



DESIGNING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS

Lessons from the DUST Regional
Futures Literacy Lab experiments

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Democratising
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Sustainability
Transitions

COLOPHON

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Participating partners:



PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This policy brief provides guidance for **regional and local public authorities and civil society groups** on designing participation strategies that empower citizens, especially those in least engaged communities, to shape sustainability policies.

Findings from the Horizon Europe DUST project show that **participation is most effective when it is closely tied to specific communities and contexts where people live**. Place-based approaches connect citizens' everyday lived experiences to policymaking processes ensuring that local knowledge and priorities guide decision-making.

Regional Futures Literacy Labs (RFL) were conducted in the DUST project case regions of Norrbotten (Sweden), Katowice Coal Region (Poland), Stara Zagora (Bulgaria), and the Lusatian Lignite District (Germany). The RFL process shows that meaningful engagement depends on structured, sustained, and iterative processes that combine inclusive formats, hybrid methods, and clear institutional pathways, enabling even the least engaged communities to shape policy decisions.

To make sustainability transitions truly democratic and socially responsive, **participation strategies must move beyond consultation toward institutionally embedded collaborative co-design processes** that foster influence, inclusivity and accountability.

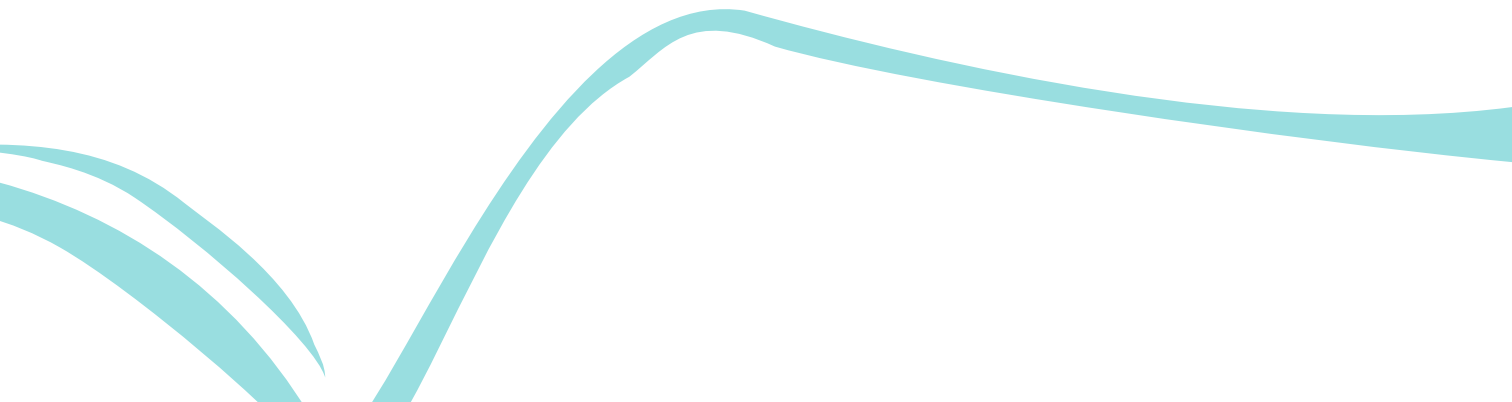
TARGET AUDIENCE

This brief is intended for practitioners in regional and local public authorities across Europe who are responsible for, or actively engaged in, designing and implementing sustainability transitions. It is also relevant for civil society groups who contribute to local knowledge development, advocate for community interests, or facilitate participatory processes.

The implementation of effective participatory approaches requires coordination and collaboration across multiple levels and actors:

- **Between governments and civil society**, to leverage local knowledge, foster trust, and ensure inclusive engagement.
- **Across departments within governments**, to integrate participation systematically into sustainability transition policy design and implementation.
- **Between local authorities** to ensure coherent, place-based approaches across territorial boundaries.
- **Between local and regional authorities**, to align regional strategies with local priorities.

Ultimately, these efforts also benefit from being connected to national and EU-level frameworks to help ensure that sustainability transitions' resources are distributed in a fair, and efficient way.





