



ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE'S JUST TRANSITION

A Policy Brief for Territorial Just
Transition Plans

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DUST

Democratising
jUst
Sustainability
Transitions

COLOPHON

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SUMMARY

Current debates on Cohesion Policy reform are critical moments for deciding whether place-based instruments such as Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) supported by the EU Just Transition Fund continue to empower territories and communities or are recentralised in ways that weaken local ownership.

Evidence from the DUST project shows that while TJTPs have strengthened territorial focus, community participation, especially communities that are traditionally less engaged in public life, remains uneven and often superficial.

Effective just transition depends not only on what is funded, but how decisions are made. Where communities are meaningfully involved - beyond consultation - policies gain legitimacy, tap local knowledge, and produce more durable outcomes. Conversely, technocratic design, centralised governance, and limited local capacity risk turning just transition into a top down exercise.

This brief distils lessons from eight JTF regions and presents clear, actionable recommendations to make participation a core feature of TJTP design, implementation, and future Cohesion Policy reforms.

Just Transition Fund at a glance

Budget: €19.3 billion (2021-27).

Shared management: requires collaboration with social partners (trade unions, employer organizations), civil society, local communities, and private sector.

TJTPs: Member States must prepare plans outlining specific territories affected by transition and planned use of funds. Requires meaningful dialogue to ensure local ownership and buy-in. 70 TJTPs covering 96 territories.

Just Transition Platform: acts as central hub for technical and advisory support, exchange of best practices across territories.

Practitioners implementing TJTPs across levels of governance face challenges in mobilising stakeholders and communities with widely differing capacities and willingness to participate. Citizen awareness of EU-level transition initiatives remains limited compared to national and local efforts, and engaging less active communities - often those most vulnerable to negative transition impacts - is especially difficult.

DUST research highlights three key messages:

Participation must go beyond consultation.

Genuine deliberation that allows citizens to shape outcomes, rather than simply respond to plans, is rare but essential for building trust and legitimacy.

Trust, knowledge, and capacity are essential. Without mutual trust, accessible information, and empowered local institutions, participation risks becoming symbolic rather than meaningful.

Just transition is inherently place-based.

Local social, economic, and geographic conditions shape what justice means in practice, requiring participation processes tailored to territorial specificities.

Knowledge of transition policies at various levels of government in DUST JTF regions

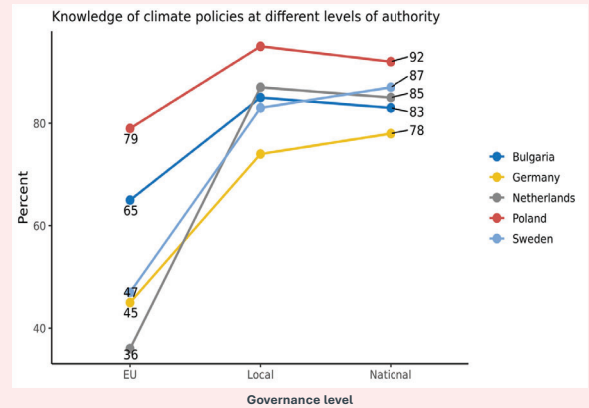


Chart shows % of DUST survey respondents from JTF case study regions aware of transition policies at various levels of government – See Mendez, et al. (2025).

“ There is a significant gap between awareness of EU sustainable transition policies on the one hand, and local and national policies ”

DUST Deliverable 2.2 Citizen survey: measuring participation

For JTF practitioners at multiple levels of governance, the message is clear:



Invest as much in how we decide as in what we decide.



Visualisation of main policy message

ENSURING NO PLACE IS LEFT BEHIND

The challenge of an inclusive sustainable transition

Sustainable transition requires policies that can accommodate trade-offs and build consensus on long-term solutions to complex issues but how can they ensure that no people or places are ‘left behind’? Transition processes have sparked contestation from different groups that are represented unevenly across places, producing a perception of ‘winners’ and ‘losers,’ and creating a disconnection between policy measures and community needs that erodes trust in the governance of transition and increases resistance to change.

The value of place-based policies

Policies that address place-specific transition issues and mobilise commitment from local communities offer benefits in this respect. They boost accountability and transparency, facilitate input of valuable local knowledge and strengthen local capacities to contribute to transition processes in the long-term.

The Just Transition framework

The EU has taken significant steps to acknowledge this through the Just Transition Facility and Territorial Just Transition Plans. This allocates €55 billion of EU Cohesion Policy support in the period 2021 to 2027 to EU member states to support them in their

transition efforts in the most affected regions in a socially just way. In theory, these TJTPs have key features that make them prominent examples of ‘place-based’, sustainable transition policies:

- First, they recognise that the green transition will produce ‘losers’ and that addressing their needs is essential to preserving social cohesion and democratic legitimacy.
- Second, funding is distributed based on Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs), developed by national and regional authorities with participation from local stakeholders and communities. These plans are intended to map the economic, social, and environmental profile of each region, identify at-risk sectors, and articulate a strategy for creating new opportunities.

