their organizational readiness, we first established standards for each aspect. We also collected information regarding the track records and current community involvement of the school board members. Then, we conducted team discussions to score the KSG in each aspect. The school board KSG scored 2 points in Knowledge, 4 in Skills, 1 in Availability, 3 in Financial Strength, and 5 in People Power. The KSG's total score was 15 with an average of 3 for each standard. Its strongest asset at this moment is People Power, having many people to commit to the project, while its biggest deficit is Availability, with many of those people overwhelmed by other tasks or ventures.

### Socio-Emotional Readiness Questionnaire

This questionnaire assesses five aspects of socio-emotional readiness: perspective, sense of responsibility, connection, authenticity, and growth potential. To evaluate a KSG's socio-emotional

readiness, the project team first identifies one or two members from the group and arranges individual interviews. The purpose of these interviews is to gather the individuals' authentic insights about the project as well as their genuine feelings towards the project. Depending on the relationship with KSG members, the project team may conduct formal interviews, semi-formal interviews, or informal meetings to gather the information needed for scoring the KSG's socio-emotional readiness. Below is a script for formal interviews. Project teams may adjust the tone of the example questions to meet their needs.

*Interview Script*

Hello, as part of the ___ community, we appreciate you taking the time to meet with us. You're a valued member of the ___ —a well respected stakeholder group in our community. We'd love to hear your thoughts on the ___ project we plan to implement. We hope you'll express any concerns freely as it will help us determine if this is the right project for our community. Do you have any questions before we proceed?

**Example Questions:**

*[Overview]*

Are you aware of this initiative?

In what ways do you consider yourself a STAKEHOLDER in this type of initiative?

Am I understanding you correctly? Is there any context I'm missing?

*[Perspective]*

Why does this project matter to our community?

Why, if at all, do you see this project as necessary?

Do you have any reservations about its importance or value?

*[Sense of responsibility]*

What is your role in advancing the goals of this initiative or similar initiatives?

How important is your involvement to the success of the initiative?

How important is it to you personally to be involved?

*[Connection]*

How connected is your stakeholder group to the rest of the community?

What connections could be strengthened?

*[Authenticity]*

When expressing concerns or rejections, is it better to speak openly and directly, or in a more diplomatic and reserved manner? Why?

What is the common approach of your stakeholder group in such situations? How do you feel about it?

**[Growth potential]**

What are your thoughts on making change versus protecting the current system?

Does your stakeholder group feel the same way or differently from you?

Thank you for your valuable insights and honest feedback. We'll reach out if we have any further questions.

*Evaluation*

After conducting interviews and meetings, the project team reviews the notes and holds discussions to assess the five aspects of the KSG's organizational readiness by answering the following questions.

**[Perspective]** Does the stakeholder group recognize the necessity of the SDG project?

**[Sense of responsibility]** How strongly does the stakeholder group sense its responsibility for bettering the community?

**[Connection]** How connected are the members of the stakeholder group? How connected are the stakeholder group and the rest of the community?

**[Authenticity]** How capable is the stakeholder group of expressing their genuine thoughts and concerns?

**[Growth potential]** In general, how open-minded is the stakeholder group towards change?

*Scoring*

The five aspects of socio-emotional readiness should also be scored using a 5-point scale as described in the Organizational Readiness Scoring section. Using the citywide youth mental health initiative mentioned above as an example, we scored the school board members KSG's socio-emotional readiness. The school board KSG scored 2 points in Perspective, 4 in Responsibility, 2 in Connection, 2 in Authenticity, and 1 in Growth Potential. The KSG's total score was 11 with an average of 2.2. Its strongest asset is Responsibility, as the group sees bettering the community as part of their charge, while its biggest deficit is Growth Potential, with many members showing rigidity or reluctance to change.