To expand the participation of least engaged communities, ensure they can initiate conversations and have time to develop their views in safe spaces. Listen carefully to what they know and have to say. Support futures literacy by engaging communities in envisioning their expected and desirable long-term futures. Increase the impact of participation by negotiating community and policy interests and ensuring communities' concerns are deliberated and represented in the public realm.



Visualisation of main policy message

CONCERNS OVER CENTRALISATION IN EU COHESION POLICY

What place-based approaches are and why they matter

Place-based policymaking tailors interventions to the unique characteristics, assets, and challenges of specific regions. By building on local knowledge and expertise, it aims to promote economic, social, and environmental development that reflects local realities (Barca, 2009).

Place-based approaches:

- ✓ Reflect local priorities and draw on citizens' knowledge of daily life impacts.
- ✓ Enable local actors to influence priorities and decision-making.
- ✓ Recognize uneven transition impacts: some communities bear concentrated costs while others gain more directly.
- ✓ Target specific territorial needs, integrating social, economic, and environmental considerations.

This Policy Brief engages with the current debates surrounding the future of EU Cohesion Policy. On the 16th of July 2025, the European Commission presented their proposals for the EU Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028-2034 (European Commission, 2025). The MFF proposals outline plans to completely restructure EU Cohesion policymaking by giving national governments more power and control over the process through the development of

national regional investment programs (Mendez et al 2025). This policy centralization drive marks a major departure from the EU's commitment to territorial governance, active subsidiarity, and place-based approaches (Moodie et al., 2022; Rodriguez-Pose, 2025a), and contrasts with the cohesion goal of 'bringing Europe closer to its citizens' (European Commission, 2020).

Reducing the role of regional actors risks further eroding public trust and weakening local stakeholders' voice in shaping Cohesion policy (Rodriguez-Pose, 2025b). The reforms will also reshape the EU Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) and Just Transition Fund (JTF), designed to ensure no person or place is left behind during the shift to climate-neutral economies (European Commission, 2021). Furthermore, policy centralization risks reducing sub-national participation, overlooking territorial diversity, and producing transition plans misaligned with local challenges.

Why participation matters in sustainability transitions

Citizen participation is not simply a democratic ideal but a strategic necessity for effective transitions. When implemented well, participation:

- ✓ Strengthens **legitimacy** and reduces conflicts around land use and infrastructure.
- ✓ Increases **trust**, particularly in communities that feel overlooked.
- ✓ Improves **policy quality**, especially where complex trade-offs must be navigated.
- ✓ Enhances the **relevance** of policies for local places by ensuring they address real-life needs, priorities, and concerns of communities.

WHAT COMMUNITIES AND POLICIES PRIORITIZE

What communities prioritize

The DUST Regional Futures Literacy Labs (RFLLs) and focus groups across Europe show that communities primarily frame sustainability transitions through **human and social experiences and perspectives, such as:**

- Quality of life
- Jobs and future skills
- Housing
- Social cohesion and family life
- Institutional responsiveness
- Education and youth opportunities
- Accessible public services
- Tangible place development (transport and energy infrastructure, heritage, nature protection)

Communities interpret environmental and economic developments primarily through their effects on everyday life and local surroundings.

What policies prioritize

Transition policies adopt broad sustainability language but tend to:

- Focus primarily on economic growth, competitiveness, and infrastructure.
- Frame social dimensions mainly in terms of labour markets, skills development, and employment needs linked to economic performance.
- Position citizen and community concerns as complementary rather than central to policymaking.

Aligning community and policy priorities

Community narratives focus on well-being, security, and the lived experience of transitions, whereas policy narratives centre on structural changes and economic priorities. Transition narratives circulating in the media spaces of transition regions often amplify these disparate rationales (Aleksieva et al., 2024).

Distrust in public institutions is a key barrier to meaningful engagement in transition policymaking and communities' participation depends on **how they perceive the relevance of policymaking to their lives and places of living** (Georgieva & Ferry, 2024). Communities often perceive policies as abstract or overly positive, which can distance decision-making from their lived realities.