Progress and ongoing governance challenges

After more than four years of implementation, there is a substantive evidence base for assessing this approach. The European Commission’s mid-term review indicates positive results, particularly in strengthening local ownership and alignment with territorial needs. However, the review also identifies persistent weaknesses in partnership-based governance and stakeholder engagement, reflecting broader challenges across Cohesion Policy and underscoring the need for continued investment in administrative capacity and participatory practices.

Future uncertainty and the importance of participation

As debates intensify about post 2027 Cohesion Policy and possible recentralisation, strengthening community participation is

both timely and necessary. Looking ahead, proposals linked to the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework after 2027 envisage the possible consolidation of the JTF with other funding instruments into a single, national framework delivered through national and regional partnership plans. The extent to which diverse territorial challenges will continue to be recognised is unclear and the continuation and influence of TJTPs would likely depend on the extent to which Member States choose to maintain a strong focus on place-based, geographically targeted transition measures.

“ [European Parliament] calls for a stronger role for local and regional authorities and other decision-makers, ensuring strategies align with specific needs of communities affected by the transition ”

European Parliament resolution of 10 September 2025 on the role of Cohesion Policy in supporting the just transition

POLICY FACTORS SHAPING PARTICIPATION

How TJTP objectives are framed matters for community participation

Policy framing shapes how transition challenges are understood and directly influences policy choices, including whether and how participatory instruments are used.

Across TJTP cases, policymakers faced a common challenge: translating abstract and contested concepts into concrete interventions. Sustainability and just transition raise context-specific questions about what should be sustained or transformed, who bears responsibility, who benefits, and which pathways are acceptable. How these issues are framed shapes priorities, legitimises certain choices, and determines the scope and depth of participation.

Narrow or technocratic framing tends to confine participation to expert actors, while broader framings create space for citizens and communities to help define transition goals and outcomes. Energy transition, innovation, and industrial restructuring were often seen by policymakers as requiring specialised expertise, limiting the perceived value of community input. These assumptions reduced incentives to design participatory processes, particularly under tight TJTP funding timelines that favoured established actors.

“ Articulation of hopes and fears remains superficial when the policy task has been set in advance (by others) using instruments/ powers that are taken as given. ”

DUST Advisory Board member

Policy factors creating participation gaps

Consultation without co-decision: Public meetings and surveys evident in TJTP processes, but few provide real influence over decisions.

Representation bias: Organised interests (unions, business chambers, NGOs etc.) often more engaged than individual citizens and communities, especially marginalized groups.

Timing: Most participation occurs early, before funding is allocated, or late, when projects are fixed.

Capacity asymmetries: Administrative complexity means that local authorities and community groups often lack the resources or skills to create and sustain meaningful participation.

TJTP governance informs the location, depth and inclusivity of participation

Governance arrangements play a decisive role in determining where, how deeply, and how inclusively participation occurs. Within the JTF framework, engaging communities is challenging in complex multi-level and multi-sector systems, especially when key decisions are taken at EU or national level rather than in affected territories.

These challenges reflect vertical and horizontal power dynamics. Vertically, participation is shaped by relationships between EU, national, regional, and local authorities, including the distribution of authority, funding, and information. Horizontally, it depends on coordination among actors at the same level and the inclusion of non-state actors such as communities and civil society.

DUST evidence highlights substantial barriers to governance arrangements that support meaningful participation. Centralised control often prioritises expert and sectoral stakeholders over territorial and community actors, while coordination problems across policy domains and administrative levels fragment governance. Differences in institutional cultures and limited sub-national capacity further constrain participation. Without addressing these governance and capacity gaps, TJTP participation risks remaining shallow, uneven, and exclusionary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

DUST offers a practical framework for a range of practitioners seeking to strengthen participation across all phases of Just Transition programming.

Lessons from DUST

Build trust through action, not promises.

Trust grows when communities see how their input affects decisions. Be transparent about outcomes, maintain long-term local contact points, and visibly recognise community leadership.

Treat community knowledge as expertise.

Lived experience adds value to technical analysis. Use participatory tools to interpret data locally and include qualitative evidence - stories, histories, visuals - alongside formal assessments.

Invest in local capacity to enable participation.

Local authorities are central to delivery but often under-resourced. Allocate funding for facilitation skills, dedicated participation roles, and partnerships with civil society to reach less-engaged groups.

Communicate clearly and empathetically.

Uncertainty is inherent to transition. Use plain language and visuals, address concerns directly, and co-design local information campaigns to keep communities informed and involved.