**The CSRS Matrix**

The CSRS Matrix is used to visually display the readiness levels of KSGs, highlighting which are most likely to be early adopters and which have potential to become early adopters. Once the organizational (vertical dimension) and socio-emotional readiness (horizontal dimension) scores are determined, project teams can place the KSGs within the CSRS Matrix to visualize their readiness levels and plan next steps.
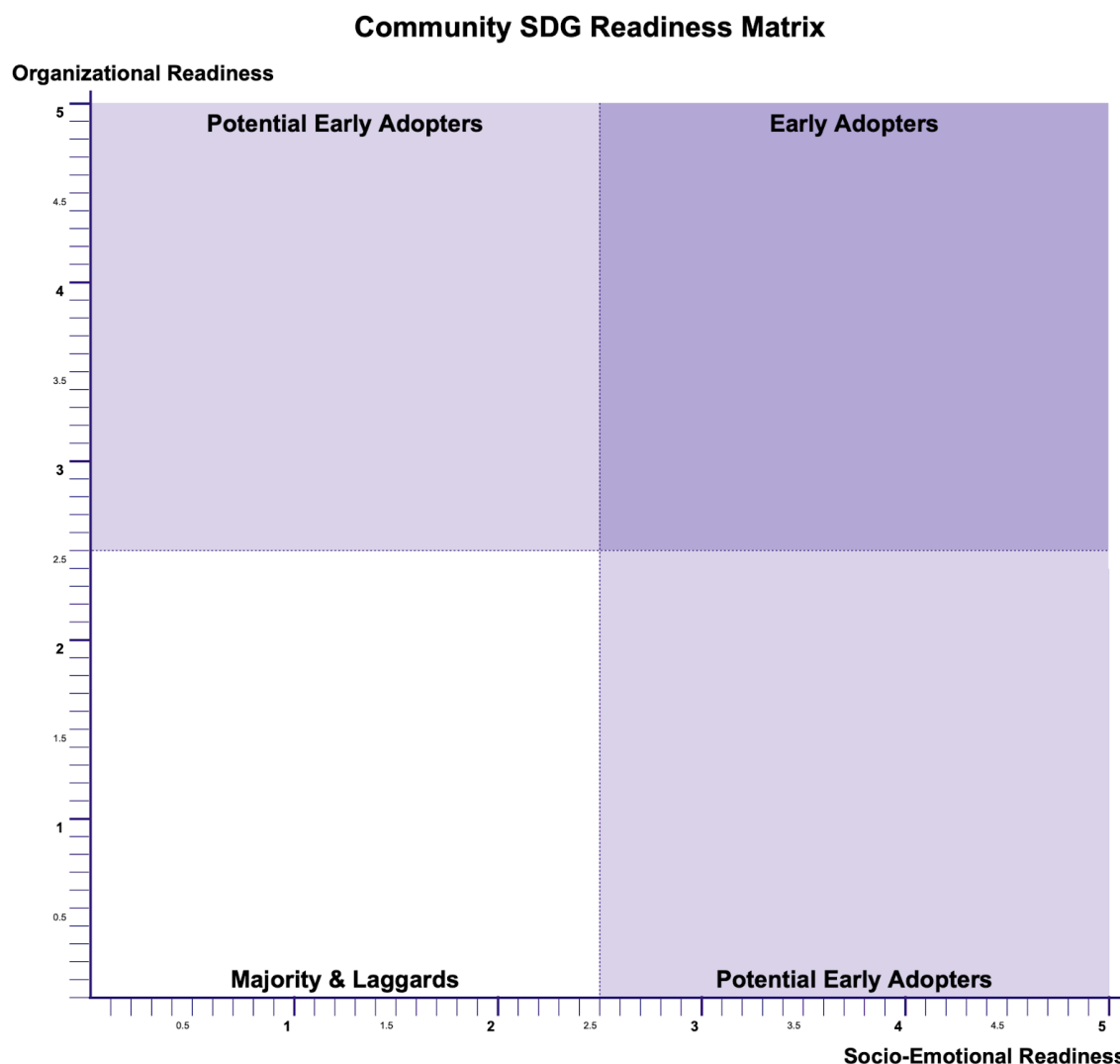
## Community SDG Readiness Matrix



Figure 3: Community SDG Readiness Matrix

The *school board* KSG example we shared in the scoring sections, for example, would land at point (2.2, 3) in the *Potential Early Adopters* quadrant (see the yellow box in Figure 4). In other words, their Organizational Readiness is solid, but their Socio-Emotional Readiness is lagging. This could provide important guidance for the project team planning to work with the KSG, leading them to focus on specific socio-emotional aspects where the KSG lags and craft strategic plans accordingly.