Policymaking must therefore:

- ✓ **Incorporate participatory processes** that acknowledge diverse community experiences and involve multiple generations.
- ✓ **Address participatory dynamics** by actively tackling distrust rooted in scepticism about policy rationales, past engagement experiences, and historical structural exclusion.
- ✓ **Embed social sustainability** as a core policy dimension.

RFLLS: DESIGNING PARTICIPATION STRATEGIES IN PRACTICE

Regional Futures Literacy Labs (RFLs) provide structured spaces where communities and authorities collaborate to plan, deliberate, and make decisions during sustainability transitions.

What the RFLs aimed to do

The RFLs were designed to involve communities most affected by transitions yet least represented in policy. They aimed to:

- Build **trust** and social capital by bringing community members and policymakers together.
- Strengthen **community agency** through future-oriented, constructive, and well-informed discussions on transition development.
- Connect local perspectives with policy priorities to improve **relevance** and produce actionable outcomes.
- **Legitimize** policy positions through public deliberation and broader democratic engagement.
- Foster **effective**, place-based policymaking by linking community perspectives to actual decision-making arenas at levels of governance.

How the RFLs worked in practice

The tables that follow outline the structure, process, and outcomes of the RFLs, with each step detailed.

Step 1-2 in the RFLs	Key outcomes
<p>Preparatory step: The interests of least-engaged communities (LECs) were compared with those in transition policy measures. The resulting themes openly structured the conversations in the RFLs.</p>	<p>Positioned deliberation at the intersection of community and policy interests where learning is likely and conflict is low.</p> <p>Let communities ground discussions in their everyday realities, giving them ownership and motivating their engagement.</p>
<p>First workshop: LECs and policymakers met for the initial RFL workshop to discuss the projected impacts of transitions policy making on LECs. LECs decided on the scope of upcoming deliberations.</p>	

Step 3-5 in the RFLs	Key outcomes	Step 5-8 in the RFLs	Key outcomes
<p>Second workshop: Community members discussed their expected and preferred futures in relation to transitions, using the Futures Literacy Lab (FFL) format in a safe space.</p>	<p>LECs developed their own visions and storylines about desirable futures, improving understanding of time and long-term change (futures literacy).</p>	<p>Third workshop: LECs developed these positions into policy statements for public deliberation.</p>	<p>Strengthened internal group discussions, helping clarify visions and set priorities.</p>
<p>Futures analysis: An analysis of the conversations enabled the representation of the regional futures that LECs expect to happen as well as the futures they would prefer.</p>	<p>LECs included policy-relevant issues in their argumentation while maintaining their core interests in human and social capital.</p>		<p>Improved understanding of contextual factors that affect policy implementation.</p>
<p>Policy comparison: A comparison between these community futures and policy impact projections provided insights into LECs' opinions and positions on EU, national, and regional policymaking.</p>	<p>Made abstract policies more place-specific and actionable by adding local knowledge, grounding them in practical experiences, and translating broad goals into concrete, context-sensitive steps.</p>	<p>Public deliberation: The policy statements were then submitted for public digital deliberation in each case study region.</p>	<p>Involved communities in democratic life by developing strategies for public engagement.</p> <p>Raised awareness of the role of communication in digital spaces and highlighted young people's skills in this area.</p>
	<p>Expressed mixed feelings about top-down policy, showing awareness of structural constraints like labour markets, housing, and economic opportunities.</p>	<p>Fourth workshop: In the final RFL workshop, communities and policymakers translated the outcomes from earlier steps into practical recommendations for policymakers at various levels of government.</p>	<p>Expanded participation, involving communities more widely in democratic life at scale.</p> <p>Gathered public opinions on policy and community issues, assessing legitimacy and support.</p> <p>Highlighted topics that build consensus or cause division.</p>
			<p>Collaboratively prioritized and detailed LECs' positions on place-based sustainability transition policies.</p> <p>Identified governance arenas to be targeted by positions.</p>

WHAT THE RFLLS DELIVERED: KEY TAKE AWAYS FROM POLICYMAKERS AND CITIZENS

The following insights come **directly from policymakers, and citizens** who participated in RFLL experiments across the case regions. They show how RFLLS reshaped engagement, strengthened capacities, and opened pathways for collaborative, future-oriented territorial governance.