For detailed examples, see DUST Deliverable 3.4 Civic participation in just sustainability transition initiatives: Scope, depth and determining factors & Deliverable 6.4 Engaging the Least Engaged: Good Practices for Inclusive Governance in Just Sustainability Transitions.

Building blocks for effective participation in TJTPs



During design and programming

- **Start early and stay continuous.** Don't treat consultation as a one-off compliance step. Establish ongoing dialogue platforms before, during, and after TJTP approval.
- **Map communities of impact.** Identify both institutional and informal actors (e.g. youth clubs, religious groups, retirees' associations) and involve them from the outset.
- **Frame transitions in local narratives.** Replace technical jargon with territorial storytelling: what does the transition mean for "our region," "our future," "our children"?
- **Blend participation formats.** Combine structured events (e.g., thematic workshops) with informal, approachable settings (mobile info vans, workplace discussions).
- **Ensure procedural transparency.** Explain how inputs are used. Feedback loops ("you said – we did") enhance legitimacy.

During implementation

- **Create co-decision arenas.** Involve citizens and communities in project selection committees, especially for small-scale local projects. This can include micro-grant schemes for community-led transition projects (e.g. emulating the CLLD model, with Local Action Groups).
- **Support intermediary actors.** Local NGOs, universities, and cultural institutions can bridge between administrations and communities. Fund them explicitly.
- **Leverage digital tools carefully.** Use participatory mapping, online voting, or idea platforms to widen reach, but always complement with in-person dialogue.

- **Facilitate peer learning.** Encourage exchanges between TJTP regions to share participatory methods. The Just Transition Platform provides a valuable arena for this.

During monitoring and evaluation

- **Measure participation quality, not just quantity.** Measure deliberative depth (partnerships, co-decision moments) alongside number of participants.
- **Include community feedback in evaluation.** TJTP reviews should incorporate community perception surveys and citizen panels. This can include "You said – we did" checklists and feedback dashboards.
- **Adapt dynamically.** Treat participation as iterative and adjust formats, timing, and tools based on feedback.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COHESION POLICY PRACTITIONERS AT DIFFERENT GOVERNANCE LEVELS

For EU institutions



Maintain a regulatory framework for Cohesion Policy and JTF that supports the territorial approach, including the requirement for Member States to develop territorial just plans in partnership with sub-national authorities and communities.

Address issues of administrative capacity and burden that are a barrier to participation, by (as suggested by European Parliament):

- Streamlining associated regulations;
- Employing ‘hands-on’ managers in towns and villages who would assist in preparing funding applications and proposals.
- Continue role of JTP in territorial capacity-building through knowledge exchange.

Strengthen financial incentives for community participation in TJTP by:

- Including a focus on JTF investment in bottom-up projects of scale (e.g. through dedicated funding envelopes, project selection criteria);
- Providing advance funding, limited co-funding requirements for voluntary sector, community organisations).

For Cohesion Policy Managing authorities and National coordinators



- **Institutionalise participation** by including community engagement requirements in TJTP operational guidelines and project calls.
- **Fund participation infrastructure**, community forums, facilitation teams, digital platforms, under Cohesion Policy technical assistance or other capacity-building lines.
- **Align governance scales**, enable local councils to co-manage JTF projects with regional and national authorities.
- **Integrate participation into evaluation**, track inclusivity and deliberation indicators.
- **Reward experimentation**, support pilot projects testing new participatory formats (community visioning labs, participatory budgeting etc.).

For regional and local practitioners



- **Build alliances early** with universities, NGOs, and cultural institutions to act as trusted intermediaries.
- **Diversify outreach**: use schools, sports clubs, and informal spaces to reach youth and marginalized groups.
- **Ensure accessibility**: schedule meetings outside working hours, provide translation, childcare, or transport support.
- **Visualise transitions**: use mapping, storytelling, and visioning workshops to make future scenarios tangible.
- **Maintain continuity**: even after project selection, keep communities informed about implementation and impact, involve them where possible in monitoring progress and results.

THE DUST PROJECT

The DUST project develops new participatory instruments in sustainability transitions, focusing on structurally weak regions that are dependent on energy-intensive industries. It supports the development and implementation of place-based policies at a scale that enhances citizen participation and democratic governance, especially among the least engaged communities. Furthermore, DUST has been conducting novel participatory experiments in eight case study regions.

The brief is based on research across DUST's case study regions, combining interviews with practitioners involved in the design and implementation of sustainable transition policies, focus groups and future literacy labs with less engaged communities to explore and compare perceptions on the facilitators and barriers to participation in these policies.

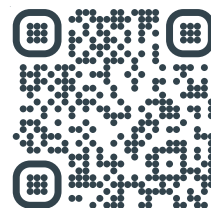
We thank the researchers who have participated in the DUST research underlying this policy brief.



Silesia from above. Photo credits: Verena Balz

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Find out more about the DUST project and read the deliverables that inform this brief here: www.dustproject.eu



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