The value of the matrix becomes more evident when multiple KSGs are assessed. In the school board example we've been using, we also identified other KSGs. As shown in Figure 5, the school board is the yellow box; the green box represents student government; the orange box represents the school president; the blue box represents other school administrators; and the pink box represents local government. According to the scoring, then, the student group (green) holds the most promise to partner with the project team (innovators) as early adopters because they are both organizationally and socio-emotionally ready to support the project. Local government (pink) is the least likely to be early adopters, as they show neither organizational nor socio-emotional readiness. School admin (blue) is showing socio-emotional support but not organizational support. The school president (orange) is directly in the middle, which may require more thinking or questioning from the innovators.
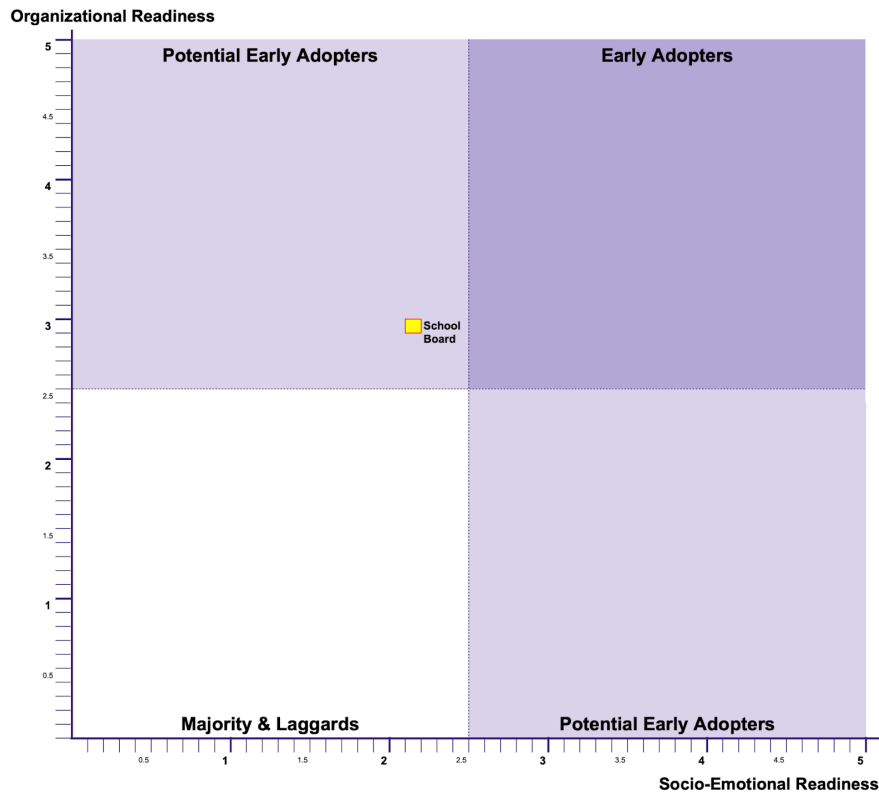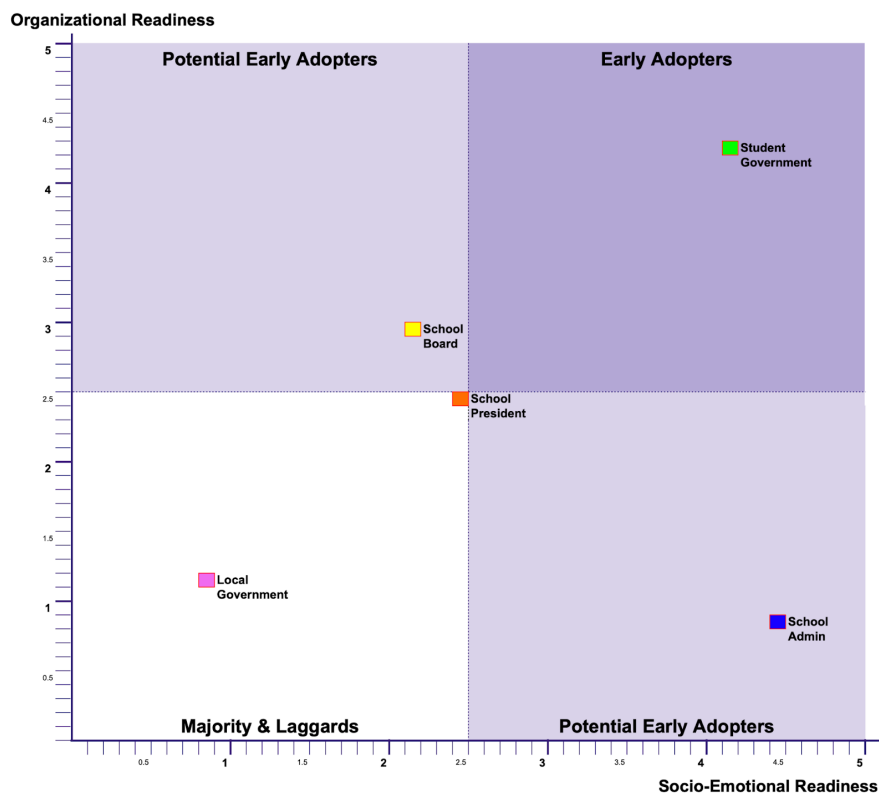
Figure 4: Scoring example for *school board* KSG