Citizen Learning

Citizen learning strengthens citizens' capacity to contribute local knowledge and engage in policy co-design. The RFLL format:

- ✓ Increases awareness of sustainability transitions and policymaking, supporting confident engagement.
- ✓ Reinforces regional networks and trust, even in least-engaged communities.

Futures Literacy

Futures literacy builds participants' capacity to imagine and reason about long-term futures. The RFLL format:

- ✓ Helps communities understand time and links long-term visions to actionable goals in the present.
- ✓ Helps communities develop clear, detailed visions of the future and the reasoning behind them.

- ✓ Changes communities' emotional dispositions about transitions to become more positive.
- ✓ Increases community confidence and social connections, especially when people envision themselves as active participants with specific roles, knowledge, and experience in the transition.
- ✓ Helps policymakers appreciate community realities, motivations, and social dimensions of sustainability transitions.

Co-Design

Co-design focuses on jointly shaping solutions by integrating citizen, expert, and policymaker perspectives. The RFLL format:

- ✓ Brings together citizen input with perspectives from politicians and civil servants and builds common ground for negotiating interests.
- ✓ Adapts policy approaches to local needs and territorial contexts and become more place-based in this way.
- ✓ Gives policymakers insight into social and human dimensions of transitions.

Digital deliberation

Digital deliberation enables equitable and transparent democratic participation at scale. The RFLL format:

- ✓ Extends participation through digital tools to the public realm
- ✓ Shows diverse opinions without domination; communities reached high agreement on concrete issues while trade-offs remained debated.
- ✓ Anonymisation increases equality, and targeted support amplified least-engaged voices.

Regional design and visual representation

Regional design and visual representation reflect on the implications of territorial development at levels and scales and make these accountable. The RFFL format:

- ✓ Provides insights into policy areas of shared or unshared community and policy concern through the systematic analysis and comparison of territorial assets occurring in visions.
- ✓ Establishes regions as a meaningful geography for communities; raises awareness of tangible development across territorial boundaries and regional disparities.
- ✓ Makes abstract issues tangible, amplifies unheard stories about territorial development, and carries these into the public realm.
- ✓ Sparks dialogue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regional Futures Literacy Labs (RFLs) are a comprehensive strategy for democratic innovation. They support iterative learning cycles where ideas can be tested, refined, and grounded in lived community experiences, making policies more responsive to territorial realities. The following recommendations provide a roadmap for practitioners and policymakers to design and implement participatory initiatives that are legitimate, transformative, and policy relevant. They can be flexibly adapted to different policy contexts, capacities, and stages of the policy cycle, and may complement existing participatory processes where these are already in place.

ORGANISATIONAL READINESS



Suggested timing: Begin preparation at least 6 months ahead of the participation intervention.

Recognize that meaningful participation is resource-intensive and requires expertise

- Dedicate time, personnel, and funding to design and implement comprehensive strategies for hybrid participation.
- Promote a long-term mindset within diverse teams and leadership, valuing interpersonal and emotional skills alongside technical expertise. Develop an organizational culture that respects community governance.

Collaborate with civil society organizations (CSOs)

- Engage trusted **CSOs** with broad community reach through regular, informal communication and transparent collaboration.

Collaborate with local universities or research centers

- Leverage academic expertise from **locally connected universities** to support participation design and policy translation, ensuring evidence-based and actionable approaches.

PROCESS DESIGN



Create safe, continuous, and iterative engagement spaces

Suggested timing: Begin preparation at least 3 months ahead of the participation intervention

Ground participation in local context and ensure relevance

- In collaboration with **spatial planning and geographic information departments**, map the ‘territoriality’ of sustainability transitions and transition policymaking to understand which assets (territorial capitals) are at stake.
- In collaboration with relevant **sector departments of local & regional governments**, identify policy pathways and relevant governance arenas where community concerns can be addressed, linking participation to ongoing policymaking.

Map and actively engage affected communities

- In collaboration with **CSOs and community initiatives**, map communities that will be affected by transitions; together identify community networks and ongoing initiatives.
- Familiarize yourself and engage with **communities**; seek to understand how past political, social, or societal events may have influenced their trust in institutions.
- Engage **trusted intermediaries** to mobilize community members and include **diverse LEC members**, especially intergenerational groups, to generate viable community positions.

- Plan a series of workshops to yield meaningful outcomes and ensure continuity by linking initial discussions to concrete positions while incorporating reflection and feedback loops.
- Create safe, **community-only** spaces for reflection and negotiation, with occasional participation from **policymakers involved in transition policies**, including at least one local representative.

Implement practical measures to support participation

- In collaboration with **trusted intermediaries**, use personal invitations, familiar and accessible venues, and a welcoming atmosphere to encourage participation.
- Use concise, plain-language communication to increase clarity and inclusion.
- Plan in sufficient time for informal exchange, such as welcoming moments coffee or lunch breaks.

Adopt open and flexible framing of discussions

- Recognize that the initial framing of deliberation is decisive for successful participation and begin with broad themes that openly address both community and policy concerns, creating space for new arguments.
- Allow participants to re-frame issues to foster ownership of deliberation, while ensuring that LEC interests remain safeguarded, as initial framing can otherwise be dominated by more powerful actors.
- Use skilled **moderators** who maintain openness, encourage creativity, and support nuanced perspectives. Balance deliberation with methods that simplify complexity.

Incorporate structured documentation, analysis and representation

- In collaboration with a **locally connected university**, ensure that input and outcomes from participatory encounters are continuously documented, analysed, and transparently shared, using systematic frameworks that compare different positions and support policy impact.
- Recognize that such a backstage function is resource-intensive but essential.

ENGAGEMENT METHODS

Suggested timing: Implement the participation intervention and following associated recommendations over a period of 6–10 months.

Ensure structured deliberation that connects to policy

- Keep community interests central in deliberation, while nudging discussions toward policy relevance by integrating **policymakers** directly in some workshops.
- Position **policymakers** as support for community-led positions, especially in later stages.

Integrate co-design approaches and futures literacy

- Employ Futures Literacy Lab (FFL) methods to foster optimism, engagement, and forward-looking perspectives in transitional development.
- Use these co-design methods to enable **communities** to imagine shared long-term futures and build agency around these.
- In collaboration with **practitioners in spatial planning and design**, ensure that visioning processes are territorially grounded and reflect local conditions.



DISSEMINATION

Use visualization and storytelling to make issues tangible

- Together with **spatial planners and designers**, use visual and artistic methods to make abstract policy issues tangible and relatable.
- Ensure visuals accurately reflect local contexts and actively facilitate discussions.

Leverage digital deliberation to expand reach

- Use e-democracy platforms to transfer community deliberation and positions into broader **public** debates to enhance representativeness and legitimacy.

Suggested timing: Conduct follow-up activities within 1–6 months after the participation intervention

Summarize and communicate outputs

- Summarize output in concise recommendations and visually attractive ways.
- Disseminate results broadly through digital channels and public events, recognizing that impact can emerge in unforeseen ways. Use and/or collaborate with **regional governance platforms, community sustainability initiatives, traditional and social media, just transition platforms**, as well as **national and EU channels**.

Connect participatory processes back to policy development

- Evaluate participatory outcomes for their relevance across policy sectors and government levels and use the findings to both engage the most appropriate governance arenas (local, regional, national, EU) and guide ongoing negotiations between **LECs, trusted intermediaries, and relevant government actors**.
- Report back to **participants** on how their contributions were used, reinforcing trust by showing their impact on policy.



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.

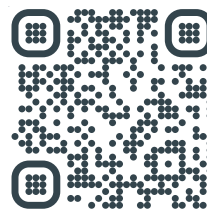
This brief is based on research conducted as part of DUST's RFLs, a series of workshops that focused on engaging the least engaged communities in each of four case study regions, such as ethnic minorities, youth groups, women, and specific sectoral workers, including miners and employees of mining-related companies.

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

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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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