Figure 5: Scoring example for multiple KSGs

## DISCUSSION

While we are still in the early stages of developing the CSRS tool, we are optimistic about its potential. Specifically, we want to highlight two methodological breakthroughs that emerged from the current study. First, the study takes a systematic approach to identifying early adopters of SDG projects within communities. Beginning with the stakeholder list, the CSRS tool guides innovators on a focused path toward successful project implementation. The questionnaires then lead them through the evaluation process, with the readiness levels of key stakeholder groups ultimately displayed in a four-quadrant matrix, providing clear direction for future actions. Second, while traditional evaluation methods for community SDG readiness have focused mainly on organizational factors (time, funding, resources), the CSRS tool equally emphasizes socio-emotional factors, aiming to foster collective mindsets that ensure sustainable transformation.

This study also offers practical breakthroughs, particularly in enabling innovators to allocate their time and emotional energy more effectively. When community stakeholders withhold support, innovators often experience feelings of discouragement or defeat. The CSRS tool introduces valuable nuance that highlights both areas for improvement and strengths. Understanding in which areas stakeholders are ready and in which they are not can prevent a project from derailing. Furthermore, the CSRS tool enables innovators to use their time more efficiently. For stakeholders in the "majority and laggards" quadrant, innovators can choose to engage with them in later stages of the project rather than in the initial phases. In these practical contexts, the CSRS tool plays a crucial role in helping innovators strategically manage their emotional energy and time, optimizing the process and preserving momentum.

In the meantime, we acknowledge that designing a tool that is adaptable across diverse contexts presents considerable challenges. We recognize the limitations of the current study; for instance, the stakeholder list may need to be more comprehensive, the questions could benefit from further testing and revision, and the scoring method might need clarification.

We are confident that continued application, iteration, and thoughtful analysis will enhance the tool's effectiveness. To this end, we plan to apply the tool to case studies drawn from our extensive experience in action research within communities. For example, we plan to collaborate with a secondary school teacher and students from the Transformative Student Voice (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2022) research collective as they implement mental health initiatives, advancing SDG 3—Good Health and Well-Being—in their school. Another example is testing the tool using past SDG initiatives, such as the Samsø Island in Denmark, a globally recognized model of renewable energy transformation through community effort, and the Hi-Desert Community in California, which came together to establish Copper Mountain College, the area's only college and a vital educational institution for the region. By applying the CSRS tool to past and ongoing SDG projects, we can enhance its effectiveness, applicability, and optimize its use.

Additionally, we invite researchers to test the tool with their own case examples and collaborate with both adult and youth action research practitioners, as well as activists, to evaluate its applicability in authentic community-based projects. Specific options include (1) partnering with the authors to assess stakeholder readiness in actual projects, and (2) conducting independent empirical studies and publishing findings to recommend improvements or applications.

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